

Advent 2008

From the Postulator's Desk:

‘O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!’ It’s Advent, that time of year when we look forward to a better future, to a fuller realisation of our hopes and dreams both for ourselves and for our loved ones at Christmas and in the New Year in the company of the Christ Child and Blessed Edmund. In a time of recession, let us hope that our priorities are mature and generous – and inclusive.

Sincere thanks for all the prayers and good wishes during and after my recent visit to hospital. It is only now that I feel sufficiently recovered to offer an explanation to the many clients of Blessed Edmund for being unavailable in my office in the recent past. It is great to be alive!

1. Health Score

Yes, indeed, 2008 has been an ‘*annus horribilis*’ for me, health-wise. After relocating the Postulator’s Office from Rome to Dublin, I experienced extreme tiredness and I was advised to have a full medical check-up. It was discovered that I was suffering from hypertension and pernicious anaemia. I was put on a course of medication, including monthly injections of Vitamin B12. During Summer 2008, I began to experience bouts of severe headaches but, seeing that I had been subject to migraine headaches in the past, I concluded that this was more of the same, due to the trauma of relocating from Rome and settling down in Dublin after four consecutive years in the Eternal City (I had spent another six years there in the 1980s).

I had booked to attend the week-long European Province Chapter at Limerick University in August and had intended giving a talk there on the present state of the Edmund Rice Cause. Things did not work out as planned! I recall travelling down from Dublin to Limerick on Sunday, 10 August, but remember little of the following week. Apparently, I attended the chapter sessions zombie-like from Monday to Wednesday, but have no recollection of being present. On Wednesday, thanks to the watchfulness of Nurse Rosaline Dillon, I was sent to Limerick Regional Hospital for tests, including a CAT scan. On Saturday, 16 August, I was removed by ambulance to Cork University Hospital (CUH) – I have a vivid memory of that journey - and was successfully operated on for four and a half hours during the morning of Sunday, 17 August, by Mr George Kaar, neurosurgeon, and his team. I was suffering from chronic subdural haematoma – in layman’s terms, a clot on the brain.

Ironically I was under the care of the same Clinical Department that dealt with Mrs Betty McSweeney, the lady who claimed to have been assisted through the intercession of Blessed Edmund Rice in her recovery from brain surgery in January 2006. Oddly enough, while I have recommended other people to pray through the intercession of Blessed Edmund, I don’t remember praying for myself during my stay in hospital! Maybe I wasn’t capable of so doing, but I do know that others were praying for me. There is a lesson there somewhere!

I have made a good recovery since the end of August, but have had to rest more than usual, as my energy levels were low after the operation. The scars have healed by now. Life feels good! You will forgive me, I'm sure, if I haven't been in touch on Edmund Rice matters recently, but hope that I will be back to my old self after Christmas. Pray for me.

2. New Vice-Postulator:

Brother Bede Minehane FPM

Due to pressure of work, Brother Donatus Brazil, Presentation Brother, who has been Vice-Postulator of the Edmund Rice Cause for the past three years, felt obliged to resign from this post. I was reluctant to lose him, as we had worked very well together. I take this opportunity to thank him for his sterling work on the Edmund Rice Cause and I wish him well in his time-consuming role as Archivist at the Generalate of the Presentation Brothers Congregation in Cork.

Taking his place as Vice-Postulator is Brother Patrick Bede Minehane. Bede hails from West Cork and has been a Presentation Brother since 1960. A science graduate from UCC, he also studied Catechetics in UCC and Mount Oliver Institute. He was a secondary school principal for 15 years before being appointed Anglo-Irish Provincial in 1990, a position he held for nine years until his election to the CLT of the Presentation Brothers in 1999.

