

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE
REFLECTION ON GREAT AMERICAN CATHOLICS: PART III
THE BUILDING OF A NATION AND THE REWARD OF HARD WORK:
SAINT JOHN NEUMANN AND SAINT KATHERINE DREXEL

I. St. John Neumann combined the Catholic faith with the American virtues of hard work and dedication, and so overcame prejudice and build up both the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and the Catholic school system in this nation.

A. John Neumann was raised in a modest middle class family, but received an excellent education in rural Bohemia.

1. He was born in 1811 in a small country town of Prachatitz, Bohemia, which was then a part of the Austrian Empire. (It is now a part of the Czech Republic.) His parents were Philip and Agnes Neumann, and they had two sons and four daughters.
2. Philip owned a small factory and so had the means to get a basic education for his son. The family was of moderate economic circumstances, but was very rich in the Catholic faith. In fact, the future saint was named after St. John Nepomucene, a fourteenth century priest in Prague who was martyred for refusing to break the seal of the confessional.
3. John Neumann entered seminary at the age of 20 and then transferred to Charles University in Prague two years later. He was a bright student who learned six languages, while working his way through college. In fact, he built up his English skills while working alongside English speaking factory workers.
4. At first his ordination was delayed because of the illness of his bishop. And then the bishop decided that had so many priests that he was not ordaining more at the time. Other bishops in Europe likewise turned him down on the grounds that they did not need a foreign priest.
5. John Neumann, being short and of somewhat provincial stock, did not make a particularly appealing first impression.

B. Pursuing his calling to the priesthood, John Neumann travelled to the United States, without any guarantee of success, and became a priest of New York.

1. At first, he wrote letters to United States bishops asking them about the prospects for ordination here. But, after he did not receive replies, he decided to come to the United States and make his appeal in person.
 2. He arrived in New York in 1836 with few possessions, but good references. It turned out that the New York Bishop John DuBois (a French exile who had earlier founded Mount St. Mary seminary) had sent an encouraging letter, but it had not arrived until after John Neumann had left Prague. But, now that he was in this nation, Bishop Dubois soon ordained him and assigned him to a parish in western New York near Buffalo, which had many German immigrants. The pastor Fr. Pax gave him the choice of a city or country ministry. He chose the more difficult country ministry.
 3. For the next four years, he travelled over western New York and was very busy with teaching and ministry in general. He had a great respect for learning and established catechetical programs in remote areas. He would often teach himself at first and then train catechists to take over. He also would visit people regularly, even in remote farms. And his gift of languages helped him minister to the broad range of immigrants.
 4. His parish stretched over 100 miles often through very difficult and swampy terrain. At one point he collapsed from exhaustion and was three months in recovery.
- C. However, he wanted more of a religious community and needed help in his busy ministry, and so joined the Redemptorist order in 1840.
1. The Redemptorists (more formally the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer) is an order founded by St. Alphonsus Liguori in 1732 especially for preaching and missionary work among neglected people.
 2. At that time, the Redemptorists were just beginning their mission to America, and John Neumann was in their first class.
 3. Fr. John Neumann joined the novitiate in Pittsburgh and was the first Redemptorist to take vows in the New World, in 1841. He first became rector of St. Philomena Church in Pittsburgh, in 1844 and then was transferred to Baltimore. His assistant at St. Philomena was Fr. Francis Xavier Seelos, who had since been beatified.

4. Fr. John Neumann became a US citizen in 1848 and became the Provincial of the order in the United States in that same year. He also took over as the pastor of St. Augustine Church in Elkridge, MD from 1849-1851. Then he became the pastor of St. Alphonsus Church in Baltimore in 1851. In the meantime, however, he was trying to increase the discipline of the Redemptorists in America very fast, and became unpopular among many of them. And so he agreed to resign as Provincial in 1850, a move that he was happy about.

