Obituary

Fr Leo Donnelly (1927-2019)

Port Macquarie’s visionary priest
Father Leo Francis Donnelly was born at Gulargambone in the Diocese of Bathurst on 17 November 1927. He passed into eternal life at the age of 91 on 23 January 2019 at St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. He was a Catholic Priest for more than 68 years and, of those years, served 48 as Parish Priest of Port Macquarie.

Inspired by the Gospel, he achieved much, rising above many challenges to lead by example, with a humble heart.

Leo's early years at Gulargamone were in the Depression Years but he was part of a family that shared everything. He was born the fourth son of Joseph (dec) and Stella Donnelly (dec) and, ultimately, the fourth eldest of nine children. He had seven brothers – John (dec), Keith (dec), Noel (dec), Raymond (dec), Alan, Kevin and Geoff (dec), and one much-loved sister, Margaret (dec).

As a youth, Leo suffered a serious bout of rheumatic fever, after which he went to convalesce with his mother's sister, Kitty Fischer, who lived in Port Macquarie. He remained there to complete his secondary education at the Convent School.

A classmate from that period, Pat McBriarty (nee Riordan), remembered Leo as the only boy in a very small classroom saying, "Leo worked hard with the help of the nuns and completed three years of study in one".

By the time he finished his schooling, Leo had decided that priesthood was the vocation for him. He then attended theological schools at St Columba's College, Springwood and St Patrick's College in Manly, and Pont Urban College in Rome.

After nine years of theological studies and having just turned 24, Leo Donnelly was ordained by HE Cardinal Furmasoni Bionch as a priest for the Diocese of Lismore, at Pont Urban College in Rome on 21 December 1950. The first Mass he celebrated on Australian soil was in the chapel at the Brigidine Convent Randwick where his sister Margaret was a Novice, and with younger brother, Kevin, as altar boy.

When Fr Donnelly arrived back in Lismore Diocese on 10 November 1951, he was appointed Assistant Priest to Fr John Curran at Port Macquarie (1951-1954) then followed a move to Lismore where he became very involved in the work of the Diocese. His first appointment there was as Assistant to the Bishop's Secretary (1954-1958) and then Bishop's Secretary (1958-1970).

While his parents lived, Leo spent all of his holidays and annual breaks with his family, which usually involved a non-stop drive of around 18 hours from Lismore to Gulargambone on what were, at the time, very poor roads. When they died in the early 1970's, he continued to be a very active member of the Donnelly family, staying in touch with a tribe of nieces and nephews – enjoying their company whenever he could.

"In every family there is an 'anchor' and Leo Francis was always ours," remembered his brother, Kevin.

According to his nephew, Matthew Donnelly, ‘family events were never really ready until Uncle Leo arrived’.

“Uncle Leo had an authority about him – it wasn't about him being a priest; or his physical presence or his intelligence; it was his unending kindness and compassion and his ability to always see the good in every person.”

Another nephew, Anthony Donnelly, described himself as ‘geographically lucky’ to have been raised in Port Macquarie where he was able to spend more time with his beloved uncle.

"We knew him as 'Leo, 'The Rev', 'The big fella'... Uncle Leo was big in every way – tall, big heart, big achievements. We all live within his achievements.”

Leo loved the ocean, the rivers and fishing. Boats also played a big role in his life – Leo had his first sea experience in Port Macquarie in 1942 on the now historic ‘XLCR’, a fishing trawler, which became Port's first sea rescue boat. He enjoyed time on the water with family and friends during holidays at Keswick Island off Mackay, Queensland. In 2009, his maritime interest led to him providing encouragement and financial support for students of Newman Senior Technical College to complete the restoration of the ‘XLCR’ (which still graces the waters of the Hastings River).
The Lismore years

Fr Frank Devoy (a former Director of Education for Lismore Diocese) remembers Fr Donnelly, during his posting in Lismore, for ‘the ground-breaking work he did to establish the Rehabilitation Unit at St Vincent’s Hospital in Lismore’ in the mid-1950’s, at a time the care of stroke patients was limited.

