

# **Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice**

## **The Life of each of us has its influence on others”**

This week’s postings aim to give a pen picture of a man of enormous significance in Irish history. Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice was born in Callan Co Kilkenny in 1762 and was the founder of both the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers whose influence in the field of education has spread to many parts of the world. There are many who having not attended a CBS school may scarcely have heard of this remarkable man whose methods of education were streets ahead of their time. It’s truly remarkable how one person born so long ago can exert such an influence even to the present day. This was brought home to me recently while staying overnight in the current residence located adjacent to Edmund Rice’s ancient homestead. Waking up in the morning and looking across to that building I realized that by virtue of having gone to a school of his founding I could attribute everything that has ever happened to me from the age of 12 until the present to the life that was born there in 1762. Had that not happened my life would have taken a very different trajectory.

## **The Early Years**

Not only was Edmund Rice a colossus in the Ireland of his time but also to the present time. The congregations he established made remarkable contributions to every aspect of Irish development, social, spiritual, economic, political and particularly educational. At this time when their mission in Ireland is not so defined and numbers are dwindling their light in as many as twenty-eight other countries continue to shine unabated.

The Rice homestead, now restored as a heritage Centre would indicate that Edmund grew up in a comparatively well to do family. This was at a time when no catholic was allowed to own land or receive an education. Yet by finding a loophole in the penal laws of the time he managed to make a good living and run a profitable business. After working with his uncle fitting out ships in Waterford, he later inherited the business and was well on his way to becoming one of the most successful and prosperous men of his generation.

## **Life breaks us all**

Life does indeed break us all and only 'some grow strong at the broken places.' While his early life was successful it was also tragic. Having married Mary Elliot in 1785, four years later her unborn child was saved but mildly retarded. This was the singular defining moment in his life that turned his comfortable life upside down. The intensity of suffering awakened his soul and from there on he searched for a deeper meaning in life. Like the challenge that is there for all of us, Edmund's life became defined not by the tragedy that had befallen him but by what he did with it. His ongoing care for his handicapped daughter probably played a central role in the direction his life would take when he would later see her needs mirrored in the thousands of urchins and orphans that were roaming the streets of Waterford with no education and no hope for their future.

## **The Providence that Directs our Ends**

His handicapped daughter Mary Rice was the broken reed in Edmund's life that could not be mended but only transcended by prayer. In the manner of Divine providence, she played a vital role in the unfolding of the Divine plan for him. He cared for her diligently and tenderly until the age of forty and undoubtedly was forced to dig deep to find the inner resources of grace that were necessary for his task as a single male parent. In a mysterious way it was she who directed the course of her father's life not in the way he would have originally intended but in a manner that became fruitful beyond all expectations. Similarly in the manner that Edmund matured in his spiritual journey and responded to his vocation he conferred meaning and purpose to his wife's early demise and to his daughters stymied life.

## **The Empowerment of Education**

In his travels through Waterford City Edmund was daily in contact with the poor and destitute, particularly the young boys without a future who frequented the docks. His first step towards improving their lot was to begin a night school. He was convinced that only with an education could they ever find their way out of the poverty trap. It was difficult to

keep people interested in helping with the project, but he was joined by two colleagues from his hometown, Thomas Grosvenor and Patrick Finn who also shared his vision of starting a religious order. So it was that on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1802 that Edmund opened his first school that was named Mt Sion in Waterford and was already drawing up the rules for his new religious order that was first known as the *Brothers of the Presentation*. He was around forty at the time, the number in the Biblical sense being associated with new beginnings.

### **A Revolution in Education**

The first CBS school in Mt Sion was originally a stable and it was here that Edmund Rice established a system of education that was way ahead of its time in every respect. Spirituality was a vital component since he believed that without it a human being could never be complete. In Mt Sion he had aptitude testing and vocational training and even a tailor's room where boys could be fitted out to face the world with self-respect and dignity. There he also had a bakery to feed the hungry. He knew every pupil by name and would stand by the door and shake the hand of each to welcome all who came to learn. Even our modern educational system would have a lot to learn from his methods, and it is no wonder that what he established was set for rapid expansion as news of his success with 'unteachable boys' began to spread far and wide.

