

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

By Father Anthony E. Marques

September 21, 2020

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 to the present day, 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 concerned for their spiritual welfare herself.

Vincent's new focus led to him to minister to galley slaves (1622). (Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi was in charge of the royal galleys.) Again, 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 the following century (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, 8 churches, and 6 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 (September 27). On September 26, Bishop Barry C. Knestout will lead the diocese in commemorating Vincent de Paul at a Bicentennial Regional Mass at St. Andrew Church in 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 September 27 to October 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.

