

The Centenary of the Death of Father John Dunne: A Dedicated Life Generously Served, Part I

Neil Dwyer
Archivist
Lumen Christi Parishes, Wollongong
18 February 2024

One hundred years ago ‘there was hardly a Catholic home in Wollongong or Bulli but had a photo of Father John Patrick Dunne on the mantelpiece or sideboard.’¹ This was in a district that could boast eminent past pastors such as Monsignor John Rigney, Father Peter Young, Archpriest Austin Sheehy, Dean Michael Flanagan, and Father P.J. Walsh. Father Dunne, it could be credibly claimed, was a legend in his own lifetime; only John Rigney and P.J. Walsh could be his equal.

John Patrick Dunne was born on 11 August 1867 in Ballyhennebry, Piltown, Kilkenny where several of the future Illawarra priests were also born: Thomas Hayden of Albion Park, Michael Malone of Kiama and P.J. Walsh of Wollongong: all Kilkenny men who nurtured the Faith in the hearts of Catholics of the Illawarra; all responders to the call of their former Bishop of Ossory, Patrick Francis Moran (later Cardinal and Archbishop of Sydney), to be labourers in the vineyard of the Illawarra. John studied for the priesthood at St Kieran’s College, Kilkenny where he was ordained on 3 July 1892. Initially he served as a curate in Sydney before his appointment to Bulli in 1896. Here he remained until 1914, when he was appointed in July of that year to Wollongong as priest-in-charge and Vicar Forane of the South Coast.



Above: Father John Dunne. “A very pleasant man who drove a very fast and hot-tempered horse.” (according to Alf Parsons, son of the founder of H. Parsons Funeral Directors)

¹ Wynne, Father Roger, Big John Dunne, The Miners’ Friend in *Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol LXIII, No.1, January, 1986, p. 64

Michael Kelly, Archbishop of Sydney, reflecting on the life of John Dunne said “Father Dunne was not an orator, not a writer nor a debater, but a doer.”² His ‘monuments’ can be found at Port Kembla, Corrimal, Coledale, West Wollongong as well as in Wollongong. At Port Kembla and West Wollongong, he purchased the land for a church, school, and presbytery for their future parishes. At Corrimal and Coledale, he commissioned new churches to be built. At St Francis Xavier’s, he built on the work of the *Great Builder*, Father Walsh, to have a new presbytery and convent completed and realised Walsh’s advocacy for a Christian Brothers’ College in Wollongong. (Sadly, the Brothers arrived after Father Dunne’s death.)

John Dunne’s accomplishments in brick, mortar and land acquisition would be enough to call him a good shepherd of the Church. To the mining communities in the Illawarra, he was known as the ‘Miners’ Friend,’ he was also the sympathetic pastor and counsellor during the Great War of 1914-18 bringing families the sad news of the death or injury of a serving father, son, husband or brother, and to John Dunne fell the lot of home visiting ill and dying Catholics during the ‘Spanish Flu’ pandemic of 1919-22. He was absolutely dedicated – to the point of disregarding physical danger. After his years of service to the people of the Wollongong District (Catholics and non-Catholics), he would be affectionately recalled for generations as ‘Big John’ Dunne. It was not his physical size which earned him the nomenclature; it was his genuine ‘big-heartedness’ for his parishioners and the people of the Illawarra. He did not see his position as pastor or vicar forane as ‘a possession’ to which he was entitled. His life was one of service. He served generously and without a sense of entitlement.



Surmounted by a Celtic Cross, the new presbytery, 1917

An early accomplishment at St Francis Xavier’s was the new presbytery. It was impressive and *The Catholic Press* at the time noted:

Although the old presbytery had been demolished, it had not been entirely obliterated, for the bricks had been used in the construction of the new building, also a great deal of the wood, and the fine old cedar doors of the old building had been utilised in the existing building. On the whole, Father Dunne is to be congratulated on having built this fine, airy house for £2500.³

2

³ *The Catholic Press*, Thursday 9 March 1916, p.18

In his address following the blessing and opening the new presbytery, Archbishop Kelly foreshadowed that another church may need to be built to accommodate the expanding Catholic population of Wollongong:

He was glad that Father Dunne had built such a fine presbytery, because the growth of the district was such that it might- be necessary to erect another church at the other end of the town to accommodate the people there, and that would mean another priest.⁴

As to ‘another church at the other end of the town to accommodate the people there.’ Father Dunne recorded in *The Church History 1915-1922*, (a form of parish diary believed to be written by Father Dunne), that in May 1922 that he purchased ‘a piece of land at the Cross Roads Wollongong consisting of 6 acres 3 rods for the sum of £100 per acre. This land or a part of it will serve at some future time for a church or church school. The population is increasing in this part of the parish.’

