

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.

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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 John J. Russell: Vatican II and Social Upheaval (1958–1973)

John J. Russell (1897–1993) became Richmond's 10th bishop following the death of Peter Ireton in 1958. Russell was from Baltimore and was a priest of that archdiocese (and later of the Archdiocese of Washington that was created in 1939). He was the bishop of



Bishop John J. Russell

Charleston at the time of his appointment to Richmond.

Like his predecessor, Russell oversaw significant changes in the diocese during his tenure. It was the story, in miniature, of the Church's initial adaptation to modernity. Just three months after being elected pope, and four months after Russell came to Richmond, St. John XXIII surprised the world by announcing an ecumenical council (1959). The thrust of this council, called Vatican II (1962–1965), was to renew the Church for the sake of evangelizing the modern world.

Prior to Vatican II, Bishop Russell supported official efforts already underway to equip the Church for its contemporary mission. This support included a wider use of the dialogue Mass to facilitate lay participation in the liturgy (1960), a practice Ireton had restricted three years earlier (1957).

In another significant achievement, Richmond became the second diocese in the country to form an ecumenical commission (1962). Russell then attended the Vatican Council. Upon returning to the diocese, he promoted its teachings and implemented its reforms: liturgical renewal, greater ecumenical cooperation and interfaith dialogue, emphasis on the laity's vocation to holiness and restoration of the permanent diaconate (1972–1973).

The Diocese of Richmond developed in other ways around the time of Vatican II. More parishes and schools were built in the northern Virginia suburbs to accommodate a growing white population that was becoming more affluent.

In Goochland County, St. John Vianney minor seminary opened (1960); it was the first such institution in the diocese since Bishop Richard Whelan's brief initiative a century earlier (St. Vincent's, 1841–1846).

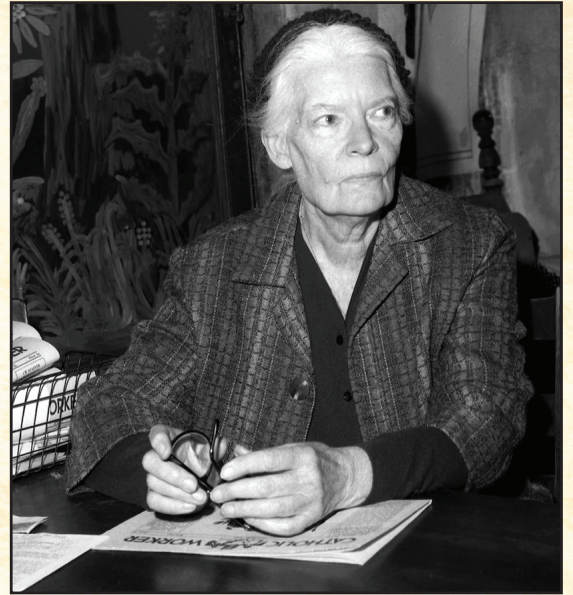
A cook at St. John Vianney Seminary, Mother Maria Bernadetta of the Immaculate (1918–2001), a Poor Sister of St. Joseph from Italy, was remembered for her everyday kindness and practical wisdom. The cause for her canonization was introduced in 2019.

The second Catholic hospital in the Richmond Diocese — St. Mary's in Richmond, run by the Bon Secours Sisters — opened in 1966. The Daughters of Charity had founded the first Catholic hospital 100 years before in Norfolk, during the Yellow Fever epidemic (1855–1856). Notably, too, a series of auxiliary bishops helped Russell govern the expanding diocese: Ernest L. Unterkoefer (1962–1964), J. Louis Flaherty (1966–1975) and Walter F. Sullivan (1970–1974).

Despite the optimism surrounding Vatican II and the election of the first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy (1960), the Church faced increasing turbulence as the decade unfolded. The quest for racial equality was one source of upheaval, as the civil rights movement (1954–1968) gathered momentum across the South, including Virginia.

In July 1963, Dorothy Day (1897–1980), co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement and a candidate for canonization (2002), came to Danville to demonstrate in favor of integration. Danville was a historically significant location, having been the last capital of the Confederacy (April 3–10, 1865).

More recently, municipal authorities there had



Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and a candidate for canonization, demonstrated for integration in Danville in July 1963. (Photo/Diocese of Richmond Archives)

closed the public library rather than allow African Americans to use it (1960), and black protestors had suffered violence during the course of a peaceful protest on “Bloody Monday” (June 10, 1963).

From Richmond, Bishop Russell vigorously supported the civil rights movement, advocating for racial equality and fair housing. He also reversed the policy of his predecessors, who had established separate churches for black Catholics.

