

Homily for the Memorial of St. John Neumann

**Closing Mass for the 2026 SEEK Conference
Columbus, Ohio**

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**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is good to be with you to celebrate this final Mass of SEEK 2026. It is hard to believe that only four days ago, we gathered for the opening Mass with Bishop Earl Fernandes, who welcomed us to his diocese and shared a message from Pope Leo. In this video, Pope Leo asked us to reflect on the question posed by Jesus in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. He asked Andrew and the other disciple, “What do you seek?” He asked them this question because, in the words of Pope Leo, “they were restless – in a good way. They did not want to settle for the normal routine of life. They were open to God and were longing for meaning.”¹

Pope Leo and I have a few things in common. Most importantly, we are followers of Jesus and successors of the Apostles. Less importantly, but

still significant, in my opinion, is that we both grew up on the south side of Chicago and remain loyal White Sox fans to this day!

I would like to ask some follow up-questions, following upon Pope Leo's question. What have you found this week? *Whom* have you found this week? Have you witnessed the joy that comes from following Jesus Christ? Have you experienced the forgiveness and healing that you never thought was possible?

We are assured by Christ that our search for Him will never be in vain. He promised that the one who seeks, finds; the one who asks, receives; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. The reality is that when we seek God, this desire comes from God who is already seeking each one of us to be His disciple, His follower. God calls each of us by name, and teaches us to call him Father. The key question, then, is how do we respond? Do we say yes to His invitation to follow His way? Will we leave here changed for the better? Will people notice any difference in the way we live our lives? Will they see the joy of God's love in our hearts manifested in the devout and fervent practice of our Catholic faith and in the way we treat other people with compassion and love?

Saint John told us in the first reading today, “you belong to God.”² What an amazing thing, to be able to say that we belong to God! The Spirit of God is the one who teaches us that we belong to God. He teaches us to cry out to God, “Abba, Father!” But John also warns us that there are many spirits in the world that do not belong to God. The spirit of the antichrist is already present in the world. This spirit wants nothing more than to separate us from God and make us think that we are orphans. Maybe we have already heard the voice of this spirit speaking to our hearts. We have heard the voice of someone saying that God is not interested in our lives and that God does not love us. This is the spirit of the antichrist! We must not trust every spirit that we encounter, but instead test them. Every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus does not belong to God. Many in the world listen to the spirit of the antichrist and seek to find ultimate happiness in this world alone, apart from Christ. The voice of the antichrist likes to shout loudly to distract us and drown out the voice of God present in our hearts. These voices belong to the world, and the world listens to them. Maybe we have listened to these voices ourselves, allowing our hearts and souls to be turned away from God. It is never too late for us to turn back to the God who made us and loves us.

My brothers and sisters, the world is changing. When we observe social media, we see many people obsessed with worldly status, content creation, and the goal of “influencing” others. On the other hand, we can look around today and see thousands of people on fire with love for God. When we look at the Church, we can see God’s plan unfold over time to respond to the challenges of each generation. When the Church is struggling, God does not create a new church. Jesus Christ founded the Church once and for all on the Rock of Peter the fisherman. When the Church is in need of renewal, God raises up saints to let the light of Christ shine anew in the Church and the world.

Today we celebrate the feast day of Saint John Neumann who was the Bishop of Philadelphia from 1852-1860. I am very intentionally using the German pronunciation of his name: *NOY–muhn*, not the English pronunciation, *NEW–man*, for two reasons: First, so as not to confuse Saint John Neumann – spelled N-e-u-m-a-n-n – with Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman – spelled N-e-w-m-a-n – an influential English churchman and scholar of the 19th century who led the Oxford movement in the Church of England and later became a cardinal deacon in the Roman Catholic Church.

This Saint John Newman was canonized a saint by Pope Francis in 2019 and was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIV just last year.

The second reason is because when I was studying for the priesthood at Mundelein Seminary, my scripture professor, the late Father James P. Doyle, was very insistent that the pronunciation of the name of the saintly bishop from Bohemia was pronounced *NOY – muhn*, not *NEW – man*. For those of you who are teachers, take heart that students sometimes do actually remember what you taught them!

Today, Saint John Neumann is known for his heroic pastoral work and founding the first Catholic school system in this country, but it would be a mistake to look only at his apparent accomplishments without knowing how these were made possible.

Like Saint John Newman, Saint John Neumann also lived in the 19th Century, but he grew up in a remote mountain village in Bohemia in a territory that is now in the Czech Republic. John often attended daily Mass with his mother and enjoyed serving Mass. He did not feel an inclination to become a priest, but when he and his classmates began discussing further studies, the idea of becoming a priest kept coming to him. John began seminary studies, and sometime during his second year of theology, John

read some reports of the Leopoldine Society which was dedicated to missionary work in North America. One day, John was walking along the Moldau River with his classmate, and all of a sudden, they each were overtaken by the desire to devote themselves to the mission in North America as soon as they were able. They invited other classmates to share in their dream, but they were frightened by this idea, and John realized that the others did not have a missionary vocation.

