



Father Emile Neubert: Our Lady's Dolphin

By BR. JOHN SAMAHA, S.M.

The dolphin is an unusual figure to apply to the biography of a notable and revered apostle of Mary. Yet that is how Marianist Father Thomas Stanley characterized the beloved Father Emile Neubert, who was his seminary rector many years ago. While a little unusual, the dolphin is an apt figure for Father Neubert, who was the foremost Marianist authority of his day in matters Marian – doctrine, devotion, and the charism of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade bequeathed to the Marianist family of religious and laity.

In heraldry and early Christian art the dolphin symbolized diligence, love, and swiftness in the pursuit of the Christian ideal. And these qualities are the trademark of this scholarly and saintly Marianist.

A native of France, born and raised in deeply Catholic Alsace, Father Emile Neubert, S.M. (1878-1967) experienced his Marianist formation in his homeland. As a new doctor of theology he ministered in the USA at Marianist formation centers for several years in the first quarter of the 20th century. He was widely appreciated as a teacher, preacher, and spiritual director. Shortly after World War I he was appointed rector of the Marianist International Seminary at Fribourg, Switzerland, where he guided seminarians and newly ordained priests for twenty-seven years.

Father Neubert's repeated admonition to his charges was that once ordained they had to be saints or they would be hypocrites. And he was a living example of his own advice. He would frequently say, "Give me ten truly unselfish priests, priests who are

the saints they should be, and I'll convert any city in the world." And those who observed him at close range never doubted that ten men like Father Neubert could do it.

The appetite of a dolphin is voracious. It never seems to get enough to eat. Father Neubert was like that in regard to winning souls and honoring Mary. While that may seem like two separate concerns to some, they were one and the same thing to Father Neubert. For him devotion to Mary meant attracting souls to Christ, and winning souls meant promoting devotion to Mary.

Amazing are the antics in which a dolphin will engage to get a fish to eat. And equally amazing were the efforts made by Father Neubert to bring someone closer to God. He was never too busy to help someone in spiritual need. No weather was too foul to venture out for the work of sanctification. Nothing was below his dignity or beyond his ability if it would increase the knowledge and love of Jesus and Mary.

The prey of the dolphin is often rendered immobile by the directness and swiftness of the attack. In like manner the evident earnestness, simplicity, and sincerity of Father Neubert seemed to stun and make easy marks of those whom he encounters. He was not especially clever or pleasing in his manner of speaking, teaching, or preaching. Yet whatever he said had a ring of conviction that captivated the listener. His enthusiasm for his subject was contagious. One might characterize him as a con artist in the game of selling the priceless treasures of grace for a meager bit of human effort.

Attributed to Chesterton is the saying, "A saint who is sad is a sad sort of saint." Father Neubert would heartily agree. Just as the dolphin is called the fish with the built-in grin, Father Neubert was a man with a built-in smile. Whenever not strained by earnestness, his face would break into a winning, cheerful smile.

Not only was he pleasant in his manner, he was blessed with a ready wit, and was a charming conversationalist. His mastery of the American idiom and slang expression was astonishing. No doubt his fourteen years spent in the USA contributed to his understanding of American behavior. His simplicity and sincerity appreciated the direct approach of Americans who are impatient with fuss and fanfare and finagling.

His humor was not the stinging or hurtful variety. Rather it exhibited the playfulness of a dolphin entertaining a shipload of passengers. He often told Americans, "When I first came to your country, I landed in New York and as I walked about I thought to myself, 'What a wonderful land. Look how they have numbered their streets in honor of our Blessed Mother's rosary: 1st Ave, 2nd Ave, 3rd Ave.'"

The dolphin is also used to represent the diligence and quickness of an author in the pursuit of knowledge, as well as the diligence and love of a Christian attaining conformity with Christ. Another apt figure for Father Neubert. During his long tenure as rector of the Marianist seminary, many brilliant men trained under him and their high regard for their mentor was not based simply on his sanctity. They respected him also for his learning and his penetrating grasp of almost every phase of sacred science. He was truly a doctor of theology.

Every day, even in the busiest periods of his life, Father Neubert set aside the morning hours of nine to twelve for research and writing. In consequence of his persistent study and daily reservation of time, Father Neubert has left us a treasure trove of books and pamphlets about the Blessed Virgin Mary and Marianist spirituality. However, it is strange that some who have listened to his conferences and classes often find his writings less compelling. The vigorous sincerity of the lecturer gave sparkle to his spoken words and left a sharp impression on the minds of his listeners. His books may not convey that same fire to readers. No doubt the sense of simplicity and urgency admired in his personality had left him somewhat indifferent to style in his writings. His approach was that solid truths have their own compelling appeal. The



wide distribution of his works, and their many translations and reprints evidence this. His interest in writing was a means to satisfy his passion to propagate Marianist spirituality and Catholic doctrine.

This outlook explains why his books run the gamut from authoritative theological exposition for the scholar to simple and sweet devotion for the child. "Of all my writings on the Blessed Virgin," Father Neubert once said, "I consider only three to be outstanding." The first is "My Ideal, Jesus, Son of Mary." This masterful little book has been published in fifteen languages in more than thirty-five editions. St. Maximilian Kolbe translated it into Polish and published it at the City of Mary Immaculate. The second is "Mary and the Priestly Ministry" published in English by Academy of the Immaculate. The third, which he thought the best, is "Life of Union with Mary."

Father Emile Neubert was a remarkable person. Like all remarkable persons, he cannot be summarized in one sentence. But one attempt at this came from a respected priest who knew Father Neubert and said he was "the only man I ever knew who could speak incessantly of the Blessed Virgin and always had something informative and interesting to say." That was the particular genius of Father Neubert. He was not only an outstanding authority on theoretical aspects of Mary's place in theology, but also a man who saw her practical connection with every single phase of our faith and our daily lives. Therefore he addressed the task of diligently, lovingly, and speedily conveying this information to the world at large.

A contemporary of St. Maximilian Kolbe, founder of the Militia of the Immaculate, and Venerable Frank Duff, founder of the Legion of Mary, Father Neubert befriended them and exchanged correspondence and compositions with them. Together with them, Father Emile Neubert is recognized as one of the most extraordinary apostles of Mary of the twentieth century.

BR. JOHN SAMAHA, SM

Currently serving at Villa St. Joseph in Cupertino, CA has been a Marianist for more than sixty years.