(Fr. Jim Cogley – January 2026)

Tue 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb

## Callan - New Beginnings



Last week's postings explored in brief detail the life of Blessed Ignatius Rice the founder of the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers. The Christian motif is Passion Death and Resurrection, and that it is through death that we enter new life. This does not necessarily mean physical death but more an end that is also a new beginning. The Christian Brothers have been through a particularly harrowing time in recent years with ongoing revelations of historical sexual abuse having happened in their schools with many of their members being responsible. This has been and still is, both their passion and crucifixion. As for all of us, when we are in the middle of the suffering phase of our journey everything seems lost, we feel we have wasted our lives, now the shameful actions of some reflect on us all and many truly good men who have given their lives in the service of God find it difficult to hold their heads high.

Wed 4<sup>th</sup> Feb

### **An Annunciation Experience**

Having worked with the Christian Brothers on a few occasions recently I had been greatly impressed by the integrity and openness of these really fine men. At the invitation of the leadership team a few of us met to discern the future of the Edmund Rice Heritage Centre in Callan. Not only was this the birthplace of Edmund Rice but it also had very fine conference facilities and a beautiful chapel. These facilities were felt to be greatly underused, and a new direction was necessary, especially given the age profile and declining numbers of the brothers. Within a very short time of meeting, and with little effort at discernment, it became abundantly clear to all that it was meant to become a center of healing. There was little or no discussion, it was an Annunciation moment, and that was it. The only question on the part of the brothers was like that of Mary. How can this come about since .....we are getting old.....we don't have the expertise in healing, and we don't know where to begin to turn the Centre around in the direction of healing?

Thurs 5<sup>th</sup> Feb

### **Cornerstone**

Immediately following the revelation that Callan was to become a Healing Centre the question arose as to who might spearhead the project. I mentioned knowing a man from Kilkenny who forty years ago spoke of his dream to have a Healing Centre close to Kilkenny. I said that 'the dream is now long dead, but the dreamer is alive and well, I happen to have his number so I will call him now'. The man answered to say he was not at home but on the road. 'Whereabouts' I asked? 'Just on the road coming up to the brothers place at Callan.' Within minutes, and while the same conversation was still happening, he had joined us. Indeed, he was more than interested in taking part and wildly excited at the project. The concept dovetailed perfectly with where he was at on his own journey and so the cornerstone miraculously came into place at that very first meeting.

Fri 6<sup>th</sup> Feb

### **The Wind of Spirit – Wind of Change**

Very quickly we began to advertise seminars with a focus on healing. We had hoped for twenty or so to begin but around seventy-five applied. Several other seminars were then held on a monthly basis and each time the numbers were appropriate for the particular topic. Towards the end of the season a series of three evening sessions were held and these too were well attended. At each session a feeling of rightness for what was taking place could be felt by all and a real sense that here we were so privileged to be at the start of something so much bigger than ourselves and to use a modern phrase, 'to watch this space.' Something that was repeated at every session was that 'this place of beginnings can also become a place of new beginnings.'

Sat 7<sup>th</sup> Feb

### **The Focus Clears – Education of the Heart**

The Bible advises us to 'despise not the day of small beginnings.' It's from tiny acorns that mighty oaks do grow. The initiative in Callan is like a ship that has been launched and rapidly seems to be taking on a life of its own. With time, the focus has become clearer as to how this new beginning might look. As Edmund Rice recognized a particular education need in his time and responded to it, so those needs have radically changed. Now the majority are educated according to what was deemed necessary in earlier times. However, the real need of this present generation is for education in emotional literacy. This was never taught in our schools and so we struggle with how to deal with our emotions, how to integrate our past and how to engage in meaningful relationships.

Sun 8<sup>th</sup> Feb

## Salt & Light



### A World of Salt

*Saying Mass in a salt mine church 1kilometer underground in Karckow*

When we say to someone that he or she is the salt of the earth it's one of the finest compliments we can pay. It usually means that they are honest and upright, as good as their word, hardworking, reliable and trustworthy. While Christ was paying that high compliment to his disciples I doubt if it began with him. In ancient times salt was a very valuable commodity and was used as a form of currency. It is from this practice that we get the word salary. In that light someone worth their salt was a good worker and worth their salary

There are so many aspects to salt that are worth mentioning:

Until relatively recent times food was very bland and without salt was quite tasteless. It was salt that added flavor and brought out the best in the food. The call to be a disciple of Christ is to bring out the best in others and to add flavor to life by bringing meaning, hope, humor and enthusiasm.