John continued his studies, where he experienced some challenges. One semester he happened to be in class with three different priests who were ineffective teachers. He said the first of these was more opposed to the Pope than for him, but none of the students held this professor in high enough regard for him to do any real harm. The second professor was far too philosophical for a single student to understand him. The third professor was a Josephinist, which was a movement that believed that the Church should be owned and operated by the state government. John wrote a very telling statement about this semester in his autobiography. He said, "It is a pity that, in institutions like this, so much more is done to keep up the appearance of learning than to spread good Catholic and useful

knowledge.”³ The idea that Catholic schools should pass on useful Catholic knowledge was an idea that never left John for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile, John tried to find a way to serve as a priest in North America to live out his missionary calling. John was put in contact with the Bishop of Philadelphia, who was happy to accept him as a seminarian. John began the long trek West across Europe to join his new diocese. However, when he was on his journey, he received a message that the bishop of Philadelphia had revoked his decision, and that John should no longer come. Moreover, he found out that the money for his travel expenses had already been given to someone else. Undaunted, John then asked the Bishop of Vincennes, Indiana, if he would accept him as a seminarian. On the day John boarded the ship, he received his answer – which was no. Nevertheless, John crossed the Atlantic Ocean, confident that God was calling him to do so. When he arrived in New York City, John presented himself to the bishop there, who was very happy to accept him as a seminarian because there was a great need to minister to German-speaking Catholics. John had found his diocese. He was ordained a priest only a few weeks later and began his priestly ministry as a missionary.

For four years, Father John labored as a parish priest, working with his whole heart to bring Christ to others through the sacraments. One time he took over a parish after the Redemptorist priests who had been there were assigned elsewhere. Father John was amazed at the holiness and devotion of the people there which had been accomplished through the ministry of the Redemptorist priests. Father John then experienced the supernatural desire to live in a community of priests. He asked to join the Redemptorists who had impacted him and his parish so deeply in a positive way. Father John ministered for several years as a Redemptorist priest and was named Bishop of Philadelphia by Pope Pius IX.

The same missionary spirit which first took hold of John's heart continued to animate him as a diocesan bishop. He tirelessly devoted himself to the needs of the people of his diocese. Bishop Neumann grounded the life of his diocese in devotion to Jesus present in the Holy Eucharist. He began the Forty Hours devotion - forty consecutive hours of prayer before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament - across his entire diocese, scheduling it so that across the entire year, at least one parish was celebrating this at any given time.

His era as bishop saw nearly eighty new churches built. As bishop, he had to serve people who spoke various languages such as German, English, and Italian. Bishop Neumann sent a plea to Europe, asking for German-speaking priests to serve in his diocese. The meager response was not enough, and he realized that the solution was only to be found in home-grown vocations. He gave resources to begin a minor seminary and promote local vocations. Bishop Neumann is most known today not only for establishing around one hundred Catholic schools during his eight short years as a bishop, but for establishing a diocesan-wide system of Catholic education. Assisted by many religious sisters and brothers, Bishop Neumann worked to make Christ known to as many people as possible through Catholic schools.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I shared the story of Saint John Neumann today to give an example of how God raises up saints to respond to the unique challenges of each generation. God placed a desire in his heart to be a priest, then he gave Saint John the desire to be a missionary in North America. Jesus Christ called Saint John Neumann by name. Through Saint John, many others also heard Jesus call them by name.

God is raising up saints for his Church today. Do not be afraid when Jesus calls you to follow Him. He will give you the strength to persevere in whatever path He calls you to follow. God has greater dreams for you than you do for yourself. In 2022, the cause for the canonization of Servant of God Michelle Dupong was opened by Bishop David Kagan of Bismarck, North Dakota. Michelle had served for six years as a FOCUS missionary. I hope that she will one day be proclaimed as the first canonized FOCUS missionary saint. If I may be so bold, I do not think that she will be the last FOCUS missionary saint.

God's commandment is that we should believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ. This name is our salvation and our light in the darkness. The people of my diocese know that I like to sing a song in my homilies on special occasions. I think our closing Mass for SEEK26 is indeed a special occasion, so I would like to close with a song about the most beautiful name of all, the name of Jesus Christ. The song is called, *What a Beautiful Name*.

I invite you to close your eyes, and let the thoughts of the most beautiful name of all fill your minds and your hearts to carry with you as you go forth from here today.

*You were the Word at the beginning
One with God the Lord Most High
Your hidden glory in creation
Now revealed in You our Christ*

*What a beautiful Name it is
What a beautiful Name it is
The Name of Jesus Christ my King
What a beautiful Name it is
Nothing compares to this
What a beautiful Name it is
The Name of Jesus*

*You didn't want heaven without us
So Jesus You brought heaven down
My sin was great Your love was greater
What could separate us now*

*What a wonderful Name it is
What a wonderful Name it is
The Name of Jesus Christ my King
What a wonderful Name it is
Nothing compares to this
What a wonderful Name it is
The Name of Jesus*

*You have no rival
 You have no equal
 Now and forever God You reign
 Yours is the kingdom
 Yours is the glory
 Yours is the Name above all names*

*What a powerful Name it is
 What a powerful Name it is
 The Name of Jesus Christ my King
 What a powerful Name it is
 Nothing can stand against
 What a powerful Name it is
 The Name of Jesus
 What a powerful Name it is
 The Name of Jesus⁴*

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2026/01/02/260102a.html>

² (1 John 3:22–4:6).

³ *The Autobiography of St. John Neumann, C.S.S.R. Fourth Bishop of Philadelphia*, St. Paul Books & Media, 1997, p. 23.

⁴ “What a Beautiful Name,” Words and Music by Ben Fielding & Brooke Ligertwood, accessed online at <https://hillsong.com/lyrics/what-a-beautiful-name/>.