Russell, seeking integration, closed some black parishes and turned others into territorial ones (1961–1970). Most black Catholics, however, were opposed to losing their distinctive communities as a result of these decisions.

The decade's unrest peaked in 1968. That cataclysmic year witnessed the assassination of civil rights champion Martin Luther King Jr. and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy; race riots in major cities; public disorder and police brutality at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; growing opposition to the Vietnam War (triggered by the Tet Offensive); and controversy surrounding the Church's teaching on contraception.

Notably, whereas Catholics had sought to show their patriotism through military service in earlier wars, the Vietnam War (1955–1973) proved bitterly divisive. Some Catholics in the Diocese of Richmond, including priests and religious, protested the conflict as part of the anti-war movement (1964–1972).

At the same time, another movement was overturning sexual mores. The prevalence of artificial birth control and the influence of the youth “counter-culture” propelled the sexual revolution. Despite expectations of change, the pope, St. Paul VI, upheld the Church's prohibition against contraception (1968), a decision many Catholics opposed.

Finally, at the end of Bishop Russell's tenure, the Supreme Court legalized abortion (1973). American society and the Catholic Church had undergone dramatic changes in just two decades.

“HE LOVES THOSE WHO LOVE THE POOR”: A SURVEY OF CHARITABLE WORKS IN THE RICHMOND DIOCESE

Richard Vincent Whelan, the second bishop of Richmond (1841–1850), probably chose St. Vincent de Paul (1581–1660) to be patron of this diocese because the Catholic Church in Virginia, like the focus of the saint’s ministry in France, was rural, missionary and poor.

The commemoration of St. Vincent de Paul during the bicentennial jubilee of the Diocese of Richmond has included an Octave of Service around his feast day (September 27 – October 4, 2020). St. Vincent de Paul reminds us that serving people in need is an essential part of the Church’s mission: “God loves the poor, and consequently he loves those who love the poor.”

The many charitable works carried out in the name of the Church over the course of the 200-year history of the Diocese of Richmond have benefitted Catholics and Virginia society as a whole. These initiatives have also lessened anti-Catholic bigotry in the commonwealth.

These actions have included direct assistance, professional social services and efforts to bring about broader social change. Clergy, religious and laity have all played a role in these endeavors.

The earliest organized charitable work took place in education and healthcare. The Daughters of Charity, based in Emmitsburg, Maryland, established the first Catholic school and orphanage in the diocese: St. Joseph’s Free School and Asylum in Richmond for (white) girls in 1834.

Orphanages and schools, often run by religious sisters for much of their history, have transmitted the Catholic faith and enabled generations of people, including immigrants and African Americans, to advance socio-economically. There are 29 Catholic schools in the Diocese of Richmond today.

The first Catholic hospital was established in the wake of a yellow fever epidemic that struck Norfolk and Portsmouth in 1855. In Norfolk, Ann Behan Plume Herron (1802–1855), a devout Catholic and benefactor, nursed her own slaves who were infected. Before dying from yellow fever, she donated her mansion to the Daughters of Charity for use as a hospital. This became the Hospital of St. Vincent de Paul in 1856, and it is now known as DePaul Medical Center.

During the Civil War (1861–1865), the Daughters of Charity and the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy, based in Charleston, South Carolina, ran several military hospitals that treated Union and Confederate soldiers. At the Second Battle of Manassas in 1862, Clara Barton (1821–1912), although not a Catholic herself, cared for wounded soldiers inside St. Mary of Sorrows Church in Fairfax.

This and other experiences led Barton to found the American Red Cross (1881). Permanent Catholic hospitals emerged later. There are 10 Catholic hospitals and medical centers in the Richmond Diocese, all of them located in Richmond and the Tidewater region.

Beginning in the early 1900s, Catholic charitable activity became more coordinated, professional and institutional. The St. Vincent de Paul Society, which established its first council in the United States in St. Louis in 1845 and then spread to other cities, including Richmond in 1865, contributed to this coordination of local efforts.

Modern Catholic social teaching, initiated by the 1891 encyclical “Rerum Novarum” (“Of New Things”) of Pope Leo XIII (reigned 1878–1903), provided another impetus to this approach to charitable work.

The founding of the National Conference of

Catholic Charities in Washington, D.C., in 1910 embodied the modern understanding and delivery of social services. One of the earliest Bureaus of Catholic Charities was founded in Richmond in 1922, in response to the economic needs following World War I (1914–1918). Throughout the diocese, Catholic Charities provided legal aid and assistance regarding the institutional care of orphans.

