

Chapter Two

The Long Walk toward Sainthood

John Neumann, born March 28, 1811, grew up in Prachatitz, Bohemia, then part of the Austrian Empire and now in the Czech Republic. At that time and place, it was common for boys to end schooling at age 10 and start working. But his parents recognized his potential and allowed the boy to continue his education.

Neumann was indeed a scholar, mastering ancient languages and learning to speak fluently in 12 modern languages. He was fascinated by science and nature, associating God's greatness with nature's diversity. After graduating from philosophical school in 1831, his options were medicine, lawyering or the priesthood. With his mother's encouragement, he entered the seminary.

Upon completion of theological studies in 1835, he was not allowed to be ordained because the bishop determined there were already enough priests in the region. Neumann traveled to western Europe and met up in France with another young priest Father Schaefer, whose first name was not listed in at least two biographies. Schaefer was also looking for a bishop to give him an assignment. Both had their sights on America but were waiting for word of an acceptance.

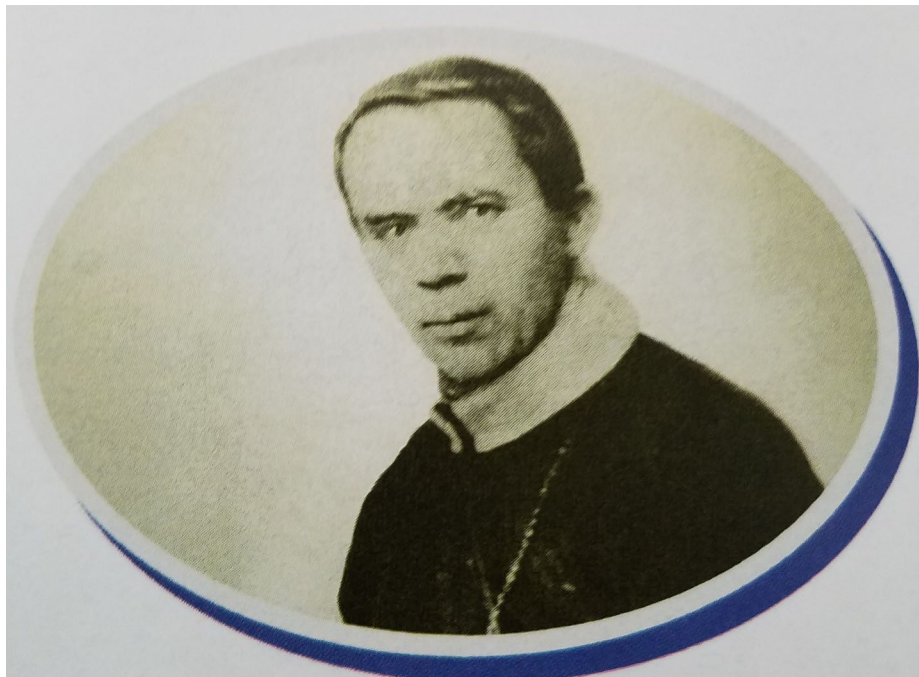
After two weeks in Paris, a letter was received from the Bishop of New York. Father Schaefer was accepted. The letter made no mention of Neumann.

Neumann appears to have been starting to lose patience as he yearned to do priestly work.

"Lord Jesus," he wrote in his journal, "do not punish me by detaining me here in

Europe, as I have a thousand times deserved! Poverty and disgrace I am willing to bear, O my Jesus; but, ah, do not punish me by holding me back from the sublime and life-giving struggle for souls!"

Neumann decided to make his way west toward the New World -- even without any assurance of ordination -- taking a stagecoach to the coastal city of Havre. Somehow, a letter from Father Schaefer found him there.



"Father Schaefer's truly fraternal letter came like a gleam of sunshine," Neumann wrote in his journal. "My God, reward this good man who has shown me so much kindness! He is the only one in France who seemed to take an interest in me, and he has shown it even beyond his means."

After about three tedious and distressing weeks in Havre, Neumann boarded the ship Europa on April 20, 1836, for a grueling 40-day trip to America. On the Feast of Corpus Christi, June 3, Neumann was allowed off the now-quarantined ship and at 1 pm began exploring the streets of New York looking for a Catholic church.

