

**Homily for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Death of Bishop James Ryan  
Ss. Peter & Paul Church (the former Cathedral of the Diocese of Alton)  
Alton, Illinois  
Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year A**

**July 2, 2023**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The great baseball player and manager Yogi Berra was known not only for his baseball skills but also for his witty sayings, known as malapropisms, which seem to make sense until you think more carefully about what the words actually mean, such as, “Always go to other people’s funerals; otherwise they won’t go to yours.” It is in that sense you could say that we should celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of other people’s deaths if we want them to celebrate ours!

So it is good to be with you here at Saints Peter and Paul Church, the former Cathedral of the Diocese of Alton, on this day that marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Bishop James Ryan, the third Bishop of our diocese. Putting his tenure in its historical context, we see the early roots of Christianity and its spread to our diocese depicted in the windows of our current Cathedral in Springfield. The windows on the north wall tell the story of the spread of Christianity, starting with Our

Lord giving the keys of His Kingdom to St. Peter, on whom He built the foundation of the Church, which withstood the threat of the barbarian and Turkish invasions in Europe. The windows on the south wall tell the story of the Church's contribution in America, starting with the depiction of St. Brendan, who is said to have crossed the Atlantic Ocean to reach the American continent in the fifth century. The second window on the south wall shows Christopher Columbus carrying a banner of Mary the Immaculate, with his flagship, the Santa Maria, in the background. The third window features the Jesuit missionary Father Jacques Marquette preaching to Native Americans on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1674.

That same year, 1674, the Holy See erected the Diocese of Quebec for all of North America. After the United States of America won its independence, the Diocese of Baltimore was created in 1789. As the country grew and expanded westward, new dioceses were created in Bardstown in 1808, Saint Louis in 1826, Vincennes in 1834, Chicago in 1843, and then Quincy in 1853. Pope Pius IX appointed Father Joseph Melcher, the Vicar General of St. Louis, to be the first bishop of Quincy, but he declined the appointment. He would later become the

administrator of the Diocese of Chicago and in 1868 was named the first bishop of Green Bay, Wisconsin.

After three years without a resident bishop in Quincy, some Catholics in the new diocese requested the transfer of the See to a more central location. Springfield was considered since it had been chosen as the state capital in 1837, but there was a larger Catholic population near St. Louis. Pope Pius IX moved the See to Alton on January 9, 1857, and named Henry Damian Juncker as Bishop of Alton. He served until his death on October 2, 1868, and was succeeded by Bishop Peter J. Baltes, who served until his death on February 15, 1886. Bishop Baltes was buried next to his predecessor in the crypt below Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in Alton.

Following the death of Bishop Baltes, Father John Janssen, the vicar general, served as diocesan administrator. In 1887, Pope Leo XIII decided to divide the Diocese of Alton and established the Diocese of Belleville from the southern portion of the Diocese of Alton. Janssen was named its first bishop and continued as administrator of Alton until the consecration of Bishop James Ryan on May 1, 1888, at the Cathedral in Alton.

James Ryan was born on June 17, 1848, in County Tipperary, Ireland, and came to America at the age of seven with his parents and

sister. Ryan attended the minor and major seminaries in Bardstown, Kentucky, and completed his theological education at Preston Park Seminary in Louisville. He was ordained a priest on the day before Christmas in 1871 by Bishop William G. McCloskey.

A significant accomplishment of Bishop James Ryan was the Diocesan Synod of 1889, our diocese's first. According to the history book prepared for our diocese's sesquicentennial in 2003, "The bishop convened this assembly of diocesan and religious clergy to adopt rules and regulations that would bring the diocese into compliance with the three Plenary Councils of Baltimore." The impact of this First Diocesan Synod would continue for several decades until the Second and Third Diocesan Synods were convened in 1953 and 1963, respectively. Of course, our Fourth Diocesan Synod took place in 2017, at which we pledged our diocese to the discipleship and stewardship way of life.

Bishop James Ryan served as Bishop of Alton for thirty-five years, the longest tenure of any bishop of our diocese. During his tenure, the estimated number of Catholics grew from 70,000 to 87,000. Forty new churches were opened and six hospitals were founded in the diocese. He is remembered for expanding the orphanage in Alton.

Bishop Ryan's Vicar General, Monsignor Edward Spalding, described Ryan as a reclusive man who lived in almost monk-like austerity. He abstained from alcohol, although he enjoyed smoking a pipe. He was said to have been a voracious reader. His favorite pastime was baseball, and it was said that Ryan knew the names and statistics for every player in the National League. I think he would have liked Yogi Berra!

After Bishop Ryan's death on July 2, 1923, his funeral took place at the Cathedral in Alton, but instead of being buried with his two predecessors in the crypt of the cathedral, he chose to be buried in St. Patrick's Cemetery in Godfrey.

A few months later, on November 3, 1923, Archbishop Pietro Fumasoni-Biondi, Apostolic Delegate to the United States of America, wrote to Rev. James A. Griffin, Pastor of St. Mary's Church in Joliet, Illinois, that "His Holiness, Pope Pius XI, has graciously appointed you Bishop of Alton, Illinois."

Just nineteen days later, on November 22, 1923, the Apostolic Delegate wrote again to "Rev. James A. Griffin, D.D., Bishop-elect of Alton," saying, "I have the honor to inform you that His Holiness, Pope Pius XI, has decided to transfer the present See of Alton to Springfield, the

Capital of the State of Illinois, where you will take up your permanent residence.”

It is good for us to recall this history as we celebrate the centennial of our diocese’s relocation from Alton to Springfield, praying that the practice of the Catholic faith will continue to grow in our diocese in the years ahead.

Jesus encourages his followers to love Him more than anything or anyone else. Loving Jesus and taking up one’s cross leads to new life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.