



## Edmund's Gift to Irish Education

Edmund Rice quickly learned that it is one thing to realize that poor boys need to be in school and another to provide effective schools that would address the huge need in Ireland in the early 1800's. Edmund was a businessman, not an educator. Although his own education was limited, he set out to accomplish his ambitious goal in a cultural milieu where various philosophies and concerns were rising to the surface.

Having witnessed the French Revolution, officials in Ireland were aware of what could happen when a permanent underclass had had enough of oppression. Educating the poor and developing their moral character so that they could be productive members of society was perceived as a social, if not survival, imperative. Espousing this view, the English educator,



Joseph Lancaster, devised a classroom approach and methodology to accomplish this goal among the Irish people. The Irish bishops were upset by the alienation of the poor from the institutional Church, and were concerned that these people were not being formed in Catholic faith and morals. To address this need, several bishops introduced the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in their dioceses.

In Europe, a Catholic pedagogy was developing, based on the Jesuit belief that the well-being of Christianity and whole world depended on the proper education of youth. In France, the Brothers of the Christian Schools embraced the philosophy, classroom management techniques, and teaching methods of their founder, John the Baptist de la Salle. They provided boys with an education that would prepare them for work in an increasingly industrial society as well as develop moral character and religious piety. Closer to home, in Cork, Nano Nagle and her Presentation Sisters were successful in teaching poor girls.

Edmund Rice consulted the bishops, the De La Salle Brothers, and Nano Nagle. He considered various educational philosophies, experimented with pedagogical “best practices” of his time, and ultimately designed an educational system which fulfilled both the practical and religious needs of the students. This system “remained a model for Catholic Education for over a century. Through its careful implementation, the Brothers effected a transformation of Catholicism and the modernization of Irish society, by providing their pupils not merely with a ‘useful education,’ but with a moral vision which supported the creation of a new Ireland.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dáire Keogh, *Edmund Rice and the First Christian Brothers*, Four Courts Press, Ltd, 2008.

## Questions for reflection and sharing:

1. What struck you in this story? What has special significance for you or your school?
2. What personal qualities of Edmund can you infer from this account?
3. What comparisons or contrasts can you make between Edmund's time and our own?
4. What does this story suggest about Essential Element # IV "Foster and Invigorate a Community of Faith"?

## Prayer

***Prayer response: Gracious God, hear our prayer.***

***Leader:***

- In gratitude for Edmund's openness and diligence as he designed an educational system that would serve the needs of the students of his day, we pray to the Lord.

***Gracious God, ...***

- That we may appreciate and use the resources and opportunities open to us as we strive to fulfill our duties on behalf of our school and its students, we pray to the Lord.

***Gracious God, ...***

- That as we educate our students to take their place as good and productive citizens, we also foster and invigorate a community of Faith in our school, we pray to the Lord.

***Gracious God, ...***

- *Please add your own prayers.... We pray to the Lord. Gracious God, ...*

***Concluding Prayer:***

***All:*** O God, we thank you for the life of Edmund Rice. He opened his heart to Christ, present in those oppressed by poverty and injustice. May we follow his example of faith and generosity. Grant us the courage and compassion of Edmund as we seek to live lives of love and service. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.