

## A Reflection on the Life of “The Duke” by Fr. Patrick Curley

My dad was a big fan of John Wayne. Growing up, I watched a number of his movies with my dad. Whether I wanted one or not, I usually got a running commentary from him too. My dad’s favorite Wayne movie was *The Quiet Man*. *The Sands of Iwo Jima* and *The Longest Day* were two favorites of mine. Therefore, when I saw *John Wayne: The Life and Legend* by Scott Eyman at Barnes and Nobles I was intrigued. Although I had other books to read, I purchased it. I began by reading only a page or two a day. However, after a few months I couldn't put it down. It was dynamite. I found his life very interesting. Granted, John Wayne was not a Saint, but maybe he is now. Stay tuned. I'll address that at the end of this article. I do think, however, we can learn a few things from his life.



**John Wayne**

I think we can learn the value of professionalism from John Wayne. He received his foray in the movie business at USC. It was one of the perks afforded to certain football players. At the time, he was known by his nickname, Duke. His birth name was Marion Robert Morrison. Initially, Wayne would help out on movie sets and get bit parts in various movies.

Eventually, he received a big break at the age of 22. He was to star in the big budget movie, *The Big Trail*. The movie was a flop. It tarnished his image and kept him in B Westerns for 10 years. During that time he was a working actor and starred in many other films. However, he was not a star. The experience benefitted him in the long run. He learned his craft, everything from props to stunts. He eventually hit it big again when he stole the show in John Ford’s, *Stagecoach*. From that movie on John Wayne was a bonafide star.

Wayne, however, did not rest on his laurels. Over the course of his career he directed, produced and invested in movies. Occasionally John Wayne went out late with his fellow actors and crew but he showed up ready to work the next day. He did not even let cancer slow him down professionally later in life. He was admired for this trait. He also owned his own movie company. His professional and personal relationship with Ford could be a bulletin article in itself. Essentially, they cared for each other and Wayne learned the movie craft from him. He had big hits and one notable failure. He pushed and tried to arrange financing for *The Alamo* for years. He personally invested a lot of money into the movie. It was the 1960 equivalent of a summer blockbuster not living up to the hype. Wayne soldiered on and his career highlight, perhaps, came when he won the Oscar for Best Actor in *True Grit*.

Wayne entered the other parts of the movie business beside acting because he liked to challenge himself and because he feared as he got older Hollywood, and possibly the movie-going public, would turn their backs on him. I think there's a lesson to be learned. It's healthy to push oneself. It's beneficial to learn new things. A person who knows their business inside and out is interesting and could ideally serve others better. Also, it never hurts to have leverage and another opportunity if a job doesn't work out.

Another quality of John Wayne we can strive to emulate is his ability to get along with others. Wayne was a well known political conservative. He was staunch anti-communist. He gave several interviews over his career that raised eyebrows. Due to his political beliefs, a number of actors and actresses went onto film sets expecting to dislike him or prepared to tell him off if he got preachy. To their surprise, they couldn't help liking John Wayne. Although he could be gruff, seemingly everyone from the grunts and stuntmen to the directors enjoyed working with him. He was a professional. He had a temper. However, if he lost his temper, he usually quickly apologized or made it known he was sorry another way. Women found him to be a gentleman, even perhaps a bit shy. Men found him to be a guy’s guy. He enjoyed playing cards, drinking and fishing with them. Wayne, would occasionally take a good natured poke at someone else's political beliefs but it was good natured. In a sense, he was at home on a set.

I think a faithful Catholic can learn a thing or two from John Wayne in this area. Our beliefs have become increasingly at odds with the secular world. For example, someone who maintains that abortion and homosexual acts are intrinsically wrong, and not all religions are equal, is likely not going to find those beliefs embraced by others. Such a person should not let being ostracized radicalize them. People or groups who feel rejected or

voiceless can easily become paranoid, over sensitive and ready to fight at any perceived slight. Don't be that person. The Catholic viewpoint regarding many of the Faith and moral issues of the day has been marginalized at best, detested at worse. I'm not sure how necessary it is to go down that road with others, especially with people who we know disagree with us. We don't want to play into the secular world's stereotype of judgmental and dour Christian. Instead, I think we should strive to be our best self everyday. True religion is more about living virtuously than winning debating points. We should pray for others. We should try to get along and enjoy others. Sports and hobbies are great avenues to find common ground. There is no need to feel we have to fight every battle. John Wayne didn't, perhaps we should not either.

The third value we can learn from John Wayne is the power of prayer and being a good example. We don't learn it from Wayne but from his first, and as far as the Church is concerned his only wife, Josephine Alicia Saenz. They were married in 1933 and civilly divorced in 1945 due mainly to Wayne's behavior. She was from a prominent Panamanian family living in California. However, she did not remarry until 1996, approximately 15 years after Wayne's death. She apparently never stopped praying for his conversion and Wayne was always impressed by her piety. John Wayne was raised nominally Presbyterian. However, he was never baptized. He had periodically expressed interest in becoming Catholic throughout his adult life. He apparently even enjoyed talking with priests. Go figure, 'The Duke' had the best of taste. On his death bed, Josephine arranged for Archbishop McGrath of the Archdiocese of Panama to baptize Wayne into the Catholic Faith. Wayne consented to the baptism. He died shortly later. Prayer and being a good example matter. Someone, besides God, is always watching us. Josephine and Wayne's grandson is now a priest in the Diocese of Orange in California.

Well, I hope you have learned something from the life of John Wayne. Earlier, I acknowledged that he wasn't a saint. However, perhaps he is now. When you are baptized all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. Therefore, John Wayne should be in Heaven. I hope my dad is with him. Although my dad would undoubtedly call me a blowhard and that I'm intoxicated with the power of my pen for writing such a long article, I know he is getting a kick out of the fact that the article is on John Wayne and not something more explicitly religious.