

ANZAC Day 2024: Remembering Fabian Patrick Gregory Dwyer

Neil Dwyer
Archivist
April 2024

In his farewell address to the U.S. Congress in April 1951 General Douglas MacArthur said, “I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barrack ballads of that day which proclaimed most proudly that ‘old soldiers never die; they just fade away.’ And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty.” In our collective mind Australians can travel so far down the road from the Great War of 1914-18 and World War II and even the Korean War and the Vietnam War, which ended fifty years ago, that events and people may fade away. ANZAC Day is that opportunity to remember.

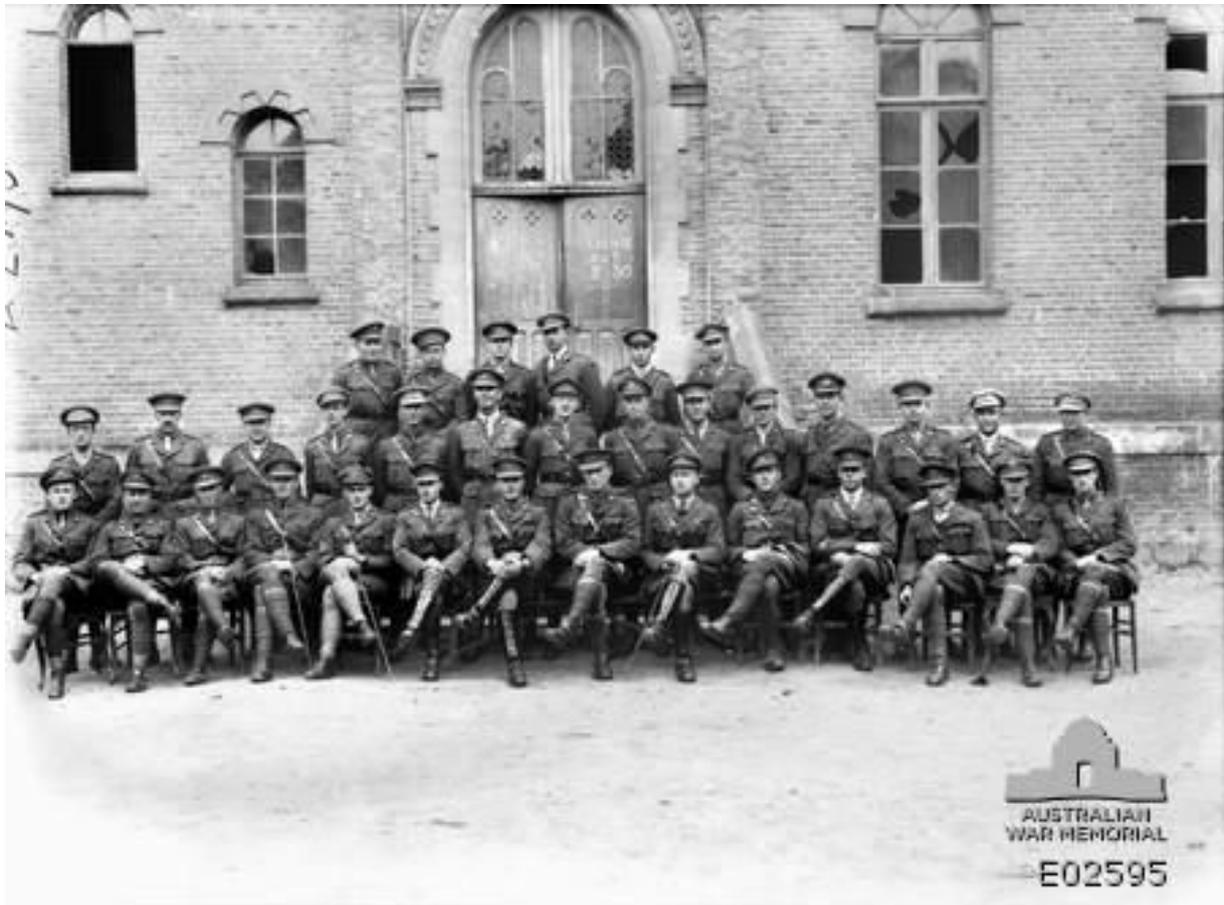
Among the people parishioners should recall is Father Fabian Dwyer,¹ a Catholic chaplain of the Great War of 1914-18, who arrived in Wollongong in July 1925 as curate to parish priest at St Francis Xavier’s. Parishioners soon realised he was a priest of ‘great heart’ and many talents. Fabian Patrick Gregory Dwyer was born at Moruya on 13 October 1883, the son of Cornelius Joseph and Rose Mary Dwyer. His mother, formerly Rose Kelly, had also been born in Moruya, while his father was born at Cambewarra in the Shoalhaven in 1849. His father was the Catholic school master at Moruya from 1879 and then became the local public-school headmaster on 25 April 1884, where he continued until 30 December 1897 when he transferred to Sydney and then retirement in Richmond.