After spending the night in a Swiss inn, the host gave Neumann directions to the nearest Catholic church. There, he learned

the location of the Cathedral, and immediately started the hour-long walk.

"I arrived at the cathedral, where the first one I met was Father Raffener," Neumann journalized. "He showed great astonishment at my unexpected appearance. He informed me that...I had been accepted (for priesthood in the New York diocese) three weeks before and a letter had been dispatched to Europe.

Books were his vice

The idea of a saint with a vice is uncommon.

John Neumann, before his voyage to America, was in France, waiting for word on whether a U.S. bishop would ordain him. Staying in Paris with a priest named Schaefer, Neumann had a lot of time to kill. He spent much of it in church, at the zoo and horticultural gardens, and on long walks with Schaefer.

Paris also offered several bookstores that apparently thrilled Neumann. Despite not having much money, Neumann found himself buying many books -- some scholarly, many religious. In his journal, Neumann repeatedly accuses himself of bibliomania.

"Before God, it is high time for me to put an end to these purchases," Neumann wrote. "For the future, I shall avoid temptation by staying either at home or at church."

A few days later, Neumann found himself in a bookstore.

"My greatest temptation is to procure beautiful books," Neumann wrote in his journal. "I begin by imagining that such and such a book would be useful to me and that I must have it. This desire is so vehement that it seems to penetrate my very soul, and yet I ought to entertain myself with Jesus Christ alone.

"Today brought me a fresh struggle, another temptation in the form of a Greek-English dictionary. I have wanted one like it a long time. I was on the point of asking the price, but, with God's help, I resisted the temptation and hurried into a church. I must struggle against this enemy which I find every ready to attack me."

--from the Life of Right Rev. John N. Neumann by Johann Berger, 1884.

"Fr. Raffener then took me to Bishop Dubois, who in his surprise and joy, knew not whether to welcome me in Latin, French or English....He promised to ordain me on his return from pastoral visitation, which had already been mapped out. Though 80 years of age, he never omits his duty," Neumann wrote.

While the bishop was away, Neumann was put to work preparing children for First Communion. Finally, on June 25, 1836, Neumann received his Holy Orders.

Upon ordination, Fr. Neumann's first assignment was in western New York at a sprawling 900-square-mile parish based near Niagara Falls.

He worked extremely hard as a diocesan priest for four years -- sometimes walking 12 hours to meet a parishioner in need.

On one occasion, his feet were so blistered and sore from walking that, unable to go any further, he sunk down at the foot of a tree. Presently, he saw several dark figures approaching. They gathered around him in threatening attitudes and regarded him with a fierce air. The poor helpless traveler recognized in them a band of roving Indians, and inwardly recommended himself to God. But as soon as these wild sons of the forest discovered he was a "black gown," they spread a buffalo skin on the ground, placed him on it, and in the novel conveyance transported him to his destination.¹

On another missionary trip to baptize a child, he was tossed from the wagon he was riding. "O my Jesus," he wrote that evening, "it was a miracle of thy mercy that I was not instantly killed." He was badly injured, though, and could not say Mass for two weeks. Many other difficulties of travelling western New York were recounted in his journal.

The struggles he experienced in discharging his duties -- including being confronted once by a man with a gun -- caused Fr. Neumann to begin questioning his calling. By 1840, he determined he could be better of service to the Lord as by joining the still-fledgling Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer order. Better known as the Redemptorists, the order had been founded by Fr. Alphonsus Liguori in Italy in 1732, but in 1840 it only had four small foundations in America, and no one had yet entered the order from within the New World. The four foundations were in Baltimore, Md.; Pittsburgh, Pa.; Rochester, N.Y. and Peru, Ohio.² It should be noted that the Peru foundation never really grew beyond being a concept.

Fr. Neumann had filled in for an absent priest in Rochester for a time in 1838 and admired the piety of the Redemptorists and the parishioners there.

¹ Life of Right Rev. John N. Neumann by Johann Berger, 1884

² John Neumann Spiritual Architect for Millions by Joseph A. Manton, 1960

New York Bishop John Hughes had been impressed by Fr. Neumann's work and did not want to part with the young priest, repeatedly refusing to release him as a diocesan priest. The order forced the bishop's hand by appealing to Canon Law.³

Another harrowing boat ride was necessary for Fr. Neumann to be initiated into the Redemptorist, which was to occur in Pittsburgh.

