

## 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

### Branching Out Toward Modernity: World War II, Vatican II and Beyond (1935–2019)

The Diocese of Richmond changed significantly as a result of World War II (1939–1945). In Virginia, as throughout the country, there was a population explosion followed by social upheavals as the “baby boomer” generation came of age.

Around the same time, a momentous event brought change within the Church: The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The implementation of Vatican II took place amid the convulsion of Western society and became intertwined with the sense of optimism, the eagerness to break with the past and the realization of personal autonomy that characterized a stormy decade (ca. 1963–ca. 1974).

A key result of these trends was that the Catholic Church in Richmond, as in the rest of the United States, faced an increasingly secular culture in the second half of the 20th century. At the beginning of the new millennium, a crisis emerged: the scandal of clerical abuse (2002–2019).

*Bishop Peter L. Ireton:  
World War II and the Postwar Boom (1935–1958)*



**Bishop Peter L. Ireton**

Andrew J. Brennan, the eighth bishop of Richmond (1926–1945), suffered a stroke in 1934 that left him incapacitated. In 1935, Father Peter L. Ireton of Baltimore (1882–1948) was appointed coadjutor and administrator of the diocese. World War II (1939–1945) and its effects on the United States shaped his episcopate.

During World War II, as in previous conflicts, Catholics rallied around the flag by serving in the military and by making other contributions. Numerous diocesan priests, along with religious priests who worked in the diocese, served as military chaplains.

One of them, Father J. Louis Flaherty (1910–1975), who later became an auxiliary bishop of Richmond (1966–1975), was awarded the Silver Star for his bravery on the Italian battlefield. Other priests in the diocese ministered to German and Italian soldiers who were interned in prisoner-of-war camps in Virginia.

One month before Germany surrendered to Allied forces, Peter Ireton formally became the ninth bishop of Richmond, when Andrew Brennan submitted his resignation (1945).

The nuclear age dawned four months after Ireton's accession, when the United States dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forcing Japan to surrender. By the end of the war, the position of the United States in the world had changed. Whereas in the period after World War I the United States pursued an isolationist foreign policy, it was now a global superpower locked in an ideological and military struggle with the Soviet Union.

These world events had practical consequences for the Richmond Diocese. In addition to a nationwide population boom after the war, Catholics from other states migrated to Virginia to work for the federal government, including the military or in related industries — all of which continued to expand during the Cold War (1946–1989).

The construction of the country's military headquarters at the Pentagon (1941–1943), located across the Potomac River from Washington, DC, symbolized this phenomenon. Tidewater also underwent significant growth as naval facilities in the region expanded.

The number of Catholics in the Diocese of Richmond nearly quadrupled, from 38,000 to 145,000, during Ireton's tenure. He established 45 parishes and 49 schools to meet the growing pastoral needs.

Furthermore, several religious orders began to staff parishes because there were not enough diocesan priests for this purpose. Fewer diocesan priests served as military chaplains in the Korean War (1950–1953) than in World War II because they were needed at home. The appointment of a local priest, Father Joseph H.

Hodges, as the first auxiliary bishop of Richmond (1952–1961) was another sign of the diocese's growth.

World War II brought the Great Depression to an end, with the result that large numbers of Catholics entered the middle class and began to live in suburbs. The widespread availability of automobiles and the construction of highways facilitated this suburban migration.

In a state like Virginia, this development led to the broader acceptance of Catholics who were a minority. But rural areas required a different approach. To evangelize there, Bishop Ireton launched a diocesan mission band (1937) to build on the work of an earlier, independent lay evangelist (1933). A designated team of priests now drove a mobile chapel, named “St. Mary of the Highways,” to teach the Catholic faith and to celebrate Mass in outlying communities.

The onset of social change was another feature of the post-war era. In this regard, Ireton distinguished himself as the first bishop in the South to integrate Catholic schools. He did so just days before the Supreme Court desegregated the public-school system (1954).



**Color guard of Negro engineers, Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, as they were known from 1941 to 1945. (Photo/Diocese of Richmond Archives)**

# ST. VINCENT DE PAUL: PATRON OF THE DIOCESE OF RICHMOND

In 1939, Betty Hall, a first communicant, had the honor of unveiling a new statue in the north transept of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond. Carved from Carrara marble, it was a gift from Charles M. Mahoney in memory of his mother, Bridget M. Mahoney.

The statue, which remains in the cathedral, depicts St. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660). At the time of the statue's dedication, the French priest had been the patron of the Diocese of Richmond for nearly a century (since ca. 1841).

Vincent de Paul was born into a peasant family in southern France and was ordained a priest at the age of 19 (1600). Some documents claim that he was later abducted by pirates while traveling by ship from Marseilles and was taken as a slave to Tunis in North Africa (1605). By some accounts, Vincent escaped captivity and returned to France (1607).

He eventually became the chaplain and tutor to the influential De Gondi family (1612). While on the family's estates, Vincent heard the confession of a dying peasant, an incident that led him to turn his attention to the poor (1617). He did so with the support of Madame de Gondi, who was also concerned for their spiritual welfare.

Vincent's new focus led to him to minister to galley slaves (1622). (Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi was in charge of the royal galleys.) With the backing of Madame de Gondi, Vincent established a religious order of priests that sought to evangelize the French countryside: the Congregation of the Mission, better known today as the Vincentians (1625).

Together with St. Louise de Marillac (1591–1660), Vincent also founded the Daughters of Charity, a religious order of women dedicated to serving the poor (1633). He died in Paris at the age of 79.

Pope Clement XII canonized Vincent de Paul in 1737. The saint was renowned for his kindness and generosity but could be irascible as well. He had also experienced a difficult period in which he was tempted to abandon the faith but did not do so (1614–1617).

