

Memorial of St. John Neumann (OF) – January 5, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Winter Sacred Music Conference, Birmingham, Alabama – 5:00pm Mass – 650 words

Again, it is my pleasure as pastor and rector of this Cathedral to welcome all of the participants in Winter Sacred Music. And we're so glad that several parishioners and other friends could join us this evening as well. Today we celebrate the feast of a great American saint. Not "American" in the sense of having been born here, but "American" in the sense of having come here to spend himself in the service of God's people in this very diverse land, and dying here as a great bishop, in the odor of sanctity.

St. John Neumann began as a priest-missionary from Bohemia to serve the immigrant populations in the area of New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. To hear the confessions of his people he learned six languages, including even Gaelic. He "rode circuit" and founded parishes. Fr. John Paul Zeller from the Franciscan Missionaries at EWTN told me today that his home parish in Pennsylvania had been founded by the saint. Father said, "I like to think that if it wasn't for him and his faith, I wouldn't be a priest." Only God knows fully the many other fruits that St. John Neumann's ministry bore then and is continuing to bear even now.

Whenever we hear about these great missionary saints we should ask ourselves where that rugged spirit of yesteryear is today – and pray that it may return and inspire the hearts of new missionaries in our time. Who today is willing to travel to a far-off land, become fluent in several new languages, adapt to a much different way of life, sacrifice by riding on horseback from place to place in sometimes extreme conditions, and ultimately die of fatigue and exhaustion from having given all in the service of Christ? If all of the recent popes have spoken vigorously of a call to a new evangelization, we can be sure that there are calls – vocations – from God for new young missionaries today also. May they hear and answer his call.

There is a tendency in some places today to see the type of music that we are singing tonight as the domain of specialists – of the educated, the cultured, and the interested. But history also shows us that that could not be further from the truth: it was precisely the missionaries who not only celebrated the Mass in Latin among those whom they evangelized, but also taught them many of the great works of sacred music and led them to compose their own. From the music of Byrd that we enjoyed last night, which was composed in an atmosphere of uncertainty and even persecution, to the great Mexican baroque composers and others, who wrote in times of relative serenity, sacred music and the sacred arts have always flourished in the Church, whether in the great centers of learning or in the poorest mission fields of the new world. It is God's will that our worship should be beautiful.

As we join with all the saints and angels this evening, then, in the solemn worship of God, we pray for ourselves, for our parishes, for our places of service and work: we pray that the Lord of beauty and holiness may inspire us to continue this work that he has begun in us. Some have spoken of it as a "restoration"; others prefer to see it as a "rediscovery". Probably neither of those terms is quite accurate – unless all we are doing is looking back. No, we are looking ahead, drawing out treasures old and new, and I commend especially all of you who are involved in the work of composition and training others. May St. John Neumann intercede for us this night, and obtain for us that spirit by which each one of us may make a total gift of self according to our respective states in life, and so serve Almighty God as he deserves. Amen.