

Sowing Faith in a Catholic Frontier

A CONDENSED HISTORY OF THE DIOCESE OF RICHMOND

Editor's note: Throughout the Catholic Diocese of Richmond's bicentennial year, The Catholic Virginian will publish the history of the diocese in the Shine Like Stars in the World section that will appear in last issue of each month. The content of this section is provided by the Bicentennial Task Force.

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A small group of Spanish Jesuits planted the seeds of Christian faith in Virginia in 1570, 37 years before Jamestown (1607), the first permanent English settlement in the New World.

Following the martyrdom of those first missionaries (1571), the Church grew slowly. "Sowing Faith in a Catholic Frontier" narrates the perseverance, achievements and failures of Virginia Catholics through the centuries. That chronicle is the testimony of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond at its bicentennial (1820–2020). This is the first of 13 installments that will be published monthly during the diocesan jubilee (Jan. 2020 – Jan. 2021).

A Grain of Wheat and Rocky Ground:

Introduction

“Once we reached this bay, the military governor ordered us to search for Alonso, the boy who came with Father Baptista, whom we were told had not been killed.”

In 1572, a Spanish Jesuit priest, Father Juan Rogel, gave this account of his missionary work around the baía de la Madre de Dios (Bay of the Mother of God, today the Chesapeake Bay) to the superior of his religious order in Rome. Father Rogel's letter contained a portent and a parable: the Catholic Church in Virginia had begun with nine people in a vast country.

Like the grain of wheat (Jn 12:24), or the seed on rocky ground (Mt 13:5-6, 20-21), the Church in this territory would grow slowly under adverse conditions. Here, Catholics would contend with low membership, religious and secular hostility, geographic isolation, economic deprivation and a chronic lack of priests.

Furthermore, events in Virginia, the



Ambush of Fr. Luis de Quirós, Br. Gabriel de Solís, and Br. Juan Baptista Méndez (February 4, 1571).

Engravings by Melchior Küsell, in Mathias Tanner, *Societas Jesu usque ad sanguinis et vitae profusionem militans, in Europa, Africa, Asia, et America, contra gentiles, Mahometanos, Judaeos, haereticos, impios, pro Deo, fide, Ecclesia, pietate* (Prague: Typis Universitatis Carolo-Ferdinandae per Joannem Nicolaum Hampel factorem, 1675). Saint Louis University Libraries Special Collections. Material in the public domain.

United States and the wider Church would have an impact on the community's development. The presence of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond four-and-a-half centuries later bears witness to the perseverance of Virginia's Catholics, who overcame hardship and who experienced both successes and failures as they carried out the Church's work.

Seeds Among Thorns:

Inauspicious Beginnings (1570–1794)

Catholics faced tribulation during their first two centuries in Virginia as a band of

Spanish missionaries suffered martyrdom in that territory (1571), and religious intolerance permeated the English colony (1607–1794). These developments formed part of the broader narrative of the European colonization of North America, during which sectarian concerns shaped national interests.

Spanish Jesuit Mission (1570–1571)

Two years before Father Rogel wrote his letter, on Sept. 10, 1570, eight Jesuit missionaries, led by Father Juan Baptista de Segura (1529–1571), and a boy, Alonso de

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'Shine like stars'

— THE BICENTENNIAL PRAYER, MOTTO

FATHER ANTHONY E. MARQUES
Chair, Bicentennial Task Force

"Shine like stars in the world, as you hold fast to the word of life" (Phil 2:15~16).

Since we reached this bay, the military governor ordered us to search for Alonso, the boy who came with Father Baptista, whom we were told had not been killed."

In 1572, Father Juan Rogel, a Spanish Jesuit "Shine like stars in the world, as you hold fast to the word of life" (Phil 2:15~16).

St. Paul wrote these words from prison (1:7, 13~14, 17), between 55 and 63 AD. The bicentennial motto of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond is this exhortation of the Apostle to the Church in Philippi (Greece), a community he founded (Acts 16:9~40).

Paul, who was himself facing death (Phil 1:20~23), encouraged the Philippians, who were supporting him during his incarceration (2:25, 30; 4:14, 18), to continue the work of proclaiming the Gospel.

