

In September 1993, with Major League Baseball season nearing an end, the first place Philadelphia Phillies visited the 2nd place Montreal Expos. In the first game of the series, the home team Expos came to bat one inning, trailing 7-4. Their first two batters reached base. The manager sent a pinch hitter to the plate, rookie Curtis Pride, who had never gotten a hit in the major leagues. Pride took his warm-up swings, walked to the plate, and on the first pitch laced a double, scoring two runners. The stadium thundered as 46,000 fans screamed their approval. The Expos third base coach called time, walked to Pride and motioned for him to take off his helmet. He was puzzled and then understood that the coach wanted him to tip his cap to the crowd. After the game, someone asked Pride if he could hear the cheering. This person was not trying to be funny – Curtis Pride is 95 percent deaf. “Here,” Pride said, pointing to his heart. “I could hear it here.”

And that is why we gather this weekend, because of the heart of Jesus and it is here (motion to heart) that we experience the presence of Jesus’ love for all of us. Sacred Heart Cathedral witnesses more marriages than anywhere else in the Diocese. Yes, here hearts in love are joined together in the one Heart of Christ. Couples who marry always place the rings on one specific finger. The reason for this is that it was once believed that that finger had a vein that went straight to the heart, the very symbol of love.

It is here that men of the Diocese are ordained, surrendering the love of their hearts to the heart of Christ. It is here that Jesus’ merciful heart forgives all who surrender their sins to him. It is here that our children are first given the Body and Blood of Christ that for the first time will become one with their body, their blood, their hearts. And finally, it is here that we surrender our loved ones, whose hearts, have ceased to beat, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Yes, we gather here, the very heart of the Diocese of Richmond. Here is where the life of the Diocese begins, circulating outward to her parishes. Yes, all of you are the lifeblood of the heart of Jesus - A very special place to be counted as parishioners.

The actual feast day for the Sacred Heart of Jesus was this past Friday – it is always celebrated the 1st Friday after “*The Most Holy Body & Blood of Christ*” Sunday liturgy. We have extended it to the weekend so that all of us might be able to come together and celebrate our very own feast day.

The first question we might ask is when/where this feast day originated? There was some devotion to the Sacred Heart in various places between the 13th and 16th centuries. And yet it did not really catch on until a French woman by the name of Margaret Mary Alacoque came on the scene (1647-1690). During this time period the faith in France and much of Europe was said to have become rather cool or tepid. This unlikely saint to be was charged with strengthening the love of God in the hearts of God’s people.

Born in 1647, she was five of seven children. At the age of 8 her father died and so she was sent to a school run by Poor Clare nuns and there her vocation was born. She received communion at the age of 9, which was very unusual because children at this time were not allowed communion. She said she found great comfort in the Blessed Sacrament, particularly as she suffered with Rheumatic fever until the age of 15.

In 1671 she entered the Visitation Convent with the hopes of becoming a sister. In this convent, there were two classes of nuns, the cultivated and educated, who often sang in the choir and the like. The unschooled performed menial chores and this is the group Margaret Mary was linked with, being described as slow and clumsy. She suffered scorn and ridicule because of her strong piety.

Beginning on December 27, 1673 for a period of 13 months she experienced visions and revelations from Jesus through different intervals. He told her the world had grown cold and that the love of his heart must be made evident through her. She was chosen to spread devotion to Jesus' Sacred Heart. To do so, he told her that he wanted a feast of reparation to be established in honor of his Sacred Heart.

One can only imagine what storms she suffered in trying to convince people of Jesus' request. She was rebuffed by her community and her superior treated her with contempt. Parents of the children she taught accused her of being an imposter and unorthodox – rumors were then spread about her. A group of theologians were brought in and rejected the validity of her visions.

To make matters worse, she became gravely ill. It was then that her superior said that if she became well, she might believe her. Immediately she became well and thus began a chain of events that would change the world forever. The priest who was the confessor for the community of the Visitation nuns declared that he believed Margaret Mary was genuine. She had turned to the heart of Jesus and the storms would be silenced. Her faith teaches us all that when we make the love of Christ evident in our lives, he will calm any storm.

In 1687, the sisters elected a new Mother Superior, Sr. Merlin, who named Mary Margaret her assistant. Isn't amazing how faith in Jesus can end up turning the tables? In 1693 the convent began to observe the feast of the Sacred Heart in private. Two years later a chapel was dedicated to the Sacred Heart and the feast was celebrated by all the Visitation convents. However, a short time later in the year 1690, Mary Margaret became ill and died. 75 years after her death, Pope Clement XIII recognized and approved the devotion to the Sacred Heart and it was Pope Pius IX who later extended it to a universal feast day in of the Church.

And the faith of this young French saint continued to inspire faith in the Sacred Heart, just as it did so in the parishioners who built this Cathedral centuries later.

+You might recall that after Jesus died on the cross, a spear was thrust in his side and blood and water poured out. A dead man usually does not bleed in such a way. You see, the physical and emotional strain were so terrible, his heart had ruptured. The blood mixed with the fluid surrounding his heart. The spear had pierced this. **Jesus literally had died of a broken heart, loving you, loving me**

Let us now return to the death of Margaret Mary. Remember she had rheumatic fever as a child. It is a disease that can lead to **inflammation of the heart**, which leads to scarring and deformity, causing the valves to malfunction. This strain on the heart muscle causes **rheumatic heart disease**, which can cause death in middle age of a person. Can we not suppose that it was an inflamed heart that led to Margaret Mary's death at the age of 43? **Her last words whispered were, "I need nothing but God and to lose myself in the heart of Jesus."**