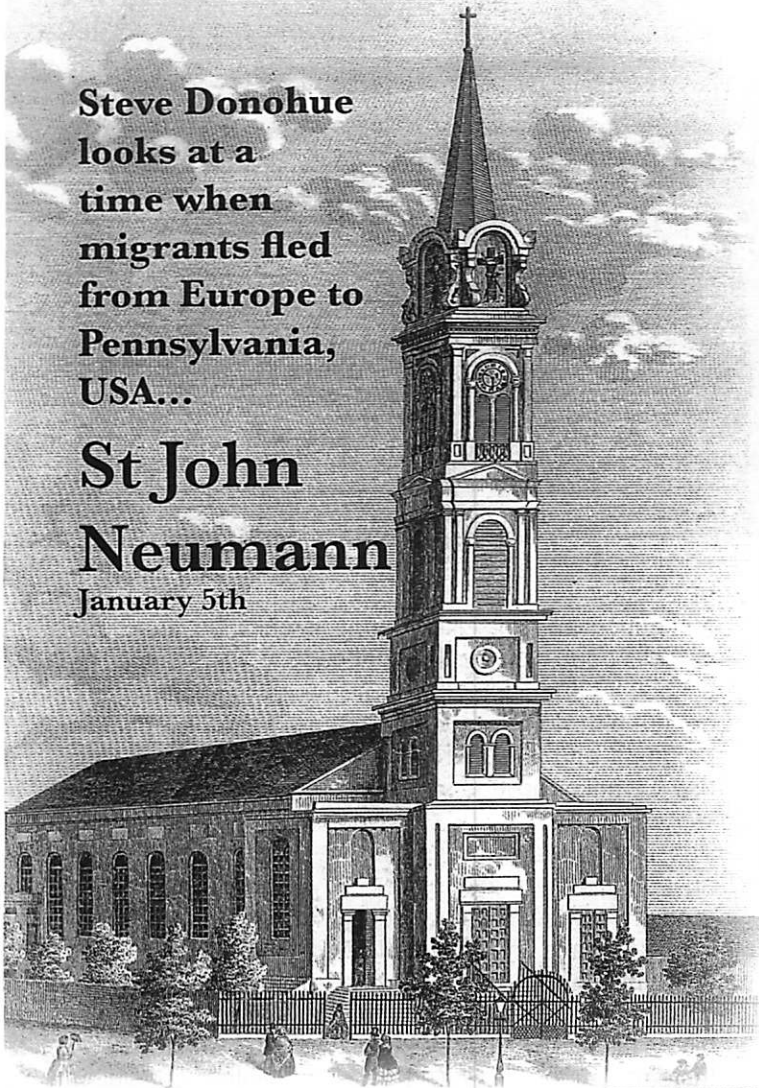


**Steve Donohue
looks at a
time when
migrants fled
from Europe to
Pennsylvania,
USA...**

St John Neumann

January 5th



John Neumann was one of thousands of Europeans who ended up in Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century and who had a big influence on the development of the state. John was born in Bohemia in 1811; then part of the Austrian empire, now in the Czech Republic. Having studied for the priesthood he was not accepted for ordination at home because the diocese had too many priests. In desperation he applied to the Diocese of New York, was accepted, and was ordained in 1836. New York then had 36 priests for a Catholic population of 200,000.



One of the most pressing needs at the time was for priests who spoke German. Fr John, who was fluent in German, was appointed to Buffalo but the bishop asked him to break his journey to minister to the German community in Rochester. There he met Fr Joseph Prost, one of the Redemptorists who had arrived in the United States to care specifically for the scattered but growing German communities. Neumann was very impressed by the old priest's lifestyle and work ethic.

But after a few days in Rochester Fr Neumann had to move on to work in a sprawling rural parish in New York State. He loved pastoral work and even the hazardous

travelling to remote villages, but he always longed for community life. After only four years in the diocese he contacted the Redemptorists and was accepted into the Congregation shortly afterwards. But instead of a quiet monastic life he was sent to do missionary work in Maryland, Virginia and Ohio. That lasted only twelve years, because in 1852 he was appointed Bishop of Philadelphia in the State of Pennsylvania.

Neumann was fluent in German and English when he first arrived in the United States. To communicate better with the immigrants from all over Europe, he learned Spanish, French, Italian and Dutch. In Philadelphia he also encountered many Irish people, who spoke only Gaelic. Neumann learned sufficient Gaelic to hear confessions, and it is said that newcomers thought he was Irish.

He needed all his talents to meet the challenges that confronted him in Philadelphia, which had been expanding rapidly since its foundation in 1681. Conflicts in Europe, and wars and famine in Ireland, saw wave after wave of immigrants flocking to the city. This influx of immigrants, from different cultures and religious backgrounds, was the root cause of the tensions that had developed, and that had to be faced by the young bishop in 1852.

Pennsylvania had its origins in religious persecution in Europe. From 1642-51 a bitter civil war was fought in England. During this time George Fox founded the Society of Friends, later known as the Quakers. They were pacifists and they were persecuted by Crown and Christians alike. Many of them fled, or were deported to the US. Some settled in what became known as Pennsylvania, named after Admiral William Penn, to whom it was 'gifted' by King Charles II. But it was his son William Penn Jr, a Quaker, who took on the administration and development of this State.

