

LUX EDMUNDI: AUGUST, 2014

Friday, 29th August, 2014, is the 170th anniversary of the death of Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice, Founder of both the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers, an occasion for all who would follow him to renew their commitment to the service of youth for the sake of the Gospel.

Amongst those who followed Blessed Edmund in the aboriginal and undivided Society of the Presentation was a 30-year-old architect from Doneraile, Co. Cork, Br. Michael Augustine Riordan, who entered the Society in Cork in 1814, two hundred years ago this year, and who, by his decision in 1826 to live on under the old, diocesan, Rule and Constitutions, became, in effect, the first Presentation Brother in the modern sense.

Brothers Ignatius and Augustine and their religious confreres in the early years of the nineteenth century were men of what might be termed an emerging Catholic middle-class. They were men who, though their opportunities were still circumscribed, whether *de iure or de facto*, because they were Catholics, still made their way in the world in one way or another, to one degree or another. Some, like Blessed Edmund, surrendered their fortunes, all surrendered their chances of career advancement, to dedicate themselves, their talents, their lives, to “a most serious application to the instruction of poor boys in the principles of religion and Christian piety (Presentation Rule, I.1.1)”.

Historian Donal Kerr writes: “Education, not emancipation, may well have been the major achievement of the Catholic church in Ireland during the nineteenth century”. This achievement was attained by the efforts of many men and women, clerical, religious and lay. They were driven by the faith-based conviction that religious instruction in particular mattered, both in this life and in the next, where, indeed, “those who instructed others unto justice would shine like stars for all eternity (*Dan. 11.3*)”. Those who, like Blessed Edmund and Br. Michael, entered the religious life to serve God in the apostolate of the Catholic school would have considered that they had a vocation so to do; that they were, in fact, called by God to this way of life; and that, in responding positively to this call, they would – to invoke the language of the time – save their own souls and the souls of others.

There is some empirical research – conducted, it must be noted, in a secular, rather than in a religious, frame of reference - which suggests that it makes a positive difference to one’s effective discharge of one’s duties to see one’s work, not as a job, not even as a profession, but as a vocation, as something one is meant to do. It seems that this sense of being called inspires people to give of their best, to go, indeed, the extra mile, at all times and in all circumstances.

As we prepare for the new term, how, precisely, we see our work in school will, it seems, affect how we do that work. It will make a difference whether we are going back to a job, re-engaging with professional responsibilities, or resuming the duties we are meant and called to discharge. Vatican II insisted that, irrespective of state in life, we are all called to holiness. The corollary would seem to be that the circumstances of our daily lives constitute the means by which we will be made holy, made an *alter Christus*, another Christ. Returning to school this August, we are not, therefore, returning to “the same old ding-dong” but to where, from all eternity, we were meant to be and meant to grow, through, with and in Jesus, “in favour with God and man (cf. *Lk. 2:52*)”.