

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

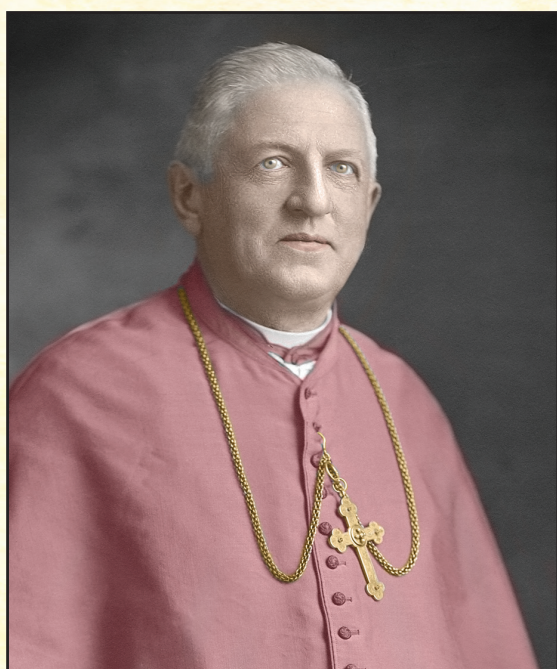
**FATHER ANTHONY E. MARQUES**  
Chair, Catholic Diocese of Richmond  
Bicentennial Task Force

### Girding Fruit:

*A Centennial Diocese (1888–1934)*

There were signs of growth and maturity as the diocese reached its centenary (1920): immigrants arrived from Europe and Lebanon (Maronites), expanding the Catholic population in Virginia; evangelization of African Americans continued; a diocesan seminarian, Frank Parater (1897–1920), bequeathed a legacy of holiness; and the entry of the United States into World War I (1917), coupled with advances in transportation, brought development to some regions of the commonwealth.

*Bishop Augustine van de Vyver:  
Outreach to African Americans and a  
New Cathedral (1889–1911)*



**Bishop Augustine van de Vyver**

Augustine van de Vyver (1844–1911) succeeded John J. Keane as the sixth bishop of Richmond in 1889. He was born in Belgium and educated at the American College in Louvain, a seminary that trained numerous priests for service in the Richmond Diocese. After his ordination, Van de Vyver came to America and worked in the western reaches of Virginia. He later became vicar general and then diocesan administrator. Two notable benefactions were made to the diocese during Van

de Vyver's time as bishop.

First, St. Katharine Drexel (1858–1955) of Philadelphia, and her half-sister, Louise Morrell, opened two schools in Rock Castle (Powhatan County) for black youth: St. Emma's Industrial and Agricultural College for boys (1895), and St. Francis de Sales School for girls (1899).

The Drexels used the fortune they inherited to fund charitable causes; in Katharine's case, this included the work of the religious order she founded (Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament) to care for African Americans and Native Americans.

Mother Drexel herself visited the schools in Rock Castle (1900), which provided vocational training, secondary education and religious instruction to generations of African Americans. Katharine Drexel was the second native-born American to be canonized (2000).

A second philanthropic gift received during Van de Vyver's episcopate became a monument to the Catholic presence in Virginia: a new cathedral in Richmond. Thomas Fortune Ryan (1851–1928) and his wife, Ida Mary Barry (1854–1917), financed the construction of the edifice. It was said that Ryan, who was from Nelson County, decided to become a Catholic after a long discussion with a conductor on a train ride to Baltimore. True to his middle name, Ryan subsequently made his fortune in tobacco, insurance and transportation. He gave generously to the Catholic Church in New York and Virginia.

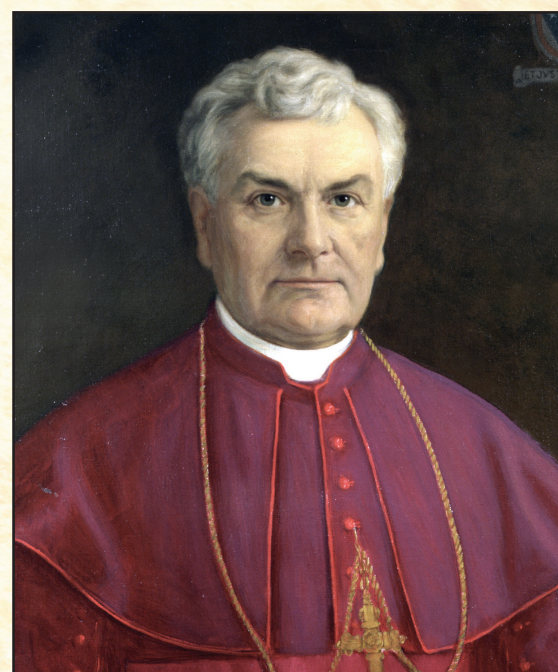
The papal representative to the American hierarchy, Archbishop Diomed Falconio, dedicated the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart on Thanksgiving Day, 1906. This event recognized the growth of the Church in Virginia and symbolized the compatibility of the Catholic faith and American society.

Overall, Van de Vyver's tenure witnessed steady growth in the diocese. By the end of his episcopate, the Catholic population numbered 30,000, and there were 60 priests (diocesan and religious), 35 parishes with a resident priest, 48 missions and 40 schools.

There was also a concerted effort to reach out to African Americans, not only by the sisters associated with Katharine Drexel, but also by other religious orders working in new parishes and schools located in cities. Van de Vyver twice sought to resign, but partly at the urging of his priests he remained in office until he died (1911).