In 1964, when Secretary to the Bishop of Lismore, Fr Donnelly played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Diocesan Investment Fund (DIF). This was a time of instability in the national economy but there was a pressing need to expand secondary schools as result of the Public Education Act (1961). As was his way, Fr Donnelly found good people with sound fiscal and legal knowledge such as Barry Wappett, Tom Rummery (dec) and Frank Liddy (dec) to help him get the DIF off the ground.

In 2011, Mr Wappett recalled Fr Donnelly’s ‘particular ability to negotiate with politicians and public servants, who held him in high regard’ and his ‘logic and knowledge of Canon Law’.

The DIF now funds projects worth millions of dollars for parishes throughout the Diocese of Lismore.

The Port Macquarie years

On 12 March 1970, Fr Donnelly took up his appointment as Parish Priest of Port Macquarie, which was then a small, quiet coastal town with a population of about 8,000. The small Catholic parish stretched from Telegraph Point (north) down to and including Lake Cathie (south).

Though Fr Donnelly was raised in the pre-Vatican II church, he was quick to implement the changes in the Liturgy brought about by the Vatican Council, such as turning the altar around to celebrate Mass facing the people.

Brian Tierney, retired businessperson, parishioner and long-time friend said Fr Donnelly had ‘a capacity to spot talent and to make use of it.’

“Father Donnelly was one of the first parish priests to make use of the new ecumenical canons from the famous Vatican Council of the 1960’s to involve the laity in his vision for future growth in Port Macquarie,” said Mr Tierney.

Fr Donnelly’s vision, as it evolved, was to cater for the whole community, from pre-school to old age. With the help of people like John Hamilton, Honour Morcom, Doreen Menary, Jim Howard, John Worner, Fred Mitchell, Bill Hill, Kay Wood, Brian Tierney, and many others, he led the transformation of St Agnes’ Parish into an extensive range of services, facilities, and education centres that touch thousands of lives every day.

Early on, parishioner donations and the running of Housie (led by Doreen Daveron) in the Parish Hall in Horton Street, played an important role in financing Parish activities. Over time, Fr Donnelly and his Finance Council were able to develop an astute and extensive commercial asset portfolio, the income from which funded the Parish’s expanding range of community-based services.

In time, just about everyone in the Port Macquarie community came to know Fr Donnelly as ‘Fr D’.

Caring for the Aged

When he returned to Port Macquarie in 1970, Fr Donnelly realised the people he knew from his earlier days there were getting older. He wondered who would look after them as they aged because not much existed in the way of aged care in Port Macquarie at that time, so he began to look for opportunities to meet this need.

To this end, when a parcel of Crown Land set aside for ‘aged care purposes’ in Morton Street became available and Fr Donnelly, through his contacts, negotiated the lease of the land and commenced construction of the Parish’s first residential aged care facility, Lourdes House.

Shortly after Lourdes House opened the Clifton Rest Home (a private nursing home) came up for sale in 1975. In a giant leap of faith, supported by Bishop Satterthwaite, DIF Board and the Parish, Fr Donnelly purchased the large property, which became the 110 bed Lourdes Nursing Home.
Between 1987 and 2017 Catholic Care of the Aged Port Macquarie continued to burgeon under Fr Donnelly’s leadership with the establishment of St Agnes’ Hostel (1987), St Agnes’ Independent Living Village (1987), St Agnes’ Lodge (1991), Centacare Disability Support Service (1993), Maryknoll Hostel (1993), Marian Centre, now St Agnes’ Food Services (1994), Mount Carmel House (1995) and Emmaus (2004). In 2017 he also backed the creation of a central place of enquiry for people navigating the complexity of the MyAgedCare system (he begrudgingly, accepted it being named ‘Donnelly House’ in his honour).

Today, the Parish is one of the largest providers of aged care on the mid north coast with Catholic Care of the Aged Port Macquarie looking after 338 residential clients, 115 in-home care clients, 280 independent living clients, and employing nearly 330 staff offering a range of high quality services.

