Article and Photos by Sherri Spellman.

Throughout the Scriptures, Jesus demonstrates a special love for those most in need and reminds us that we will be judged based on how we treat the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. We read in the gospel, “whatsoever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

The Catholic social teaching encourages us to imitate Christ’s love for the poor by working to create a society where the needs of the poor are always considered.

The Church teaches that “those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church.”

Here at the Cathedral, the Christian Service Committee encourages the involvement and participation from all parishioners to live out a love for the poor through works of mercy.

Through the annual Food Drive which is conducted every March, the Cathedral parish is a major supporter and provider of food to the Social Apostolate, the Catholic outreach program to the disadvantaged in the Savannah area. This diocesan program provides thousands of meals to the needy in the area, as well as showers, toiletries, prescription assistance, birth certificate and State I.D. procurement assistance, without regard to religious affiliation.

Latacia Avila has worked at the Social Apostolate for the last 12 years and was named Director in July 2018.

Latacia says the Apostolate serves lunch to the homeless four days a week from their soup kitchen. However, the largest group they assist is the working poor who receive food from the Apostolate pantry. Of the 710 families receiving help last year, 165 families were headed by a senior citizen. Seniors who receive the minimum $700 check from Social Security receive only $16 in food stamps. The Apostolate is unique in that they are the only food pantry open five days a week.

One of the best ways our parishioners can help the needy through the Social Apostolate is by donating food items during the March drive. The items always in need are basic staples like soups, vegetables, cereals, rice, boxed foods and dried beans. But the main items that are always in the greatest need are proteins such as canned meats, tuna, hearty beef soups and peanut butter. At this time, the protein shelves in the Social Apostolate pantry are completely bare.

Cathedral parishioners are encouraged to bring items when they come to Mass during the month of March, dropping off the food in baskets placed near the side entry doors. The Christian Services Committee members happily load their cars after each weekend Mass and make countless deliveries throughout the month. Latacia says that they receive more food from the Cathedral in March than any other time of the year. She says that she can also call and request food items at any time and our wonderful parish will always come through.

What an easy way to imitateChrist’s love for the poor. There comes with this simple act, a real feeling of serving God and his people.
By Moira Novack

Saint Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until we rest in you.” We know this to be true because we all experience this innate and persistent ache for more...more meaning, more fulfillment, more purpose and more connection. Father Ronald Rolheiser calls it a Holy Longing. God longs for us and we long for Him. To honor this Lenten season it might be worth considering how to answer this call to a holy longing rather than just simply exercising more self-control by forgoing cookies, alcohol or some other soft pleasure.

Our answer starts with prayer because prayer is how we build a relationship with God. We need to recognize and embrace our need and reliance on God and to be in close relationship with Him. If your prayer life isn’t changing you, or at least making you uncomfortable, Lent is the perfect time to make improvements. Prayer is non-negotiable. If your only prayer is in passing or some sort of casual, mental, inner dialogue, now is a good time to get something a little more formal, demanding or measurable going. We all know it takes time and energy to build meaningful relationships when we meet people we want to know. Friendships don’t materialize just because we hope they do. They take time to nurture and grow. God is literally longing for relationship with us and we need Him more than we need breath.

A relationship with God leads us to a virtuous life with a commitment to social justice, a spirit of hospitality and an attitude of tenderness towards those we don’t agree with.

During Lent most of us will tithe to some charity but we will hold greedily to our own righteousness, frustrations, resentments, judgements or disgust at our adversaries or even just those with opposing political views. Maybe during Lent we can offer hospitality instead of hostility? We don’t need to invite our foes to dinner but can we think of them tenderly, recognizing them as beloved by God and seeing their goodness rather than just our differences?

Politics is polarizing but an effort to understand and empathize when our views are antithetically opposed is being responsible for the energy and attitude we bring to situations. Even when we are “right” we must hold the “wrong” in a spirit of forgiveness and compassion as we engage in the battle for social justice because judgement, anger and bitterness separate us from God. During Lent we need to consider disciplining our emotional states as well as our physical states. Fasting from chocolate might be easier than fasting from resentment or indignation but alignment with God’s will involves both action and attitude.

Our spiritual lives are not just private matters, like some sort of self-help or therapeutic practice.

