

THE DAILY VIEWS ~ OP/ED

The rocky road to sainthood

by William C. Kashatus

When Pope John Paul II declared, earlier this year, that the healing of a deaf, 7-year-old Bucks County girl represented the third miracle attributed to Katharine Drexel, he cleared the way for the bank heiress' canonization.

Founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in 1891, Drexel, who spent \$20 million of her family inheritance to educate poor blacks and Indians, will become Philadelphia's second saint in October. The event will cap a process initiated by Cardinal John Krol in 1954.

But for Bishop John Neumann, the city's first saint, canonization was a much longer and more complex process that mixed politics with piety.

Designated bishop of Philadelphia by Pope Pius IX on March 28, 1852, Neumann actively discouraged the appointment. Instead, he longed for a quiet, penitential life, free from the political struggles of the diocese.

Because he was the first Bohemian-born Catholic bishop of Philadelphia, a position traditionally held by the Irish, Neumann was the object of almost constant attack from dissident clerics and laymen.

While he considered himself a failure as an administrator, the accomplishment for which he is best known — the establishment of the first parochial school system in the United States — was an administrative act.

Despite the paradoxes, Neumann's accomplishments were impressive.

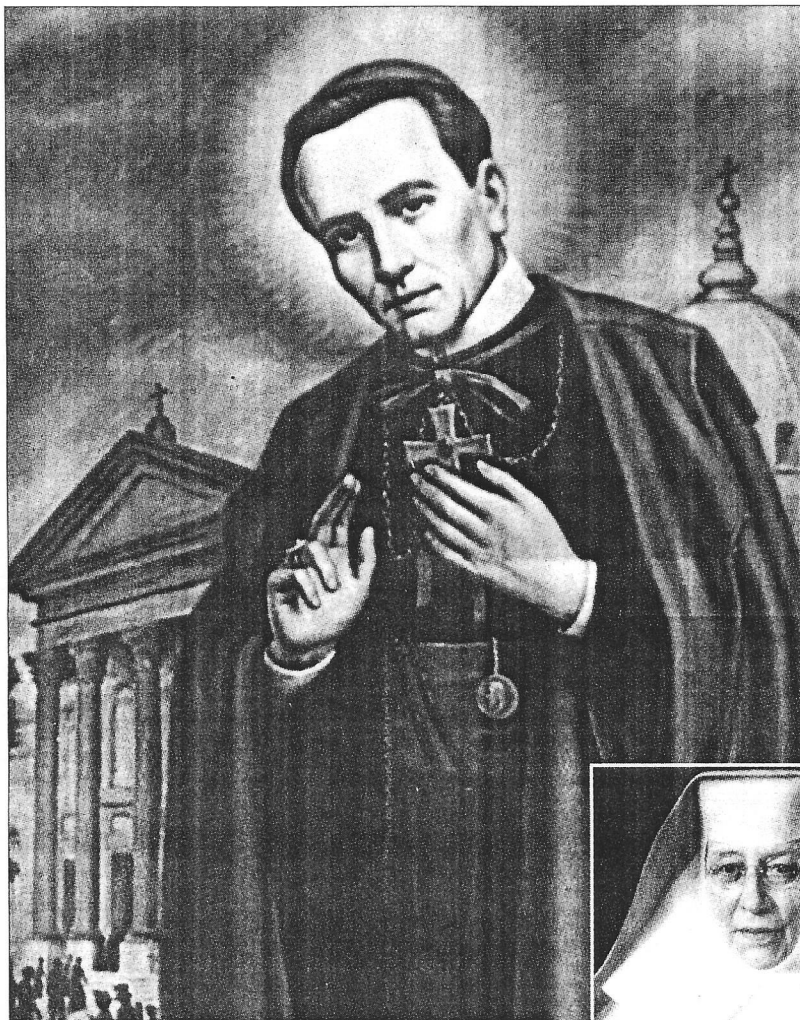
In addition to establishing the parochial school system, he brought into the Philadelphia diocese eight religious orders (including a wholly new congregation of women, the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis), he introduced a completely new concept in Catholic worship — the Forty Hours Devotion held at successive churches of the diocese on a year-round schedule — and presided over the establishment of 80 churches in the city during his seven-year tenure.

When he died on Jan. 5, 1860, thousands of mourners filed through the chapel of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul on Logan Square to pay their final respects to the short-statured cleric Philadelphia had come to embrace as "our Little Bishop."

The publication of Father John Berger's biography of Neumann in 1882 created a popular demand for canonization among Catholics, both in America and Europe.

Shortly after, Neumann's writings, along with the testimonies of some 51 contemporaries, were sent to Rome and the secretive deliberations began within the marbled confines of the Vatican.

In 1892, members of the royal Hapsburg family petitioned Pope Leo XIII to consider his sainthood. Five years later, the Roman Catholic Church began its judicial



It took John Neumann 71 years — and the death of one devil's advocate — from the start of his sainthood process to its end. For Mother Katharine Drexel, the process will be completed after only 46 years.

and the hearings continued.

Over the next 35 years, Neumann's case was adopted by the Catholic bishops of Czechoslovakia and the Conference of American Bishops, both of which petitioned Pope Pius XII on Neumann's behalf. But it wasn't until 1958 when Pope John XXIII urged Cardinal John F. O'Hara, then archbishop of Philadelphia, to expedite the required formal investigations of the miracles attributed to Neumann that the second stage of the process began.

Two miraculous cures attributed to Neumann were identified. One was that of an Italian girl, Eva Benassi, who recovered from peritonitis after seeing a picture of the bishop. The other was that of a Main Line youth, J. Kent Lenahan, who had been crushed between a car and a utility pole. He recovered after his mother had touched him with a piece of Neumann's cassock, and asked people to pray to Neumann for her son.

In 1961, a panel of medical experts — consultants to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints — ruled that the Benassi and Lenahan cures had no medical or natural explanations.

Beatification, the second step in the process of canonization, took place in the Basilica of St. Peter at the Vatican on Oct. 13, 1963.

In 1975, a third miracle was identified in the recovery of Michael Flanigan, a young Philadelphian, from bone cancer. Pope Paul VI confirmed the decision

of the cardinals the following year, and gave his assent to sainthood for Neumann in 1977.

Today, the physical remains of St. John Neumann are housed in a glass-enclosed sarcophagus under the altar in the lower church at St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church on Girard Avenue near 5th Street. ■

Visitors are welcome at the shrine, which is open seven days a week. For more information, phone 215-627-3080.

William C. Kashatus is a historian at the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester.

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process, appointing a "postulator" to argue Neumann's case, and a "promoter of the faith" — popularly known as the "devil's advocate" — to argue against it.

On Dec. 11, 1921, Pope Benedict XV declared that Neumann exhibited extraordinary "heroic" Christian virtue, the first of three steps leading to sainthood.

At this point, however, Neumann's cause was almost terminated when the devil's advocate argued persuasively in preliminary hearings that the bishop's life had been "too simple and ordinary, lacking the great deeds expected from saints."

When the devil's advocate died shortly after, clerics interpreted his death as a sign of divine favor for Neumann's cause

