

PASTORAL DYNAMO

From the Perspective of

**SAINT JOHN
NEUMANN**

FR. RICHARD BOEVER, CSSR



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Foreword

FR. RICHARD BOEVER HAS WRITTEN a biography of St. John Neumann in the first person as if the saint were speaking to the reader. Fr. Boever's objective to focus on the humanity of St. John rather than on his accomplishments is achieved in an unusual way. The direct quotations of St. John throughout the text provide a moving context for the experiences of his life rooted in a deep trust in God.

This chronology of St. John Neumann's life includes the development of his deep faith from the early years until his death while bishop of Philadelphia. The reader is privileged to peer into his heart during his discernment of a priestly vocation and his perseverance in traveling across the Atlantic to the United States, where he was ordained.

Saint John's letters to his family in Bohemia are both tender and stirring in describing the challenges and joys of serving in the developing Church in the United States.

His life as missionary and bishop convey the holiness and humility that attracted so many souls to being disciples of Jesus Christ.

This book invites each of us to accompany St. John Neumann along his path of faithful discipleship, deepening our own commitment to discipleship and living out our unique vocation in Christ.

Cardinal Justin Rigali
Archbishop Emeritus of Philadelphia

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A window at the National Shrine of St. John Neumann in Philadelphia depicts the founding of the Catholic school system.

Introduction

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT ST. JOHN NEUMANN (1811–60): his development of a school system, his dedication to the Eucharist and the Forty Hours devotion, plus his untiring energy in visiting distant places where his ministry was most needed. These are examples of his monumental accomplishments. In this book, my intention is not only to familiarize you with these enormous achievements but to also help you understand St. John as a person.

I began studying St. John Neumann while in search of material for my dissertation when I was a doctoral student at Saint Louis University. I knew the Redemptorists of the Baltimore Province were responsible for collecting primary sources about John Nepomucene Neumann, who had been canonized in 1977—the first American male to receive this honor. As I studied the life of St. John, I became interested enough to make his life and work the focus of my disserta-

tion. Since then, I have remained “in contact” with St. John by praying with him, writing about him, and admiring him from across time. This latest adventure—the evolution of this book—has been a different experience.

A special thanks to the Redemptorists of the Baltimore Province who have preserved so much excellent material from the life of St. John Neumann and to the Redemptorists who read and commented on this book. Finally, thanks to the men and women of Liguori Publications for their attention to the many details of publishing this book.

“The merits of an active man are measured not so much in the number of deeds performed, as in his thoroughness and stability,” Pope Benedict XV said of Neumann. “For true activity does not consist in mere noise. It is not the creature of a day, but it unfolds itself in the present. It is the fruit of the past and should be the good seed of the future. Are not these very characteristics the mark of the activity of Venerable Neumann? Bearing all this in mind, no one will any longer doubt that the simplicity of the works performed by our venerable servant of God did not hinder him from becoming a marvelous example of activity. Their very simplicity has forced us...to impress on our children...the proclamation of the heroic virtues of Neumann, since all find in the new hero an example not difficult to imitate.”

Fr. Rich Boever, CSSR

CHAPTER 1

Early Life in Bohemia

THE TOWN OF PRACHATICE SEEMED to sprout from the ground with a beauty all its own. My presence made little difference to the Bohemian community [now part of the Czech Republic], but for me, this is where my roots began to grow. My parents were named Philip Neumann and Agnes Lebis. My father was a stocking weaver by trade who had immigrated from Bavaria, so we spoke German in our home. My mother was Czech, but I would not study that language until years later in the seminary. I was born on March 28, 1811, the third of six children. I was baptized that same day in the parish church and given the name of Bohemia's protector, St. John Nepomucene.

We were brought up in the old-fashioned school. Our parents were both deeply Christian. While our father supervised the five or six apprentices and workers in our home from morning to night, our mother never missed a



John Neumann was the third of six children in his family.

day hearing Mass, always taking along one of us children who was not yet in school. In my case, at times I needed the promise of a penny or something similar to coax me to go to Mass, rosary, and the Stations of the Cross.