D. Seeing his great administrative abilities, Pope Pius IX appointed him as the fourth Bishop of Philadelphia in 1852.

1. At the time, Philadelphia was also a center of immigration, and especially Catholic immigration, to the United States. Germans and French had immigrated in large numbers earlier; and at that time, the Irish Potato Famine was at its worst and was leading to a large exodus of Irish people to America.
2. There was also a great deal of anti-immigrant, and in particular, anti-Catholic sentiment in the city. The Know Nothing party, which was vehemently anti-immigrant, was largely centered in the city; and there had been anti-Catholic riots in the 1830s and 1840s.
3. In addition, Philadelphia was a very prosperous city, with much culture and wealth. And many people in society looked down on the more rural and simple culture of John Neumann. For his part, he never tried to impress people by sophistication and travelling in elite circles.

E. During the short tenure of St. John Neumann as Bishop of Philadelphia, the Catholic Church grew rapidly in Pennsylvania.

1. Over the course of the next eight years, the diocese built 73 churches and began the construction of several others.
2. Many of the churches were called national churches because they ministered heavily to the immigrants from a particular country or countries, who did not yet understand the language or the culture. In particular, Bishop John Neumann founded the first Italian church in America, and at first ministered there himself until he could get a priest to do so. Latin was still be the liturgical language, and the parishes would encourage the learning of English. But they understood that there needed to be a time of transition. Because Bishop Neumann spoke fluent German, French, Spanish, and Italian, as well

as English, Latin, and his native Czech he could minister to all of the different groups well. He even learned Gaelic to help in ministry to the Irish.

3. Bishop John Neumann organized the first diocesan Catholic school system in this country. When he arrived, there was one Catholic school in the diocese. Eight years later, there were over 100. The number of students in these schools increased from 500 to 9000. They would hand on both education and Catholic values, combining them with an appreciation of the new nation. The success of these schools and the dedication of their students refuted the Know Nothing party's claim that Catholics could not be good Americans because they were Catholic first.
 4. Bishop Neumann personally wrote two catechisms and a Bible history for the teaching of the faith, as well as a handbook for clergy. This idea of publishing catechetical books for the general public would become a central inspiration for future catechetical instruction in the United States.
 5. Liturgically, Bishop Neumann promoted Eucharistic Adoration, including the 40 Hours devotion that has become very common in America.
 6. He helped found the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia in 1855 to serve the immigrants in education and care for the poor. He also invited the Sisters of Notre Dame to come over from Germany to help with schools and orphanages and the Christian Brothers to come in to help with teaching. And he brought in the Oblate Sisters of Providence, who were founded in Baltimore from Hatian women who were dedicated to the education of girls and adult women, as well as care of the elderly. The order was a bold move both in integrated African Americans and in educating girls and adult women of modest means.
 7. He had to deal with grave opposition, including the burning of several schools and convents by anti-Catholic mobs. Although he was at times discouraged (and in fact asked the Pope to appoint someone who would be more popular), he persevered.
- F. Bishop Neumann was in Rome for the proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. He was chosen to hold the text for Blessed Pope Pius IX; it is sometimes said that that reason was precisely that he was short and would not block the view of the Pope.