He has been co-ordinator of the Presentation Volunteer Programme since its inception in 2000. He has been deeply involved in developing collaboration between the three Congregations of the Nagle-Rice Family from 1990 to the present, serving on many Inter-Congregational groups on behalf of the Presentation Brothers. He is a member of the Mount Sion Board of Directors and also of the Nagle Rice On-Going Formation Committee. He is at present community leader at Mount St Joseph, Cork. His brother, Denis, is also a member of the Presentation Brothers.

3. What Age was Edmund Rice?

Traditionally we have accepted that Blessed Edmund Rice was born on 1 June 1762 and died on 29 August 1844, aged 82 years. This was based on the inscription which appeared on the Memorial Chapel erected in his honour at Mount Sion in 1845, the year after his death: "Edmund Ignatius Rice departed this life, 29 August 1844, aged 82 years". It was felt that his own Mount Sion community would get these details correct. This was reinforced by the account of Edmund's life written for the 1845 edition of the *Catholic Directory* by Br Austin Grace whose family had been neighbours of the Rices in Callan, Co. Kilkenny.

But are you aware that according to some sources Edmund Rice was a mere 80, or even as much as 87 years of age, when he died? What first drew my attention to this contradictory

evidence was my involvement in early July 2007 in the exhumation of the remains of Blessed Edmund Rice prior to the scientific process in which a likeness was made of his skull for the new Mount Sion Heritage Centre. Inside the present coffin I found the breastplate of the original coffin in which Blessed Edmund was buried in 1844. Etched on it was the name “Br Edmund Ignatius Rice” and the inscription “aged 87 years”! This would have Edmund born in 1757 rather than 1762, the traditional date of his birth. Was it a simple case of the undertaker mistaking 82 in some Brother’s handwriting for 87? Then I discovered another strange coincidence. The *Tipperary Vindicator* of Wednesday, 4 September 1844, recording the death of Edmund Rice and purporting to be quoting from the *Waterford Mail* and the *Waterford Chronicle*, stated: “At Mt Sion in this city, in the 87th year of his age, the Venerable Brother Edmund Ignatius Rice, Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in Ireland and England.”

Intrigued, I looked further afield. The obvious records of Church and State, i.e., Baptismal Records and Birth Certificates, weren’t of much use in my quest. Catholic church registers in Ireland, as often as not, were not compiled during the 18th century because of the Penal Laws, and Birth Certificates in Ireland began as late as 1868. Thus the Register of Births, Baptisms and Marriages kept in Callan Catholic Parish Church was of no help since it didn’t go further back in history than January 1821. The starting dates for neighbouring parishes, in the forlorn hope that Edmund might have been baptised in some other neighbouring church, precluded any relevant information – Ballycallan (1819), Cuffesgrange (1819), Gowran (1809), Dunamaggan (1824), Mullinahone (1835), Kilkenny, St John’s (1789), Kilkenny, St Patrick’s (1802) The Founder’s Will, written in 1838, does not contain his date of birth. Many of our national records that survived into the 20th century were destroyed in two disastrous fires, the first in the Custom House (1920) during the War of Independence, the second in the Four Courts (1922) during the Civil War. So there are many gaps in our Public Records, causing much frustration.

Finally I discovered in two official lists that Edmund Rice is stated to have been born, not in 1762 or 1757 but in 1764! The first of these was compiled in 1829, the year of Catholic Emancipation, when all male religious in England, Scotland and Ireland were obliged by law to register with the Clerk of the Peace. The register was printed by order of the House of Commons. On page 21 of this register are the names, ages and birth-places of 16 Brothers then resident in Dublin. The first of the entries is: “22 September 1829: Edmund Rice: 65: Westcourt, Co. Kilkenny” [i.e., born in 1764]

The second list appeared in a circular letter sent out to each of the Brothers’ Houses on 4 November 1831. This gave the names of the “Brothers Directors [Superiors] now in the Institute with their ages, the number of years under vows, and the names of the places where the houses over which they preside are established”: Edmund I. Rice: 67: 22: Dublin [i.e., born in 1764; professed in 1809]. Are we to suppose that Edmund was confused about the year of his birth or was it a case that whoever wrote out the lists simply didn’t check with the man in question?

