Father Coyle Mass – Memorial of St. Clare – August 11, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 12:10pm Mass – 700 words

It is my pleasure to welcome you all here as we honor the memory of Father James E. Coyle on this, the 96th anniversary of his death. When our former pastor here at Saint Paul's was killed on the front porch of the rectory, it was the feast that day of two early Roman martyrs – Saints Tiburtius and Susanna. Our celebration today, under a liturgical calendar that has changed through the years, now corresponds with Saint Clare of Assisi. We pray that Father Coyle now enjoys the company of Saints Tiburtius, Susanna, and Clare – and all the saints – in the halls of heaven.

Saint Clare was, of course, the great companion of Saint Francis. She became the head of the female branch of the Franciscans – first known as the "Poor Ladies", and later known as the "Poor Clares". And Clare was really the female incarnation of the spirit of Saint Francis; in spite of her noble and wealthy background and the prosperity of the city of Assisi, she wished to renounce everything to follow Christ. In this, she really meant *everything*: she and her sisters in religion, besides not having any personal property, would also not own anything in common. They were to rely on the providence of God in all things, even the smallest. Saint Clare understood this to be the most perfect form of doing what our Lord instructs in today's gospel: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."

Many cardinals and even several of the popes of that period – the early 13th century – were greatly impressed by the movement that Francis and Clare had begun. But they were concerned that they might be going to an extreme, and on several occasions different churchmen tried to induce them to relax to some degree their observance of holy poverty. When Pope Gregory IX visited Clare on one occasion he sought to do this very thing, but she replied to him: "Holy Father, I desire absolution from my sins, but I desire not to be absolved from the obligation of following Jesus Christ". She understood the Lord's call to her and her followers to be an obligation, to be part and parcel of following after him. And she wanted to follow him fully.

What obligations did Father Coyle understand himself to have – from which he, too, did not seek to be absolved? One was that of teaching his people to love our Lord in the Most Blessed Sacrament and to have a filial affection and devotion towards his holy mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Another was that of promoting fraternity and solidarity through his spiritual care of the Knights of Columbus and the Ancient Order of Hibernians. And yet another – of many that we could list – was that of being a spiritual father to all who sought him out, even if they were not Catholic or of the same race. Father Coyle knew of the risks associated with marrying the minister's daughter to the Puerto Rican, but he did not excuse himself from his obligations. Thus he became a "martyr to duty".

What are the obligations that each one of us has in our own following after Christ? Let us not seek to be absolved from them, or to excuse ourselves. Let us take up our crosses anew and follow after the Savior. May Saints Clare, Tiburtius, and Susanna intercede for us in this task, so that we can imitate the virtue and example of Father Coyle and bear faithful witness to the name of Christian. A month after his death, Mrs. L.T. Beecher wrote of Father Coyle: "They have killed all they could kill of Father Coyle, and God has already comforted us with a vision of how little that really is." Let us take comfort in these words whenever we are burdened by the weight of the cross or the duration of the struggle, and resolve to follow Christ faithfully until our dying breath.

Eternal rest grant unto Father Coyle, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.