On Ash Wednesday we are all marked with a symbol of our longing for God. During Lent we encourage and inspire each other as a community bound by God to fast, pray and tithe. We are imbued with a holy longing for God because He wants to be in relation with us. Lent gives us an opportunity to answer this call and transform our lives by making a holy encounter of all our relationships with family, friends, neighbors and foes.
Most of you who come to the Cathedral for Mass every Sunday may not be aware of what goes on in the church during the rest of the week. As one of the premier tourist destinations in Savannah, we see throngs of people flocking to our doorstep every day. Last year, over a quarter of a million tourists visited our beautiful Cathedral and they were greeted by a member of our Tour Guides Ministry coordinated by John Pryor. Recently we asked this group to tell us about their experiences sharing the wonders of the Cathedral with people from all over the world. In response to several questions we posed to them, here is what they said:

In response to the first question, “Why are you a tour guide?” we received many similar answers.
- Kathy Siler believes it is important to share our beautiful Cathedral with people of all faiths.
- Mary Clark Rechtiene considers it a subtle means of evangelizing or sharing our faith.
- Anne Hackett says she’s gained a greater appreciation of her own faith and the Cathedral through the comments of the tourists.
- And Dick Anderson does it to enrich visitors’ experience at the Cathedral, as well as to deepen his own knowledge of the church. An unanticipated benefit is the inner sense of peace he experiences while sharing the wonders of our holy place with tourists.

Most of them really seem to enjoy the opportunity to speak positively about Savannah, to highlight the historic significance of the Cathedral and its importance to the City, as well as to be an ambassador for our beautiful city.

They all had interesting but similar responses to the next question, “What is the most common reaction to the church?” Here are some of their responses:

- “Wow!”—People enter the Cathedral with their mouths wide open.
- “Absolutely Gorgeous, Beautiful, Amazing, Awesome, Stunning!” Of more impact than words is observing the number of jaws that actually drop when visitors walk through the Cathedral doors.
- “This takes my breath away. I’m not Catholic but I feel something in here; this brings tears to my eyes; this reminds me of churches I have seen in Europe; this is the most beautiful church I have ever seen.”
- The reaction is one of “AWE.” Regardless of whether the weather is sunny or rainy, as soon as tourists open the door to the Cathedral, and see its beauty and warmth, they truly do emit an “AHHH” in hushed tones.

In response to the question “Where do the visitors come from?” the most common response was “All over the world.”

In addition to states from across the USA plus Canada, various guides said, they have spoken to people from England, France, Spain, Ukraine, Belarus, Ireland, Greece, Germany, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, and Asia. Visitors often mention a church in their country and compare it to the Cathedral. Mary Clark stated that “Besides educating our visitors about our church building and its contents, I have learned much from them.”

What is the most interesting question you have been asked?

One of the most common questions concerns the name of the church:
- Why did the original French immigrants name the church after St. John the Baptist?
- If this is a Catholic church, why is it named after a Baptist?
- Others ask if the Cathedral was once a Baptist Church?
• Some will comment that, “This doesn’t look like any Baptist church I’ve ever seen.”

One of the most interesting questions was:

• “Why does the sixth Station of the Cross feature St. Veronica wiping Christ’s face with a cloth when there is no mention of her in the Bible?”

Other questions posed include:

• How much to build the Cathedral today?
• What makes the water holy?
• How do you change the lightbulbs?
• Why do you light candles?
• What is that big thing in the rear of the sanctuary behind the lower altar that looks like a castle?
• Do you have relics? (Now we can answer Yes.)
• Does the organ still work?
• Do you still use the confessional?
• Are services still held here? (People seem to have the idea we are a museum.)
• Why is the Altar of the Blessed Virgin Mother on the right side of the main altar?
• Why is Mary always draped in light blue clothing?
• Due to the size of the Cathedral’s baptismal font, do you offer immersion Baptisms?
• Are there human ashes in the Ambry?

What was the most unusual request?

• Believe it or not - one day a couple that had just been married in the square came in and wanted to have their picture taken in front of our Altar.

Anything else you would like to share?

John Pryor loves explaining the basic beliefs in our religion and how many parts are tied into Jewish traditions, since Christ was Jewish, as were the early Christians.

Tourists are often surprised that the Cathedral is an active parish with such a large membership and that it is the heart of the Diocese. They are inspired because some of their churches are closing, due to decreasing membership.

We wish to thank the following tour guides for their contributions to this article:

Dick Anderson, Anne Hackett, Mary Clark Rechtiene, Kathy Siler and John Pryor.

It is easy to see that they all find it personally rewarding serving in the Tour Guide Ministry. There are time slots open in the schedule and John would be happy to train you to serve as a guide. If you have any interest in becoming a Tour Guide, please contact John Pryor at fizzypryor@gmail.com.
The Diocese of Savannah is proud to have been represented in the January 18 March for Life in Washington D.C. by more than 200 people. For the first time in a long time the Diocese was able to sponsor a bus from Savannah to D.C. for the March. This was an overnight bus trip, no hotel accommodations. However, it was not difficult to pack the bus with 51 participants including families, college students, a seminarian, a deacon and priests. For many this was their first time in Washington and at the March for Life.

As we began with the youth rally and Mass celebrated by the Papal Nuncio, we were all inspired to march for life, for a respect for life, and not just for the end of abortion. The homily was clear that abortion is not the only factor against life in our nation or even the world. There are many more issues that affect the dignity and respect for human life. Human trafficking, suicide, euthanasia, hunger, homelessness,
immigration, pornography, and the list can go on. It’s our Catholic, Christian duty to fight for the respect for all life.