Honor Morcom, former director of Catholic Care of the Aged, Port Macquarie recalls Fr Donnelly’s ‘extraordinary vision of possibilities and his indomitable spirit’. In 2011, she said, “His pioneering ideas led to the institution of Christo House for homeless youth and the PCYC facility at Bourne House.”

Commitment to education

Fr Donnelly’s commitment to Catholic education was unwavering. He sat on many Diocesan, State and National committees for education, including the NSW State Catholic Education Commission, working with people like Archbishop James Carroll, himself a leader in education until his death in 1995.

Fr Donnelly looked beyond the civic obligation of schooling young people to take their place in society to the sacred obligation of acquainting them with “the existence of that other world, the world of ultimate reality – God’s world”.

“There is no legal or constitutional question about the admission of religion into the public square. The only question is whether or not all citizens, religious or otherwise can participate and influence public life freely and equally”, Fr Donnelly said at the opening of the newly relocated St Joseph’s Regional College in 2009.

“The fact that the constitution guarantees your right not to practice my religion, also guarantees my right to try and convince you of the value of adopting my religious tenets as public law.”

Jim O’Brien (former Principal of St Joseph’s Regional College) said Fr Donnelly was admired for his leadership qualities, his faithfulness to his Catholic beliefs and values, and his ability to choose the right people and to have confidence in their skills.

Between 1970 and 2009, Fr Donnelly oversaw the growth of Catholic education in Port Macquarie from one school (St Joseph’s Primary) to the current six campuses (St Joseph's Primary, St Agnes Primary, St Peter's Primary, Mackillop Senior College, St Joseph's Regional College and Newman Senior Technical College). In 1975 he also set up 'Joprim' (now St Agnes’ Uniform Store), as an outlet for school uniforms.

At his direction, the Parish also responded to the call for pre-school and early childcare services, establishing St Joseph’s Family Services (1973), Hastings Family Day Care (1977), Joey’s House Occasional Care (1988) and St Agnes’ Early Education Centre (1994).

In 2018, around 4000 primary and secondary students and 850 children were educated through Port Macquarie’s Catholic schools and early education childcare centres.

One of the educational projects Fr Donnelly took most delight in was the development of the vocational education and training college, now known as Newman Senior Technical College. From its genesis in 1979, he was the architect of its development and gathered the right people together, such as Sister Marie Boland and Tom Quinn, to launch it successfully as VoCol. Together, they developed a vocational alternative for Year 11 and 12 students who did not want to pursue the traditional
academic Higher School Certificate. Trial courses ran and in 1979, the first cohort of around forty students, started down this new pathway of learning.

After the Federal government announced the establishment of the Australian Technical College (ATC) network across Australia, VoCol was rebranded as St Agnes’ Parish ATC and a newly built campus in Boundary Street was the first to be officially opened by the then Prime Minister John Howard in February 2007.

John McQueen, former Coordinating Executive Officer for Parish Education at St Agnes’, was inspired by Fr Donnelly’s vision and purpose in establishing St Joseph’s Vocational College.

“The Vocational College commenced at a time when vocational education was viewed by the establishment as a ‘fad’ that was not relevant for the majority of students. Increasing enrolments and employment success for 95% of the students quickly established the College as leader in its field,” said John.

“Newman Senior College is now a multi-million dollar facility that provides the best vocational educational and training in the country.”

Another education initiative championed by Fr Donnelly, which was ahead of its time was a catechetical program for primary and secondary schools called ‘Understanding Faith’. Launched using hard copy booklets in the mid-1990's, Understanding Faith is now an extensive online resource that meets the religious education curriculum needs of Catholic Schools Australia-wide. In 2018, it reached 502 schools and its online pages enjoyed well over three million views.

An outreach church
Fr Donnelly's words often inspired but his actions were what really did his talking. He was always conscious that community outreach was a key part of the work of the Catholic Church. In March 2018, he said, “A real church is an outreach church”.