The mutual support of St. Paul and the Philippians, and their common endeavor to make Christ known, are manifestations of communion and mission respectively: "I hold you in my heart, you who are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel" (Phil 1:7).

Fundamental forces

Communion and mission are the fundamental forces at work in any Christian community, and they are themes of the diocesan bicentennial. "Communion," which is derived from the Latin *communio*, translates the Greek *koinonia*, a term used in the New Testament to denote fellowship.

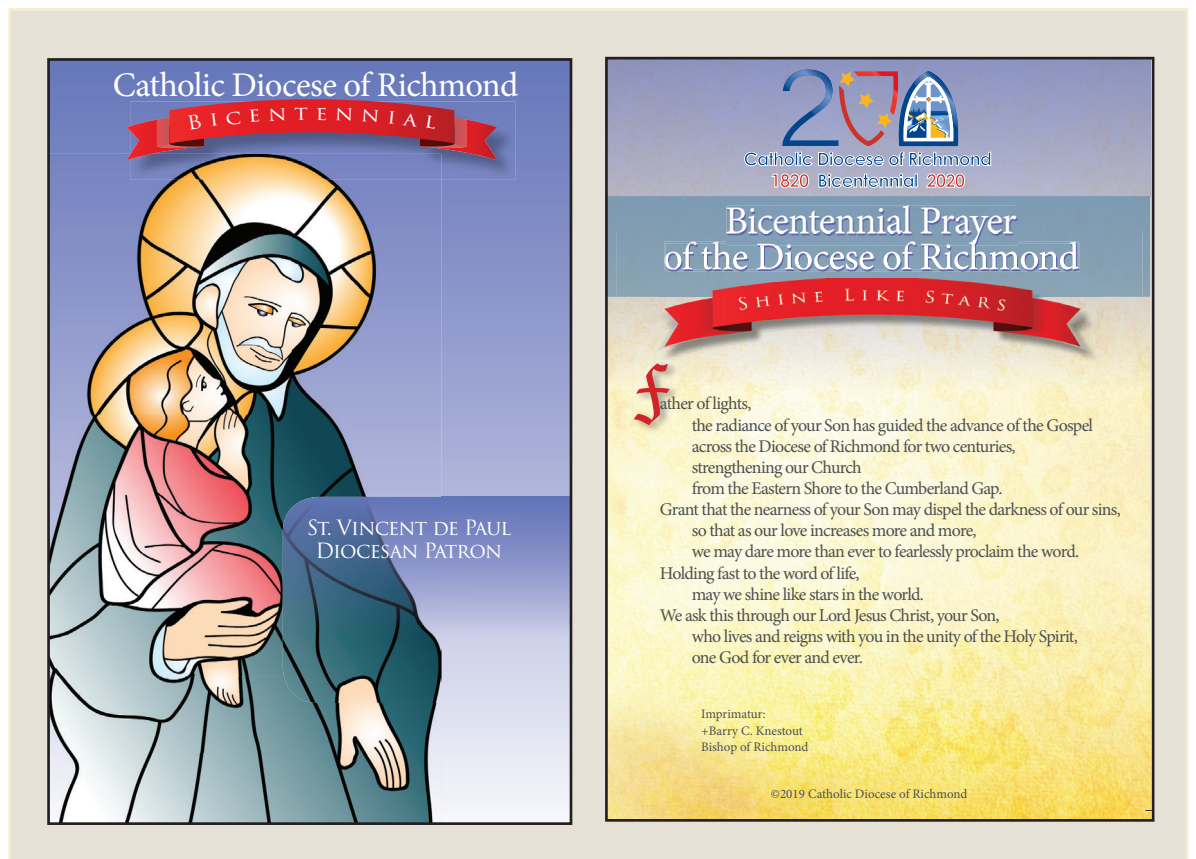
Communion refers to the bonds that unite members of the Church to God and to one another (see, for example, Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10).

The term "mission" comes from the Latin *missio* and means "sending." This same idea of "sending" is present in the Greek word *apostolos* (from which we get our English word "apostle") meaning literally "one sent" (see Phil 2:25).