Fabian was educated at the Marist Brothers’ College, Darlinghurst before entering the seminary at St Patrick’s Manly. He was ordained at St. Mary's Cathedral in November 1912, along with Fathers. Robert Peoples, Justin Simmonds (the first Australian born Archbishop of Hobart), and William Byrne (later of Mittagong). Father Dwyer served at Darlinghurst, Katoomba and during 1913 and 1914 he was at Gosford, from where he joined the army as a chaplain.

Father Dwyer was 33 years old when he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces on 13 February 1917 as Captain Chaplain 4th Class. (His three brothers had already enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces.) He left Melbourne on the *Shropshire* on 11 May 1917, disembarking at Plymouth on 19 July 1917 from here he was allocated to 1st Infantry Training Brigade at Plymouth Downs on 10 November 1917, proceeding to France from Southampton on 21 December 1917. Father Dwyer was attached successively to number of Australian battalions during 1918. However, his service in the Army was short: on 29 October 1918, the 2nd Field Hospital at Abbeville advised that Father Dwyer had asthma. He was admitted to hospital at Boulogne on 1 November, but by 6 November Father Dwyer was embarked for England to the 3rd London General Hospital, Wandsworth with bronchial asthma. His condition was of sufficient concern that his father was informed on 26 November. By this time, the Great War was over and the enormous task of bringing the members of the First AIF home commenced. Father Dwyer returned on the troop transport ship *Demosthenes*, which arrived in Australia on 2 March 1919. In Sydney, the Disembarkation Medical Board declared Father

¹ No relation.

Dwyer to be in good condition with heart and lungs clear, though the Board determined that he was not fit for permanent general service or for active home service with troops. As a result of war service Father Dwyer was awarded the 1916-18 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. The French awarded him the Croix de Guerre.



Above: Group portrait of officers of the 19th Battalion including Captain Fabian Dwyer (Front row on the left), Somme River, Picardy, France, 26 June 1918.

It seemed the thirty-five-year-old Father Dwyer returned to Australia with mixed feelings: a patriotic Australian and Churchman, but one senses restlessness in how he could best serve both. In December 1919, he attended the annual prize-giving at his alma mater the Marist Brothers' College, Darlinghurst and gave voice to the concerns of the Church in the immediate post-war as the *Freeman's Journal* reported:

The Rev. Father Fabian Dwyer, who was received with prolonged applause, said, in the course of an interesting address, that Australia was at present being ground down under the heels of politicians. Efforts were being made by certain sections of the community and the daily press to oppose a Catholic spirit, and it was the work especially of our Catholic schools to counteract the evil influences that were operating.²

Presiding over the prize-giving was His Grace, the Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, who had numerous battles with the Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who called Mannix a traitor during the Great War. This prizegiving provided an opportunity for the Archbishop to clarify his allegiance to Australia: 'I have two countries. Ireland was my country, and I couldn't get

²*Freeman's Journal*, 25 December 1919, p.20

away from it. Australia is my country and I do not want to get away from it.’ It also offered Archbishop Mannix the opportunity to promote Fabian Dwyer with whom he was impressed as an exemplar of the Catholic spirit:

I endorse his remarks that all credit is due to the Marist Brothers for cultivating an Australian democratic spirit amongst their boys. He saw what the Australian boys were able to do on the other side of the world. He knows what they are capable of doing here. After going to the other side of the world, seeing the heart of the Empire, France, Belgium and the rest, he has come back telling that he met no better people than his own; and therefore, he can appeal to you and your children -to be proud of Australia - and never to put Australia in second place as compared to any empire or kingdom the whole world over.Father Dwyer is an Australian with a world-wide experience, and I hope his words have sunk deep into your hearts. I do not know that there is any particular reason why you should separate your Empire; but, whether in the Empire or outside of it, I do not see any reason why you should be putting any other, country before your own.³

Serving his Country must not have been too far from the mind of Father Dwyer. The following month his prior health conditions did not appear to stop Dwyer’s entry into the Royal Australian Navy, when in January 1920 he was appointed the Navy’s Catholic chaplain on board HMAS *Australia*. He remained for three years, but apparently unfulfilled by duty in the Service, he resigned and returned to his diocese.

