

Surfing priest makes second ocean rescue, saving father and son.

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By Francesca Pollio Fenton

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Australian priest Father Liam Ryan, also known as “the surfing priest,” is making headlines after rescuing a pair of struggling surfers from a rip current — the second time the priest has saved a person in danger of drowning. The 38-year-old priest from Our Lady Queen of Peace Cathedral Parish in Broome, Western Australia, was surfing when he saw a father and son struggling to stay afloat at Western Australia’s Cable Beach. The two were caught up in a nearby rip current.

“I saw a couple of fellows who looked like they were getting pretty close to where a little flash rip was,” he said in an interview with ABC News Australia. Ryan paddled over to them after he yelled out and heard no response. A few moments after reaching the area, one of the individuals climbed onto the priest’s surfboard, grateful for the help.

“Being in a tourist town, we do get a few people who are not familiar with being around open water,” he said. “[It] can look really calm, but if there’s a big tide ... one minute you’re in the flags, next minute you’re on your own.” The parish priest, who is also well known in the community for surfing and swimming in the open ocean, said this rescue was “a little scarier” than his first one almost five years ago.

On July 31, 2020, Ryan helped a surfer survive a shark attack at Bunker Bay in Western Australia. The priest was surfing while on vacation visiting his best friend when he noticed a fellow surfer — Phil Mummert — in distress. “I saw him off his board, looking really lost, and there was half a board floating there,” Ryan told The Catholic Leader, a publication of the Archdiocese of Brisbane. He then saw a great white shark, approximately 13 to 16 feet long, bite Mummert’s leg. Ryan began to yell for assistance and Alex Oliver, another surfer, heard his cries for help and paddled over. Ryan and Oliver were able to hoist Mummert onto Oliver’s longboard and the two paddled him back to shore.

According to The Catholic Leader, Mummert was “bleeding profusely” by the time they reached shore, having sustained deep shark bites in his upper leg. Ryan shared that once Mummert was airlifted to the hospital, he took a “quiet moment of solitude in the sand dunes.” “I had a little bit of a cry, and just blessed the Lord,” he told The Catholic Leader.

The priest also told The Catholic Leader that he didn’t hesitate to help.

“There’s something deep inside you that wants to help,” he said. “Christianity is built on that principle of someone giving their life for you.” “You come face to face with what would be one of the greatest fears for a lot of people, a lot of surfers... but what gives you strength in that moment is the grace of God,” he added.

In 2022, Ryan received an Australian Bravery Award in recognition of the rescue.

“It feels like I haven’t done anything extraordinary,” Ryan told The Catholic Leader after receiving the award. “I thank God for giving me courage in that moment, and I also remember that I was not alone.”

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