

# Shine like Stars

Catholic Diocese of Richmond  
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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 Francis X. DiLorenzo: Restructuring and New Initiatives (2004–2017)**

Francis X. DiLorenzo (1942–2017) of Philadelphia was named the 12th bishop of Richmond in 2004. A priest of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, DiLorenzo had been an auxiliary bishop in Scranton and then bishop of Honolulu.

During his tenure in Richmond, the diocese found new ways to meet persistent and evolving challenges such as the shortage of priests and declining religious practice. After reaching 75, the usual retirement age for a bishop, DiLorenzo continued to lead the diocese until his unexpected death (2017).

In response to the aging of priests and scant ordinations in previous decades (ca. 1980–ca. 2005), the diocese began to recruit more seminarians, an effort that yielded a modest increase of priests. But with retirements outstripping ordinations, more priests were needed.



**Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo, seated, is pictured with the permanent deacons following their ordination on Oct. 19, 2013. He also ordained permanent deacons in 2012 and 2015.**

(Diocese of Richmond Archives photo)

To alleviate the shortage, the Richmond Diocese negotiated agreements with dioceses in Africa, the Philippines and Latin America to bring priests from those places to temporarily staff parishes (2004). These arrangements marked a historic role reversal as some regions supplying priests had once been missionary territories themselves. The clergy of the Diocese of Richmond became more diverse, as eventually 35% of its priests originated from other countries.

Moreover, some priests were assigned to multiple churches as part of several parish “clusters,” beginning in 2005. These structures hearkened to an earlier period in the diocese and reflected the longstanding practice in southwest Virginia. Beginning in 2012, Bishop DiLorenzo continued to ordain permanent deacons who provided ministerial support at the parish and diocesan level.

Education and Catholic identity were distinguishing features of DiLorenzo's episcopate. New funding, a systematic outreach to Hispanics (Segura Initiative, 2010), and greater oversight made Catholic schools more affordable, accessible and effective throughout the diocese.

Another initiative, the Lay Ecclesial Ministry Institute (2010) began to train professional men and women for various roles in parishes, schools and campus ministries. DiLorenzo, together with the bishop of Arlington, also established the Virginia Catholic Conference (2004) to advocate for Catholic values in the Virginia General Assembly and with the governor of the commonwealth.

Catholics in the Diocese of Richmond, as in the rest of the United States and other parts of the world, lived in an increasingly secular society. One effect was the continuing ebb in Mass attendance and reception of the sacraments among English-speakers.

Religious practice held steadier in ethnic communities where culture was more closely tied to faith, notably among Hispanics and Filipinos, although even there some erosion was evident.

Beyond the Church, there were signs that American culture was becoming more skeptical of institutional religion and hostile toward its

(2015) less than a decade after Virginia adopted an amendment to the state constitution outlawing the practice (2007). The Dioceses of Richmond and Arlington had strongly supported this measure as part of the referendum.

In another trend, more Americans, particularly those belonging to the “millennial” generation (born ca. 1982–ca. 2004), were affiliating with no organized religion while often still seeking spiritual experience.

In response to these trends, the diocese reorganized its staff to form an Office for Evangelization (2011), which encompassed ministry to young people (ages 12–17), college students (ages 18–22), and young adults (ages 18–30). This decision reflected an awareness of the 68 universities and colleges within the territory of the diocese. Faced with a changing religious landscape, parishes and campus ministries made greater efforts to reach non-practicing Catholics and to bolster the commitment of those already in the pews.

These were stirrings of the “New Evangelization,” Pope St. John Paul II's initiative (1983) to rouse the growing numbers of inactive members of the Church in historically Catholic areas (namely, the Americas and Western Europe).

By way of background, Vatican II (1962–1965) and Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) had recognized the change in religious attitudes. More recently, John Paul II's successors have renewed his call for large-scale evangelization efforts within the Church.

The newness of this project entailed a paradigm shift in Catholic practice: the full involvement of the laity, emphasis on dialogue and mercy rather than on condemnation, a focus on one's personal relationship with God, giving testimony to one's faith and developing a missionary outlook on ordinary life.

Throughout the history of the Diocese of Richmond, Catholics lived in a missionary territory because they were outnumbered by Protestants. While that disparity continued, Catholics were now a religious minority in another sense: the surrounding culture and population were becoming less religious.