Father Dwyer did not stay long in Australia. He spent two years in the United States, returning to Australia to be appointed to Araluen in March 1923, followed by Wollongong in 1925. Shortly after his arrival, Father Dwyer gave a lecture on his war and travel experiences in Wollongong Town Hall on Tuesday 28 July 1925 as part of a lecture and concert to raise funds for Wollongong’s new Christian Brothers’ College. The *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus* reported, “Father Dwyer is a vigorous speaker with a racy and humorous style, and a manly philosophy. he was not a militarist, he believed strongly in military and naval discipline as a factor in nation-building.”⁴ He also spoke about his travel in the United States.

Father Dwyer was a versatile priest: The *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* had said of him years earlier that “Father Dwyer is not only a distinguished preacher, but a musician and artist of some note, and a journalist. He has contributed many articles to Australian and American publications.”⁵ He was also a poet. In Wollongong, he was Spiritual Director of the Children of Mary, and was involved with the Hibernians as well as the St Vincent de Paul Society. His great organisational skills resulted in several successful Catholic Balls. He helped at the Illawarra Eisteddfod and as set designer for the local amateur dramatic societies. Father Dwyer was also active in the local branch of the Returned Services League and his portrait hung in the Wollongong R.S.L. Club in the 1930s (until fire destroyed the club), such was the regard for the ex-serviceman and chaplain. In short Fabian Dwyer, like many of the priests who served this parish over the past 186 years, involved himself totally in the spiritual life of people and, in so doing, endeared himself to parishioners. His wholehearted involvement in the township, through the arts and community service, won the affection and regard of the general populace.

³ *Freeman’s Journal*, 25 December 1919, p.20

⁴ *South Coast Times and Wollongong Argus*, Friday 31 July 1925, p.20

⁵ *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, Friday 23 January 1920, p.7

Father Patrick Doherty, the parish priest and Vicar Forane went overseas on leave from St Francis Xavier's in July 1929. He was farewelled at Sydney by Father Dwyer, who took the opportunity to visit his brother, Louis, a patient in St Vincent's Hospital. While in the city, Father Dwyer, who already had a cold, developed pneumonia, and was admitted to St Vincent's. His condition deteriorated and on 19 July he received the Last Sacrament at the hands of a fellow seminarian of St Patrick's College Manly, Monsignor Robert Peoples. Fabian Patrick Gregory Dwyer died of pneumonia on Saturday 20 July 1929, aged 42 years.

There was profound shock as the news spread among the Catholics of the Wollongong District and following the 11 a.m. Mass on Sunday the Dead March was played. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that,

Widespread regret was expressed at the announcement of the death of the Rev. Father Fabian Dwyer, 45(*sic*), a popular priest, who had been stationed here for the past five years He left here last Sunday to visit his brother who was ill in Sydney, and contracted pneumonia. Deceased was a chaplain at the Great War. He was popular with all sections of the community.⁶



Left: Father Dwyer's cortege proceeded along Harbour Street, east along Market Street to Keira Street, south along Keira Street to Crown Street. It then proceeded down Crown Street to St Francis Xavier's Church for burial in the church grounds.

On Monday morning at the Sacred Heart Church, Darlinghurst, Solemn Office was chanted and Requiem Mass celebrated for the repose of Father Dwyer's soul. The Archbishop of Sydney, Michael Kelly, presided at Mass, which was celebrated by Monsignor Robert Peoples, who was Private Secretary to the Archbishop, while the deacon was Father William McNally, another former classmate of Father Dwyer at St Patrick's College, Manly.⁷ Among the 120 priests in attendance were former fellow army and navy chaplains, former classmates from Manly, priests who served on the South Coast and some young priests the Diocese of Wollongong would come to know, including Cyril Callaghan (St Francis Xavier's Parish Priest and Vicar Forane, 1935-52 and fellow RAN chaplain), John Mulheren (later Monsignor and Parish Priest of West Wollongong) Thomas Grealy (later Monsignor and P. P. of Albion Park), Michael. Irish (later Monsignor and P. P of Kiama) and Cornelius Lynch (served at St Francis Xavier's from December 1924 to June 1925 and later Monsignor and P.P. Moss Vale). The

⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Monday 22 July 1929

⁷ Both had served at St Francis Xavier's: Monsignor Robert Peoples from December 1912 to January 1914 and William McNally November 1914 to November 1917

Christian Brothers from Wollongong were represented by Brother Hogan and the Marist Brothers by Brother Ernest.⁸

In Wollongong on that Monday morning at 6.45 a.m., Father Michael Farrell, a fellow curate celebrated ‘the Requiem Mass in St. Francis Xavier's Church, and, despite the early hour and shortness of the notice, there was a large congregation, including the school children and nuns and members of the various Societies.’⁹ That evening at the service held at St Stephen's Church of England, Port Kembla, the Rector, the Reverend Thomas Terry, who had served with Father Dwyer as an army chaplain, made special mention of his passing.