Fr. Neumann had to wait in Buffalo for four or five days before gaining passage on a small lake steamer bound for Erie, Pa., the night of October 13, 1840. Once on the boat, he found there was no place to sit, because it was already overloaded with 400 immigrants. It was supposed to take about nine hours to travel the 90 miles across eastern Lake Erie. But three hours into the trip, a fierce storm blew up and by morning, the boat had been forced back to Buffalo.

After the storm abated and another supply of coal was loaded, the boat again headed southwest toward its destination. Stormy weather continued to slow travel, and additional coal had to be borrowed from a passing vessel. By night, the boat was just approaching Erie, but the lake became so rough, the captain was concerned he could not navigate the sand bars near the port. So, he changed course back to Dunkirk, N.Y., getting there around midnight.

On the third attempt, the skipper successfully completed the voyage, landing in Erie at 2 p.m. on October 15, some 41 hours after the initial departure from Buffalo. There was no food on the boat and most passengers had not brought any for what was supposed to be an overnight trip.

A Franciscan priest in Erie allowed Fr. Neumann to rest at his rectory that night, then he boarded a stagecoach the following day for a two-day trip to Pittsburgh. Upon arrival, Fr. Neumann found Father Francis Tschenhens temporally in charge of the Foundation. Fr. Tschenhens had been pastor at Peru St. Alphonsus from 1833 to 1840.

Neumann was immediately put to work in Pittsburgh, being directed to sing High Mass and preach the next morning. It was then time to invest Fr. Neumann into the order. Being the first Redemptorist investiture in America, the priests wanted to make it a solemn affair. However, the only paperwork outlining the prescribed ceremony had been destroyed in a fire. Using memories of their own ceremonies, they made up the order of Neumann's investiture.

The novice Neumann served his first six months in Pittsburgh, then in May 1841 he was transferred to Baltimore because additional Redemptorist priests had arrived from Europe and there was no longer room for Neumann in Pittsburgh. At the same time, there was a shake-up in leadership among American Redemptorists.

After just three days in Baltimore, he was sent to New York City and then two weeks later to Rochester. In the next two months, Fr. Neumann was sent to Buffalo, then to Peru St. Alphonsus, arriving in late July. Fr. Tschenhens, who was Neumann's novice master, had just been sent back to Peru, where the parish had been in a dispute with Catholics in nearby Norwalk.

³ Bishop John Neumann, C. SS. R. A Biography by Rev. Michael J. Curley, C.S.S.R., 1952

Neumann apparently had reservations about going to Ohio.

"The whole situation was distressful to Neumann," biographer Rev. Michael Curley wrote in 1952. "Was his change from place to place a sign he was unwanted?"

Further disturbing the novice were the troubles of the Fr. Joseph Prost, who had recruited him to the Redemptorists. Prost, who had previously served at Peru St. Alphonsus, was removed as superior of the Pittsburgh foundation after a misunderstanding over property deeds. Neumann was further bothered by a rumor that the order was on the verge of dissolution in America.

Prost, in a letter to Neumann, said the young priest was obligated to go to Peru.

"Obedience is always safest, even if it sometimes appears to be the opposite," Prost wrote in the letter. "To follow one's own opinion is always dangerous, and what will Your Reverence say in defense, if you remain in Buffalo and the schism in Norwalk continues, where through your presence so great a scandal could be removed?"

