

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

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Twelve months later the word went out to the Catholics of the Wollongong District that their beloved pastor was coming home. At the end of Sunday Mass, at Port Kembla, Catholics heard the celebrant advise: 'Watch Friday's papers for notice announcing date of Father Dunne's Welcome Home.' Then on Septuagesima Sunday the celebrant informed the congregation that 'A grand "Welcome Home" will be tendered Rev. Father Dunne, your devoted Parish Priest, in the School Hall, Wollongong on Tuesday evening next at 8 o'clock sharp. As many as possible should attend. Mr Bourke will speak on behalf of the Catholics of Port Kembla.'

Father Dunne returned to Australia on board the S.S. *Ormuz* in late February 1924. He was unwell and was admitted to Lewisham Hospital. In the book containing the Church Notices to be read out by the celebrant at Port Kembla, parishioners were advised at Mass on Sexagesima Sunday that, 'Prayers for recovery of Father Dunne. The date of the "Welcome Home" will be announced in due course' and then at the 7.30 am Mass on Quinquagesima Sunday the plea for prayers was repeated. On the First Sunday in Lent at the 10.30 a.m. Mass the people of Port Kembla were told: 'St Patrick's Night Concert has been cancelled owing to the death of Father Dunne. Prayers for Father Dunne.'

Prior to his death there had been early concern for him but then encouraging news: 'Very Rev. Father Dunne (Wollongong), was reported last night from Lewisham Hospital to be slightly better.' The *South Coast Times* reported. 'His condition earlier in the week feared to be almost hopeless.'¹ It seemed from the placement of only this brief comment by the paper on its' second last page of its 29 February issue that it was considered that the worst had passed. Indeed, the *Mercury* had commented earlier that while 'the welcome home to the Rev. J. P. Dunne had to be postponed on account of his illness. He went from the ship he travelled in to a hospital, where he underwent an operation, and the latest report is that he is making satisfactory progress.'² He died from dysentery and pneumonia at 1.30 pm on Saturday 2 March 1924.

At the time of his death the Australian Bishops were at sea returning to Sydney from New Zealand where they had celebrated the Golden Jubilee of the Archbishop of Wellington, Dr Redwood. They were cabled the sad news and the vessel increased speed to reach Sydney for the Requiem Mass. When Mass for Father Dunne was held at St Mary's Cathedral the Tuesday following his death, almost all the bishops of Australia attended as did 150 priests with the Bishop of Wilcannia-Forbes (and former parish priest of Albion Park), Dr. William Hayden as the celebrant, with Archbishop Kelly presiding. This was not simply a show of solidarity by Australian bishops and the Archdiocese's priests for a fellow priest: John Dunne knew these men and they knew and greatly respected him. *The Catholic Press* said

¹ *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus*, Friday 29 February 1924, p.15

² *Illawarra Mercury*, Friday, 22 February, 1924, p.2

Father Dunne was of the most genial disposition. Everyone who ever met him became a friend, and in the various districts where he ministered, he was loved by all. Physically he was a big, powerful man, but he had a heart correspondingly large. The people of the South Coast have lost their best friend. . . . Amongst his fellow priests of the Archdiocese Father Dunne was universally loved as one of the most zealous and genial of their body. In hospitality, he was princely; in personal piety and priestliness of character he was ever most edifying. He was ever at work for the advancement of religion and was remarkable for his zeal in parochial visitation. Every member of his flock, down to the smallest tots at the school, was known to him personally, and he had no other interest in life save their spiritual welfare. His lamented death is a distinct loss to the Archdiocese and caused widespread sorrow when the sad news became public.³

Archbishop Kelly addressing the congregation said

They stood that day over the bier of a great priest. Father Dunne was not an orator, not a writer, but he was a doer, a worker. His works remain. The monuments of his zeal are to be seen on the South Coast, from Helensburgh to Port Kembla. He was a big man with a big heart. He died as he lived — in the Grace of God. His work done.⁴

Following the Requiem at St Mary's Cathedral, Father Dunne's body was brought to Wollongong by train to be met at the station by hundreds of people, who escorted the cortege to St Francis Xavier's Church. The flag on the Town Hall was at half-mast and most shops in the town were closed for the public farewell for Father Dunne on Wednesday 7 March.