There is no finer example of Fr Donnelly's idea of outreach than his ministry to the people of Lord Howe Island, within the Archdiocese of Sydney until 1994, when it officially became part of the Lismore Diocese within the Parish of Port Macquarie.

In 1974, during routine visits to Port Macquarie Hospital one of the Parish's priests met cancer patient, Mrs Gae Derwent (dec) from Lord Howe Island. On the Island, she said, they never saw a priest and there was no one to look after the Catholic community.

Responding, Fr Donnelly spoke to then Bishop John Satterthwaite (then Bishop of Lismore Diocese), who gained Cardinal Freeman's consent for Port Macquarie Parish to minister to the people of Lord Howe Island. Priests from Port Macquarie visited the island several times a year, and arranged for priests, who were visiting the islands on holiday, to say Mass, usually in the local Anglican Church. Each fortnight, the Blessed Sacrament and other liturgical requirements arrived on the island by plane for regular communion services conducted by the local laity.

There was no Catholic Church on the Lord Howe Island and, in his usual way, Fr Donnelly resolved with determination and ingenuity to secure for the Catholics on the island their own church, by the construction of a largely prefabricated building. The components of the church were produced by students from Vocol Engineering (part of the Parish's Vocational College) and shipped to Lord Howe Island on the MV Sitka. Along the way, he even resolved an industrial dispute that came about because there were no stevedores in Port Macquarie to load the boat.

The church arrived on Lord Howe Island in August 1994 and, at its blessing and opening, was dedicated to St Agnes at the insistence of the grateful Islanders.

The 1980's saw Fr Donnelly continue his community outreach but this time further afield in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Western Australia. In the Diocese of Broome, funds from the St Agnes’ Foundation enabled volunteers (such as Peter Ruggiero, Steve and Cath Quirk, Geoff, Bernard and Justin Swan) to go to the Mirrilingki Spirituality Centre in Warmun to assist the Sisters of St Joseph in their work with Indigenous people in remote communities. Fr Donnelly, keen to see the work being done, also visited Mirrilingki.
In the last three years of his working life, Fr Donnelly’s desire to meet the community’s spiritual and vocational needs was strong. For example, he approved the purchase of The Francis Retreat, a beachside property at Bonny Hills (2015) as a place of spiritual retreat and peace. In 2016, he launched the John Henry Institute for adult vocational training and education.

When local Port Macquarie sporting clubs were in need, as their playing fields were under threat, Fr Donnelly engineered the purchase of the Tuffins Lane sporting fields to protect their interests.

A man of humour and humility

Fr Donnelly was known for his dry wit and unique way of phrasing things. For example, when he was testing an idea he would often say ‘I’ll throw a few crumbs on the water and you never know, it might come back a sandwich’. In his time, Fr Donnelly had a lot of sandwiches come back to him.

Don Farrell, Foundational Principal of St Peter’s Primary School in Port Macquarie, recalls his humour when classrooms flooded after heavy rain due to an uncapped electrical pit during Stage 2 of the school’s construction.

“On a wet, rainy Sunday afternoon I stood over the electrical pit with Father Donnelly and Matthew Rourke [Parish Property Manager]. I said to Father ‘I’m not keen to put my hands into electricity wires and water’. Father, quick as a flash, said, ‘It’s ok, Don – I have the holy oils in the car’,” Mr Farrell said.

Fr Paul Gooley, current Parish Priest of Port Macquarie and former Assistant Priest to Fr Donnelly at St Agnes’ Parish (1990 to 1995) remembers his humility, telling of a time when Fr Donnelly, celebrating an anniversary in Lismore with all the Diocesan priests, was upset to hear himself described by one of his peers as ‘Leo the builder’.

“For him, it was not about the buildings; what was always more important in his mind was what happened ‘in’ the buildings,” Fr Gooley said.