The Penns had strong Irish connections. The Admiral had fought in the civil war in England and was rewarded with land in Ireland where he supported Cromwell's military campaign. His son, William Jr, had a chequered career himself. He had fought with his father and disliked the experience. He abandoned his military career and became a Quaker. His father promptly disowned him, and for the next few years he experienced harassment, imprisonment and even homelessness. He fled to America in 1682 where he was soon entrusted with the administration of Penn State.

William Jr was very capable and well-educated and the treatment he received in England because of his beliefs probably influenced his style of leadership. While he was known to be critical of other religions in England he offered religious freedom to Catholics, Huguenots, Mennonites, Amish, Lutherans, Jews, and others in the

Opposite page: The Roman-style German Catholic Church, St Peter the Apostle, built 1842-1847 at 1015 North Fifth Street, Philadelphia, where the National Shrine of St John Neumann is located. Below: Stained glass window of St John Neumann in the National Shrine.



new territory. As a pacifist he had a vision of a utopian community in Pennsylvania and he had considerable success. He was ahead of his time in promoting prison reform, social justice and the abolition of slavery. He also advocated two houses of parliament to ensure justice was done; he promoted human rights; he reduced the number of crimes punishable by death from two hundred to two; all criminal cases were to be tried by jury and prisons were to be more like corrective workshops. Slaves entering Pennsylvania were declared free citizens.

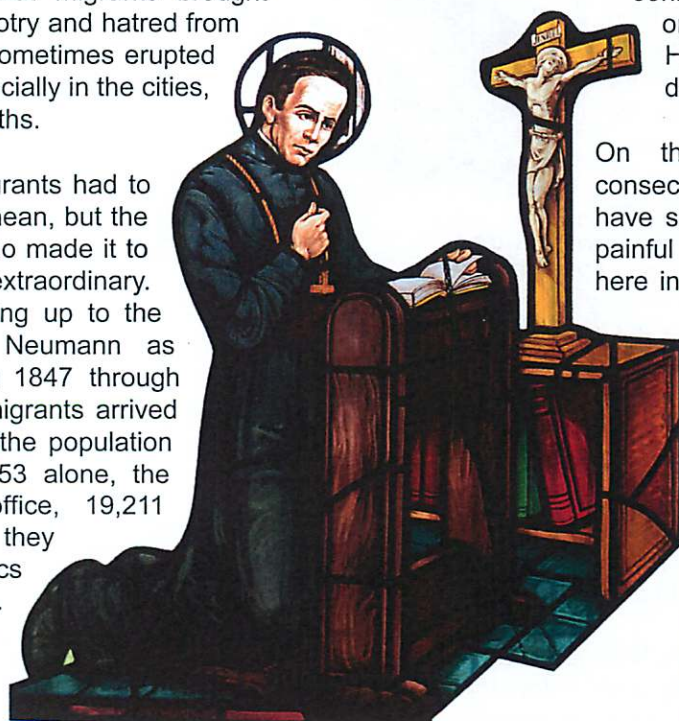
However, two hundred years on, in John Neumann's time, Philadelphia, was no utopia. Thousands fleeing war, persecution, unemployment and poverty in Europe flocked to the city. They knew there was employment in Pennsylvania, building canals and railways and later in the mining, steel and related industries. Neither education nor knowledge of English were essential qualifications to obtain work. And there was employment for women too, especially as domestic workers. But migrants brought historical baggage of bigotry and hatred from their homelands which sometimes erupted into violent clashes, especially in the cities, leading to arson and deaths.

Considering that the migrants had to cross, not the Mediterranean, but the Atlantic, the numbers who made it to Philadelphia alone is extraordinary. In the eight years leading up to the appointment of John Neumann as bishop of the city from 1847 through 1854, over 120,000 immigrants arrived in Philadelphia swelling the population to over 400,000. In 1853 alone, the year after he took office, 19,211 arrived. Of course they were not all Catholics but many of them were. Their churches were important to Christian communities and

small Catholic churches were being built at the rate of about one a month. There was a growing need for education and Neumann established the first catholic education system in the USA. The number of schools in the diocese grew from one to two hundred during his eight years as bishop. In spite of such progress and in spite of the ideals of William Penn, anti-Catholic feelings were running high at this time.

The bishop was always more a pastoral man than an administrator and preferred working in the rural areas to city life. His poor administration skills, and his failure to leave financial matters to someone else, was something he would regret. Life eventually became so difficult that he asked the authorities in Rome to relieve him of his responsibilities as bishop. That was refused. Instead James F. Wood was appointed coadjutor bishop with the right of succession on Neumann's death. Neumann was only 47 at the time, just two years older than Wood. It seemed it would be many years before the younger man would take over. But sadly,

John Neumann died soon afterwards, on 5 January 1860, at the age of 49. His feast day is celebrated on that date.



On the occasion of the episcopal consecration of a friend he said: "You have scarcely any idea how difficult and painful the office of bishop is, especially here in America. Catholics come from all parts of the world, all nationalities mingle with one another and the bishop is supposed to please all – an impossible task." History remembers that John Neumann was rather good at this impossible task. He was beatified in 1963 and canonized in 1977. ■

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