*Bishop Denis J. O'Connell:  
Americanism, World War I and Post-war Growth  
(1912–1926)*

Denis J. O'Connell (1849–1927) was the third native Irishman and the second of three Richmond priests to become diocesan bishop. He returned to the diocese after 30 years away. O'Connell's tenure marked a turning point in the history of the diocese as Tidewater and northern Virginia experienced



**Bishop Denis J. O'Connell**

their first stage of rapid growth.

O'Connell was a significant figure in the American Church prior to becoming bishop of Richmond. Earlier in his career, he played a leading role in the "Americanism" controversy (1895–1899) that dealt with the question of the Church's identity in the United States. Significantly, the historical experience of the Diocese of Richmond became a point of reference in this dispute.

Americanism sought to adapt Catholicism to the American way of life. Its leaders included James Gibbons and John J. Keane, former bishops of Richmond, and O'Connell, who was the movement's intellectual architect.

O'Connell was a close aide to Gibbons, his mentor and patron, going back to Gibbons' time in North Carolina and Virginia (1868–1877). O'Connell had also been the rector of the North American College seminary in Rome (1885–1895), where he functioned as a liaison between U.S. bishops and the Vatican.

Americanist bishops held that constitutional norms such as religious freedom and the separation of church and state were beneficial to the Catholic Church. They also saw the value of ecumenical collaboration in overcoming ignorance of Catholicism and in reducing anti-Catholic bigotry.

Opponents argued that this program risked obscuring Catholicism's status as the true faith, and that the spirit of American independence would weaken the Church's unity. The Americanist perspective was based on the experience of bishops like Keane and Gibbons as leaders of a religious minority in the Diocese of Richmond.

When Pope Leo XIII condemned some aspects of Americanism (1899), Gibbons denied having ever held such views. The Americanist position on religious liberty was eventually vindicated at Vatican Council II, which declared the freedom of religion to be a human right (1965).

While O'Connell was bishop of Richmond,





**Cathedral of the Sacred Heart circa 1906** (Photo/Cook Collection, Valentine Museum)

the death of a seminarian in Rome inscribed a witness of heroic sacrifice in the annals of the diocese. Francis (Frank) J. Parater (b. 1897), a Richmonder and student at the North American College, died unexpectedly at the age of 22 (1920). He courageously offered his life and sufferings “for the spread and success of the Catholic Church in Virginia.” The cause for Frank Parater’s canonization was introduced in 2001.

At the time of Parater’s death, the Richmond Diocese was in the midst of a growth spurt. It began when the United States entered World War I (1917). Catholics, as they had done during the Civil War for either the Union or Confederacy, once more demonstrated their patriotism, this time by supporting the national war effort. In the meantime, a naval base opened in Norfolk that quickly brought thousands of people to the area.

After the war (1918), even as the military demobilized, Norfolk, Hampton Roads and Virginia Beach continued to grow. The invention of the trolley, as well as the construction of new rail lines, fueled this expansion.

Further north, the opening of the Key Bridge (1923) enabled trolley cars to cross the Potomac River, a pivotal development that made northern Virginia a suburb of Washington, D.C. Parishes were opened to accommodate the growing Catholic population in northern Virginia and Tidewater. In several cases, lay persons took the lead in developing existing missions into these new parishes.

O’Connell’s tenure also included the founding of a bureau of Catholic Charities in Richmond (1922), one of the first in the country. This institution evolved from a long tradition of charitable work done by religious sisters and parishes, especially the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the St. Vincent de Paul Auxiliary. By employing professional social workers, Catholic Charities enabled the Richmond Diocese to provide more systematic assistance to the poor for housing, placement in orphanages and legal matters.

Bishop O’Connell resigned in January 1926 due to illness. He was named administrator of the diocese and an honorary archbishop — one year before he died (1927).

## CHRONOLOGY OF THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF RICHMOND – 1889-1926

**1889 October 20** Augustine van de Vyver, a priest of Richmond, is ordained the sixth bishop of the diocese.

**1895~1899** The “Americanism” controversy over the identity of the Catholic Church in the United States: Cardinal James Gibbons, Archbishop John J. Keane — both former bishops of Richmond — and Msgr. Denis J. O’Connell — a future bishop of the diocese — play a role in the dispute.

**1900** St. Katharine Drexel visits Rock Castle, where she and her half-sister, Louise Morrell, founded two schools for African Americans: St. Emma’s (1895) and St. Francis de Sales (1899).

**1906 November 29** Archbishop Diomed Falconio, the papal representative to the American hierarchy, dedicates the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond on Thanksgiving Day, highlighting the compatibility of Catholicism and American society.

**1912 March 19** Denis J. O’Connell, a priest of Richmond, is installed as the seventh bishop of the diocese.

**1914~1918** World War I

**1917 April 6** The United States enters World War I by declaring war on Germany; Catholics support the national war effort.

**Ca. 1917** Tidewater and northern Virginia experience their initial stage of suburban growth, which results from the United States’ entry into World War I and developments in transportation.

**1920 February 7** Frank J. Parater, a Richmond seminarian, dies in Rome. The candidate for canonization (2001) offered his life and sufferings “for the spread and success of the Catholic Church in Virginia.”

**1920 July 11** The Diocese of Richmond reaches its centenary.

**1922 October 22** A local bureau of Catholic Charities, which provides systematic charitable services to the poor, is founded in Richmond.

**1926 April 3** Denis J. O’Connell, having resigned as bishop of Richmond due to illness (January 26) and having served as diocesan administrator, is relieved of his duties.