Communion keeps the Church united; mission enables the Church to grow. Paul urged the Philippians to remain united as they spread the Gospel (Phil 1:27; 2:1~2; 4:1~3). The motto of the diocesan jubilee expresses both of these realities: "Shine like stars in the world" (mission), "as you hold fast to the word of life" (communion).

Stars are significant

Stars are a vivid image of the bicentennial of our diocese because to gaze at the stars is to look back in time, to the moment when starlight began to travel to our eyes. Stars also aid navigation, and in that way represent the charting of



a new course.

Coincidentally, there are three stars in the coat of arms of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, which represent the Trinity and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The prayer composed for our diocese's bicentennial uses the image of stars to develop the themes of communion and mission. Many of the phrases in the prayer are drawn from the Letter to the Philippians.

For example, the prayer states: "The radiance of your Son has guided the advance of the Gospel across the Diocese of Richmond for two centuries, strengthening our Church from the Eastern Shore to the Cumberland Gap" (see Phil 1:12; 4:5).

Christ, like a star, has illuminated the work of this local Church for 200 years across a vast territory.

Stars give off heat as well as light. In the same way, the presence of Christ (communion) ignites a love that becomes a witness to the Good News (mission): "Grant that the nearness of your Son may dispel the darkness of our sins, so that as our love increases more and more, we may dare more than ever to fearlessly proclaim the word" (see Phil 1:9, 14).

Prayer of gratitude

The jubilee motto recapitulates and concludes the prayer. Like Christ, Christians are "stars" that emit light in a world that is often

dark (Phil 2:15~16). In Philippians, these verses follow a magnificent exposition of Christ's saving work (2:6~11).

That passage is thought to be a hymn known to St. Paul's audience: "Though he was in the form of God, [Christ] did not regard equality with God... Rather, he emptied himself... becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him."

Jesus' act of salvation — the complete offering of himself that leads to his exaltation — is the model for any Christian community, whether in Philippi or in Richmond. Christ's death and resurrection also encapsulates the life of any local Church, with all of its sacrifices, difficulties, accomplishments, and even failures (see Phil 1:29~30; 3:7~16).

The Letter to the Philippians is filled with joy and thanksgiving, although St. Paul himself was in dire straits. The strength that the Apostle received from God, along with support of the community he founded, helped him to continue bearing witness to the Gospel (Phil 1:18~19; 4:13).

Paul, pointing to what God had done in his life, urged the Philippians to imitate him (Phil 1:30; 3:17; 4:9). This same principle is reflected in the stirring words he addressed to them: "Shine like stars in the world, as you hold fast to the word of life."

The Diocese of Richmond offers this prayer with gratitude, joy and conviction at the beginning of her bicentennial anniversary.

Beginnings

Continued from Page 1

Olmos, disembarked near the future site of Williamsburg. To Spanish ears, the native word for the region sounded like “Ajacán”; Spain claimed this land as part of la Florida (North America).

Indians of the Chiskiack tribe, led by Don Luis de Velasco (formerly Paquiquineo), an indigenous guide who betrayed the priests and religious brothers, killed these men between Feb. 4 and 9, 1571. Only the boy survived, having been rescued after living with his captors for a year after the massacre.

Three of the missionaries — Cristóbal Redondo, Gabriel de Solís and Juan Baptista Méndez — made their Jesuit profession sometime between their arrival and the attack. These were the first religious vocations in what became Virginia. The cause for the canonization of the Jesuit Martyrs of Virginia was introduced in 2002.

The short-lived Jesuit mission was one



Martyrdom of Fr. Juan Baptista de Segura, priest; Br. Cristóbal Redondo; Br. Pedro Mingot de Linares; Br. Gabriel Gómez; and Br. Sancho Zeballos (February 9, 1571).
 Saint Louis University Libraries Special Collections. Material in the public domain.

of many difficulties Spain encountered in its colonization of North America.

Unlike Central and South America, North America lacked precious metals, its terrain and climate were sometimes harsh, and its inhabitants proved more resistant to conquest and conversion.

