

THE LITTLE BISHOP... The Holy Father Pope Francis has stated many times that bishops in the Church should have “The Smell of the Sheep” on them. In other words, a bishop should know his flock and journey with them. Certainly, John Neumann, the saint we honor in this month of January (January 5) would certainly fit that description very well. John Neumann was born in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) on March 28, 1811. When John was about twenty years old, he decided to study to be a priest and began studies at the Seminary in Budweis. However, before ordination, John decided to come to the United States and work in the mission fields which America was at that time. He departed from France for New York by sailing ship and it took forty days to cross the rough waters on the Atlantic! So eager was the seminarian to debark from the boat for New York, that he asked the captain for permission several times. Finally, permission was granted and he was able to commandeer a row boat and made it right here to Staten Island and took the ferry to Manhattan on Corpus Christi Sunday, 1836. The saint only had a dollar in his pocket; his clothes were in tatters, and his shoes worn. But he presented himself to the bishop of New York, a man by the name of John Dubois. Bishop Dubois said to John Neumann, “I must ordain you immediately because I have need of you!” On June 25, 1836, St. John Neumann was ordained by Bishop Dubois at St. Patrick’s Old Cathedral. The Old Cathedral by the way still stands in lower Manhattan on Mulberry St. and has recently been beautifully restored. The Bishop put John to work right away. He needed a German priest to minister to the immigrants in upstate New York. Fr. Neumann did a great deal of pastoral work there in the north country, most of it on horseback and in terrible conditions. In 1840, John Neumann decided to become a priest of the Redemptorist Order. He became superior and then totally against his wishes, in 1852, Neumann was chosen to be the fourth bishop of Philadelphia. The saint was a very capable man but he lacked confidence in himself. He was plagued by bouts of insecurity and feelings of personal incompetence to fulfill the job of bishop. He even wrote one of the cardinals in Rome to be relieved of the burden of the Philadelphia Diocese and go to a smaller place where he could minister to the needs of the simple folks. His wish was not granted! Despite his personal insecurities, St. John Neumann did a tremendous amount of good for the Church. He started the foundations of the Catholic School System in this country. He established fifty schools in Philadelphia and 100 churches. He began the beautiful practice of the “Forty Hours” devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. As a bishop, he was totally dedicated to his flock and Christ-like, a model shepherd. John Neumann died on January 5th in 1860, worn out by his labors for the Lord and his Church. Although he was not a big man physically, about five foot two, yet spiritually speaking, he was a spiritual giant of vast proportions. The “Little Bishop” did big things for God. As we start this New Year, let us resolve to imitate his zeal and fervor for the Catholic faith. Through the intercession of St. John Neumann, may more young people follow Christ’s call and serve the Church!

Sincerely in Christ,

Father Jerome