

## **Second Talk    SURRENDER: EDMUND OPENED HIS WHOLE HEART TO CHRIST**

Brothers, last evening I quoted our charism statement:

*"Aware of the Providential presence of the Father in his life, Edmund Rice was moved by the Holy Spirit to open his whole heart to Christ, present and appealing to him in the poor."*

In 1982 we came up with that statement of the Congregation and since then every new ministry tried to focus on the second part - *"present and appealing to him in the poor."* Twenty years later we looked at ourselves and said that, indeed, we had gone a long way. But so much of what we are and who we are has not changed. To find out why this is so, the Chapter of 2002 has asked us to focus on the first part of that statement: Edmund Rice *opened his whole heart to Christ*. What happens to us when we open our whole hearts to Christ? So this morning and during the days ahead, we will attempt to uncover what lies at the heart of being Brother. Let me tell you in just a few words that it is all about God.

**An angry God:** The snag is, "Which God?" We Christians, we Catholics especially, have struggled for years under the spell of an Almighty God, fearful of the punishment we will receive if we do not obey him, hopeful of reward if we do. Much of the practice of religious life revolved round this premise. This does not apply to us alone. I go to my own country and I see that Hinduism is all about trying to appease this God who is usually angry at what human beings do. All this gives rise to a superstition, which becomes strong because of the conviction that God is somewhere out there and you do anything you can to appease him. This goes right back into the history of humankind. Even St. Paul found an altar "to the unknown God" in Athens, just in case the Greeks had not got the name right! So there was a lot of hocus-pocus mixed up with religion.

**A placid God:** Then the pendulum swung to the other extreme and the fear of authority was replaced by the negation of authority. Jesus became Emmanuel - God with us - placid and gentle, a good friend, who blesses everything and makes very few demands. He invites us to him saying, *"Come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest. Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart. My yoke is easy and my burden light."* This was good. God became more familiar. But in the transition, we lost. It seems that in the minds of people, Jesus lost his divinity, his sacredness. In the minds of people the flame of love that purifies, that hurts, that burns, in order to lead us into something totally new, an ecstasy of love and a peace that

surpasses all human understanding - all that was lost. The challenge and the struggle were diluted and we lost the notion of costly, sacrificial love, the real love as Christ lived it and demanded of us to live it too. That is what was lost.

**The real God:** I think that we, religious brothers, need to fear and fight against this cheap God, a God of the imagination and human dreams, a God who is an idol rather than a fact, a God who blesses our mediocrity and weakness rather than calling us to growth. The real God makes demands on us saying, "*If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out...; Take up your cross...; Leave all and follow me.*" Remember that when those words were written, they did not refer to the inconveniences of every-day life. "*Take up your cross,*" meant the thing that is going to kill you. Embrace that! "*Turn the other cheek!*" I hate having to do that. "*How happy are you when people speak ill of you and revile you and persecute you*" We know these days a little about what that means and it does not make us happy. We remember the Jesus who said, "*Sin no more; neither do I condemn you but go and sin no more.*" We cannot adopt the attitude that God will understand. We need to take a stance, to seek the real God. We pray and sing at times, "*Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me.*" What are we inviting God to do? To break us. I want to see this real God. I want to feel the flame of the love that burns and quenches the deepest yearnings of my wounded heart because I know that my heart is wounded.

**Risk:** Sometimes I sit down and visualise myself far away in a little village at the back of beyond, where no one would ever hear of me again - just about the twenty people who live there. I would stay with them and serve them. Pondering over this brings on the fear that all the supports that I have in my life and all the people who are there to hold me will no longer be there for me. Then I ask myself, "Will God be enough for me?" That frightens me. During these days can I look for the beauty and the humility and the vulnerability of this God, who is seeking a space in my life? Just as the heavens were torn apart by the Father to acknowledge his son Jesus, the same thing is happening in my life. God is trying to get in, to be part of my life. I am holding back because I am scared.

**Trust:** In the 1832 Rule, Edmund Rice spoke of the spirit of the Institute as the spirit of faith that attributes everything to God and that views everything as through the eyes of God. I ponder within myself how he must have been caught up in this. I ask myself what it means to trust in the person and in the promise of Jesus. As regards my life, what does it mean? What does it mean that God will suffice? If this is true for me? I must do away with everything else. Years ago I remember hearing the statement that the Gospel of Jesus is worth staking my whole life on and I then said to

God as I held out my hands, "Here is my life!" But I have always kept something in my back pocket - just in case. Schneider has this to say and I think it is very apt: *"The only reason for honouring in perpetuity the commitment of profession, regardless of what happens or what else becomes available, is the love relationship between the religious and God. The love that is rooted in sustained contemplation of the loveableness of Christ is what called us to the life."* It is what we said yesterday - that love expresses itself in a vow. It is what motivates our ministry to Christ's body. It is what is to be lived day after day in a lifetime of joy and suffering. Nothing then is more important - indeed ultimately crucial - than the daily nurturing of this relationship.

