

Shine like Stars

THIRTEEN IN THE WORLD JANUARY 2021



Throughout the Catholic Diocese of Richmond's bicentennial year, *The Catholic Virginian* has published the history of the diocese in the *Shine Like Stars in the World*. This is the final installment. The content of this section was 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 Barry C. Knestout: Preparing for the Diocesan Bicentennial (2018–2019)

Barry C. Knestout (b. 1962) of Cheverly, Maryland — a priest and auxiliary bishop of Washington, D.C. — became the 13th bishop of Richmond in 2018.

The bishop began his tenure by crisscrossing the diocese to learn about its people, parishes and other institutions. The regions of the diocese were reorganized into deaneries (groups of parishes) in order to foster priestly fraternity and to aid the bishop in his task of governing (2018).

As the bicentennial of the



Two priests and one transitional deacon were ordained on July 11, 2020, during the Mass marking the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Richmond. (Photo/Vy Barto)

local Church approached, a commemoration was planned to strengthen the bonds of fellowship within it and to revitalize its evangelizing mission, inspired by the exhortation of St. Paul: “Shine like stars in the world, as you hold fast to the word of life” (Phil 2:15–16).

Numerous bicentennial activities were organized: a year-long program of spiritual preparation; Masses in historic churches to recognize key events in diocesan history; pilgrimages; service projects; and, as the culmination, the diocese's first Eucharistic Congress.

The clerical abuse scandal reemerged six months into Knestout's tenure. The bishop responded to the crisis by meeting with victims of abuse. During 2018 he wrote a pastoral letter on the calamity, celebrated Masses of atonement and conducted listening sessions throughout the diocese.

Like many bishops in the United States, he published a list of all priests in the diocese against whom a credible and substantiated accusation of sexual abuse of a minor had been made (2019). These were steps toward rebuilding trust in the Church.

Reaping the Fruit: Diocese's Bicentennial (2020)

With advances and setbacks, the Catholic Church in Virginia spread gradually across an expansive, uneven terrain. The 200th anniversary of the Diocese of Richmond (July 11, 2020) was a vantage

point from which to survey how Catholics in this commonwealth have practiced and transmitted their faith over that period. The Church has grown since the arrival of the first missionaries. There are now 200,000 Catholics in the Richmond Diocese, 5% of the total population. The diocese has 191 priests, 161 deacons, 139 parishes and 30 schools.

An assessment of the prospects of the Church in Virginia, written around the time of the first Catholic mission (1570–1571), is instructive. Six months after the martyrdom of his fellow Spanish Jesuits, Father Juan Rogel sensed the challenges that the Church would face in this land: “I truly fear that there will be the same hardness in them [the indigenous people] regarding conversion as in the other places we have been; and if there is to be any fruit, it will come about over time, as when they are softened by water dripping on rock.”

Perseverance has borne fruit over time, as the Catholic Church cultivated the Gospel in all types of Virginia soil, ranging from barren to fertile (Mt 13:19–23). That story of struggle, failure and modest growth is the parable of the grain of wheat: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

Catholics in Virginia have overcome adversity, they have committed errors, and they have bettered society in their continuing effort to serve God.

A VAST COUNTRY: THE TERRITORY OF THE RICHMOND DIOCESE

FATHER ANTHONY E. MARQUES
Special to *The Catholic Virginian*

“Since now for a long time it has been implored of Us that the State of Virginia in North America, which was enclosed in the Diocese of Baltimore, be erected into a new Diocese separated from it... We... have established and decreed that... a new Episcopal Church, suffragan of Baltimore, should be erected at Richmond, which is the capital city of Virginia, and that it should embrace the whole State of Virginia, not including [the District of] Columbia.”

This excerpt from the founding document of the Diocese of Richmond specified its extensive territory. The Richmond Diocese would encompass Virginia, which at that time stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ohio River, including what later became West Virginia. (The founding document expressly excluded “Columbia” because at one point the Vatican had considered including Washington, D.C. within the territory of the Richmond Diocese.)

