

ANDRÉ SAMPERS

THE DOCUMENT OF THE EXECUTION OF  
ST. JOHN NEUMANN'S WILL

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Zeitgenossen von Bischof Neumann wie auch seine späteren Biographen behaupten öfters, er habe gefehlt in der finanziellen Administration seiner Diözese. Er selber gibt Grund zu einer solchen Behauptung, da er mehrmals sagt, in Geldangelegenheiten nicht zuständig zu sein und zu fürchten, es könnten sich daraus Unannehmlichkeiten sowohl für ihn selber wie für andere ergeben. Wenn man aber in Betracht zieht, wieviele Kirchen, Schulen und Wohltätigkeitsinstitute während seiner Amtszeit in der Diözese Philadelphia errichtet bzw. vergrößert worden sind, fragt man sich doch, ob seine Fähigkeiten auf ökonomischem Gebiet nicht unterbewertet worden sind.

Das neuerdings gefundene Dokument der Vollstreckung von Neumanns Testament trägt entschieden dazu bei, die Legende seines Versagens in der finanziellen Verwaltung zu entkräften, wenn nicht endgültig zu widerlegen. In seinem am 11. August 1856 datierten Testament überlässt Neumann seinem Nachfolger als Bischof von Philadelphia seinen ganzen Besitz, ohne diesen allerdings näher zu umschreiben. Die Einzelheiten seines Vermögens finden wir aber im Dokument der Vollstreckung vom 27. Januar 1860 verzeichnet. Neben Kirchensachen, Bibliothek und Haushaltsgegenständen werden darin \$ 50.000, in städtischen Wertpapieren zu 6% angelegt, erwähnt.

Es entgeht unserer Kenntnis, wie und wann Neumann diese immerhin beträchtliche Summe — in heutiger Währung etwa \$ 350.000 — zusammengebracht hat; vermutlich aus Spenden, die ihm während einer längeren Periode zugegangen waren. Es ist keineswegs sicher und kommt uns sogar unwahrscheinlich vor, dass er diese Summe schon im Besitz hatte, als er sein Testament errichtete. Auch ist es nicht leicht, eine triftige Antwort zu geben auf der Frage, warum Neumann das Geld bis zu seinem Tod — zwar sicher angelegt — aufgehoben und nicht zur Linderung der finanziellen Nöte der Diözese, die ihn bis in seinen letzten Jahren schmerzlich drückten, verwendet hat. Wollte er vielleicht Geld sammeln für einen bestimmten, uns unbekanntem Zweck, möglicherweise den Fertigbau der Kathedrale, der ihm immer sehr am Herzen lag?

Auch wundert man sich, dass Neumann das Geld nicht seinem Koadjutor Bischof Wood zur Verfügung stellte, nachdem dieser 1857 grösstenteils die finanzielle Verwaltung der Diözese, für deren Verwen-

dung es doch offenbar bestimmt war, übernommen hatte. Mag sein, dass Neumann, dessen äusserste Vorsicht genügend bekannt ist, zur Sicherheit etwas für eine eventuelle Notlage zurückhalten wollte, da er doch nicht völlig vom Gelingen der Administration Woods überzeugt war. So wie Neumanns Charakter in vielen Dokumenten hervortritt, wäre es keineswegs verwunderlich, wenn er einen Notgroschen zurückgelegt hätte.

## INTRODUCTION

It has been stated repeatedly that Bishop Neumann's financial administration of his diocese was a failure, if not a disaster. We have statements to this effect made by contemporaries, fellow-Bishops and others, especially by his Coadjutor Bishop James F. Wood<sup>1</sup>, himself « a first-rate business-man »<sup>2</sup>. The objections against Neumann as Bishop of Philadelphia, formulated in America and at Propaganda in Rome, stressed mostly the fact that he did not know how to handle money properly<sup>3</sup>. Mainly for this reason he was given a Coadjutor in 1857 who would assist him especially in temporal affairs. The Saint's biographers agree that on the whole he did not have a clever hand for business<sup>4</sup>. Neumann himself provides some ground for this opinion — which may be pretty well described as a traditional one — affirming repeatedly that he felt himself incompetent in these matters and that consequently certain difficulties could arise in business affairs both for himself and for others<sup>5</sup>.

Considering, however, the many churches, schools and charitable institutions built or enlarged in the Philadelphia diocese during Neumann's time, one wonders if it was indeed all that bad, in other words if the stated incapacity was real or wrongly supposed. All this building involved a vast amount of money, and the Bishop was certainly the man — in part behind the scenes, no doubt — who collected, administered and spent it to a large extent. He may have had less talent for this sort

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<sup>1</sup> See G. Orlandi's article *G. N. Neumann e i vescovi degli U.S.A.*, in *Spic. hist.* 24 (1976) 316 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Wood is described as such in a letter of Marc A. Frenaye — himself a financial expert — to Mons. Tobias Kirby, the Rector of the Irish College in Rome, dated September 7, 1857. Cf. *Spic. hist.* 24 (1976) 300, n. 180.