Another spiritual writer has said, *"The person who will lose touch with the beloved will become a stranger to the one to whom he is committed. Such persons continue to keep their commitment out of a sense of duty or obligation. But the life has gone out of the relationship and that life has no further meaning"*. These are powerful words for us, Brothers, at the outset of this Retreat. Our relationship with God is the rock on which we build. Which God? Is it a real God? How much of God have I experienced and how much comes out of what I have read and what I have listened to in sermons? The God that I have experienced is the real God. The other one is a head-trip. I can speak with authority of the God that is in my life.

From time to time I receive some very sad letters. A short time ago I received one from a Brother, who wrote:

"I have been challenged within myself by the question whether I should remain in the Christian Brothers or not. For a time I resisted even acknowledging the reality of that question, thinking that if I kept doing more or less what I have been doing it would go away. I was of the mind that dealing with the question of ministry would keep the bigger issue out of the way. What am I doing in the Christian Brothers? At a time when we are being called to explore the heart of being Brother, my heart no longer seems to be in this way of life. While I could acknowledge our Chapter directions at an intellectual level, I did not feel that I could commit myself to them or that I would be energised by being a Brother."

There are so many of these stories that keep coming up. Men state that they find community life a strain, that they have nothing in common with their confreres and that there is no longer any meaning in the life they are leading. They say that celibacy blocks them from the intimacy for which they crave. But because this intimacy is not to be found in religious life, that life does not satisfy the deepest needs within them. Some of these men state that because they are so angry even with the Church, they can no longer be members of it: they find it too patriarchal and hierarchic.

Brothers, all of us are called to life - to freedom, to wholeness, to more than what we are now. There have been some among us who have felt the need to pursue this wholeness outside the bounds of religious life. But for us, the challenge is to see this call as a reaching out for God. I have to see and to accept the grief of the abandonment, of my powerlessness, of my inadequacy. The danger is that I may use coping mechanisms to deal with this - to deal with my loneliness, my restlessness, my depression and my frustration. Then I may try to find my need for intimacy in entertainment, in a life built on credit cards, in travelling, in the country club, in restaurants, alcohol, pornography, inappropriate relationships. At one level I know, with St. Augustine and can say with him, *"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts will never rest until they rest in you."* Yet there is a fear inside me, a fear I have when I think of that village at the back of beyond. I fear that this call of God is too hard, too demanding. I may say that I wish I had thought of all that twenty years ago; now I am too old to change. Or I may make the excuse that I tried it and nothing happened. I was not able to keep it up because I was not getting any sort meaning from it. I was not getting the support that I needed from the other men in my community. I was the odd man out.

On the other hand, if I am honest with myself I will admit that I find it much too hard to give up a relationship or an addiction. Doing so would cost me too much. But there is a reason that is still more genuine when I concede: "What if I did say "Yes," to God. Take everything!" and then God did not satisfy all my needs? What guarantee do I have that God can satisfy them all? There is no guarantee. But there is his word. There is nothing that inspires me to say, "Yes! Just give it up today." Perhaps tomorrow I may ask myself why I had not made the sacrifice earlier. On the other hand I may feel that I was a fool for having taken the risk

Many people have taken this risk of surrendering all to God. One of these is St. John of the Cross. Because he took the risk of surrender, his writings can speak with authority. From his own experience he testifies to a God, who presses in on me to change me, to fill me in my deepest need, the need that even I cannot verbalise. God is waiting to come in there so as to give a meaning to my life that I never dreamt possible. John, too, stood at the threshold of uncertainty, as you and I stand, and he assures us that what dwells beyond is not chaos but the Spirit of God brooding over the waters, waiting to create us anew, ready to fill us with fresh life. He can answer the question that haunts us: "What happens when trusted patterns have broken down, when I find myself driven to the limits bordering on chaos, lost at failure, stressed when something happens that throws my whole life upside down? In such circumstances I am aware that many of our Brothers

have coped heroically. But so few of us share our stories. We still have to go to books to assure ourselves that such is possible, when living witnesses are here with us.

Against that backdrop, Brothers, may I invite you to have a look at Luke, IX, at the people who came along to Jesus and the people to whom Jesus posed an invitation? They came to him and said, "*I will follow you wherever you go.*" Something stopped them. Against that backdrop look at your life and ask yourself what fear is stopping you. What excuse are you making when Jesus calls you to give everything? What is the one thing that would happen in your life if you had the courage and generosity to say, "Yes"! to Jesus? You know that you would have to hand over something in order to receive something. I would ask you to stay with the words of scripture in Luke IX: 51-62. Remember what I said yesterday of the struggle between God's will and my will. You recall that Edmund Rice said to his Brothers, "*Pray, Brothers, that God's will may be done in me. May the will of God be done in this and in everything we undertake*" Jesus himself said, "*My food is to do the will of the one who sent me.*" It is all about letting God in - the real God - who will call us to growth. That involves groaning and burning and cutting. It involves handing over to God. Unfortunately, it is only when we take that step that we will understand what will happen. There is a lovely Jewish *midrash* that says, "*The waters of the Red Sea never parted when Moses lifted the rod. The waters parted only when the first Israelite put his foot into the sea.*" This is a beautiful saying for us to remember.

**What excuse am I making when Jesus calls me to give everything?**

**What would happen if I did risk saying "yes"? How would my life change?**