After the Great War, the pastoral care of families and friends of war dead and injured turned to pastoral care for those from another global catastrophe. For some time before the Armistice, men and women from the services had been coming home from the Western Front bringing with them pneumonic influenza, the misnamed ‘Spanish flu.’ The influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 infected 500 million people world-wide. The pandemic first appeared in Victoria and here the first death was recorded in October 1918. By the end of 1919, 10,000 Australians (Australia’s population was five million in 1919), mostly between the ages of 15 and 35, had died of this pneumonic influenza. More deaths would follow. In the Illawarra, the first death was recorded at Thirroul in February 1919. At one stage, Father Dunne ceased the celebration of Mass at Mount Kembla to protect the Catholics in the area from the spread of the disease. Neither priests nor people could escape. It claimed the curate of St Francis Xavier’s, thirty-year old Irish born Father Bernard Mahony who died on Tuesday evening, 5 August 1919⁵.

(Only months into his time at St Francis Xavier’s, the new curate Father John Byrne had to take on the entire pastoral care of the parish when Father Dunne fell ill with the Spanish flu. Then, Father Mahony died because of the epidemic. It proved too much for the young priest and Father Byrne was admitted to Lewisham Hospital following a nervous breakdown.)

Overlapping the pandemic, another catastrophe was taking place: the fight for Irish self-determination. Support for this cause was not restricted to Ireland: the United States and Australia with sizeable populations of Irish birth or heritage responded to the call for a free Ireland. In Wollongong involvement in the cause of Irish self-determination can be followed in the entries by Kilkenny-born Father Dunne in the parish’s *The Church History* (and the local newspapers), as he was the local leading advocate of Irish independence. He chaired many of the rallies, strongly supported by the local Catholic clergy (all Irish) and, among others, Andrew Lysaght,⁶ who provided the grounds of his ‘Stanbrook’ estate for one rally at which 5000 people attended.

⁴ *The Catholic Press*, Thursday 9 March 1916, p.18

⁵ Not 6 August as shown on gravestone; see the Parish’s *Liber Defunctorum* and local newspaper reports for verification

⁶ Local member of State Parliament (1925-1933) and Attorney-General (1927 and 1930-31)

The local call for a free Ireland was opposed by the Protestant Federation whose local leader, the Congregationalist Church minister, Reverend Olver declared

They were Protestant people, representing a Protestant Empire, and, consequently should not give way to anyone. They had a perfect right to organise a counter demonstration to a Self Determination meeting. Those advocating Self-determination for Ireland were out to dismember and destroy the Empire, whilst they (the Protestant Federation) were out to maintain it. Because of continued insults to the nation and the flag, during the war, the Federation had determined that anyone, Protestant or Catholic, who opened their mouth in an unpatriotic way would find the fist of a Protestant down it . . .⁷

Surely, the rancour of the Irish Troubles would end when an agreement for a settlement between the Irish nationalists and the British government was signed in December 1921 to create the Irish Free State? The *Illawarra Mercury* reported that ‘the news of the Settlement was joyously received at the presbytery and convent school, Wollongong. The Irish flag was fluttering briskly in the southerly breeze.’⁸ Father Dunne appeared to have endorsed the agreement.

On 18 February 1923 Father John Dunne conducted his last Baptism ceremony at Saint Francis Xavier’s. It was for Leo Paul Doyle, who was born on 25 January 1923, the son of Thomas Doyle and Margaret Roach of Port Kembla. Father Dunne was taking leave to visit Ireland, Europe, and the United States and while in Ireland, he would spend time at Ballenebry, Kilkenny. In farewelling the people of St Francis Xavier’s at a gathering in the School Hall on Thursday evening, 15 February, Father Dunne requested that “his parishioners would pray for him on his journey— that he would not fall a victim to the Ku Klux Klan in America or a stray bullet in Ireland.”. Alas, he escaped all the perils of travelling in unsettled countries only to die within sight, of home.’⁹

As usual, John Beatson chaired the farewell proceedings at which Father Dunne was presented with a wallet containing nearly £200 (the equivalent purchasing power today of \$14,700) for his overseas trip. Beatson provided a list of Father Dunne’s accomplishments in the district. For Father Dunne, it was the steadfastness of the parishioners in the Faith that was the greatest accomplishment. When he came to Wollongong, he had one curate to assist in providing two Masses at St Francis Xavier’s on Sunday, an occasional Mass at Mount Kembla and no Mass at all at Port Kembla. “For the last seven years,” Father Dunne told the farewell crowd, “they had six Masses and there were two curates for better or for worse (laughter).” His happiest moments were the number of parishioners who received Holy Communion at Mass. At Christmas ‘they had something like 1000 communicants at the early Mass.’¹⁰

The curates, Father Dempsey, who would be acting Parish Priest during Father Dunne’s absence, and Father Hannan were not left stranded with Father Dunne’s departure. The priests now had a car, “Lizzie” (a Ford motor vehicle). At a meeting of the Parish Church Committee on 9 October 1922, the decision was taken to erect a garage and paint the stable, as well as paint the presbytery – all for £80! Father Dunne referred to the building of a home for “Lizzie” as his last accomplishment for the Church in Wollongong!

To be continued

⁷ *Illawarra Mercury*, Friday, 20 May 1921, p.2

⁸ *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus*, Friday 9 December 1921, p.15

⁹ *Freeman’s Journal*, Thursday, 6 March 1924, p.27; first reported in *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus*, Friday 16 February 1923, p.13

¹⁰ *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus*, Friday 16 February 1923, p.13