“For as long as I knew Fr Donnelly, he always acknowledged that it was not just about him but it was also about the efforts of the many hardworking, dedicated and generous people who have been part of the life of the Parish and the wider Hastings community. He found joy in following the will of God, meeting the needs of the vulnerable in our community, and in encouraging others to do the same.”

Chief Executive Officer of St Agnes’ Parish, Adam Spencer, was inspired by Fr Donnelly’s trust in God’s plans.

“He shared his knowledge and wisdom freely with others and was always confident that God would provide the people and the resources needed,” said Mr Spencer.

The Hon Dr David Gillespie MP, Member for Lyne, commended Fr Donnelly as an ‘exceptional man’, a ‘visionary parish priest’ and ‘a distinguished community leader with a very long legacy of good’.

In a speech to Federal Parliament Dr Gillespie said, “It is hard to quantify the impact that this one man has had on the local community of Port Macquarie. He has literally moved mountains, including swamps and buildings, to build infrastructure to care for, educate and enrich the lives of many local people.”

Offices held

Awards received

Fr Donnelly was the Hastings Citizen of the Year in 1991 and was named Port Macquarie’s first ‘Heritage Person and a Living Treasure’ by then Hastings Council Mayor, Wayne Richards (dec) in 2000. Awarded the Member of the Order of Australia (in the General Division) in 2002, he received the Centenary Medal in 2003, and he was the recipient of the Perkins Award for Individual Excellence in Service in 2010. On his retirement in 2018, Fr Donnelly was awarded the Cross-Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice Medal by the Vatican for his distinguished service to the Church.

Retirement

Fr Donnelly retired from active duty as Parish Priest of St Agnes’ Parish Port Macquarie on 16 March 2018.

On retirement he said, “I cannot think of a greater privilege than to be called to lead a faith community. But with that privilege comes the responsibility to do your very best for the people of that community.”

“What happens [at Mass] on Sundays, over all of those 68 years, has been the real engine room of this parish. That is where that gift of faith we received at our baptism reaches its full expression – worship around, and with, our Eucharistic Lord.”

In November 2017 he said, “This parish has always meant so much to me. I was an altar boy at the opening of the church. I was the first priest from Port Macquarie. I was only ever in two places, Port and Lismore. In that, I have been uniquely blessed and at the heart of that blessing are the people who have accepted me, encouraged me”. During his years as a priest, Fr Donnelly celebrated Mass around 20,000 times. He preached numerous homilies, always well prepared and concise as he adhered to his seven-minute rule. Fr Donnelly baptised hundreds, was there for the first communion of three generations and shared the joy of many young couples as they exchanged their marriage vows. He was there, too, when families suffered loss and grief, anointing the sick, comforting loved ones and performing the rite of Christian burial.

Fr Donnelly spent his last year as Emeritus Parish Priest, enjoying retired life at The Francis Retreat in Bonny Hills.

Farewell for a man of compassion

Nearly 2000 people attended Fr Donnelly’s funeral, held on Friday 1 February 2019 at St Agnes’ Catholic Church in Port Macquarie. Another 10,000 viewed the service, streamed via social media, online.

Shortly after his passing, Bishop Greg Homeming (Bishop of Lismore) delivered the inaugural ‘Fr Leo Donnelly Oration’ at the 2019 National Conference of Catholic Social Services Australia, in which he named Fr Donnelly as the only example he had seen of someone who exemplifies the Aristotelian virtue of megalopsuchia.

“The best way to describe a megalopsuchos is his body is not big enough to contain his soul – someone whose soul, whose capacity for goodness, whose compassion, whose virtue is so great that it just bursts out of them. Such people do exist, but they are very rare. And I met my first and only megalopsuchos in Fr Leo Donnelly,” Bishop Homeming said.

Fr Leo Francis Donnelly lived an extraordinary life, dedicated to his priestly vocation and to the people and community he served. His surviving brothers (Alan and Kevin), sisters-in-law, nieces, nephews, and their families rest safe in the knowledge that he is at home in heaven with the Lord.