Life begins at conception, it is what the Catholic Church teaches and what science can prove. It is great to begin the year advocating for human life at the moment of conception, to fight against abortion. It is also important to not end the fight after the March. This is what many speakers at the March for Life rally emphasized, speakers such as Ben Shapiro and Vice President Mike Pence. They urged us to not end the fight at the March but to bring the March to our hometowns, on our social media, to our neighbors and friends. It is our duty to educate and inform people that human life begins at conception. We are encouraged to spend the rest of the year fighting for the respect and dignity of human life.

It is easy for us to forget about respect life until next January rolls up and it’s time for the March again. Let us make 2019 a year in which we do not forget about life but are praying and advocating for the dignity of human life from conception to natural death.

Left: SCAD student Jillian Wenner with her Respect Life poster.
Here at the Cathedral we have several images of our patron saint, St. John the Baptist. He is featured in the three windows in the apse which display his mission as the one who prepared the way of the Lord. And this year he was added to the crèche scene as described in the January Twin Spires. There is however another representation of St. John the Baptist which often goes unnoticed.

He is pictured in the mural on the upper northwest transept wall above the confessional. This is an unusual depiction of St. John the Baptist as a small child. The adults in the mural left to right include John’s parents St. Elizabeth and her husband Zachariah, as well as his kinsfolk, Mary and Joseph.

The cross staff he carries symbolizes his life’s mission. The drape on top of the staff reads “Ecce Agnus” which in Latin means “Behold the Lamb” in reference to the Messiah. It is interesting that although a small child, he is shown attired in a garment that was woven from camel’s hair and was secured at the waist by a leather belt, or girdle about his loins which he would wear later in life when he was preparing the way.

The elder standing behind the family is possibly the Old Testament prophet Elijah, whose mission as a reformer paralleled that of John the Baptist. Both men called on sinners to repent and return to holiness.

According to Georgia Colonial Records dated May 2, 1742, “Bailiffs in Town Courts were directed to administer the Declaration against Transubstantiation to every person who accepts any Office in the Province.”

Despite these obstacles, the Catholic Faith ultimately became established and finally flourished in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist.

Did You Know That?
Catholics were banned in the Colony of Georgia by the original charter which granted religious freedom to all “Except Papists”.

But did you know that...
A few Catholics did eventually settle in Savannah but if they ran for office they had to disavow their belief in Transubstantiation.
For the past 18 years the St. John Vianney Vocations Ministry has been promoting vocations to the priesthood, diaconate, and religious life in the Diocese of Savannah. Soon after its formation back in 2001, it began encouraging the saying of the Diocesan Prayer for Vocations, which we say every day, at every Mass, here in the Cathedral, as well as in other parishes throughout the diocese.

Early on, to help create an environment conducive to promoting vocations, they began sponsoring a Vocation Essay Contest for the seventh grade students in the Catholic Schools and Faith Formation Programs throughout the diocese. It has recently been expanded to include a separate contest for the eleventh grade high school students.

The question presented to the 7th graders this year was: “How have the lives of the Georgia Martyrs inspired you to go on mission to spread the Catholic Faith to others in our Diocese of Savannah — as a priest, religious or lay person?”

The students were asked to watch the Georgia Martyrs video, available on the diocesan website, before answering the question. A total of 89 essays were submitted, 72 from the Catholic Schools and 17 from the Faith Formation Programs. On Saturday, January 12th, members of the Savannah and Augusta Vocation Ministries gathered at St. Mary on the Hill in Augusta to judge the essays.

It was very interesting reading the winning essays which were published in the Southern Cross. Several of the winners said they were inspired to “stand up for my faith,” or “volunteer in my church community” and even “spread the Word of God.” And finally one of them concluded her essay with this powerful statement, “Their lives inspired me to live my faith loyally and profess it outrageously.”

We are pleased to announce that Richard Terry of the Cathedral Faith Formation Program received an Honorable Mention Award Certificate for his essay submittal. Richard was presented with his certificate by Roger Haneline, Savannah Vocations member with his teacher Amy Schuler and Fr. Schreck looking on.
We recently received a call in the office from a gentleman who was inquiring about the various symbols in the Cathedral, in particular, the symbol above the central portal of the Cathedral.

It is a quatrefoil. This decorative element consists of a symmetrical shape which forms the overall outline of four partially overlapping circles of the same diameter. It is found in art, architecture, heraldry and traditional Christian symbolism.

Many of them can be found in the Cathedral as decorative features in various stained glass windows. A beautiful example is the one in the center of the rose window which contains St. Cecelia, the Patron Saint of Music, holding a small hand organ.