Spain eventually controlled what is today the southwestern and southeastern United States. On the Atlantic coast, the fort of St. Augustine — the site of several battles and a base for launching operations against Spain’s enemies — encapsulated the region’s strategic role.

Founded in 1565 on the Florida peninsula, St. Augustine was the first permanent European and Catholic settlement in what became the United States. Ultimately, la Florida was a barrier for protecting Spain’s more lucrative southern colonies against potential incursions by France or England.

The complete version of “Sowing Faith in a Catholic Frontier,” including endnotes and bibliography, is available on the bicentennial website, 2020.richmonddiocese.org.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF RICHMOND

1534

King Henry VIII initiates the Reformation in England, a decision that eventually results in its future colony of Virginia being Protestant.

1553~1558

The reign of Mary I, who restores Catholicism in England.

1558~1603

The reign of Elizabeth I, who re-establishes the Church of England.

1565 September 8

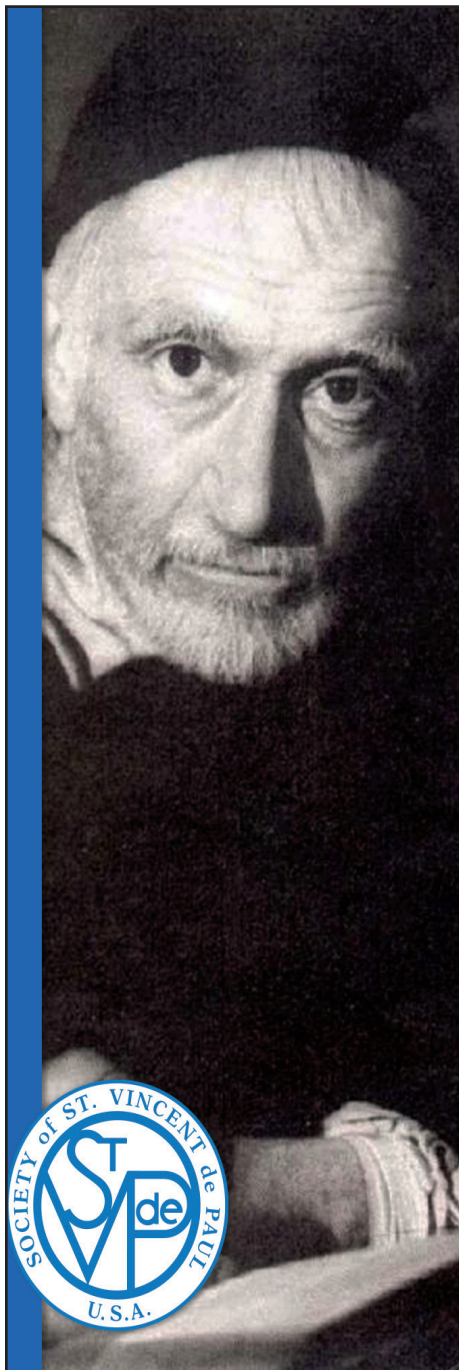
Spaniard Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founds St. Augustine, the first permanent European and Catholic settlement in what will become the United States.

1570 September 10

Eight Spanish Jesuits, led by Father Juan Baptista de Segura, establish a mission near present-day Williamsburg.

1571 February 4~9

The martyrdom of the Spanish Jesuits. Between their arrival and the massacre, three of the missionaries make their Jesuit profession. These are the first vocations to the religious life in what will become Virginia.



Our Patron. Our Mission.

St. Vincent de Paul, patron of the Diocese of Richmond, wrote, “We should strive to keep our hearts open to the sufferings and wretchedness of other people, and pray continually that God may grant us that spirit of compassion which is truly the spirit of God.”

As our diocese celebrates its bicentennial, learn how that "spirit of compassion," which is at the heart of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, can serve those in need.

Contact Dan Kearns, St. Vincent de Paul Council President, Richmond, at Info@svdp-rva.org.

Bicentennial Edition



Shine Like Stars

a condensed history of the Diocese of Richmond



Diocese of Richmond

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