

COURAGEOUS CHARITY: VIRGINIA'S CATHOLIC HEROES IN TIMES OF PESTILENCE

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 the last issue of each month. The content of this section is provided by the Bicentennial Task Force.

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The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is a calamity. It has caused suffering and death throughout the world, produced economic turbulence and upended ordinary life for millions of people. This contagion has also forced the Church to adapt to new circumstances in order to continue providing spiritual and charitable assistance at a time when such care has become more urgent.

In the Diocese of Richmond, as in other places, this is not the first experience of pestilence. Several waves of yellow fever battered Norfolk and Portsmouth (1821, 1826, 1855), and the Spanish flu (1918–1920) cut a path of destruction across Virginia. Countless persons worked to alleviate the sufferings of others during those outbreaks.

Among those whose deeds are known are several Catholics who acted out of faith. Their heroism contributed to the common good and provided hope. It also helped to lessen anti-Catholic bigotry in Virginia.

Patrick Kelly (1779–1829) had a brief but arduous tenure as the first bishop of Richmond (1821–1822). He had come from Ireland to lead the newly formed diocese that was rent by schism, meaning a formal division among believers (ca. 1794–1821).

Owing to a lack of financial resources, the Richmond Diocese was placed under the administration of the archbishop of Baltimore (1822–1850), and Kelly was transferred to the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore in Ireland (1822).

In the fall of 1821, Bishop Kelly ministered to victims of a yellow fever epidemic in Norfolk. A fellow bishop, John England of Charleston (1786–1842), wrote that Kelly, “was constant in his attendance upon the sick, and during months, was every day



Father Matthew O'Keefe

amongst the infected, solacing, cheering, instructing, and administering sacraments to the diseased.”

This ministry included receiving numerous non-Catholics into the Church. Kelly himself recounted that, “All the Protestant ministers fled,” whereas he, by carrying out his pastoral duties, had gained “the admiration and veneration of the Americans.”

Five years later, yellow fever struck Norfolk once more (1826). The priest stationed there and in Portsmouth, Father Christopher Delaney (ordained ca. 1821), likewise ministered to victims. Delaney had come with Bishop Kelly from Ireland as a newly ordained priest; after Kelly's departure (1822), he remained in the Norfolk and Portsmouth area, and made occasional pastoral visits to Richmond.

The recurrence of yellow fever devastated Norfolk and Portsmouth in 1855, claiming 3,000 lives. At the time, the cause of “yellow jack” was unknown. It was not until 1900 that an Army doctor, Walter Reed (1851–1902), who was born in Belroi (Gloucester County), and was a graduate

of the University of Virginia, confirmed the theory that a type of mosquito transmitted the disease.

Two priests and a laywoman acted bravely during the 1855 epidemic. Father Matthew O'Keefe (1828–1906), pastor of St. Patrick Church (later rebuilt as St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception) in Norfolk, was twice infected in the course of ministering to Catholic and Protestant victims, and survived.

In what was an unusual friendship and ecumenical partnership, O'Keefe and the Reverend George Armstrong (1813–1899), a local Presbyterian minister, pledged that if either should die from the pestilence, the other would conduct his funeral. Both men survived. Four decades later, O'Keefe officiated at the funeral of his friend.

Across the Elizabeth River in Portsmouth, Father Francis Devlin (1813–1855), pastor of St. Paul Church, contracted yellow fever three times while ministering during the outbreak and eventually died from the infection. The people of Portsmouth erected a monument to commemorate this “humble Priest, the faithful Pastor, who sacrificed his life, in the cause of Charity, during the plague of 1855.”

In Norfolk, Ann Behan Plume Herron (1802–1855), a benefactor of the Church, transformed her home into a hospital where the Daughters of Charity cared for victims of yellow fever. Herron nursed her infected slaves and, before dying, donated her mansion to the religious sisters. This was the first Catholic hospital in Virginia, which was later named the Hospital of St. Vincent de Paul, today DePaul Medical Center (1856).

