



*Servant of God*  
**FATHER PATRICK RYAN**

Pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Parish  
Chattanooga, TN - 1872-1878

Born 9/29/1844, County Tipperary, Ireland

Died on September 28, 1878  
caring for yellow fever victims.

**'The just shall be in everlasting remembrance.'**  
*Inscription on his grave at Mt. Olivet Cemetery*



Heavenly Father, through the intercession  
of the Servant of God, Patrick Ryan,  
may I be granted the favor I seek...  
I ask this in the name of Jesus, Your Son  
who lives and reigns with You and  
the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever,  
Amen

† Richard F. Stika,  
Bishop of Knoxville,  
June 12, 2016

●  
Please report any favor received to the Vice Postulator  
for the Cause for Patrick Ryan, Deacon Gaspar DeGaetano  
at [deacongasp@me.com](mailto:deacongasp@me.com) or calling 423-266-1618

Father Patrick Ryan, pastor of Saints Peter and Paul's parish from 1872 to 1878, was a shepherd who gave his life in ministering to his flock. He died a martyr's death in the yellow fever epidemic of 1878 on September 28 on the day before his 34<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In the six years that he was at the parish, he enlarged the little frame church, built a rectory on Georgia Avenue and zealously tended his flock. The accomplishment for which the Chattanooga community should ever hold his name in benediction was the opening of Notre Dame academy under the direction of the Dominican Sisters. Notre Dame survives to this day as Notre Dame High School, the oldest non-governmental school in Chattanooga.

A magnificent tribute was paid the noble priest in 1886, when his remains were reburied in Mt. Olivet cemetery. One of the longest corteges ever seen in Chattanooga, as of 1952, followed his body to the new cemetery on the other side of Missionary Ridge from downtown Chattanooga before there was even a tunnel through the ridge. Imagine the effort and time it took to make the trip up the ridge in those horse and buggy days!

Patrick Ryan was born on September 29, 1844 near Nenagh, County Tipperary, Ireland. He was of a good family, but his parents were evicted from their home by a ruthless landlord and forced to emigrate. They settled in New York, where Patrick grew to young manhood.

In pursuance of his desire to be a priest he entered St. Vincent's College, Cape Girardeau, Missouri in October, 1866, Although he was no genius, says one of his schoolmates, he was one of the soundest and most reliable students in the seminary and was noted for his common sense. He excelled in athletics, and few could compete with him in hand, foot or base ball.

He was ordained a priest in the summer of 1869 at the Cathedral in Nashville by Bishop P. A. Feehan. The Feehan and Ryan families were close neighbors in Ireland and possibly this was the reason young Ryan decided to join the Nashville diocese. After his ordination, Father Ryan was appointed pastor of Clarksville and its missions.

For three years the young priest faithfully ministered to the people of Clarksville, Cedar Hill, Edgefield Junction and the surrounding territory. At Gallatin he built a church, which served the congregation for many years.

About this time, Chattanooga, in a race for commercial prosperity, threatened to outstrip all the second class cities of Tennessee.

Bishop Feehan, cognizant of the prudence and priestly zeal of Father Ryan, transferred him to the larger field of labors in Chattanooga. He took charge on July 10, 1872.

He is described as almost impetuous in his efforts to make his parishioners practical as well as professing Catholics. Having recovered somewhat from the ravages of war, Chattanooga was growing by leaps and bounds. In the decade from 1870-1880, the population increased from 6,093 to 12,892.

The little frame church on Lindsay Street, which Father Brown, the first Pastor of Chattanooga, had completed in 1847, proved too small for the growing congregation, so Father Ryan added 30 feet to the building thus making it 80 feet long and 20 feet wide. This enlarged church served the parish until the present beautiful edifice of 1890, later to become a Minor Basilica was built on East Eighth Street. The church bell that now hangs and regularly rings in the Basilica bell tower has the date of 1873 and the name of Rev. P. Ryan, Pastor cast on it. This bell was likely first used at the Lindsey Street Church. It was also likely blessed by Father Patrick Ryan and as such may be considered a second class relic. We can muse, tongue in cheek, that the sound from that bell can be thought of as a third class relic every time she's heard!