Another decorative feature called a cinquefoil (from the French, “five leaves”) has been used in Christian design and architecture from the Middle Ages. This five-petaled-rose is often found at the tops of Gothic arches or above windows. This one is above the window in the apse in which St. John is baptizing Jesus. The latin inscription on the ribbon translates to: “Thou art My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased.”
The Diocese of Savannah was canonically erected on July 19, 1850 by Pope Pius IX. On July 23, 1850, Father Frances Xavier Gartland of Philadelphia was appointed to the new see and he was consecrated as the first Bishop of Savannah on November 10, 1850.

Sadly Bishop Gartland, the “good shepherd,” became infected with yellow fever while selflessly serving the sick. He died on September 20, 1854 and was known as the “Martyr Bishop.”

In 1870, Pope Pius IX appointed the Right Reverend Ignatius Persico as the fourth bishop of Savannah. Determining a larger Cathedral was needed, he inaugurated plans for the construction of a new building. He secured the property for the planned Cathedral on Abercorn Street from the Sisters of Mercy, however he resigned the see for reasons of ill health in 1872 before the construction began.

Bishop William Hickley Gross, C.Ss.R. was consecrated as the fifth Bishop of Savannah on April 23, 1873 in Baltimore. On November 19, 1873, Bishop Gross laid the cornerstone for the new Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. The Cathedral, planned by Bishop Persico, was designed by Baldwin and Price of Baltimore, MD.

The Most Reverend James Roosevelt Bayley, Archbishop of Baltimore, solemnly dedicated the new brick Cathedral on April 30, 1876. The structure, which cost $150,000, was dedicated to “Our Lady of Perpetual Help.”

Ten years later, the Right Reverend Thomas Andrew Becker, the sixth Bishop of Savannah, discovered that the name of the Cathedral had never been officially changed to “Our Lady of Perpetual Help” and the Vatican directed it should resume its original title: “Cathedral of St. John the Baptist.” Bishop Becker built an Episcopal residence in 1889 at a cost of $26,000. The twin spires were added at a cost of $35,000 in 1896 and the brick church was stuccoed and whitewashed.

Sunday, February 6, 1898, the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist was almost destroyed by fire. While the embers still smoldered, in the face of the seemingly overwhelming costs for rebuilding, Bishop Becker declared, “The Cathedral must be rebuilt, and as soon as possible.” Thus, Savannah Catholics threw themselves into the monumental task of rebuilding another Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, as beautiful as its predecessor.

After the sudden death of Bishop Becker, Father Benjamin Keiley, Cathedral Rector, was appointed the seventh Bishop of Savannah. He was consecrated on June 3, 1900 by James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore. The current building was dedicated on October 28, 1900 by Archbishop Sebastian Martineelli, Apostolic Delegate to the United States as the representative of His Holiness Pope Leo XIII.

Bishop Keiley achieved a long-desired wish when he witnessed the solemn consecration of the Cathedral in 1920, once it was debt-free.

In 1929, at the age of 36, Bishop Gerald Patrick Aloysius O’Hara was named Auxiliary Bishop for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. At the time, he was the youngest bishop in the world. On November 16, 1935, Bishop O’Hara was appointed by Pope Pius XI as the ninth Bishop of Savannah. He was installed at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist on January 15, 1936.

Bishop O’Hara was often outside of the diocese because of his extensive work in the Vatican Diplomatic Service. On July 15, 1950, Bishop O’Hara received the personal title of Archbishop, as a sign of Pope Pius XII’s gratitude for his courageous work internationally.

On October 16, 1950, Archbishop O’Hara presided over the Diocese of Savannah’s 100th anniversary celebration. The highlight of the Centennial was a Solemn Pontifical High Mass celebrated by His Eminence Eugene Cardinal Tisserant. As the third ranking prelate of the Catholic Church and one of the preeminent churchmen of the time, he attended as the personal representative of Pope Pius XII.

These six men helped the Catholic Faith become firmly established and flourish in Georgia.
The Celtic Cross — A Symbol of Faith & Heritage

A Celtic cross was placed in Emmett Park on Bay Street in 1983 to commemorate Georgians of Irish ancestry. This “Irish Limestone Celtic Cross” was hand carved in County Roscommon, Ireland.

In 2012 the beautiful, wooden Celtic cross, handcrafted by Pat McCarthy, made its appearance in the Cathedral just in time for the St. Patrick’s Day festivities and has since retained a place of honor next to the Ambry at the entrance to the Sacred Heart Chapel.

The Celtic cross is a symbol that combines a cross with a ring surrounding the intersection.

The main body of the cross, measuring about 75 inches, is made up of three pieces of sapele laminated together. The massive base which was necessary to support the cross is a laminate of sapele, Caribbean rosewood, cocobolo and elm from Ireland. The finished cross measures 108 inches from floor to cap.