Above: young and old witness the departure of the late Father Dunne from his parish church. The pall-bearers were the members of the church committee, and representatives from the various parts of the parish: Messrs. J. Hannan, J. Brown (Mount Keira), P. Ffrench, P. Gabbett (Port Kembla), S. J. Thorne and J. McEnally. (SFX Archives Image Collection)

³ *The Catholic Press*, Thursday, 6 March 1924, p.20

⁴ *The Catholic Press* loc. cit.

Prior to the remains being taken from the Church, Mrs. Nuttall sang ‘Thy Will Be Done’, then the Dwyer 's Orchestra played Chopin's ‘Funeral March’ as the men of the parish brought Father Dunne from the church. The cortege was led by the town band, followed by pupils of St Francis Xavier’s Convent School: the girls in white dresses with a black sash over their shoulder and the boys wearing white shirts and black shorts and a black armband. The students of St Mary’s College followed in their black uniforms.

The funeral proceeded along Harbour Street, then along Smith Street to Keira Street and finally down Crown Street to return to the St Francis Xavier’s Church grounds. It was estimated by *The Catholic Press* that four thousand people took part in the funeral procession.⁵ Here, in the grounds of St Francis Xavier’s beside the church, Father Dunne was laid to rest with Bishop John Carroll, Bishop of Lismore, fellow Kilkenny man, fellow seminarian at St Kieran’s and former parish priest of Moss Vale, conducting the burial ceremony. Bishop Carroll said:

Every inch of ground from Helensburgh to Port Kembla would contain a memorial of Father Dunne. every inch, because it was not only the noble edifices that he had raised to the glory of God that would stand as a testimony to his holy life, but in the hearts of his people also there would be found monuments of piety and faith — love of the people for God, and love of their neighbours⁶.



Above: ‘The funeral cortege wended its way slowly along Harbour Street to Smith Street, and thence along Keira and Crown Streets to the grave beside the Church. The procession was a very lengthy one, extending from Harbour Street to Keira Street.’

Illawarra Mercury, 7 March 1924, p.9 (SFX Archives Image Collection)

⁵ In 1921 the Wollongong Municipality had a population of 6708 people, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

⁶ *The Catholic Press*, Thursday, 13 March 1924, p.23

Bishop Carroll reflecting the emotions of those present at the graveside, lamented, “We have lost a beloved friend, whom we shall remember in our prayers.” To the people of Wollongong, the bishop suggested this memorial for Father Dunne: “The 2nd of March should be kept as a special day by the Church in Wollongong as the anniversary of the death of their beloved Pastor, and they should pray for the happy repose and blessing of God upon his soul.”⁷

It is no exaggeration to say that the deceased priest was one of the most popular who had ever laboured in the archdiocese. He was known far and wide by prelate, by priest, and by lay man, for his vigorous and genial personality drew all very close to him. A giant in strength, he had all the kindness of a strong nature, and he was especially loved by children. On the South Coast, where for so many years his mission lay, he was not only regarded with affection and reverence by his own flock but by citizens of all denominations. People loved to tell stories of his zeal and thoughtfulness in times of stress, of his alacrity in responding to sick calls that carried him over dangerous roads, and of his big-hearted charity and selflessness when he heard a tale of distress. Although living under modern he was a pioneer priest in spirit — one of the breed that blazed the track when a stout heart and a sturdy hand were needed in the wilderness. Is it any wonder that his death has shadowed the districts in which he did his work, and that the news of it came as a communal calamity!⁸



Left: The headstone of the grave of the very Reverend John Patrick Dunne, P.P., V.F. (Author's Collection)

Father Dunne is buried at Wollongong Cemetery among some of the early pastors of St Francis Xavier's and the early parish priests of the Diocese of Wollongong.

It is said that they are not dead who live in the hearts they leave behind. Today the generations who remembered John Dunne are no more. It is hoped that this story will provide a 'memorial for Father Dunne.' Touchingly, the *Illawarra Mercury* in March of 1924 remarked of John Dunne:

By the South Seas he sleeps — back in the Wollongong so loved. There will be weeping for him in the Homeland he so lately left — 'the wide wash of Australasian seas will for ever wail his requiem.' Those of the many thousands present at his interment on Wednesday who could not join in the supplication 'God rest his soul' will at least wish that the clay lay lightly on him.⁹

⁷ *Illawarra Mercury*, Friday, 7 March 1924, p.9

⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, Thursday 6 March 1924, p.27

⁹ Death of Very Reverend J.P. Dunne, P.P., V.F. in *Illawarra Mercury*, Friday, 7 March 1924, p.9