

# Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 21: MSGR. THEODORE M. RYAN'S ROSARY AND NAPKIN RING

14 DECEMBER 2014

**M**sgr. Theodore M. Ryan (1890-1960) was one of the most distinguished members of the clergy of Seattle. He held many significant posts—Chancellor under Bishop O’Dea, Vicar General under Archbishop Connolly—and was an unmistakable presence at solemn liturgies and clergy gatherings, with his tall, stately figure and his magnificent head of prematurely grey hair.

Theodore Ryan was the son of Timothy and Catherine Ryan, who arrived in Seattle from Ireland in 1888. He later said that he had inherited his acumen in acquiring properties from his father, a general contractor. A member of the first graduating class of Seattle College, Theodore had long known he wanted to be a priest. There was no seminary in Seattle, so Bishop O’Dea sent the young man to the Grand Seminaire in Montreal.

O’Dea kept Ryan’s first letter to him from seminary: “On Sunday, I took the soutane.... Wearing the soutane makes me feel more at home and more in keeping with the spirit of the seminary. I am getting along fine in my studies. In the two weekly examinations we have so far had, I was among the first third whose names are read out.” On completing his seminary studies, Ryan was ordained in Montreal on December 18, 1914—exactly one hundred years ago this week—the first native-born Seattleite to be ordained a priest. He was the proud “native son” of the Seattle clergy.

Father Ryan’s first assignment was at St. Patrick’s Church in Tacoma, where he served under Msgr. William Noonan. But just a few years later, Bishop O’Dea called him to Seattle to serve as Chancellor of the diocese. The story (probably apocryphal) was told that Ryan was considering missionary work overseas, and Bishop O’Dea convinced him to stay by telling him that serving as Chancellor was a higher calling!

In Bishop O’Dea, Ryan found a dear friend. He became O’Dea’s right hand man, a staunch defender of the gentle Bishop. He saw to it that O’Dea’s vision for the Church in Seattle came to life—even when that vision seemed most unlikely. When O’Dea dreamed of building a seminary, Ryan not only discovered the site for St. Edward’s, high on a hill overlooking Lake Washington, but he saw the project through to completion in spite of the Great Depression.

In 1926, Ryan was invested as a “Domestic Prelate”—a Monsignor—which entitled him to wear the *ferraiolone*, a cape lined with purple silk, and other special attire. His letter to Gammarelli’s—purveyors of ecclesiastical vesture to prelates and popes—still survives in the Archives: “I am highly pleased with your workmanship and shall continue to order from you in the future. Please keep my measurements on record.”

In 1929, Msgr. Ryan became pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Seattle, which had been administered by the Jesuits but now passed to the diocesan clergy. One of his first projects was the installation of the wonderful Lourdes



Left, a candid shot of Monsignor Theodore M. Ryan, the first native Seattleite to be ordained a priest. Right, Msgr. Ryan’s rosary and napkin ring are now treasured by his second cousin—Father Michael G. Ryan.

grotto, the gift of the Casey family (of UPS fame). The project raised some eyebrows since the parish’s first non-Jesuit pastor had to remove several statues of Jesuit saints to make way for the new shrine!

Ryan would lead the Immaculate for thirty-one years. It was there that he baptized Michael Gerard Ryan, the son of his first cousin Russell. Our Father Ryan remembers formal visits to the Rectory at the Immaculate growing up. The family would be greeted at the door by the housekeeper, Miss Enright, and shown into an old-fashioned parlor. After a few minutes, the Monsignor himself would appear, resplendent in his cassock with what seemed to the young Ryans to be hundreds of buttons. Father Ryan still remembers the Monsignor’s buckled shoes and his socks which matched the piping on his cassock!

With Monsignor Ryan, there was substance as well as style. He was open-minded and forward-thinking. During World War II, Ryan served on the National War Labor Board, and after the war continued to be a friend to organized labor, and served as mediator in several tense labor disputes. A college friend described him as “absolutely free from the slightest semblance of bigotry.” He never lost his openness to the new: to the very end of his life he greeted new buildings and new projects “with the eagerness of a newly ordained priest,” as Msgr. John Doogan wrote in a tribute.

Early in January, 1960, Ryan’s old friend Lucie Frenette died. She had been Bishop O’Dea’s devoted housekeeper for many years. Though he was somewhat under the weather himself, Msgr. Ryan insisted on preaching at her funeral and then attending her to her grave at Calvary Cemetery. Soon after, he landed in Providence Hospital, just down the street from the Immaculate. When asked how he was doing, he replied, “I am a caged lion.” The “caged lion” escaped one afternoon to go across the street to his barber for his regular haircut, then returned to his bed at the hospital. He died on January 23, 1960, at the age of 69. As Archbishop Connolly said at the funeral Mass for Msgr. Ryan at the Immaculate, he was “a pillar of strength to his bishop and a devoted, unflinching friend and helper to his brother priests.” —Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*