The United States was 44 years old, and James Monroe occupied the White House (1817–1825) when the Richmond Diocese was established.

The political organization of American territory at that time revolved around the question of slavery. The Missouri Compromise became law four months before the founding of the Diocese of Richmond. It prescribed that Maine would be admitted to the Union as a free state and Missouri as a slave state, and that slavery would be prohibited in territories north of Missouri's southern border — except in Missouri itself.

In Virginia, slavery was legal. Most Catholics were too poor to own slaves but supported the right of others to do so. The issue of slavery did not figure in the establishment of the Diocese of Richmond. (Several popes had condemned racial slavery, or at least aspects of it, as early as 1435, but their teachings were mostly ignored.)

With the establishment of the Diocese of Richmond, together with the Diocese of Charleston, South Carolina, on the same day, the Catholic Church in the United States was organized into eight dioceses that spanned the 22 states and three organized territories. Catholics were a small minority at that time in Virginia and in the country as a whole.

In 1820, there were approximately 240,000 Catholics in the United States — 2.5% of the population, and 1,000 Catholics in Virginia — 1% of the population. The Church only grew prodigiously once large-scale immigration from Europe began in the mid-1840s. The Vatican officially considered the United States to be a mission country until 1908.

The territory of the Diocese of Richmond has been changed four times in its 200-year history. In 1850, the Diocese of Wheeling was created to encompass the portion of Virginia west of the Allegheny Mountains. Richard V. Whelan, second bishop of Richmond (1841–1850), had recommended this change because he considered the diocese's existing territory too extensive.

Whelan himself had moved from Rich-

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mond to Wheeling in 1846, partly in the hopes of establishing a Catholic colony there. The construction of the National Road, which reached Wheeling in 1818, had made the city a gateway to the Midwest.

Later, many Italian and Irish immigrants, most of whom were Catholics, came to build the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (1848–1852). The Vatican granted Whelan's request that he be named the first bishop of Wheeling.

In 1858, the Archdiocese of Baltimore transferred control of the city of Alexandria, Virginia, to the Diocese of Richmond. This move belatedly followed a change in the city's political status.

Alexandria had been ceded by Virginia to the new federal capital of Washington, D.C. in 1790 but was retroceded to the commonwealth in 1847. Alexandria, along with Norfolk, was home to the oldest organized Catholic community in Virginia (St. Mary's parish, ca. 1794).

During the Civil War once Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861, numerous western counties themselves seceded from the commonwealth. Fifty counties then formed the new state of West Virginia (originally called Kanawha), which was admitted to the Union in 1863.

This political development caused civil and ecclesiastical boundaries to overlap: the Richmond Diocese now included the eastern panhandle of West Virginia, and the Wheeling Diocese encompassed southwest Virginia.

The next territorial change to the Richmond Diocese took place in 1868, when the Diocese of Wilmington was founded. This diocese encompassed Delaware and the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia. Father Thomas A. Becker, a priest of the Diocese of Richmond, was named Wilmington's first bishop.

The present territory of the Richmond Diocese was settled upon in 1974 when three changes took effect simultaneously. First, the Diocese of Arlington was created to encompass northern Virginia. As a suburb of Washington, D.C., this area had become a distinct region of the commonwealth, growing significantly after World War I and then exponentially after World War II.

Second, state and ecclesiastical boundaries between the Diocese of Richmond and the Diocese of Wheeling (soon renamed Wheeling-Charleston) were realigned, with Richmond ceding the eastern panhandle of West Virginia to Wheeling and receiving southwest Virginia in return.

Third, the Diocese of Wilmington ceded to the Diocese of Richmond the Eastern Shore of Virginia, which had been made more accessible owing to the construction of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel in 1964.

With the 1974 loss of the Catholic population of northern Virginia, and the acquisition of regions with few Catholics, the Diocese of Richmond became even more missionary than it had been for some time. Today in its territory there are 200,000 Catholics, 5% of the population. The approximately 33,000 square miles of territory in the Richmond Diocese make it the 25th largest out of 176 dioceses in the United States.