<sup>3</sup> This emerges clearly from the letters and other documents published by Orlandi; *supra* n. 1. Noteworthy in this context is Robert Trisco's observation in *The Catholic Historical Review* 63 (1977) 638: « In this year of the canonization of John Nepomucene Neumann it is ironic to note that some of his episcopal colleagues denounced him to Rome for his administrative incompetence and his lack of energy and efficiency ».

<sup>4</sup> However, Neumann's standard biographer, M. J. Curley, points out convincingly that Wood's « implication of complete lack of knowledge about finances in his ordinary was far from true ». *Ven. John Neumann CSSR*, Washington [1952], 316. A photostatic paperback edition of this work: Philadelphia [1977].

<sup>5</sup> See Neumann's letter of June 4, 1855, to the Secretary of Propaganda, Archbishop Alessandro Barnabò; edited in *Spic. hist.* 24 (1976) 273. Neumann adds, however: « Hucusque spiritualia [in diocesi] satis prospere processerunt, imo et in temporalibus res non in deterius cesserunt ».

of work than some of his colleagues<sup>6</sup>, preferring to devote his energy to the more direct spiritual care of his flock<sup>7</sup>, but he did it anyway and with success.

The legend of Neumann's incapacity in financial matters is decidedly, if not definitively, discredited on closer inspection of the document of the execution of his will. This document — strangely enough unknown until recently — has come to light shortly before his canonization<sup>8</sup>. Mr. Adrian Lee was the first to make the discovery publicly known, giving also a concise evaluation of its significant contents<sup>9</sup>. Mr. Robert H. Wilson, whose excellent sketch of the 'Litte Bishop' will be known to our readers<sup>10</sup>, had the goodness to send us a xeroxed copy of the document, for which courtesy we are deeply indebted to him<sup>11</sup>.

In the will, dated August 11, 1856, Neumann bequeathes to his successor as Bishop of Philadelphia « all the property and effects, real and personal, whatsoever and wheresoever in me vested or with me deposited », without any further specification of his assets. Full particulars, however, of his personal « property and effects » are listed in the document of the inventory and execution of his will, dated January 27, 1860. Besides religious objects, the library and furniture, valued together at \$ 2,800, there is mention of \$ 50,000 invested in 6% City of Philadelphia bonds. This last entry demands some explanation which — let us face it — is not so easy to give.

We do not know how and when Neumann collected this quite large sum of money — in today's inflated currency certainly to be valued at about \$ 350,000<sup>12</sup>. Probably he accumulated it from donations over a

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<sup>6</sup> Some of Neumann's confreres were severally criticised — and not without reason — for spending too much of their energy and time on the temporal affairs of their dioceses. See *Spic. hist.* 24 (1976) 343-345.

<sup>7</sup> In the letter quoted *supra* n. 5 Neumann says: « Labores missionarii, itinera, visitationes, calores frigosque excessivas etc. semper amavi, imo etiam quaesivi, sed debita et transactiones monetarias semper abhorruui ».

<sup>8</sup> The document — together with the will — is on file at Philadelphia City Hall, Office of Register of Wills, 1860, n. 13. The texts are written by a clerk; the signatures are in the subscribers' own hand. The will was published shortly after Neumann's death on pp. 36-37 of the *Funeral Obsequies of Rt. Rev. John Nep. Neumann* and in *Leichen-Feierlichkeiten des hochw. Johann Nep. Neumann*, both published in Philadelphia, January 1860.

<sup>9</sup> In the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, March 15, 1977, p. 17. Neumann's will is not mentioned in the title of the article. In its second part Mr. Lee deals with the famous ivory Genoese Crucifix owned by Neumann, which disappeared without trace from the cathedral on March 25, 1936; 76 years after the Saint's death.

<sup>10</sup> *St. John Neumann, 1811-1860. Fourth Bishop of Philadelphia*, Philadelphia 1977. On the cover: *Saint John Neumann, Philadelphia's « Little Bishop »*.

<sup>11</sup> We also feel obliged to Mr. Wilson for the kindness he showed us and for several oral communications received from him when we met in Philadelphia on September 3, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> As the value of money is mainly based on its purchasing power it is hard, of course, to give such estimates, all the more because the standard of living and consequently the supply and demand of certain goods have changed so much. Comparing the dollar with the value of gold, we find that the cost of an ounce of gold in 1860 was about one seventh of what it costs today.

somewhat lengthy period. It is by no means certain and it seems even rather unlikely that he owned the whole amount at the time he made his will. Likewise it is hard to give a convincing answer to the question why Neumann kept the money — well invested, it is true — till his death and did not use it to relieve the financial needs of his diocese which still weighed heavy on him in the last years of his life. Did he intend perhaps to keep it together for some specific purpose, unknown to us, possibly to finish the building of the cathedral about which he was always very much concerned?<sup>13</sup>

One remains also somewhat surprised that Neumann did not place the money at the disposal of his Coadjutor Bishop Wood who, in 1857, took over for the most part — much to Neumann's relief — the financial administration of the diocese<sup>14</sup>, for the use of which it was obviously destined. Maybe he thought it prudent to hold back some money during his lifetime to have it always on hand in case of some emergency, as he perhaps did not feel too sure about the success of Wood's administration. Also a financial expert can make mistakes or meet with misfortune. Moreover, the economic situation in the States was rather difficult at the time; indeed in the autumn of 1857 it came close to disaster<sup>15</sup>. After all Neumann was an extremely prudent man, always careful to take precautions. Seeing him save something for a rainy day should cause little surprise, as this way of acting is completely in harmony with his character.