The influenza pandemic of 1918–1920 was called the “Spanish flu” because early news reports focused on cases in Spain, which, as a neutral country during World War I (1914–1918), did not censor negative information the way belligerent countries did. The virus spread as the Great War came to end and accelerated because of troop movements. The Spanish flu killed 50 million people worldwide, including 675,000 in the United States and 15,000 in Virginia.

In Richmond, an Eagle Scout and devout Catholic named Francis (Frank) J. Parater III (1897–1920), together with other scouts, helped begin an ambulance service to transport victims to hospitals. Parater then went to Rome for theological studies as a seminarian for the Diocese of Richmond. There he contracted rheumatic fever and died at the age of 22, having offered his life and sufferings “for the spread and success of the Catholic Church in Virginia.”

Philip J. Bagley Jr. (1904–1996), a fellow Catholic and later mayor of Richmond (1968–1970), extolled Parater’s charitable actions in a 1920 poem: “But now he has departed, / To his reward dear Frank has gone. / He worked for the good of his country, / As a citizen he was true blue / He worked on the Emergency Ambulance / To combat both death and the ‘Flu.’”

The annals of the Diocese of Richmond demonstrate that the Church strives to accomplish its mission even in harrowing circumstances. During times of pestilence, outstanding Catholic men and women in Virginia have served their communities by acts of charity that give witness to their faith. The Church’s work continues during the current pandemic.



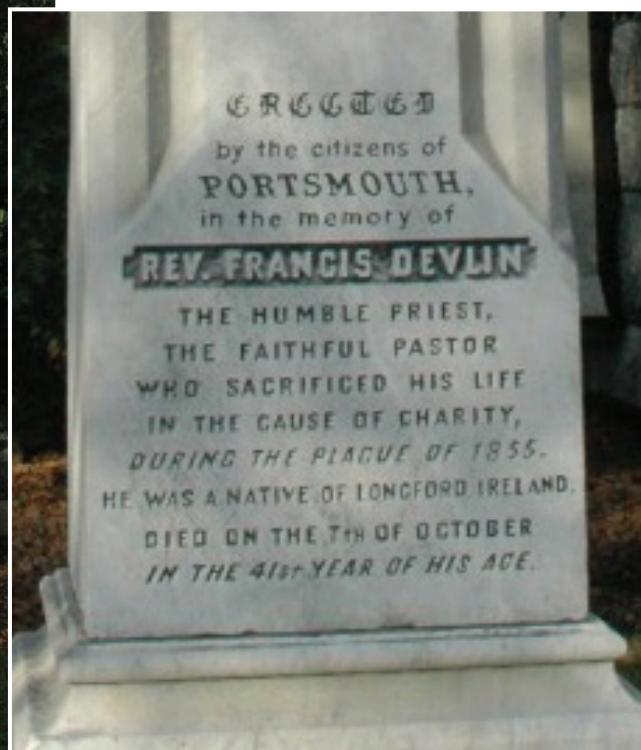
FRANCIS J. PARATER 3d.

We knelt in the chapel this morning
In memory of one whose above,
While on this earth amongst us he gained
Both respect and our love.
In memory I can see him as he served Mass
each morn.

But now he had departed,
To his reward dear Frank has gone.
He worked for the good of his country,
As citizen he was true blue
He worked on the Emergency Ambulance,
To combat both death and the "Flu".

We hold his past as a model
For all of our Christian boys,
Dear Frank loved his Holy Master
Above all the world and its joys
He died on the shores of Italy,
Near the Holy See at Rome,
We can picture him on his death bed
Thinking of both God and Home.
Now that you're up in Heaven,
Pray for your loved ones at Home.
For we have our life's battles to fight
While you Frank have gained your Throne.

Philip J. Bagley, Jr.
1920.



Father Francis Devlin monument.

(Photo/ Maggie McAllister)

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/62430661/francis-devlin>