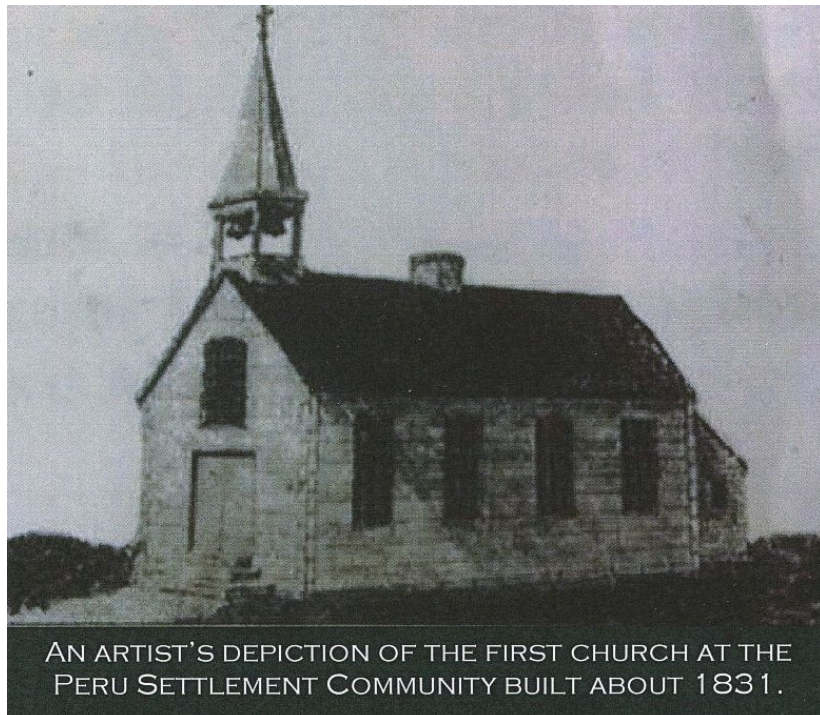
Prost also addressed Neumann's other concerns.

"I earnestly beg Your Reverence not to be led astray by the recent occurrences in our little Society," Fr. Prost wrote. "There is not a single Order in which no faults occur, but in a religious society the fault is recognized sooner and therefore corrected sooner. The exhortations, the meditations, and the like do not permit the fault to become rooted.

"My dear confrere, do not think that you are a burden," Prost wrote, referring to Fr. Neumann's feelings of being unwanted. "On the contrary, you are universally loved and cherished...So have courage. Go to (Peru). You will not only then be free from reproach on the part of your conscience and on the part of your superiors, but you will also have the reward of your good works in Heaven."

Due to the continuing dispute with Norwalk Catholics (see chapter 3 for details), Fr. Tschenhens had been sent back to Peru just ahead of Fr. Neumann, who arrived on or about July 30, 1841.

At the time, the priests assigned to St. Alphonsus ministered to a wide area from Medina to Shelby to Tiffin to Fremont to Sandusky.



AN ARTIST'S DEPICTION OF THE FIRST CHURCH AT THE PERU SETTLEMENT COMMUNITY BUILT ABOUT 1831.

"Frs. Neumann and Tschenhens spent so much time traveling and helping parishioners, that they saw little of each other," St. Alphonsus parishioner Marianne Schaffer wrote in her booklet chronicling the saint's impact on the parish. "The troubled novice was badly in need of direction. Unfortunately, Tschenhens absences continued, and Neumann's doubts remained unresolved."

Despite his reservations, Fr. Neumann ministered fervently to the flock of 300 souls associated with St. Alphonsus. Parish records show his signature memorializing three baptisms.

"We can be sure that the needs of our ancestors were always John Neumann's main concern," Marianne Schaffer wrote. "He saw the necessity of the sacraments for all his people, even those on out-of-the-way farms. His travels must have taken him many long miles over rough fields and dense woods; through rain, mud, heat and cold to attend to the more remote and neglected of his flock."

Wenzel Neumann, John's brother -- and a religious brother -- spent at least some of the time with him in western New York and in Peru.

Fr. Neumann's doubts about his vocation continued. Fr. Tschenhens, who was being transferred to Baltimore, obtained approval to bring the

SAINT JOHN NEUMANN, C.S.S.R.

