News



Fr. James E. Coyle, left, is seen with then Irish president Éamon de Valera in the United States in an undated photo. (Drum Heritage Centre)

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The annual memorial Mass in honor of the late Fr. James E. Coyle will take place Monday in Alabama, where he was killed in cold blood by a Ku Klux Klan member in 1921 for celebrating an interracial marriage.

Bishop Steven Raica of Birmingham will celebrate the televised liturgy at the Cathedral of St. Paul, where Coyle served for 17 years as pastor before the creation of the Diocese of Birmingham.

"Let us honor the life and legacy of Father James E. Coyle by uniting together at Mass in memoriam," reads an announcement from the Father Coyle Memorial Project, which organizes the annual Mass on the anniversary of the priest's death.

Born in Ireland in 1873, Coyle immigrated to the United States in 1896 and became rector of St. Paul's Church in 1904, where he met a young Ruth Stephenson, the daughter of a local Methodist minister and KKK member, Rev. Edwin "E. R." Stephenson.

The younger Stephenson, then in her pre-teens, had taken an interest in the Catholic faith against her father's wishes and discussed the topic with Coyle. Ruth also became acquainted with a local Puerto Rican handyman, Pedro Gussman, a Catholic more than two decades her senior who was employed at the Stephenson home. They began a courtship and Pedro eventually proposed.

At age 19, Ruth Stephenson converted to the Catholic faith—earning a beating from her father—and obtained a marriage license, intending to start a new life with Gussman. Needing a celebrant for the sacrament, she turned to Coyle, who obliged on Aug. 11, 1921. Just hours later, the elder Stephenson shot the priest dead at his evening porchside post.

Stephenson was charged with second-degree murder, and the prosecution quickly became a sensationalized affair, featuring dual claims of insanity as well as self-defense. It was alleged that Gussman, a dark-skinned Boricua, was in fact a Black man—interracial marriage was then still a crime in Alabama—and that Coyle had attempted to kill Stephenson first upon their encounter.

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Stephenson's Klan-funded defense team—including future U.S. Supreme Court justice and KKK member Hugo Black—was ultimately triumphant, though Stephenson was acquitted by just a single juror's vote.

Coyle was funeralized at St. Paul's, drawing a historic Birmingham crowd before his burial at Elmwood Cemetery. Devotion to him has since grown, with annual memorial Masses organized since at least 2013. Coyle is also honored at the Drum Heritage Centre in his native County Roscommon, Ireland.

A full-length documentary on Coyle was released by his great-nephew Pat Shine in 2010, and a historical fiction novel arrived in 2021 from his grand-niece Sheila Killian . The Coyle Memorial Project made a short film in 2019 based on Sharon L. Davies' book, "Rising Road: A True Tale of Love, Race, and Religion in America," and a short documentary marking the centennial of Coyle's death was released in 2022.

Monday's Mass in Birmingham will begin at 10am CT, and a livestream will be available on the cathedral's Facebook page. The liturgy will also be televised live on EWTN. The in-person event will be followed by a reception and presentation.

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