- G. St. John Neumann died on January 5, 1860 at the age of 49. He had been having lunch with friends and said near the end of that time, “A man must always be ready, for death comes when and where God wills it.” He then went out to perform an errand and collapsed in the street. He was brought into a home and died a few minutes afterward.
- H. Blessed Pope Paul VI beatified Bishop John Neumann on October 13, 1963, less than 4 months into his papacy. He declared him to be a saint on June 19, 1977, less than a year before his own death.
- I. St. John Neumann accomplished all of these things based upon his deep prayer life, his simplicity of life, and his extraordinary hard work.
1. Even as Bishop, he kept a very frugal lifestyle, rarely getting new clothes and giving the vestments he received as gifts to newly ordained priests. When he visited his hometown in 1854, the other bishops were surprised at how simple his luggage was and the fact that he was used to walking when he could get a horse.
 2. He was constantly visiting parishes to encourage the parishioners. At his funeral, his predecessor Bishop Kendrick of Baltimore said, “The constant visitation to his diocese throughout almost the whole year marked him as the good shepherd anxious to afford his sheep the pastures of eternal life.”
 3. From early in his ministry, he was known for being willing to ride through very poor weather in treacherous roads to bring ministry to those in remote areas.
 4. At first, his heavy accent and uncultured manners made people rather look down on him. And in fact, even near the end of his life, he wrote to the Pope asking that he transfer him to a more rural diocese because that would be more in tune with his background. However, his intelligence and dedicated impressed people, both Catholic and non-Catholic, and gradually increased the prestige of the Church.
 5. His tireless energy also promoted the American goal of education for all, joining this goal with the Catholic faith. As Pope Paul VI said at his canonization, “He helped children to satisfy their need for truth, their need for Christian doctrine, for the teaching of Jesus in their lives. He did this both by catechetical instruction and by promoting, with relentless energy, the Catholic school system in the United States. And we still remember the words of our

late Apostolic Delegate in Washington, the beloved Cardinal Amleto Cicognani: “You Americans”, he said, “possess two great treasures: the Catholic school and the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Guard them like the apple of your eye.”

6. He drew strength each day for his ministry from the Mass. As Pope Paul VI said at his canonization, “The Eucharistic Sacrifice was the center of his life, and constituted for him what the Second Vatican Council would later call “the source and summit of all evangelization.”

J. St John Neumann thus exemplified many great American traits.

1. He valued learning highly, but was never boastful of it. Instead, he put great effort in the promotion of education for all people.
2. He was a man of the people, never trying to live high on the hog, but rather visiting people wherever they were.
3. He was willing to overcome prejudice, both against himself and against other minorities.
4. He accomplished all of these things through his patience and hard work. But work did not dominate his life. Rather it was based upon the love that was inspired by his prayer, his conversation with Jesus and the angels and saints. That prayer was the grounding of his success and must be the grounding of the success of this nation. For even the relatively secular Ben Franklin promoted prayer as a part of the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, saying, “God governs the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can with without His aid? We have been assured in the sacred writing that ‘Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that built it.’”
5. Through this joining of prayer and work, a confident willingness to overcome all obstacles by patient effort, St. John Neumann exemplified the American spirit.

II. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, St. Katherine Drexel showed how the Catholic faith can be lived out by one who is wealthy and works hard to use that wealth and business sense for the service of society.

A. Katherine was raised in a wealthy and devoutly Catholic Philadelphia family.

1. She was born in 1858 to Francis and Hannah Drexel. Her father, was a very wealthy man, and a leading member of the banking and railroad industries. His brother Joseph Drexel took on J.P Morgan as a junior partner and formed what was then called Drexel, Morgan and Company; that corporation would later become what is now called J.P Morgan and Company. Joseph Drexel also founded Drexel University in Louisiana.
2. Francis was Catholic, while Hannah was a Baptist Quaker. But Hannah died five weeks after Katherine's birth. And so Katherine and her older sister Elizabeth were raised by an uncle and aunt.
3. But when Francis remarried Emma Bouvier in 1860, they both returned home to their father and step mother. Three years later, the couple had a daughter Louise.
4. Both Francis and Emma were devout Catholics and the home life was imbued with the Catholic faith and promoted education, with a private tutor for the daughters.
 - a. On three days a week, Emma used the family home for care of the poor, giving them food, clothing and financial assistance. Katherine and her sisters helped out when they were able. They would get to know the poor and their needs, rather than giving resources at a distance.
 - b. Later on Elizabeth and Katherine taught summer school when at the family's summer home in Torresdale, Pennsylvania; the family called the summer house "Saint Michael's."
 - c. The family also travelled extensively, including tours of Europe. On one of the tours, they met Pope Pius IX in 1875.
 - d. Two other woman at the house that would have interacted with the daughters a lot and thus had a great influence on Katherine and her sisters. Joanna Ryan was a servant and a devout Catholic who had tried to become a nun, but could not due to her health. And a Miss Cassidy was the tutor, teaching not only academic subjects, but also piety and good manners.