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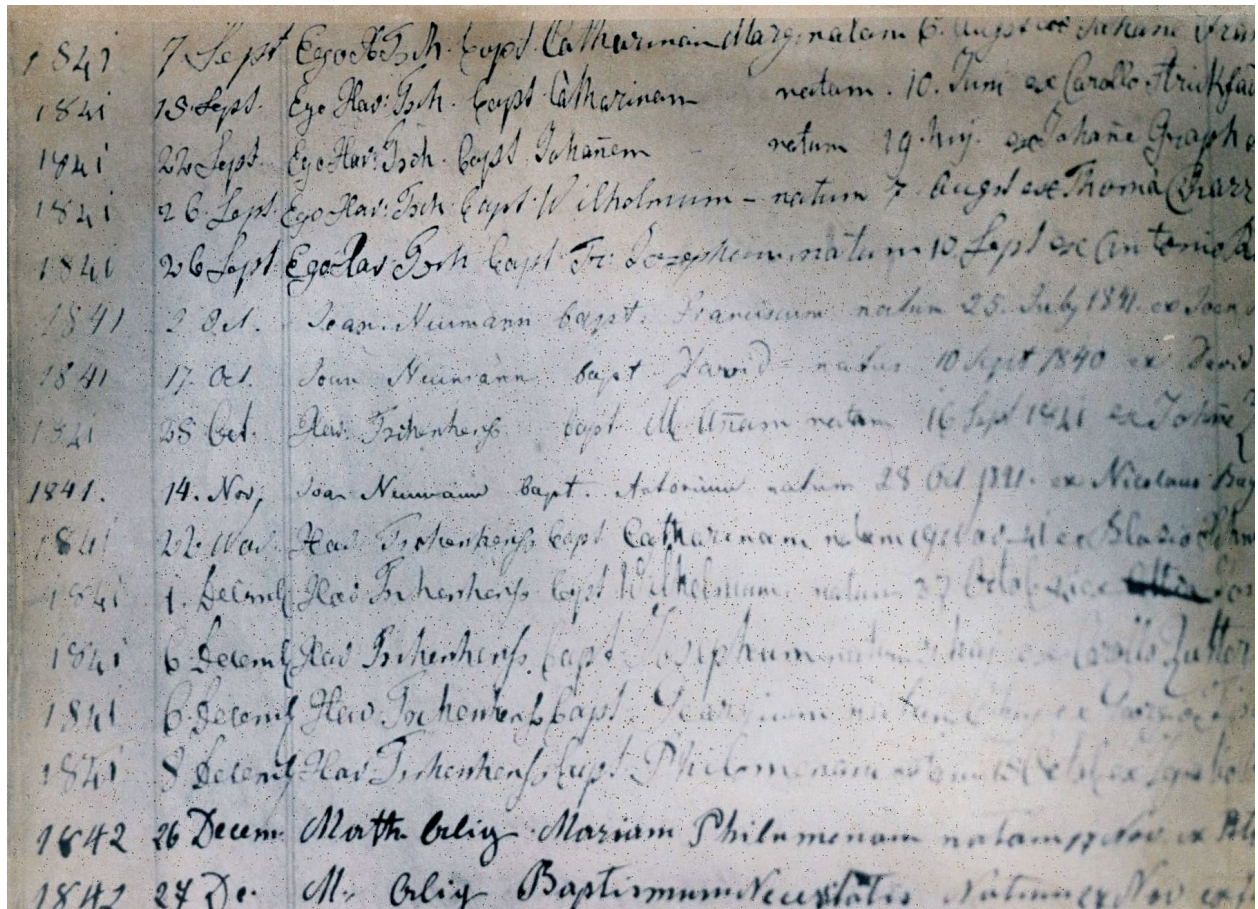
FOURTH BISHOP OF PHILADELPHIA
REDEMPTORIST MISSIONARY
SERVANT OF GOD AND MAN



THE SAINT.....WHO WALKED AMONG US

Compiled By
Marianne Schaffer

The cover of Marianne Schaffer's thought-provoking booklet.



John Neumann's signature appears three times in St. Alphonsus Parish baptismal records.

novitiate there. Riding an open wagon in pouring rain, Neumann reached Canton on November 19, 1841. There he met with Cincinnati Bishop John Purcell who recruited Neumann to leave the Redemptorists and return to being a diocesan priest.

"Although it was a temptation that came at a time when his soul was shaken to its depths, the young priest met the test and refused," Curley wrote in the 1952 biography of Neumann.

Though he rebuffed the bishop's recruitment efforts, Fr. Neumann agreed to change course and go to the community of Rudolf, where there was yet another dispute among German Catholics.

