Diocese of Richmond

January 18–19, 2020

Dear Faithful of the Diocese of Richmond,

Today we begin the celebration of the bicentennial of our local Church which will last throughout 2020. This Mass commemorates the arrival of the first bishop of Richmond and recognizes the Catholic presence in the Eastern Vicariate of our diocese. I am grateful to be celebrating this historic occasion with you.

The establishment of the Diocese of Richmond took place under difficult circumstances. First, a schism or formal division among believers had arisen in Norfolk over the question of the ownership of Church property and the authority to appoint pastors. Second, the communities of Catholics in Virginia were small, far flung, and mostly poor. These were the challenges that Right Reverend Patrick Kelly faced when he came from Ireland as the first bishop of Richmond.

Although the Norfolk Schism eventually subsided, Bishop Kelly still had no income and supported himself by teaching. He returned to Ireland after just a year and half in Virginia, having never reached Richmond. The diocese, which lacked resources, was placed under the administration of the archbishop of Baltimore for the next nineteen years.

In this historical episode, we sense the perennial need for unity in the Church. That unity flows from the Eucharist, since each celebration of Mass both expresses and strengthens the communion of the Church; that is, the bonds that unite us to God and to one another. Communion is one theme of our diocesan bicentennial.

The readings and prayers for today’s Mass focus on the Church’s communion. In place of the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, I have asked that a special Mass from the Roman Missal, for the Particular or local Church, be celebrated throughout the diocese. These readings and prayers will help unite us in giving thanks to God for the presence of the Catholic Church in Virginia through the centuries.

May this Eucharistic Celebration at the beginning of the diocesan jubilee help us live out the motto of our bicentennial, which echoes the words of St. Paul: “Shine like stars in the world, as you hold fast to the word of life” (Philippians 2:15–16).

Sincerely in Christ,

[Signature]

Most Reverend Barry C. Knestout
Bishop of Richmond