Father Dwyer's dying wish was to be buried beside St Francis Xavier's Church, alongside Fathers John Dunne, Bernard Mahony, Patrick Ryan, and Malachy Murray, OSB: that sacred space between the church and presbytery near where the original chapel of the Catholic pioneers was located. (The remains of these priests were later re-interred in 1952 at Wollongong General Cemetery.) In his service to his country and his parishioners, Fabian Dwyer favoured ‘a world of cheer’ over complaining about illness, which he expressed in one of his poems:

*Let my dark hours be dark for me alone,
Nor shadow other lives that I hold dear.
Let me in laughter choke each useless moan,
And make my little world a world of cheer.
Teach me to turn my every hurt and pain,
Into white blossoms of tenderness for Thee,
Teach me to make each earthly loss a gain,
And when I fail, be patient Lord, with me.*



Left: Father Dwyer is buried at Wollongong General Cemetery beside Fathers Dunne, Mahony, Ryan and Murray

The parishioners of St Francis Xavier's raised the funds for the Memorial headstone for Father Dwyer and on 18 May 1930 it was solemnly blessed by Father Doherty. Among those present at the ceremony were Father Fabian's mother, his three sisters and two brothers, and

⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, Thursday, 25 July 1929, p.29 provides a list of the 120 priests in attendance.

⁹ *Freeman's Journal*, Thursday, 25 July 1929, p.29

Mr. and Mrs. Basclain his uncle and aunt. Also present were Fathers C.B. Callaghan, William McNally, Farrell, and Quinn.

The Memorial is in the form of a Celtic Cross, and bears the inscription: 'Of your Charity pray for the repose of the soul of Rev. Fabian Patrick Dwyer, Assistant priest at Wollongong, born at Moruya, N.S.W. Ordained priest, 30th November, 1912, died 20th July, 1929, aged 42 years. Sweet Jesus have mercy upon him. Erected to his memory by parishioners and friends.' The monument is the work of Messrs, Rose and Son, Keira street, Wollongong. On the Memorial had been placed a number of wreaths, including an ever-last wreath in glass case, bearing the inscription: 'A tribute of affection to the memory of their devoted and zealous priest, from men of parish.'¹⁰

The money raised exceeded the cost of the memorial and Father Doherty was asked by parishioners to select a gold chalice in memory of Father Dwyer for use at Mass in St Francis Xavier's Church.

A further memorial to Father Dwyer and Father Dunne can be found within the Chapel of Saint Mary's Star of the Sea College where there are two stained-glass windows, one dedicated to Father John Dunne, the other to Father Fabian Dwyer. One window depicts Jesus, the Sacred Heart, (the memorial to Father Dune) appearing to Saint Margaret Mary (shown in the other window and is the memorial to Father Dwyer).

His mother presented a 100-guinea gold engraved chalice (worth \$5412 today) which belonged to Father Dwyer to St Monica's Church, Richmond and which he used 'when he was chaplain at the Great War. It was fitting, therefore, that it should have been used for the first time in St. Monica's Church during the celebration of Mass on Anzac Day.'¹¹

Eighty-two years ago, Charles Bean published the last volume of the official history of the Great War (The Official History of the War of 1914-18, Volume VI). He wrote:

The Old Force passes down the road to history. The dust of its march settled. The sounds of its arms died. Upon a hundred battlefields the broken trees stretched their lean arms over 60,000 of its graves. The time has arrived to sum its achievements... What these men did, nothing can alter now. The good and the bad, the greatness and smallness of their story, will stand. Whatever of glory it contains, nothing can now lessen. It rises, as it will always rise, above the mists of ages, a monument to great-hearted men. And, for their nation, a possession forever.

Possibly this is the essence of the memory of those who served we should have, so that they do not 'fade away.'

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*¹²

¹⁰ *Freeman's Journal*, Thursday 22 May 1930, p.29

¹¹ *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, Friday 8 May 1931, p. 1

¹² *For the Fallen* by Laurence Binyon, third stanza