He preached to and prayed with the congregants for 10 days.

"The grace of God worked wonders in that mission," Curley wrote. "In spite of bitterly cold weather, the people came enthusiastically, almost all of them, to hear him; and what was better, 300 confessions were heard and almost all in the parish crowded to the Communion rail."

Neumann's intervention inspired a delegation from the parish to travel to Cincinnati to seek forgiveness for their quarrelsome conduct, Curley reported.

Fr. Neumann finally reached Baltimore on December 8, 1841, after stops in Steubenville, Ohio; Wheeling W.V.; and Frederick, Md. By then, Novice Neumann had ministered in 12 places in just 14 months.

"This was a trying period," Curley wrote. "Neumann wondered whether he was doing the Will of God in joining the Redemptorists, but he persevered in prayer."

To Neumann's surprise, just six weeks later he made his profession to become a full member of the Redemptorists. There were just too many German Catholics in Maryland that needed shepherding for Neumann to remain a novice in Baltimore.

"One has to think about how he traveled the primitive roads and trails of northern Ohio to minister to the faithful in 1841 and of the five years he spent as a missionary in western New York before coming to Ohio," wrote Huron County historian Henry Timman in a 2016 installment of his weekly Norwalk Reflector *Just Like Old Times* column. "Everyday must have brought new experiences to the young priest as he learned to cope with frontier America."

It would seem Fr. Neumann's time at St. Alphonsus made quite the impression on the parish.

Before his arrival, the parish was in almost constant turmoil. When the Precious Blood priests arrived a couple years after Neumann's departure, they found a well-organized, faithful parish.

In Fr. Leon Lentsch's 1897 parish history, he described Neumann as "the saintly little priest." At the time this was written, 80-year process of Neumann being canonized had barely started.

Likewise, Neumann's time at Peru seemed to end the turmoil in his life.

Fr. Neumann went on to become superior of the U.S. Redemptorists in 1847 and a naturalized United States citizen in 1848. In 1852, he was consecrated Bishop of Philadelphia. It was an appointment that he resisted because he felt unprepared for it. But once in office, he flourished.

At the time, Philadelphia was the largest diocese in America. Bishop Neumann championed the Catholic education system. During his eight years as bishop, 80 churches, 35 schools and a cathedral were built in the diocese. An analysis written at the time of Neumann's canonization describes his "fervent building of churches, which he did as if in fulfillment of a vow."⁴

As bishop, he suggested the celebration of 40 Hours Devotions. Despite initial pushback from priests, who were worried non-Catholics would make fun of the ceremony, it became a standard Catholic practice.

Neumann died of a heart attack -- some accounts describe the cause of death as exhaustion -- January 5, 1860, at the age of 48, collapsing in the snow while walking back from the post office. He was buried in the basement of St. Peter's Church (now the national Shrine of St. John Neumann) in Philadelphia.

⁴ 'Newest U.S. saint doesn't fit pattern' by Fr. Robert A. Graham, S.J.; Catholic Universe Bulletin July 1, 1977.

Almost immediately, devout souls were drawn to his grave. More than a few were claiming extraordinary miracles of grace. It was as though John Neumann, now dead, continued his works of mercy among his people. For decades, this unsolicited devotion continued. Finally, after many years and many incontrovertible miracles worked through the intercession of this holy man, his cause was introduced in Rome.⁵

In December 1896, the Vatican began to officially take notice and started the process toward sainthood. The progress of canonization proved extraordinarily slow, thanks in part to a prominent naysayer and some others that thought John Neumann was too ordinary of a person to be considered a saint.

A Roman monk, who Neumann biographer Joseph Manton called by the apparent pseudonym Padre Carlo, was named devil's advocate for the bishop's veneration hearing. Carlo took his mission seriously, vehemently questioning Neumann's saintly qualifications.

"Padre Carlo in all sincerity could not see that Neumann had attained any extraordinary degree of sanctity. What was heroic in the life of a common plodder? There were no remarkable undertakings, no chilling penances, no great trials. This man's life was too ordinary to be considered for canonization," Manton wrote, paraphrasing the monk's stance.