The first two years Father Ryan was in Chattanooga he had to take care not only of the city but also of most of the southeastern part of the state. Tracy city, Winchester, Shelbyville, Etna Mines, and Cleveland are some of the places recorded in the baptismal register where the hard-working priest administered the sacraments.

Soon after his ordination in the summer of 1874, Father William Walsh, who in later years was to become another famous pastor of Chattanooga, was sent to assist Father Ryan. When Father Walsh was transferred to Memphis in 1876, the Reverend Bernard J. McNally who was also to succeed Father Ryan as pastor of Chattanooga, was sent here. He spent almost all his time on the missions.

Early in 1875 a unique character, Dan Hogan, died and left his valuable estate to the Church. The United States Senate had passed a bill for reimbursing the Church for the Civil War deliberate destruction of Hogan's stone church by the Federal Army in 1863. Father Ryan, therefore, felt justified in beginning a much-needed expansion program in the parish.

In anticipation of the coming of the sisters to staff the new school, Father Ryan built a new rectory, thus leaving the old presbytery on East Eighth Street for use as a school and convent. The new rectory was of brick and faced Georgia avenue, where the YMCA building stood. This building was used as the priests' home until 1908, when a new convent was built and the priests returned to the old frame structure on East Eighth.

The parish, since the beginning, had always maintained a school for its children under the supervision of the priests. But this was a makeshift affair where all grades were taught by one lay man or woman in the basement of the church. Father Ryan was now determined to have a

first-class school taught by the sisters. He prevailed on the Dominican Sisters of the St. Cecilia congregation, who had been established in Nashville 16 years previously, to send out their first foundation to Chattanooga.

On Jan. 6, 1876, occurred an event that was to have profound and far-reaching effects on the upbuilding of Catholicity in Chattanooga. On that day four Dominican Sisters arrived and immediately began preparations for the opening of Notre Dame de Lourdes academy.

Mother Angela Robinson, the first superior, was accompanied by Sister Ann Hanlon, Teresa Fritch and Dominica Hoffman, all teachers of wide experience.

The sisters really conducted two schools. "In addition to the parochial school," Father Ryan said to them on arrival, "you will find it necessary to carry on a select school, otherwise you will not make support, few as are your needs. My people are numerically small and also they are poor; the exceptions consist of only two or three families."

The parish or free school was continued in the basement of church, but it took on new life under the care of the nuns.

Notre Dame de Lourdes academy, a select school for girls, "a higher institute than the parochial school," was housed in the former rectory, which also served as a home for the sisters.

This frame structure, with its turrets and more than seven gables, built by Father Brown in 1854, "was renovated and adorned, within and without." Some of Chattanooga's most influential citizens were patrons of the new institution, and teachers of marked ability worked to give the school a high standard.

The future of the parish seemed exceedingly bright and Father Ryan was happy. But the school had been in operation for little more than two years when it had to be converted into a hospital and orphanage. The yellow fever scourge had come to Chattanooga.

Father Ryan had already faced many difficulties in his administration of the parish. When he arrived the city was just recovering from a series of disastrous fires that had destroyed much of the business district. A cholera epidemic threatened the population in 1873. In 1875 a big flood came. And now the horrible "yellow jack" appeared on the scene!

Because it had escaped previous visitations of the plague, Chattanooga considered itself protected by its mountains. In offering hospitality to people of neighboring cities, where the fever has broken out, it gave refugees a chance to introduce the scourge within its own limits.

On Sept. 18, 1878, when Dr. R. N. Barr said that one of his patients had yellow fever, the city refused to believe it. Father Semmes, cousin of Admiral Semmes, who happened to be visiting his sister, Mrs. P. A. Brawner, at the time, was called to look at the patient. This distinguished priest had been a practicing physician before being ordained and had had experience with yellow fever in the Deep South.

