

Father James E. Coyle
(1873-1921)
Priest and Martyr, *uti fertur*¹

Jim Pinto

Father James Edwin Coyle was truly a man after God's own heart. His dedication to Christ, the Church, and all of humanity was well known to the people of his generation and is being rediscovered in ever-growing numbers in our day.

Born on 23rd March 1873 in Drum, near Athlone, Co. Roscommon, Ireland, he attended the Jesuit run Mungret College in Limerick, and from there went to the North American College in Rome to study for the priesthood. Ordained on 26th May 1896 at the Basilica of St. John Lateran by Cardinal Lucido Parocchi, he was sent as a missionary priest for the Diocese of Mobile, Alabama, in the US, and was assigned to the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. He later became rector and then director of McGill Institute for boys in Mobile. In 1904 he was appointed rector to the prominent parish of St. Paul's in Birmingham, Alabama. Birmingham was a burgeoning city both in its industries - coal, and steel, and population as people from various lands were drawn to the many employment opportunities; many of them were Catholic. Among the vision casting words of his inaugural sermon to the congregation of St. Paul were these:

I appeal then to you, my new friends, to beg our Lord during this Mass for the graces and blessings and help you and I need in the great work before us in extending God's Kingdom and make the spiritual keep pace with the material progress of this great city in winning all hearts to it.²

In tandem with the growth and variety of ethnic and religious groups seeking opportunity in the city, various associations like the Ku Klux Klan and so-called patriotic associations like the "True Americans" targeted the various immigrant and religious groups for discrimination and violence. The intensity of the bigotry, and in particular anti-Catholic bigotry, intensified during Fr. Coyle's years of ministry. He was an outspoken apologist for the Catholic Faith and the dignity of every human person. With accuracy and eloquence from the pulpit, in newspapers, and on the streets, Father Coyle was the face of Catholicism and the voice for human equality amid systemic and physical threats against ethnic and religious minorities. He would serve for seventeen years in St Paul's.

In 1915 a 12-year-old girl, Ruth Stephenson had visited Father Coyle on his porch to discuss the Catholic Faith with which she had become enamored. Ruth's father was a Methodist Minister and Klansman, E.R. Stephenson, who earnestly warned Ruth that if she ever spoke with Father Coyle again he would do violence to him and the parish. Despite the threat, Ruth was eventually received into the Church. Six years after that first visit and months after her conversion, she asked Father Coyle to perform her wedding; she had become engaged to a dark-skinned Puerto Rican Catholic by the name of Pedro Gussman. Father Coyle was happy to do so, and he married the couple at St Paul's at 5:30 pm on 11th August 1921. During the ceremony, anticipating the possibility of danger, he asked the two witnesses to stand a safe distance from the altar. Indeed, earlier in the day he had predicted that if he presided over the wedding there would be trouble: "I suppose old man Stephenson will shoot me or something!" he said.³ When Rev. Stephenson learned of the marriage he was irate, paced up and down in front of the Church grounds plotting to kill Fr. Coyle.

¹ The term 'uti fertur', from Latin, 'as it is reported'; a designation given to those who are reputed to have been martyred but, as yet, the Church has not formally declared it.

² James Pinto, *Killed in the Line of Duty*, Fr. James E. Coyle Memorial Project, 2011, p. 35.

³ 'Letter Proves That Fr. Coyle Had Premonition of His Death', *Daily American Tribune*, Dubuque, Iowa, Nov. 16, 1921.

It was Coyle's custom to say his evening prayers sitting on the rectory porch swing; the 11th August 1921 it would be no different. At 6:30 pm, while he was reading his breviary, Rev. Stephenson entered the front gate of the rectory grounds and shot three times at Father Coyle; one bullet fatally entered his left temple and exited the back of his skull. He was found lying on the front porch by his beloved and devoted sister, Marcella, who also confronted the murderer as he walked away from the scene. Father Coyle was rushed to the local hospital, St. Vincent's, where he received the Last Rites of the Church just before he died at 7:43 pm.

Following the shooting, Stephenson walked into the County Courthouse, almost adjacent to the rectory, with the smoking gun in his hand and confessed, "I just shot the priest." Thus began an agonizing, yet faith-filled process of grief for the family, friends, and diocese. The murder would also lead to a tortuous and favorably prejudicial trial.

