

THE MOST SACRED HEART OF JESUS (YEAR A)

June 21, 2020

Deuteronomy 7:6–11 • 1 John 4:7–16 • Matthew 11:25–30

I.

This cathedral church was supposed to have been called “St. Peter’s.”

That’s because this building is actually the second cathedral of the diocese; the first was St. Peter’s, which is located next to the Virginia State Capitol.

There was no cathedral when the diocese was established in 1820.

St. Peter’s was the cathedral from 1841, when the second bishop of Richmond, Richard V. Whelan (1841–1850), was appointed, until the dedication of this cathedral church in 1906.

Normally, the name or title of a cathedral transfers automatically, but Augustine van de Vyver, the sixth bishop of Richmond (1889–1911), who built the new cathedral, asked that its title be changed to “Sacred Heart.”

The reason was that there was a parish by that name two blocks away, dating from 1887, which the new cathedral would absorb.

So, out of deference for the local parish, this cathedral was named after the Sacred Heart.

This anecdote is a beautiful reminder that a cathedral is both a diocesan church and a local parish.

Both aspects converge in the mission of a cathedral parish, which is to serve as an example for all other parishes in the diocese.

II.

Interestingly, Church law requires each church have a name: either that of a saint, which becomes the church’s patron, or a title that refers to a “mystery of the Lord”—an event in Christ’s life or an aspect of his person (*Code of Canon Law*, canon 1218).

This is so that the faithful who worship in the church will have someone to inspire them, someone they can imitate.

This also means that each church has a patronal or titular feast.

The titular feast of this cathedral is the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Typically, this feast is celebrated on the Friday after the second Sunday after Pentecost.

But where it is the title of the church, the feast can be moved to Sunday.

All of this is a way of saying that today's feast is big deal.

III.

We have three lovely images of the Sacred Heart in this church, which are found in the Sacred Heart chapel: the statue, the tabernacle door, and the stained-glass window.

The image on the tabernacle door is striking: a heart, crowned with thorns, dripping blood, with rays of light emanating from the center.

The statue depicts Christ with his heart exposed, and, more notably, his arms extended, inviting all to draw close to him.

The stained-glass window, which like most in the cathedral, was installed for the church's golden jubilee in 1956, depicts the apparition of Christ to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690), a French Visitation nun.

Christ revealed his Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary, who did much to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart.

Each of these images in the cathedral is worth a closer look.

In their own way, each expresses the magnitude of God's love for humanity, which is the meaning of the Sacred Heart.

The Sacred Heart signifies the love, mercy, and tenderness of Christ, which is not mere sentimentality:

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am meek and humble of heart;
and you will find rest for yourselves.”

This passage from the Gospel provides a glimpse of Jesus’ Heart, which in the biblical sense, is not a metaphor for emotion, but rather indicates the core of a person.

Christ’s “yoke” is a rest from the Mosaic law—
not a refuge from commitment, decisive action, or even suffering.

Jesus’ humility and meekness points to the Cross,
where, above all, his Heart and character are revealed:
there, he dies out of love for us:

“In this way the love of God was revealed to us:
God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him.
In this is love: not that we have loved God,
but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.”

The beautiful images of the Sacred Heart, and the magnitude of this church,
point to the breadth and depth of God’s love—and our generous response.

The Heart of Christ is like the barrel vault of the ceiling;
it is large enough to embrace everyone.

But so often, we, as sinful human beings, are small and petty,
apt to complain about this or that.

This building, and its devotion to the Sacred Heart,
inspires us to be magnanimous, committed, forgiving, compassionate, and kind.

It’s helpful for us to feel “small” in this beautiful space,
because that can be a moment of conversion.

In fact, devotion to the Sacred Heart focuses on making reparation for sin and undergoing a conversion of life.

So, a practical encouragement on this our feast day:
let's make the Sacrament of Penance a regular and vibrant part of our lives.

Thankfully, we been able to offer that beautiful experience of divine mercy throughout this time of quarantine.

If you are having trouble forgiving someone,
or if you feel that your spiritual life is in a rut,
perhaps it's time to make a good confession.

IV.

A closing thought.

Plans for a new cathedral in the diocese began as far back as 1865.

The third bishop of Richmond, John McGill (1850–1872),
proposed that a new cathedral be built in the western part of the city,
and he purchased a triangular cornfield on which this church was later built.

But the building project languished for the next fifty years, for lack of funds.

Then, in 1901, Thomas Fortune Ryan, and his wife, Ida Mary Barry,
made a generous donation: \$500,000 (today \$15 million).

This cathedral was then constructed between 1903 and 1906.

Not everyone can make that kind of financial gift.

But each person—each Catholic—can be generous in responding to God.

That is the Heart of Christ: infinite love for all people.

That is the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.