



100 YEARS:

THE ENDURING LEGACY OF ARCHBISHOP JOHN MARK GANNON

By Father Justin Patrick Pino • Charcoal sketch by Matthew Watters

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is an edited excerpt of the research by Father Justin Pino on Archbishop John Mark Gannon, who was installed 100 years ago this month as the fifth and longest-serving bishop of the Diocese of Erie. Archbishop Gannon led the diocese for 46 years. Father Pino is pastor of St. Leo Parish, Ridgway, and is the archivist and historian of the Diocese of Erie.

Legend has it that *Life* magazine once published a photo of an American Catholic bishop seated on the front steps of his house, attired in regal pontifical vestments, a bejeweled mitre, a sparkling amethyst ring and, between two fingers, a lit Lucky Strike cigarette.

This image is said to be Archbishop John Mark Gannon, the fifth and longest-serving bishop of the Diocese of Erie. One hundred years ago — on Dec. 16, 1920 — he began shepherding Catholics of northwest Pennsylvania, retiring 46 years later on Dec. 9, 1966. More than three generations of Catholics had known no other bishop.

The *Life* photo of Archbishop Gannon has yet to be found; it may be lost to the ages. But the image would be

a striking example of the man behind the collar.

In the diocesan archives are many other photos and plenty of evidence of Archbishop Gannon's legendary episcopate. Some black and white images particularly stand out: one with his family; another of him sitting on a boat in Florida, attired in scuba diving gear; and another of him in Mexico, where he donned a simple suit and tie so as not to risk violence in a caustic political and anti-religious climate. (In 1937, he oversaw the construction of a seminary in New Mexico to train Mexican priests.)

Born in Erie on June 12, 1877, John Mark Gannon lived nearly 92 years, most of it in Erie.

Ordained a priest in 1901, his religious life began at the cusp of the 20th century, an era that would bring stunning progress and incomparable tragedy.



This photo from 1917 shows the Gannon family shortly after John Mark Gannon was consecrated auxiliary bishop of Erie. Julia, the new bishop's mother, is seated at his right. Others pictured include his brothers and sisters and their spouses.

Sixteen years into his priesthood, at age 40, the First World War still raged in Europe and the 1918 influenza epidemic was about to rear its ugliness. But the course of Father Gannon's life changed when Pope Benedict XV named him Erie's new auxiliary bishop.

Three years later, he would be named bishop, unaware that he would accompany the diocese and its faithful through another world war, conflicts in Southeast Asia, unparalleled advances in medicine, and innovations in radio and television.

Legend has it that during the Great Depression, unemployed men would congregate in the early evenings near the bishop's residence on Sassafra Street in Erie. They gently launched pebbles to a specific second-floor window. Inevitably, the window opened and a hand bejeweled with a sparkling ring would release paper money, like treasures floating down from heaven.

Another tale is when Bishop Gannon reacted to a water main rupture near St. Peter Cathedral in downtown Erie. The basement of the cathedral, including the crypt that holds deceased bishops, was flooded. Bishop Gannon called the mayor and ordered that all main water lines be rerouted around the cathedral so when it came time for his burial, his sarcophagus would be high and dry!

Described by the *Oil City Derrick* as a man of "deep learning" and "pleasing personality," Bishop Gannon established numerous schools and parishes and other institutions, including Cathedral College (now known as Gannon University), Cathedral Preparatory School for Boys, Mercyhurst Prep, Villa Maria College, St. Joseph Orphanage, Saint Mary's Home for the Aged, and Spencer Hospital in Meadville.

He founded regional Catholic high schools and St. Mark Seminary, along with overseeing the expansion of the parish elementary school system. It seemed that every granite cornerstone bore his name.

During his tenure as auxiliary bishop and bishop, he witnessed 254 priest ordinations and encouraged the growth of religious communities of women in the diocese.



Photo courtesy of the Diocese of Erie Archives

His presence on the national and international stages of the Catholic Church also increased. In 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt, in the throes of war, sent him a letter, saying, in part, "In all you have done — in your diocese as Chief Pastor; in the field of journalism as Episcopal Chairman of the Press Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference; and on behalf of the good neighbor policy — you have set a stirring example of dynamic Christianity. You exemplify those Christian virtues for which we fight today and which our enemies so heartily despise."

High praise, indeed!

Further recognition came in 1953, when Pope Pius XII named him an archbishop *ad personam* (because of the person). It was a rare title given to someone in a small diocese, but it reflected Archbishop Gannon's dynamic leadership and personality.

In his late 80s, he traveled in 1962 to Rome to attend the historic Second Vatican Council. He returned to Erie with his eyes wide open to the new possibilities of ecumenism envisioned by Pope St. John XXIII.

Upon Archbishop Gannon's death on Sept. 5, 1968, *The Baltimore Sun* quoted Rabbi Bernard J. Perelmuter of Erie: "At an age when most people became intransigent, [Gannon] was able to understand the new direction his church was to take and became a true leader of the ecumenical movement."

His successor, Bishop John Francis Whealon, told *The Clearfield Progress* that he would attempt "to carry on [Archbishop Gannon's] noble work."

More than 50 years after his death, Archbishop Gannon's earthly body awaits the resurrection in the crypt of St. Peter Cathedral, which, legend has it, will never flood again. †

Then-Bishop John Mark Gannon is pictured scuba diving while vacationing in Florida in the late 1930s or early 1940s.

TO READ THE FULL UNEDITED VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE, GO TO www.ErieRCD.org/images/pdf/ArchbishopGannon.pdf