Slat also has wonderful healing qualities. On so many occasions I saw someone getting a deep gash while at sea with the blood pouring out. Invariably they would hold the hand over the side for a few moments and then continue cleaning fish or whatever. I always found it amazing that by the time the boat was ready to return the wound would have already begun to heal. In fact over the years I never saw a fisherman with an infected wound. To be a follower of Christ is by definition to be a

healer not just in the medical sense but to bring peace where there is conflict, comfort where there is sorrow and to be an uplifting presence to those who are bowed down.

My mother was a keen gardener and I didn't take after her in that regard. I often saw her using coarse salt as a weed-killer when she had nothing else, and it always worked. In relation to matters of faith there are so many weeds of strange beliefs flourishing in the soil of ignorance that need to be killed off. To think that our souls can be adequately nourished on a stable diet of Sunday mass is to expect quite a lot. If we need supplements for our bodies surely we need to avail of every opportunity as it presents itself to supplement our soul diet. For example during the year we have several special liturgies. These are very meaningful events that take a lot of work and have the potential to really nourish the spirit. To not avail of such wonderful faith building opportunities could be classed as a sin of laziness or negligence of one's spiritual life. Some will travel over 100 miles for such an event while 300 or 400 yards for others might be asking too much.

Some years ago I discovered a rather interesting quality of salt while visiting a large counseling centre in another country. This was a place that catered for all creeds and none so you could class it as non-christian, In the foyer area there was a large bowl of salt and wondering what it was there for I was told that it was to absorb negative energies; in other words it was used as a psychic cleanser to counteract the heaviness, negativity and depression that most clients would be carrying into the place. That gave me a whole new insight as to why the Christian church has used salt from the beginning in the blessing of homes and buildings. The age-old wisdom was that the blessing of places was about removing negative energies and introducing a positive atmosphere where people could live in peace and harmony and enjoy good health. A place can be psychically sick without being haunted and in that negative atmosphere its very difficult for the occupants to not be vulnerable to sickness and general unease.

Finally there is a quality of salt that only those of a much older generation will be familiar with, that of being a preservative. In days before fridges and deep freezes the only way to keep food fresh was to store it in salt. So in many households a pig would be killed and salted and you ended up with salted bacon. Similarly harbours would be full of barrels for salting herrings and other fish. We live in a society where age-old values are being reversed and in many cases evil is being presented as good. For example:

We exploit the poor and it's called the lottery.

We vote for abortion, call it free choice and then wonder at the birth rate decline.

We covet wealth and possessions and call it ambition.

We neglect discipline of children and call it building self-esteem.

We accept perversion and call it alternative lifestyle.

We condone pornography and call it freedom of expression.

We accept abuse of power and call it politics.

We neglect the needy and call it self-preservation.

We condone the term fake truth when there is just either truth or falsehood.

In so many ways the time-honoured values of our forefathers are being undermined, eroded, cast aside and replaced with beliefs that are classed as more enlightened. It is in relation to preserving and upholding what is inviolably true that the salt of discipleship is called for. It is where we all too often remain silent when we should be using our voice and usually until it is too late and something we don't want has taken hold and is accepted as the norm just as 'fake truth' is now a household word in America.

Mon 9<sup>th</sup> Feb

### **Stations of the Heart**

As the vision for the Edmund Rice Healing and Heritage Centre continues to unfold towards education of the heart the difficult issue of childhood trauma and abuse needs to be addressed. As part of this response, it is envisaged to install what might be called *Stations of the Heart* in the garden area adjacent to the Centre. These will be large heart shaped sculptures with each designed to reflect different stages of the healing journey. This initiative has now received the approval of the Congregation at global level and is already well under way. It will be the largest sculpture project in the Country. Designs have been drawn up, and the sculptor is shortly starting his work on around fifteen pieces of best Carrara marble. He is the same man who was involved with Raphael's Healing Garden in Oylegate and his work there will be an indication of the size, standard and stature of what is involved. This is a faith project funded by Divine providence, where prompted by the Spirit, individuals or businesses may decide if they want to be part of the work that is taking place. It's really about healing at the deepest level and restoring to hurting people their dignity and freedom. This place of beginnings is now set to become the place of new beginnings.