How Vincent de Paul became the patron saint of the Diocese of Richmond is unknown. The earliest mention of his patronage is in 1843, during the tenure of Richard V. Whelan, the second bishop of Richmond (1841–1850). It is likely that Bishop Whelan chose St. Vincent to be the diocesan patron.

The characteristics of the Catholic Church in Virginia — rural, missionary and poor — closely aligned with the ministry and legacy of Vincent de Paul. At the time of Bishop Whelan's arrival in Richmond, there were only 9,000 Catholics, eight churches and six priests scattered across the diocese, which at that time extended from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ohio River (all of Virginia, including what is today West Virginia). Most of these parish communities were composed of Irish, French and German immigrants and were poor.

Vincent was Bishop Whelan's middle name, which may have introduced him to the figure of Vincent de Paul. Perhaps Whelan became more familiar with the saint when he studied under French Sulpician priests at Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg, Maryland, and then at the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. Later, Whelan lived a Vincentian lifestyle as a priest circuit rider in what is today West Virginia.

As bishop, Whelan insisted that his priests lead the same simple and evangelical way of life.

He wrote that a Richmond priest, "Must expect

a life of great labour & fatigue, much exposure to cold, heat & rain, bad roads, very indifferent diet & lodging, but little respect for his dignity, [and] few Catholics... Many of our missions are just such as this; & I want no priest who does not come fully prepared to enter upon such a charge, certain that his recompense is not here, but hereafter."

Whelan practiced what he preached, often walking 22 miles from Richmond to Petersburg — while fasting — to celebrate Sunday Mass there at St. Joseph's Church!

Soon after coming to Richmond, Bishop Whelan began a seminary and college on the outskirts of the city that he named St. Vincent's (1841–1846). Whelan considered having the Vincentian order staff his institution but ultimately decided to run it himself. The seminary and college closed after a few years because of financial difficulties.

Perhaps another reason why St. Vincent de Paul became the patron of the Richmond Diocese was the work of the Daughters of Charity. They were originally called the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph in the United States, and Bishop Whelan may have known them during his time in Emmitsburg, where the order was based.

They were the first women religious in Virginia, having opened a school and orphanage in Richmond (1834). During Whelan's time as bishop, the Daughters of Charity began St. Mary's School and Orphan Asylum in Norfolk (1848).

Over time, several institutions in the diocese were named after St. Vincent de Paul: schools; orphanages; the first Catholic hospital in Virginia (Norfolk, 1855; today DePaul Medical Center); a parish church (Newport News, 1891); and a charitable organization (St. Vincent de Paul Society, 1865), which gave rise to a bureau of Catholic Charities in Richmond (1922).

St. Vincent de Paul will be honored in a special way during this year's bicentennial jubilee around the time of his feast day (Sept. 27). On Sept. 26, Bishop Barry C. Knestout will lead the diocese in commemorating Vincent de Paul at a Bicentennial Regional Mass at St. Andrew Church, Roanoke. Since the saint's feast falls on a Sunday this year, Bishop Knestout has directed that the commemoration of this feast be observed at Sunday Masses throughout the diocese.

The commemoration of St. Vincent de Paul will also include an Octave of Service in his honor, from Sept. 27 to Oct. 4. During this eight-day period, parishes, campus ministries and schools are encouraged to carry out service projects to benefit their communities.

The statue of Vincent de Paul in the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart shows him holding a book (perhaps the Bible) in one hand and the Christ Child in the other. It is a moving expression of the saint's commitment to proclaim the Gospel to the poor. This monument also reassures us of St. Vincent's watchful care over the Diocese of Richmond that has lasted for nearly two centuries.

*Editor's note: More information about this year's liturgical commemoration of St. Vincent de Paul can be found on the website of the diocesan Office of Worship: <http://www.cdrworship.org>. Details about the Octave of Service in honor of St. Vincent de Paul are available on the diocesan bicentennial website: <https://2020.richmonddiocese.org>.*



The statue of St. Vincent de Paul in the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart shows him holding a book (perhaps the Bible) in one hand and the Christ Child in the other. It is a moving expression of the saint's commitment to bring Christ to all people and to care for him in the poor. This monument also reassures us of St. Vincent's watchful care over the Diocese of Richmond that has lasted for nearly two centuries. (Photo provided)

## CHRONOLOGY OF THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF RICHMOND 1935–1958

**1935 September 23** Following Bishop Andrew J. Brennan's incapacitation from a stroke (February 26, 1934), Bishop Peter L. Ireton of Baltimore is appointed coadjutor and administrator of the Diocese of Richmond.

**1939–1945** World War II: Catholics in Virginia enlist in the Armed Forces and support the war effort; numerous priests associated with the Diocese of Richmond serve as military chaplains.

**1945 April 14** Bishop Andrew J. Brennan resigns and Peter L. Ireton becomes the ninth bishop of Richmond.

**1946~1989** The Cold War

**Ca. 1946** Northern Virginia, followed by Tidewater, undergoes a second stage of rapid growth as the federal government and military continue to expand after World War II and with the onset of the Cold War.

**1952 August 8** Joseph H. Hodges, a priest of Richmond, is appointed the diocese's first auxiliary bishop.

**1950~1953** The Korean War: fewer Richmond priests serve as military chaplains than in World War II because they are needed in the diocese.

**1954~1968** The civil rights movement, which Bishop Peter L. Ireton and his successors support.

**1954 May 7** Bishop Peter L. Ireton announces the integration of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Richmond; he is the first bishop in the South to do so.

**1954 May 17** The Supreme Court desegregates public schools (*Brown v. Board of Education*).

**1958 April 27** Bishop Peter L. Ireton dies while in office.