After examining the patient, Father Semmes said the case was unmistakably one of yellow fever, and he was sorry to have to advance his opinion that the patient would be dead within 24 hours. His diagnosis and opinion were sustained by the facts as they developed in rapid order.

Within a few days the fever was declared "epidemic," and four fifths of the population began to hurry from the stricken city. Before the deadly work was past, 366 citizens lost their lives.

Father Ryan and Jonathan W. Bachman, pastor of the First Presbyterian church, were among the 1,800 people remaining in the city. They were good friends, and when Father Ryan was stricken, he was visited by Dr. Bachman.

Father Ryan is described by an eyewitness as "going from house to house in the worst-infected section of the city to find what he could do for the sick and needy." He continued ministering to his flock after he himself had contracted the dread disease - to within 48 hours of his death.

He was stricken on Sept. 26. On the morning of the 27th, he was reported much worse, but the evening of that same day he was visited by Dr. Luke Blackburn (afterward Governor of Kentucky) who reported that everything seemed to favor recovery.

"He was cheerful and chatty," said Dr. Blackburn, and remarked was that Bishop Feehan had telegraphed asking how he was. "I told him if he wished I would send a dispatch to the Bishop on reaching the telegraph office. This I did, saying 'Father Ryan is much better and will recover, I think.' When I heard of Father's death, it astonished me more than an earthquake would have done."

The heroic priest died September 28, after having received the last sacraments from the hands of his younger brother, the Reverend Michael Ryan. Father Michael, who had just ordained, had come to Chattanooga a few days before to spend a short vacation with his brother. The shock of his brother's tragic death so undermined the young priest's health that, after a few years service in Nashville, he retired to St. Louis, where he died shortly afterwards.

The news of Father Ryan's death was carried by the press wires, and within a few hours the Rev. John Bertazzi came from Savannah, Ga., to do what he could. Father John, as this volunteer Italian priest was usually called, conducted the funeral, and Father Ryan's body was buried in the church yard "Bury me in Chattanooga among my people," was Father Ryan's last request. For eight years his grave was a hallowed spot, kept beautiful by the hands of those who revered the memory of the this great priest who offered his life in the cause of charity.

When Mt. Olivet cemetery was formally opened Nov. 11, 1886, Father Ryan's remains were carried in solemn procession to the new graveyard. It was a fitting occasion to pay the tribute of honor won by the martyred priest who stuck to his post in the time of trial.

The church was filled an hour before services were scheduled to start. Bishop Rademacher, officiating at the first Pontifical Requiem Mass ever sung in Chattanooga, was assisted by Fathers Scannell, Gleeson, and Abbot of Nashville, Veale of Memphis, Benedict of Huntsville, Alabama and Clifford of Dalton, Georgia.

Father William Walsh in his sermon spoke of the self sacrifice and generosity of the deceased and read a letter he had received from Father Ryan, early in September 1878, in which the later expressed the wish that he might come to Memphis to help out in the epidemic that was then raging there. Father Walsh testified that Father Ryan clearly offered his life in that prophetic letter by him stating to Walsh that as a post script: "P.S.— As I cannot live without ye, I will go and die with ye. P.R."

The entire letter follows:

"My Dear Father Walsh: I have written and dispatched to Memphis and cannot hear anything from you. I again try to hear from you, as I know you are still living. Can't I hear from you? Just one line will satisfy. You do not know my anxiety.

I have heard with regret, about the deaths of Fathers Welsh and Meagher. My God! are we to lose all our priests! I could have been with you about the 15th of last month, but the Bishop promising to go to Knoxville, I did not wish to be away. I wished since that I had been to Memphis. Perhaps it's not too late yet. I will go, should the Bishop let me. I am going to Nashville this week. I have heard that Fathers Riordan and McNamara are down with the fever; I hope to hear of their recovery.

I have received the circular addressed to the T.A. Societies appealing for aid. Unfortunately our society could do nothing. I took up a collection for the objects specified in your appeal. The amount is \$100, which I am sending you or Father Riordan by express.