At age seven, I entered the local elementary school and did well in my studies during my first six years of schooling. My love of books began in these early days—a love

that tended to be an extravagance later in life, as I was often tempted to buy more books than I could afford. "I had acquired from my father...a decided passion for reading," I later wrote. "As a result, the time that others spent in sports or bird catching, I spent in reading all the books I could get hold of. This is the reason why my mother often called me 'the Little Bookworm.'"

From the days of childhood, I was taken by the wonders of nature that surrounded me. One night I was unable to sleep because I was so fascinated by the moon's ability to float in space without falling into the vast expanse of the universe. My mother told me to go to bed and let the moon float on its own. I began my study of botany in those days with the parish catechist in the church gardens. This interest continued into adulthood.

At age twelve, I finished my elementary studies in Prachatice and entered secondary school, or *gymnasium*, in České Budějovice, a day's journey from home. "Actually, I had very little studying to do," I wrote. "The catechist at home, during our few lessons each week, made us learn so much that with little preparation we could have been immediately promoted into the third class. That, however, was not permitted. I used the many idle hours and days in more and more reading—all kinds of books, whatever I could indiscriminately get my hands on."

In my third year at České Budějovice, however, I ran



John attended this secondary school, or gymnasium, at České Budějovice, a day's journey from his hometown.

into a problem. We had a very old, good-natured professor who had an unfortunate addiction to liquor. As might be imagined, we made no progress in our studies. Eventually, the professor was dismissed from the school. His successor was as strict as he was learned, and he wanted us to crowd into six months the studies that should have been accomplished earlier under his predecessor. It came as no surprise that this accelerated schedule caused many students to fall behind in their studies.

In the years of gymnasium, I was also dissatisfied with the teacher of Christian doctrine. He was the personification of dryness and a stickler for verbatim recitations. So, the two hours of religious instruction were very irksome to me. At the end of my gymnasium school years, some of my grades were not as good as they could have been. Naturally, my father assumed I was finished with studies and that I was ready to exchange my books for a trade. It would have been appropriate timing to conclude my formal studies, and I even resolved to discontinue them. However, my family persuaded me to change my mind. I was allowed to take the final exam a second time and, after successfully passing it, I continued my studies.

During the two years of study following gymnasium, known as the school of philosophy, many changes took place within me and in my interests. At least a dozen students showed great aptitude for the sciences. We employed

all our free time—even our days of recreation—communicating to one another about what we had learned. “During these two years I followed perhaps a little too much my inclination for the natural sciences,” I later wrote. “Natural history, geography, physics, geology, astronomy kept me busy, while algebra, geometry, trigonometry, which I had formerly disliked, were now my favorite studies.” I was less inclined toward some of the other subjects.

One day after a history test, my classmates saw me shaking my head. I explained I wanted to rid myself of the material I had just studied for the test. During my time as a student, I never abandoned my spiritual life. Within the course of study, I not only remained faithful to my prayers, but I also read and studied several works like *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, and *The Sinner’s Guide* by Venerable Louis of Granada. I did my best to practice virtue and avoid sin.

At the end of the philosophy years, the time came when I had to declare my field of future study. I cannot say that I was aware of any inclination toward the priesthood during my childhood. For one thing, the possibility of getting accepted into the seminary seemed slim—only twenty of the eighty to ninety applicants were accepted. Besides, I had great interest in the sciences, so my predisposition was to enter medicine.

While grappling with uncertainty about my choice of

a profession, I returned home during the autumn holiday that year. To my surprise, my father was not opposed to the idea of me going to Prague to study medicine, but my mother was saddened by the thought of my pursuit of this profession. I told her about my inability to procure recommendations from influential people for the study of theology, as I was not acquainted with anyone who would be able to make such a recommendation on my behalf.

She refused to listen to my reasoning and urged me to send a petition to the Episcopal Consistory. Honoring my mother's wishes, I drew up a petition for admission to the seminary and sent it by special messenger to the council. Without any recommendations and simply at my own request, I was admitted to the seminary. From that moment, the temptation to devote myself to the study of medicine disappeared. Without regret, I also gave up physics and astronomy almost entirely. I began my studies of the sacred science on November 1, 1831.