



### OUR FAVORITE IRISH PRIEST

For our family and friends I share the untimely death of our dearest Fr. Phillip J. Ryan. He died on December 14, 2017; he was 86 years old. He's been my one Irish priest and one of my best Irish friends for almost 40 years. He slipped away peacefully in his sleep on that Thursday evening 6:00 pm with Peggy Woodson at his side (he moved in with Peggy and her husband Gary after he retired 15 years ago). Fortunately, I visited him earlier in the afternoon and was able to say my good byes and blessings to him.

Fr. Ryan preached the Gospel in coal fields of Kurrii Kurri to the plains the Manning River from 1957 and for the next ten years before coming to the Redwoods of California. Then on the eve of the Assumption 1975, after reading in the Press Democrat that the Parish of St. Mary's were about to build a church on the north shore in Lucerne, he came, took up the mantle and began his ministry in Lake County.

Fr. Ryan was bigger than life in this County. Over the years he was known to nearly every person and certainly every merchant as he planned first with his parishioners to raise funds to restore St. Peter's in Kelseyville. As he wrote in his *Pilgrims People* [ . . . "the steeple was a-peeling and the walls no paint had seen since sixty four".] Next, he began the arduous attempt to raise funds for a new church in Lakeport. In *Pilgrims People* he wrote, [ . . . "St. Mary's Church, white as snow, stands proudly on the hill, She glances over the lake and beckons to Lucerne and Kelseyville. The bells of St. Mary's have been tolling for three score and ten, And the pews are a-squeaking for they are overloaded with too many men and women" . . .] Seeking the approval of the Bishop of the time, he was told "you don't have the money nor the numbers, you are dreamers without my support" {again as related in his *Pilgrims People*}. Undeterred, and with the support of nearly the entire parish and with his inspiration and under his leadership, he set about to raise the necessary funds; holding BINGO games, producing a Parish Directory (1985), holding St. Patrick's Day Dinners with raffles and drawings and BINGO at the Fairgrounds. The ladies of the Parish published a St. Mary's Cook Book and The Men's Club held a Yard Sale and again the ladies stepped up holding fine dinners at the Sayre House for the public to attend. And then there was St. Mary's Summer Camp he started and held for a week on Cobb Mountain for few years. (I was a 2nd grade counselor the first year and the sou chef thereafter; and the chef for the St. Patrick's Day dinners.) But after years of fund raising efforts yielded over a million dollars (half of which were invested wisely we believed by the Chancery and the remaining one half held here in Lake County -the Diocesan Committee confiscated the money and told us we could only build a church of the Bishop's design and for a budget of \$350,000 in total. A savage blow to Fr. Ryan.

Father moved on from serving in St. Mary's parish, his spirit daunted but not his faith. And although he served at several parishes after here like Santa Rosa, Cazadero and Guerneville, his heart (other than in Ireland of course) was in Lake County.

In 1981 Fr. Ryan and Fr. Paul Moran conceived, produced and began the preparations to stage an Annual Lake County Outdoor Passion Play. It was the first of these awesome compassionate Dramas of Dramas – a love story that has no ending - as Fr. Ryan called it. People from all his past parishes donated money for the Passion Play, sold automobiles and donated the profits, gave supplies and materials and volunteered to build the costume house, the tool shed and the sound equipment building, the fencing and the beautiful gates. They donated time and dollars to construct the three stages, donated sheep, goats and Llamas and himself purchased two Arabian horses. He managed to elicit donations from numerous organizations, anonymous donors and the cast of hundreds over the years as well as from the several Pilgrimages led by Fr. Ryan to Rome, Ireland and Fatima, Portugal. (Bobby and my daughter Michelle and I traveled with Fr. to Ireland one year. That was such a swell trip.) When he and the BOD decided to purchase the land on which the play was held, we were short the necessary funds to buy the property. He raised \$110,000 knocking on doors of people he knew and complete strangers in the space of a few months and added \$30,000 of his own money. He held a candlelight Rosary to honor the blessed Virgin Mary on the Play grounds. And we borrowed the remaining funds which we later paid off with money from an anonymous donor in Ireland. (Bobby and I have been in the Passion Play since Bobby was 4 years old, Bobby almost all and I have missed only one year when I broke my ankle. I was/am a member of the cast committee and was/am on the BOD for many years now.) The Passion Play was Fr.'s Passion forever more. He lived for the Passion Play. And the Passion

Play has thrived to these past thirty-six years with Fr. Ryan's endless prayers, constant physical labor daily on the grounds - and Fr. Ryan has always been there at every practice (always 6 week ends prior to the play) and at every performance; he never stopped raising money to continue the play, never stopped championing the Lake County Outdoor Passion Play in the beautiful rolling hills of Lake County - witnessed, as he recounted, by countless thousands "elated, refreshed, renewed and assured that as they leave [that] Jesus is leaving with them".

Fr. Ryan spoke with an Irish brogue hard for some to understand, had many stories to tell, continued to do Rosaries and Funerals and Weddings in Lake County. He was to perform my son Bobby and Teresa's wedding this past summer in July, but illness prevented him from doing so at the last moment. Several of us attended Mass on Cobb Mountain with him and had dinner afterward together 5 weeks before his passing; and he was invited to dinner last night (the Friday after his death) at my house with a few others for Fish and Chips - one of his favorite meals. But then he passed away on Thursday ... We had the dinner that Friday night anyway and celebrated his life in our own small gathering, this photo on the fireplace mantle with a candle - and shared our stories with each other.

In my grief, I am unsure just how to end my short tribute except to say I loved this Irish priest of mine with all of my heart and I will miss him - miss him forever. . . and ... to quote himself... he'd say, he would, "May you have food and raiment, A soft pillow for your head, May you be forty years in heaven, Before the devil knows you're dead "...

Judith Steele Lanfranco  
Board Member, The Lake County Outdoor Passion Play