

Sainthood cause for Chattanooga priest advances with exhumation order

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Deacon Gaspar DeGaetano can check off another box in his effort promoting the cause of sainthood for Father Patrick Ryan, who died in 1878 during a Yellow Fever epidemic that swept through Chattanooga.

On Monday, Jan. 14, Hamilton County Chancery Court Judge Jeff Atherton signed an order approving the Diocese of Knoxville's request that the body of Father Ryan be exhumed.

"It went very well. Very, very well," said Deacon DeGaetano of the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul in Chattanooga and the vice postulator for the cause of beatification and canonization of Father Ryan.

Father Patrick Ryan is not the same Father Ryan who is the namesake of the Nashville Catholic high school. The school is named after Father Abram Ryan. Both were priests of the Diocese of Nashville, which then covered the entire state of Tennessee, during the mid-19th century.

Father Patrick Ryan was a hero of the Yellow Fever epidemic. He refused to flee the city so that he could continue to care for and minister to the sick and dying until he succumbed to the disease himself.

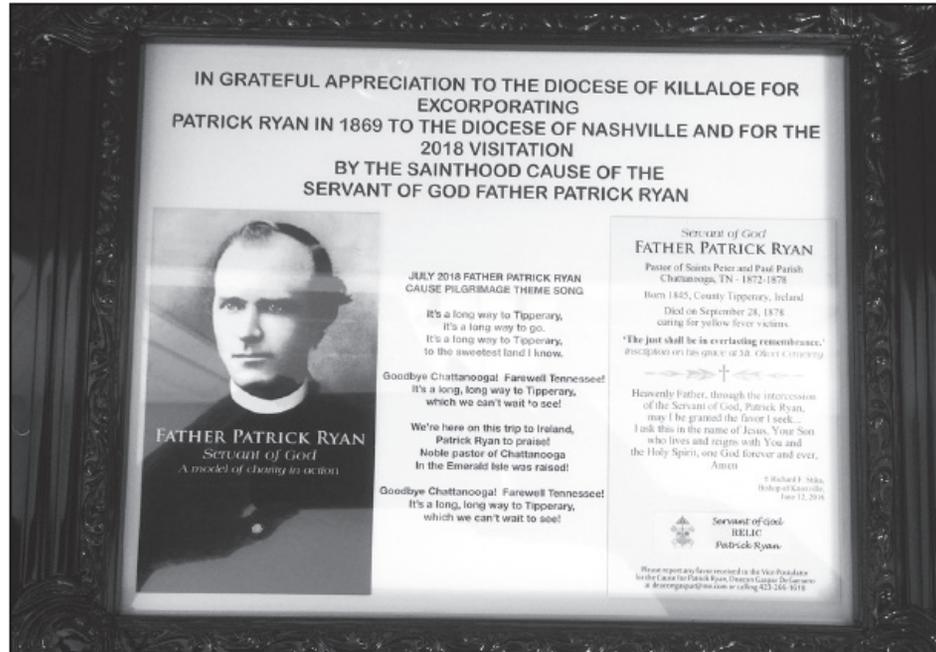
When consulting with the Vatican about the best way to proceed with the cause for sainthood, officials from the Congregation for the Causes of Saints said the Diocese of Knoxville should move the body from its current resting space, Mount Olivet Cemetery in Chattanooga, to the Basilica, where Father Ryan was the pastor at the time of his death, Deacon DeGaetano said.

But he ran into an obstacle. "The regular rules indicate you have to have a living relative to authorize an exhumation," Deacon DeGaetano said. "In our case we don't know of any direct descendant or relative of his."

So at the suggestion of the Hamilton County Health Department, the diocese petitioned Chancery Court to approve an exhumation of the body.

At the start of the hearing, the judge "puts his phone on the bench and plays 'Dem Bones,'" Deacon DeGaetano said. "He seemed kind of excited. He said he had never handled anything like this before."

