

Mass in Memory of Fr. James E. Coyle – August 10, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 12:10pm – 900 words

A warm welcome to you all, as we again honor our beloved former pastor, Fr. James E. Coyle, who sacrificed himself in the line of priestly duty. Our observance of his memory falls this year on the Feast of St. Lawrence, a martyr of the early Roman Church. One of the great treasures that we have from the life of Fr. Coyle is the parish chronicle that he kept – a sort of diary for almost every day of each of his years here, documenting pulpit announcements and other pertinent points of parish history. And almost every year, he had a special entry for this feast of St. Lawrence – a sort of short biography of the saint that he would share with parishioners. Sermons at daily Mass were not common in those days, so it is probable that he read the biography during his announcements from the pulpit on the preceding Sunday.

“God loves a cheerful giver”, St. Paul memorably taught in our first reading for this feast. Writing about St. Lawrence in 1907, Fr. Coyle highlighted the cheerfulness of that martyr’s self-sacrifice. He wrote in the parish chronicle, “[St. Lawrence] suffered in the third century a most cruel martyrdom, being roasted to death on a gridiron over a slow fire. He endured all his sufferings *most cheerfully*, and God has honored the saint by granting through his intercession very many favors.” Indeed, we have surely all heard how St. Lawrence told his executioners, “Flip me over – I’m done on this side”, as he lay on that hot grille being cooked to death. Such cheerfulness amidst unspeakable pain and suffering is hard for us to fathom, much less put into practice in the much smaller trials that we so often must endure.

St. Lawrence’s cheer in the face of martyrdom was neither a sort of masochistic pleasure nor holy fakery. No, his good humor amidst great pain and certain death flowed from his firm hope of seeing God and experiencing a life unimaginably better with him beyond this world, in heaven. St. Paul understood this well; thus he wrote in his Letter to the Romans, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us”. Then, in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul commented further on the reality of suffering: “We do not lose heart”, he said. “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this momentary light affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”

Our lack of cheer comes not from that weight of glory of which St. Paul spoke, but from the weight of this world – which includes the weight of sin. Sin makes us sad, for it widens the gulf between us and God. The more we are free of it, the closer we come to the source of all true happiness. St. Lawrence had been so transformed by the grace of God that he no longer experienced attachment to the things of this world – was no longer weighted down by them. Thus, when his executioners came for him and demanded of him the treasures of the Church, he – again, with good cheer – presented to them the poor and the needy of the city of Rome. There was his true treasure: in helping those souls who had nothing and could not help themselves. By his witness, St. Lawrence gave generously not only to the poor – but to us all.

Fr. Coyle, after speaking of St. Lawrence’s good cheer, added that “God has honored the saint by granting through his intercession very many favors”. Indeed, the Lord truly is not outdone in generosity. God loves a cheerful giver – and he gives far more in return. What will we ask of the Lord through the intercession of St. Lawrence, on his feast? What special favors do we need? We can hope to obtain them thanks to the saint’s great generosity to God, which continues to bear fruit. Fr. Coyle gave all that he had, also: detached from anything in this world and not fearing the consequences of doing what was right, he helped that couple that came to him seeking marriage. He knew what could happen, but he did his priestly duty nonetheless. Fr. James E. Coyle gave all – and his witness continues to bear fruit nearly 100 years later.

Thus we see the truth of today's gospel, in contemplating the lives of both Fr. Coyle and St. Lawrence: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies," Jesus said, "it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life." We must pray for that holy loss of life that is the steady, daily gift of self to which Christ calls us. We pray that his grace will transform us and thus make it possible for us truly to be cheerful givers in this holy enterprise; for, till now, we have so often traded the weight of glory for the weight of this world. And we ask the help of St. Lawrence's prayers, inspired also by the many other holy men and women who have modeled this way of life for us – including our beloved Fr. Coyle.