The Bureau of Catholic Charities in Richmond was eventually renamed Commonwealth Catholic Charities. Another Bureau of Catholic Charities was established in Norfolk in 1932 and was later renamed Catholic Charities of Eastern Virginia.

Today the work of both Catholic Charities agencies, which all parishes in the diocese support by means of a second collection at Christmas, includes distribution of food and clothing; housing assistance; counseling, pregnancy, adoption and foster care services; aid to refugees and immigrants; and care for disabled persons and senior citizens.

Social justice activism marked another turning point in the Church’s charitable activity as Catholics sought to remedy the underlying causes of injustices. This era began in the Diocese of Richmond in the 1940s, with official and active involvement in what became the civil rights movement (1954–1968).

This was a historic development because leading up to the Civil War, most Catholics in Virginia — including the third bishop of Richmond, John McGill (1850–1872) — had supported the right to own slaves although they themselves were generally too poor to do so.

In 1954, Peter L. Ireton, the ninth bishop of Richmond (1935–1958), became the first Southern bishop to integrate Catholic schools. His successor, John J. Russell (1958–1973), advocated strongly for racial equality and fair housing for African Americans.

The 11th bishop of Richmond, Walter F. Sullivan (1974–2003), made social justice a hallmark of his tenure. He was an outspoken advocate for the abolition of abortion and capital punishment, prison reform, nuclear disarmament and the alleviation of poverty.

During this time, the diocese became more involved in legislative advocacy to advance these causes. Bishop Sullivan also established seven facilities to care for the elderly (1973–1998) and launched a systematic program of “twinning” outreach to the Diocese of Hinche in Haiti (1984).

Efforts geared toward systemic change continued under Bishop Sullivan’s successor, Francis X. DiLorenzo (2004–2013). Together with Bishop Paul S. Loverde of Arlington, Bishop DiLorenzo established the Virginia Catholic Conference to advocate for Catholic values with the governor of Virginia and the Virginia General Assembly (2004). Pro-life efforts were also reinvigorated during this period.

The longstanding tradition of charitable work in the Diocese of Richmond continues as Catholics serve thousands of people by distributing food and clothing, offering financial assistance for rent and utilities, ministering to the incarcerated, supporting pro-life efforts and supplying disaster relief.

These and other works of charity are the legacy of St. Vincent de Paul, who placed service to the poor at the forefront of the Church’s activity: “[The poor] are taking the place of the Son of God who chose to be poor. . . . With renewed devotion, then, we must serve the poor. . . . They have been given to us as our masters and patrons.”



St. Vincent de Paul Hospital, Norfolk, seen in this 1892 photo, was the first Catholic hospital in the Diocese of Richmond. It opened in 1856. (Photo/Diocese of Richmond Archives)

CHRONOLOGY OF THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF RICHMOND 1958–1973

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

1958 September 30 John J. Russell of Baltimore, bishop of Charleston, is installed as the 10th bishop of Richmond.

1960 September 20 St. John Vianney Seminary, for high-school students, opens in Goochland County.

1960 November 8 John F. Kennedy is the first Catholic elected president.

1961~1970 Bishop John J. Russell, a strong supporter of civil rights, closes some black parishes and makes others into territorial parishes in an effort to achieve integration.

1962~1965 Vatican Council II, which Bishop John J. Russell attends, seeks to renew the Church for its mission of evangelizing contemporary society.

Ca. 1963~Ca. 1974 The turbulent decade of the 1960s causes social unrest that affects the Catholic Church.

1963 July 19 Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and a candidate for canonization (2002), participates in a civil rights demonstration in Danville, Virginia.

1966 January 9 Cardinal Lawrence J. Sheehan of Baltimore dedicates St. Mary’s Hospital in Richmond; it is the second Catholic hospital in the diocese.

1968 A year of social upheaval and controversy: the Tet Offensive (January 30) triggers increased opposition to the Vietnam War; Martin Luther King Jr. (April 4) and Robert F. Kennedy (June 6) are assassinated; race riots erupt in major cities (April–May); there is public disorder and police brutality at the Democratic National Convention (August 26–29); and Pope St. Paul VI upholds the Church’s prohibition against artificial contraception (July 25).

1972 May 26 Auxiliary Bishop Walter F. Sullivan ordains John Bowler, the first permanent deacon of the Diocese of Richmond.

1973 January 22 The Supreme Court legalizes abortion (Roe v. Wade).

1973 April 28 Bishop John J. Russell retires, the first bishop of Richmond to do so.