In the days before the November 21, 1921, veneration consistory, Padre Carlo individually met with the cardinals that would take part,



⁵ An excerpt from an article that appeared on the St. John Neumann website, now a site hosted by the Neumann national shrine.

implored each not to advance Neumann toward sainthood.

"The princes of the Church had listened, fascinated, to the eloquence of this black-robed monk with the flaming eyes, and had assented to the superb logic of his argument as it rolled from his ringing voice," Manton wrote, "in the end they nodded grave agreement."

Padre Carlo's rounds also included a sitting with Pope Benedict XV. The pope was not impressed by the argument. "In fact, he could not be convinced at all," Manton wrote, but traditionally popes had simply ratified the conclusion of the cardinals.

The morning of the hearing, Padre Carlo was confident of his impending success in derailing Neumann's eventual sainthood. He stopped for a haircut. The monk never made it to the hearing. He died in the barber's chair -- mid-haircut.

The consistory, with the Holy Father presiding, was impatiently waiting for Padre Carlo's arrival when news of his death came. The cardinals read the death as a sign from God and unanimously dropped their objections to the veneration of John Neumann.

"Willingly, gratefully, the cardinals fell in line with what God had wrought," Manton wrote. "Indeed, God had exalted the humble."

On December 11, 1921, Pope Benedict decreed John Neumann was heroic in virtue and therefore, Venerable.

Even after that impressive series of events, the march toward sainthood continued to be slow.

"In furtherance of his beatification cause, a nationwide campaign of prayer was inaugurated a few years ago," the Catholic Chronicle, the Toledo Diocesan newspaper reported in August 1940. "In St. Alphonsus Church on the Feast of St. Alphonsus, parishioners concluded a novena in which were included prayers for Bishop Neumann's canonization."

On October 13, 1963, during the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI declared Neumann Blessed. "This beatification is an excellent document which dispels the mistaken belief that American Catholicism is not oriented to the singular and sublime expression of sanctity," Pope Paul said during the ceremony.

John Neumann finally became the first male American citizen to be canonized a saint in 1977.

In the homily on the occasion of Neumann's canonization, Pope Paul VI summarized the activity of the new saint: "He was close to the sick, he loved to be with the poor, he was a friend of sinners, and now he is the glory of all emigrants."

Even though John Neumann was only stationed in Peru for a few months, it seems the time was more than a footnote in his life; that it might have been a turning point.

"We know that God has a plan for all of us and so it was for John Neumann," Marianne Schaffer wrote in her conclusion. "He included St. Alphonsus in that plan. His continued influence led John Neumann to us, where he walked among us and touched our lives, leaving his imprint on all of us.

"That we have been touched by St. John Neumann and included in fulfilling the circle of his life should make us grateful. That we were necessary in God's plan for St. John Neumann is indeed awesome and overwhelming; to know that we have our own personal saint is a privilege that most people will never experience. It is a divine blessing that we should never, never forget," Marianne Schaffer wrote.

A saint saved our parish

commentary by Jack Schaffer

Having read many articles and several books and listened to many stories, I believe that St. John Neumann saved our parish three times.

The first time occurred when he arrived at our parish in 1841 when it was being torn apart as a result of a dispute between Norwalk "town people" and the "settlement". The residents of Norwalk contended they were more at the center of activity and therefore needed a priest and a parish of their own.

The pastor, Fr. Joseph Freygang, favored the townspeople and "went along" with them when they "kidnapped" the pastor on March 19, 1841 - the pastor's feast day.

Fr. John Neumann arrived at St. Alphonsus the following July to find the parish in turmoil. He was a natural peacemaker and saved parish for the first time.

After Neumann -- then Bishop Neumann -- passed away in 1860, many parishioners prayerfully joined others who knew the holy Bishop.

St. Alphonsus parish naturally petitioned the holy man to help them through very trying times. The parish grew and survived many years of struggle despite being a small parish with large needs.

This, it seems, is the second time the Saint saved the parish.

A few years back many parishes, especially ones in rural areas, were closed because of a lack of priests. St. Alphonsus could have been one of those to be closed because it is situated close to other parishes.

I believe that Saint John Neumann saved our parish the third time by inspiring us to move the Log House where it is believed he said Mass, and where he taught children because they were the future parishioners!