I trust in God I shall hear better news from you, and that you are still well. My prayers, if they avail anything, are for your safety. May God, in His great mercy, give you strength and courage to bear up against this terrible calamity.

Will you be kind enough to write or dispatch to me on receipt of this, and believe me to be ever

Your most faithful friend,

P. RYAN.

P.S.— As I cannot live without ye, I will go and die with ye. P.R. "

When the procession left the church it was more than a mile long. It consisted of more than 100 carriages, and, the cortège passed along Market Street, hundreds stopped on the sidewalks to gaze respectfully at the hearse. Father Gleeson had invited Dr. Bachman and the members of the relief committee of 1878 to a place of honor in procession.

Others taking part were the Catholic Knights of America, the Chickamauga Guards, the Sisters of Notre Dame academy, members of Saints Peter and Paul's congregation, and other citizens. Pallbearers were Joseph Ruohs, J.F.W. Monning, J.R. Ryan, J.T. Cahill, Pat Fleming, Dr. H. S. Thacher, P. A. Brawner, Michael Timothy, Joseph Friedel and J. J. Sullivan.

The noble priest's remains were interred at the highest spot in the cemetery, on Priests' Mound. The monument over the grave was inscribed:

**REV. P. RYAN.  
DIED  
SEPT. 28, 1878  
DURING THE EPIDEMIC  
THE JUST SHALL BE IN EVERLASTING REMEMBRANCE  
REST  
IN  
PEACE**

In 1901 the Chattanooga council of the Knights of Columbus Council 610 was organized. But it was only named the Father Patrick Ryan Council in 1915-16 in honor of the priest who, by his high ideals, his devotion to duty, his spirit of sacrifice for his congregation and his city, seemed to exemplify the aims and purposes of the new order. How wonderful that his memory must have survived some 37 years after his death! The Knights of Columbus 4<sup>th</sup> Degree Assembly 1084 also took his name in 1928-29.

Perhaps no better eulogy of Father Ryan could be written than that which appeared in an editorial in the Chattanooga Times Nov. 12 1886:

"The reburial of Father Patrick Ryan yesterday roused into vivid realization the terrible scene of September and October, 1878, in the retrospective vision of all who were his co-workers in that trying season. The brave and faithful priest literally laid down his life in the cause of humanity. Only the morning before he was stricken with the deadly pestilence, the writer met him on his rounds of mercy in the worst infected section of the city. Cheerfully but resolutely he was going from house to house to find what he could do for the sick and needy.

Then the work of the destroyer was upon him, but he looked the one whose spirit had conquered the flesh, like one so absorbed in of dangers of afflictions of his fellow men that he was unconscious of personal suffering, unmindful of personal evil.

We shall never, to the hour we close our eyes for the last time, forget the unselfish and efficient work of Father Ryan and his elder eminent brother, Father John. It was peculiarly meet and very touching the respect shown the dead father's remains yesterday by many of the chief survivors of that terrible fall. This was without regard to religious connections, as it should be. They were on a level then. The yellow scourge was no respecter of persons or creeds."

On July 31, 2021, Father Ryan's remains were transposed via a procession from Mt Olivet Cemetery into a new tomb blessed by Bishop of Knoxville Richard Stika at the Basilica of Sts Peter&Paul in Chattanooga under the last station of the cross where Jesus is laid in the tomb, in accordance further with Father Ryan's last request of "Bury me in Chattanooga among my people."

*This biography was adapted and revised by Deacon Gaspar DeGaetano, Vice Postulator for the Cause of the Beatification and Canonization of the Servant of God, Patrick Ryan, Priest of Chattanooga, from "The Centenary" of Sts Peter and Paul Parish, Chattanooga, Compiled by Father George Flanigen with the Imprimatur of William L. Adrian, Bishop of Nashville July 7, 1952, published by the Parish of Sts Peter and Paul. 8/25/2022*