Today’s second reading describes the essence of a priest. I want to speak briefly about one Western New York priest, now deceased, who exemplifies this Scriptural description, namely, St. John Neumann (1811-1860).

“Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God.” John Neumann was born near Prague, in Bohemia, in what is now the Czech Republic. He completed his seminary studies in 1836, but the local bishop had so many priests, that he put on hold ordaining any new priests. Meanwhile, young John had been dreaming of serving as a missionary in the New World, and had written to various bishops but none had responded. Nevertheless, John sailed at age 24 to New York City. He arrived with one set of clothing and one dollar in his pocket. Two days later, John met the bishop of New York. Three weeks later, the bishop ordained John, and assigned him to his first parish: here in Western New York. The parish boundaries extended east to west, from Rochester to Lake Erie; and north to south, from Lake Ontario south to the Pennsylvania state line. John established his home base for this mission territory at Tonawanda. In our area, Neumann established parishes at downtown Niagara Falls, St. Mary of the Cataracts; at Williamsville, St. Peter and Paul on Main St.; and at Tonawanda, St. John the Baptist.

In doing his ministry, this young priest experienced much loneliness. With the permission of his bishop, John transferred from the diocesan priesthood to the Redemptorist Community, where, however, he continued to experience a similar loneliness. In order to serve his various migrant populations, he kept learning new languages: eventually, seven, besides his native Slavic, also German, English, French, Spanish, Italian and Gaelic. In the next few years, the Redemptorists missioned him to Pittsburgh, then Baltimore and eventually Rome appointed this very industrious priest as the Bishop of Philadelphia. At that time, the boundaries for the Diocese of Philadelphia included the entire state of Pennsylvania, the lower half of New Jersey, and the entire state of Delaware. During his eight years as bishop, he founded eighty parishes and thirty five schools. To provide teachers for these schools, he founded at Glen Riddle, PA, the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis. To propagate the faith, he wrote a catechism for children, and a Bible History book for adults. He certainly “came to serve, not to be served.” (Mt. 20.28)

Today’s Letter to the Hebrews continues, “He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness.” Many people did not like John Neumann. He was short: 5’4”. He spoke his many languages but with a Bohemian accent. The Philadelphians especially did not like him, and formally requested that someone more attractive be named bishop. Philadelphia, you may know, had been the nation’s first capital, before New York City and Washington, DC; and during the time of John Neumann, Philadelphia was regarded, especially by the Philadelphians, as the most sophisticated
city in the USA. Also, he had to deal with certain factions among the Philadelphians: the anti-Catholic Know Nothing political party, and the ultra Catholic members of the lay trustee movement.

Today’s Letter to the Hebrews concludes, “No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God.” John Neumann felt called to be a parish priest. When the Philadelphians requested that he circulate more often among the rich and powerful, he refused. He replied that his job was to serve all his people, including the rural and remotely located people who had no priests. One funny story, please. Bishop Neumann with his priest-nephew traveled from Philadelphia to Reading, PA to visit a diocesan priest. Uncle and nephew arrived at a central location, where the local priest had sent a horse and wagon to pick up his guests. Unfortunately, the wagon was filled with manure. With no room on the driver’s plank, the bishop and nephew rode at the back of the wagon with their feet dangling. The wagon bounced uncomfortably with each bump on the rough country road. Then it started to rain. The two travelers became covered in mud splashing up from the dirt road. Then a foul-smelling cloud of steam emanated from the wagon load of manure. Can you imagine that scene! Then the bishop reportedly leaned over to his nephew and, in his dry sense of humor, uttered, “Have you ever seen such a wonderful welcome for a bishop?” When John Neumann died, people from every class of society came to his wake and funeral.

St. John Neumann represents one example of a man who lived well his vocation to the priesthood. We all know there are countless other examples here in Western New York, who also have demonstrated their love of God and love of God’s people by living well their vocations to priesthood, sisterhood, married life and single life.

At Niagara University this coming spring, we will hold a vocations panel. Our presenters will include a priest, religious sister, a married couple and a single person. We pray and work not just for one vocation but all vocations. In Church History, vocations to priesthood, sisterhood, married life and single life either prosper together or suffer together. Faith underlies, inspires and sustains all our vocations. Currently in Western Civilization, we are suffering a crisis of faith. In due time, faith will be revived by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, vocations again will flourish. For that time and until that time, let’s work and pray for the vitality of all vocations. May today’s Scriptures and the exemplary life of St. John Neumann inspire each of us to live well our particular vocation.