The above shows the unexpected pitfalls that can waylay researchers in Ireland who merely wish to check up on the dates of birth of people born in 18th century Ireland. In the absence of more definite evidence, I think you will agree that it is safer to accept the traditional dates associated with the life and death of Blessed Edmund Rice: born in 1762, died in 1844.

4. The Cork ‘Cure’: A Lost Cause?

As you may be aware from a recent edition of the ‘Postulator’s Desk’, we had pinned great hope of advancing Edmund’s Cause to canonisation by a cure in the Cork region attributed to Blessed Edmund. Betty and her family were convinced that the intercession of Blessed Edmund was involved in Betty’s restoration to full health after a serious operation for the removal of a large tumour from her brain. Nobody was denying the skilful operation performed by the Neurosurgeon for the removal of the tumour. It was after the operation that things seemed to deteriorate for Betty. She remained in a coma, and it was only after the application of a first-class relic of Blessed Edmund that she regained consciousness and made a rapid recovery, so much so that today, three years after her hospital visit, she is not on any form of medication. What made her recovery all the more remarkable was that two Brothers, one a Christian Brother, the other a Presentation Brother, were involved in procuring the relic for her in the very city where Edmund Rice’s followers divided into two separate congregations all those years ago in 1827. Maybe I was too sanguine! The family members and their GP were convinced that something extraordinary had occurred. I had been trying to contact Betty’s surgeon, a very busy man, and then my own neurosurgery delayed any contact between us. His report finally arrived a few weeks ago, and what a disappointment it turned out to be. He was convinced that no miracle happened! Maybe he thought that we were trying to downgrade his own surgical skills. His report includes the following paragraph:

“No miracle took place here. She developed post-operative complications which were probably predictable given the enormous size of her tumour. With benefit of steroids and good nursing care, plus the passage of time, her condition improved over a number of days which, again, was predictable. Speaking as a surgeon and therefore as a scientist, I have little belief in miracles.”

I wrote a nice letter in reply to the Surgeon, who is not a Catholic, thanking him for taking the trouble to put pen to paper. It included the following:

“When people are gravely ill, their families and friends, in desperation, resort, not only to the best medical services but to various forms of prayer, either directly to God the Healer or to one of his saints. I do realise that it must be frustrating for surgeons who have used up-to-date procedures to have these ignored and the improvement in the patient attributed instead to miraculous intervention. Normally, grace builds on nature, and it would be foolhardy indeed to ignore medical science. Yet, for a believer, there are cases from time to time that appear to defy the ordinary laws of healing. Whether they are miracles or are attributable to hidden healing powers within the body may be interpreted according to one’s belief system, but they are outside the usual medical sequences. So I keep on hoping that some day a ‘cure’ attributed to Blessed Edmund Rice will satisfy the high criteria upheld by the Medical Bureau at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome and so help to have Blessed Edmund declared ‘SAINT Edmund Rice’.

So, is this the end of the matter? The only hopeful phrase in the surgeon’s report is the use of the phrase “probably predictable”. He is entitled to his opinion. The family and their friends are disappointed but are quietly convinced of the intervention of Blessed Edmund’s intercession on behalf of the sick woman. The surgeon, however, is not prepared to admit anything but good medical procedures. To have his views overturned, an independent

surgeon of equal or higher competence nominated by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints would have to examine the case and over-rule the opinion of the neurosurgeon, and Rome is very reluctant to go to that extreme, especially when there is some doubt in the matter.

We have been at this point a few times in the past few years concerning a number of reported cures. In the end, the medical evidence was not sufficiently strong to convince the Medical Bureau in Rome, and so it is back to the drawing board. It isn't that a definitive verdict was returned that no miracle occurred - in all cases, the recipients were convinced that a miracle had happened - but that the medical evidence was insufficient to prove "beyond reasonable doubt" that a miraculous cure had occurred. Remember that at Lourdes, despite the many thousands of cures claimed over the years, only 67 cases are accepted as truly miraculous by the Medical Bureau there. It doesn't mean that all the other occurrences are sham.