She emphasized the importance of regular letter writing, which was an occupation that Catherine took on extensively throughout her life.

- e. Katherine was also very devout, known for spending long times of prayer in the chapel. The local priest, Fr. James O'Connor was her spiritual director.
5. At the time, Katherine was active in charity, but also used to the wealth of her family. And so, although she considered religious life, she decided against it; and her spiritual director agreed. She wrote, "I hate never to be alone. I hate the privations of poverty and the religious life. I have never been deprived of luxuries." She was not yet not ready for the more intense call of religious life. But she was devout and honest with herself and with God.
 6. And so, it was thought that she would marry into one of the prominent families. At the age of 21, there was the debutante ball for her, a common occasion for daughters of wealthy families.
- B. But when her parents died, Katherine inherited a large fortune and used it at first to fund schools and missions.
1. In 1879, Emma came down with cancer, and Katherine nursed her for three years until she died. During that time, Katherine's faith grew much stronger. Francis also died in 1885, leaving Katherine with an inheritance of \$15.5 million, which would today be the equivalent of over \$300 million.
 2. She had learned from her travels of the needs of the American Indians. And so, at first, she used her great income to fund schools for the less fortunate, and especially for American Indians.
 3. In 1870, President Grant had established what he called the Peace Policy with the American Indians, which among other things created reservations for them and tried to get religious groups to minister to them. However, by 1880, the policy had lost most of its support, and the United States government was more hostile to Indians. Among others, Bishop Martin Mart, Vicar Apostolic of Northern Minnesota, and Reverend Joseph Stephan, Director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions. Appealed to the Drexel sisters generally, and received over \$1.5 million over the course of time for the missions.

- C. In order to serve the Almighty God and the American Indians better she joined the Sisters of Mercy.
1. James O'Connor was now the bishop of Omaha, Nebraska, and Katherine he took up a more extensive correspondence with him. He was looking for a religious order to help found new schools in his diocese.
 2. In 1887, she met Pope Leo XIII and asked him about a congregation that could serve the American Indians in Wyoming and elsewhere. He recommended that she become a missionary herself.
 3. Katherine had already been thinking about religious life since her mother's illness, and she took this advice to heart. She continued consultations with Bishop O'Connor, who advised her about her desire and her reservations. She was reluctant to break ties with her family, for her sisters were still very active in charity. And she still had a reluctance to live in community and still had an attachment to the comforts of wealth. In one letter he wrote:

You give positive personal reasons for not embracing the religious state. The first — the difficulty you would find in separation from your family, does not merit much consideration, as that would have to be overcome, in any case. The second — your dislike for community life is a very serious one, and if it continues to weigh with you, you should give up all thought of religion. You would meet many perfect souls there, but some, even among superiors, who would be far from perfect. To be in constant communion with these, to be obliged to obey them, is the greatest cross of the religious life. Yet to this, all who 'would be perfect,' must be prepared to submit. Indeed, toleration of their faults and shortcomings is, in the Divine economy, one of the indispensable means of acquiring perfection. The same must be said of 'the privations and poverty,' and the monotony of the religious life, to which you allude. If you do not feel within you the courage, with God's help, to bear them, for the sake of Him to whom they lead, go no further in your examination. Thousands have borne such things and have been sanctified by them, but only such as had foreseen them, and resolved, not rashly, to endure them for Our Lord."

4. She also preferred contemplative life, but Bishop O'Connor realized that, with her background and talents, as well as the fortune, she would be of greater service in a more active order. Once she settled on religious life, she also wanted to give away the entire fortune at once. But Bishop O'Connor advised her that she should use it for a new order dedicated to the service and education of African Americans and American Indians.