After Deacon DeGaetano testified about the sainthood cause, Judge Atherton agreed to authorize the exhu-



Father Patrick Ryan, a priest of the Diocese of Nashville who cared for victims of Yellow Fever in Chattanooga in the 1870s, is considered a "Servant of God," one of the first steps on the long road to being officially recognized as a saint. He is not the same Father Ryan who is the namesake of the Nashville high school.

mation. "The judge mentioned, 'I don't want to be the one to stand in the way of a cause for sainthood,'" Deacon DeGaetano added.

Before Father Ryan's body is exhumed, the diocese will have to get Vatican approval for the design and location of the tomb, Deacon DeGaetano said.

Once the design concept has been approved, the diocese will need to complete the plans, solicit bids to for the project, "and then we need to make sure we have enough money to build it," Deacon DeGaetano said.

A location for the tomb inside the Basilica has already been chosen, Deacon DeGaetano said. "We have a place for it. We have a very good spot," he said. "The plan is to place him under the last Station of the Cross, Jesus is placed in the tomb. Very appropriate."

When that is all accomplished, then the diocese can set a date for the exhumation, he added. "I think it's possible as early as three months and as late as six or seven months."

'A local hero'

Deacon DeGaetano first heard of Father Ryan when he joined the Knights of Columbus Council 610, which is named after the priest, in the 1980s.

When Deacon DeGaetano was assigned to the Basilica about three years ago, the rector, Father David Carter, told him, "I want you to get involved with the Knights here."

"It just popped into my head, what if I looked into the possibility of a cause for sainthood for Father Ryan," Deacon DeGaetano said. "One of the first things I did was go to the library and started researching. He was a local hero. ... He was a great guy."

Father Ryan was born in County Tipperary in Ireland in 1845 and later moved with his family to New York City. He was a seminarian at St. Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and was ordained as a priest for the Diocese of Nashville by Bishop Patrick Feehan, who was a family friend, in 1869.

His first assignment was in Clarksville, and in 1872 Bishop Feehan appointed him as the pastor of what was then Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Chattanooga.

The young, energetic priest went about serving the growing Catholic community in Chattanooga and led an expansion of the original church.

But in 1878, the city was struck by a Yellow Fever epidemic. In those days,

the arrival of the deadly Yellow Fever in a community was terrifying, Deacon DeGaetano said. "If you went into a town and they thought you had it, you might get shot. ... It was a plague."

While most of the population of Chattanooga fled, Father Ryan was one of the few who refused to leave, determined to continue caring for the people.

Eventually, Father Ryan contracted the disease himself and died on Sept. 28, 1878. "He was a hero not just to Catholics, but to the town," Deacon DeGaetano said.

Father Ryan originally was buried in the cemetery near his parish church in downtown Chattanooga. But in 1886, his body was moved to the city's new Catholic cemetery, Mount Olivet.

"He was the grand opening of Mt. Olivet Cemetery," Deacon DeGaetano said. The procession to his new burial site on Priests Hill in the cemetery included more than 100 carriages and Bishop Joseph Rademacher came from Nashville to preside at the event.

"It was a big deal," Deacon DeGaetano said. "A hero was leaving town."

The reverence the town held for Father Ryan is reflected in the fact that nearly four decades after his death, the Knights council took him as their namesake, Deacon DeGaetano said.

"That's kind of the amazing thing," he added. "The fact that the council took his name is what kept his name alive long enough for me to think maybe I can do something with this."

Knoxville Bishop Richard Stika approved the cause for sainthood in 2016 and Father Ryan was given the title of Servant of God. He still has a long way to go before he is canonized, Deacon DeGaetano said. Two miracles attributed to his intercession would first have to be verified.

The Diocese of Knoxville is distributing prayer cards to encourage people to pray for his intercession.

The diocese is pursuing sainthood for Father Ryan as a person who offered his life, also called a Martyr of Charity, a new classification of sainthood approved by Pope Francis in 2017.

Father Ryan's sainthood cause is the only one in the Province of Louisville, which includes all the dioceses in Kentucky and Tennessee, Deacon DeGaetano said. "It's an honor to be involved with it." ♦



Father Patrick Ryan is buried in Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Chattanooga. A judge recently approved the Diocese of Knoxville's request to exhume his body and move it to the Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul in Chattanooga.

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