## DOCUMENTS

### I

#### [*Text of the will*]

In the name of Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen! Be it remembered that I, the Right Reverend John N. Neumann, Bishop of Philadelphia, do make and publish this my last will and testament.

I give and bequeath my library and furniture unto my Executors in trust to transfer the same to my successor in office in trust for his use as such Bishop, and to be transmitted for the like use by<sup>16</sup> his successors.

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<sup>13</sup> See *Spic. hist.* 24 (1976) 312, n. 11.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.* 302, doc. 24 (*in fine*) and 406, doc. 38.

<sup>15</sup> See the preceding article, note 105.

<sup>16</sup> « to » seems to give a better sense in the context.

All the property and effects, real and personal, whatsoever and wheresoever in me vested, or with me deposited, I give, bequeath and devise unto my Executors hereinafter named and to the survivor of them, his heirs and assigns, in trust to assign and convey the same in fee simple and forever unto the person who shall next succeed me, by appointment duly made, as Bishop of Philadelphia, upon all and singular the same uses and trusts and with the like powers upon which the said property and effects shall have been held by me immediately preceding my decease.

I hereby declare that I have no property or effects to be accounted for by my Executors to, or to descend to my lawful heirs or next of kin<sup>17</sup>, and that this will is made in order to transmit all titles and property in me legally vested, according to my duty, and as I am authorized by law to do, that all trusts, confidences and powers in me reposed may be faithfully executed and performed in all respects as I am now authorized and bound to execute and perform the same.

I appoint to be the Executors of this my last will and testament the Very Reverend Charles I. Carter and the Reverend Richard O'Connor of Philadelphia, and the Reverend Patrick Nugent of Norristown, Pennsylvania.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal, this eleventh day of August, in the year of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, One thousand Eight hundred and fifty-six.

John N. Neumann m.p.  
Bp. of Phil<sup>a</sup> *seal*

Published and declared as and for his last will and testament by the Right Reverend John N. Neumann, in our presence, who in the presence of each other and at his request have signed our names as witnesses thereunto.

Eli K. Price  
J. Sergeant Price  
H. C. Townsend

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that Neumann explicitly excludes his family as heirs; the Congregation of the Redemptorists is not mentioned in the will.

## II

[Text of the execution of the will<sup>18</sup>]

City and County of Philadelphia, ss.<sup>19</sup>.

*Personally came before me, Register of Wills, in and for the said City and County, William Maroney and Michael Walsh who upon their solemn Oaths did say, that at the request of the Executors they did « well and truly, and without prejudice or partiality, value and appraise the Goods and Chattels, Rights and Credits », which were of The Right Revd John N. Neumann deceased, « and in all respects perform their duties as appraisers, to the best of their skill and judgment ».*

Sworn and subscribed this  
27<sup>th</sup> day of January 1860  
before me

Sam.l Sloyne [?] Register  
Dep. [?]

W. Maroney  
M. Walsh

*Inventory and Appraisement of the Goods and Chattels, Rights and Credits, which were of the Right Reverend John N. Neumann late of Philadelphia, taken and made in conformity with the above deposition:*

Sacred Vessels and Vestments	\$ 1.500
Crucifix	500
Library and Fixtures	500
Household and Kitchen Furniture	300
Invested in City Sixes	50.000
Interest due on the first of Jan. 1860 on said City Sixes	00
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	\$ 52.800

All of which were held in trust by the decedent for the purposes expressed in his will and are over and above such deposits and

<sup>18</sup> The document is a printed form filled in by hand. The signatures are autograph. We give the printed parts in italics.

<sup>19</sup> ss. = sworn statement.

investments as have been made in the name of the late assistant Bishop and now Bishop of the diocese<sup>20</sup>.

I do hereby acknowledge and declare that I have received from the Very Reverend Charles I. Carter, the Reverend Richard O'Connor and the Reverend Patrick Nugent, Executors of the Will of the Right Reverend John N. Neumann deceased, the whole of the Sacred Vessels, Vestments, Crucifix, Library and Fixtures, Household and Kitchen Furniture and City Sixes in the foregoing Inventory mentioned, amounting together, according to the appraisement, to the sum of Fifty-two thousand Eight hundred dollars (\$ 52,800).

† James F. Wood  
Bishop of Philadelphia

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<sup>20</sup> From this notice it follows that the document concerns a personal bequest, distinct from the properties held by Neumann as Bishop of Philadelphia and transmitted routinely to his successor.