Father Coyle's body lay in state the next afternoon, a Friday until his funeral on Sunday the 14th August. Thousands of mourners paid their respects and it was said that his funeral service was the largest in the history of Birmingham with crowds spilling out from the Church to the street outside. Bishop Edward Allen, Bishop of Mobile, celebrated the Requiem Mass. Visibly moved, numerous times his speech faltered with overwhelming grief and compassion, he spoke of the priest. Among his poignant reflections he stated:

Father Coyle was a zealous and devoted missionary... He labored and preached the word of God in season and out of season, visiting the sick, instructing the little ones of the poor and needy and afflicted. He especially labored to bring the people to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.⁴

Moving thoughts and reflections also poured forth from parishioners and community leaders. One parishioner said:

They have killed all they could kill of Fr. Coyle, and God has already comforted us with a vision of how little that is. His tragic taking off has only underscored the simple Gospel he was always expounding by word and example. If the words were written in fire they could not be burned more indelibly into the hearts of the Catholics of the district: *'Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you, falsely, for my sake; rejoice and be exceedingly glad for great is your reward in heaven.'*⁵

Rev. Stephenson was a known Klansman, as his trial approached, funds were raised by that association to gather the best defense team including attorney Hugo Black. Black, who would later join the Klan, become a U.S. Senator, and later a Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court. The trial was followed closely not only locally, but nationally, including detailed coverage by the *New York Times*. Stephenson's defense claimed that he was not guilty by reason of insanity, however, in the preliminary hearing, his daughter Ruth testified that her father had often made threats against Father Coyle's life. The minister also claimed that the priest had attacked him and the killing was in self-defense – other witnesses claimed that they thought they heard the shots, there had been no raised voices or audible indication that there was a scuffle. Both judge and jury had strong Klan and Anti-Catholic representatives and in the end, the Rev. Stephenson was found "Not, guilty and not guilty by reason of temporary insanity."⁶ Stephenson was given his gun back and resumed his ministry as the "marrying parson" in the County courthouse.

⁴ L.T. Beecher, 'The Passing of Father Coyle' in *The Catholic Monthly*, 1921 in *Killed in the Line of Duty*, 2011, p.15

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12

⁶ Rose Gibbons Lovett, *Catholic Church in the Deep South*, Diocese of Birmingham, Al, 1981, p. 60

Father James Coyle was a priest who knew his faith, lived what he believed, and freely imitated his Lord unto death. He was a priest who sought to make a full donation of his life each day and was killed in the line of duty. As his bishop and friend, Edward Allen, so clearly stated shortly after the murder:

“Father Coyle was a martyr to duty... He married a couple. The man was Catholic by birth. The woman was taken into the Catholic faith several months ago. The marriage ceremony was performed before God’s altar and then Father Coyle was shot down with no one near to defend him.”⁷

Well before his murder, Fr. Coyle’s life was under sincere threat. These threats were confirmed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and shared with diocesan authorities.⁸ In the face of multiple threats over several years, and at the risk of his own life, he courageously chose to remain faithful to God, the Church, and respect for the dignity of the human person.

On Ash Wednesday, 22nd February 2012, almost 90 years after the murder, Methodist Bishop William Willimon of the North Alabama Conference, prayed a Prayer of Confession and Reconciliation that included words specific to the Father Coyle tragedy:

Forgive us if we have been guilty of treating baptized sisters and brothers as if they were our enemies. More specifically this night, we ask forgiveness for the indifference of the Methodist Church in the unjust death of Father James E. Coyle, a servant of God among us, whose ministry was tragically ended. Heal us, we pray of dissension and hatred for brothers and sisters of other faiths.

Father Coyle’s life and legacy grow in reverence throughout the United States and especially in Birmingham, Alabama, the city where he gave his life. ‘The Father James E. Coyle Memorial Mass and Reception’ is celebrated yearly in the Cathedral of St. Paul, on the very grounds where he ministered and was slain. *The Father James E. Coyle Memorial Project* is an ongoing multifaceted project promoting the life and legacy of Fr. Coyle to foster respect, justice, and peace. The world-renowned *Civil Rights Institute of Birmingham* hosts an exhibit on Father Coyle’s sacrifice on behalf of human and civil rights. Currently, a film is in production on Father Coyle entitled *Pursuit of Justice*, based on the book, *Rising Road: A True Tale of Love, Race, and Religion in America*, by former Ohio State University law professor Sharon Davies.

As the one-hundredth anniversary of Father Coyle’s martyrdom nears, there is great anticipation and planning for numerous ventures to help catapult the sacrificial witness of this holy priest into the awareness of many throughout the world, that many may be inspired to reconciliation to God and one another. Many emulate Father Coyle’s sacrificial life as articulated in the last words he penned in the *Church Notice Book* shortly before the giving of his precious life: “Give. Give until it hurts, then and only then is there sacrifice.”

⁷ Beecher ‘The Passing of Father Coyle’, p.6

⁸ Sharon Davies, *Rising Road. A True Tale of Love and Religion in America*, New Oxford University Press, 2010, p.46