So, we need to renew our prayers in the Cause of Blessed Edmund Rice that sooner rather than later a cure attributed to the intercession of Edmund will be of such clarity that both the medical people involved as well as Rome itself will declare that there is no natural explanation for the new well-being of a client of Blessed Edmund. We pray that this situation will happen in our own time. As Edmund himself might utter, "may the will of God be done in this".

5. Launch of Daire Keogh's " *Edmund Rice and the First Christian Brothers* "

I attended a pleasant function on Thursday, 20 November 2008, at the Merrion Hotel off Dublin's Merrion Square. About two hundred people attended. It was the launch of Dr Daire Keogh's new book, *Edmund Rice and the First Christian Brothers* (Four Courts Press, 316 pages). It is the first volume of a two-volume study of the Christian Brothers in Ireland up to the year 1950. A good read, Volume One, according to its Introduction:

"aims to get beyond the stereotypical representations of Edmund Rice and the first generation Christian Brothers, to see them as they saw themselves and were understood by their contemporaries. It goes beyond hagiography, and interprets the Brothers against the background of Catholic Emancipation, the modernization of Irish society and the fashioning of the Church according to the norms of the Council of Trent."

The book first appeared in the bookshops in early August and such is the interest it has aroused among historians and others that the second edition is already nearly sold out. Daire, a scrupulous historian, presents Edmund and his early companions in all their humanity, warts and all. These were vital years in the formation of Irish Catholic consciousness, marking the emergence from the penal era and the establishment of the modern church. Edmund Rice made a radical contribution to this process, fostering confidence and helping to create a literate modern society through the revolution in Irish education that he initiated. It is refreshing to have a prominent historian put the record straight, and we look forward to the publication of Volume Two next year. The launch was performed by the Honourable Mr Justice Peter Kelly, past-pupil of O'Connell CBS, Dublin, and Chairman of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust, the high-powered statutory group selected to ensure the continuation and integrity of Ireland's Christian Brother Schools into the future.

6. Projected Edmund Rice Prayer Book

Before last summer I mentioned my interest in producing a collection of Edmund Rice prayers, reflections, novenas, etc., that might be of benefit to Prayer Groups, School Assemblies, etc. This announcement generated quite an amount of interest among readers in both Christian Brother and Presentation Brother circles of influence, and I received leaflets, booklets, etc., from Edmund Rice devotees all over the world. There was, as one would expect, quite an amount of repetition among these, but sufficient to supply variety for those charged with preparing liturgies, organising prayer groups or honouring special occasions connected with the life of Blessed Edmund. I faithfully collected the various contributions into a large cardboard box in my office, with the intention of sorting and editing these during the summer. Unfortunately, my episode of brain surgery intervened, and the task remained uncompleted. I was, of necessity, away from my office for two months and, in my absence, the details of where the various contributions for the new booklet had come from were mislaid! Now that I am (almost) back to full time in the office, I intend to take up once more the task of producing the booklet, this time, however, without the detail of where the various contributions have come from. I hope the various contributors who kindly provided material will be understanding of this. My new deadline, considering that I have other tasks in hand, is the anniversary of Blessed Edmund's Birthday, 1 June 2009. In the meantime, feel free to contact me, preferably by e-mail, at my Dublin office. God bless you all and may Blessed Edmund guide you. A Happy Christmas and a Bright 2009 to all of you.

Br Donal Blake CFC,

Edmund Rice Roman Postulator/

Congregation Historian,

Edmund Rice House,

North Richmond Street,

Dublin 1,

Ireland

postulatorcfc@gmail.com

Mobile No. 086-300 5604

Office Phone +353-1-6230097

[Dublin 01-6230097]

Feast of the Presentation of Our Lady,

21st November 2008