5. And so she joined the Sisters of Mercy in 1889 with the understanding that she would be forming a new religious order.
 6. She took final vows in 1891 and, with a few of the other sisters, founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Indians and Colored People, later called simply the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. To the regular religious vows, she added another vow, “ To be the mother and servant of the Indian and Negro races according to the rule of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament; and not to undertake any work which would lead to the neglect or abandonment of the Indian and Colored races.” The order was funded by the interest on her inheritance, which she gave to the control of her and the sisters. As superior of the order, she learned to control wealth without being controlled by it.
- D. The Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament soon became very active in founding schools in poorly served areas.
1. She and the other 15 sisters then founded their first school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. (The town’s name is from Spanish for The Faith. The city was founded as the “The Royal Town of the Faith of St. Francis.)
 2. As the order grew, the family home of Saint Michael became the novitiate house and then the motherhouse.
 3. Over the next 40 years, they founded 23 rural schools, 50 missions for Indians and 40 other mission centers. The schools were mostly for African Americans and Indians, for schooling was still segregated then. The sisters often received opposition from locals who did not care for quality schooling in minority areas. As a result, they often had to buy property for the schools through intermediaries. When they and the Archbishop of Philadelphia Patrick Ryan were going to dedicate Saint Michael as the novitiate, a piece of dynamite was found in the cornerstone nearby. The groundskeeper labelled the platform with a warning that it contained nitroglycerine to keep anyone from trying to come near again.
 4. The order continued its growth. By 1904, there were 104 sisters in Pennsylvania, New Mexico and Arizona.
 5. She had to join an enthusiastic spirit with prudence. For example, at first she wanted to send even sisters in formation to Wyoming for the schools in that region. But, at the advice of Archbishop Ryan, she decided that they needed to complete formation before entering into such a difficult environment. They

would eventually send sisters to Wyoming, as well as California, Louisiana, Tennessee and Virginia.

6. In 1917, the order founded Xavier School, which would what eventually became Xavier University in New Orleans, which was among the first universities for blacks in America. With her sisters, she helped found St. Emma's Industrial and Agricultural Institute near Richmond, Virginia, which was a trade school for African Americans.
 7. The order received approval from Pope St. Pius X in 1913.
- E. St. Katherine Drexel lived out the last 18 years of her life in quiet contemplation.
1. She suffered a heart attack in 1935, at the age of 77. Two years later, she gave up the leadership of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.
 2. She had always considered prayer central to the order's success, and in fact made sure that the tabernacle was always central in the convent. As the name of the order implies, she considered time spent in the chapels central to the order.
 3. During those last 18 years, she gradually became more infirm, but was still regularly at prayer and filled notebooks full of her meditations.
 4. But she lived until 1955, regularly at prayer. By her death, the order had over 500 sisters in 51 convents. They ran 49 elementary schools, 12 high school, 3 houses of social services, Xavier University and a house of studies in Washington.
- F. St. Katherine Drexel both assisted in the overcoming of racial prejudice in American and exemplified the American ability to use talents and wealth to build the world into a better place.
1. She had great wealth and business acumen. But she was not dominated by her wealth, but instead considered it to be an opportunity to serve others.
 2. She kept busy, but was not a workaholic. Instead, her work was based upon her prayer, and became a source of dignity for herself, her sisters, and those whom she served.

3. She was a pioneer in making education available to more and more people, not only to help them get ahead in the world, but also to give them a sense of self-worth.
4. As St. John Paul II said in his canonization homily, “To her religious community, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, she taught a spirituality based on prayerful union with the Eucharistic Lord and zealous service of the poor and the victims of racial discrimination. Her apostolate helped to bring about a growing awareness of the need to combat all forms of racism through education and social services. Katharine Drexel is an excellent example of that practical charity and generous solidarity with the less fortunate which has long been the distinguishing mark of American Catholics.”