

## The Christian Brothers

We were founded just over two hundred years ago by a remarkable Irishman called Edmund Rice. Born into a situation where his people had little share in their country's resources, Edmund was part of a minority who had the advantage of a good education and everything needed in the way of material goods. He became apprenticed to an uncle and proved to have a real flair for business.

At age 23 he married Mary. Within two years, while Mary was pregnant, she had an accident, and just after delivering their child, she died. Edmund was devastated: at 25 he found himself a widower and a single-parent. And soon it became apparent that his daughter was seriously disabled and that she needed specialised and constant care. Though his business grew and thrived, his success felt hollow. In his pain, he felt himself identifying more and more with those who live on the margins of society. He became increasingly involved with the needy and the neglected, especially the young. And in his contact with the poor, he experienced a closeness to God and felt drawn to follow Jesus more radically.

He saw that education and care of the young was the key to truly liberating people. At the age of forty, with no training or experience as a teacher, he made the decision to give his life to God by educating the neglected boys and young men of his city. His aim was to empower them to make something of their lives, leading them away from the dangers of their day and towards God. He sold his business and rented out his property to provide income to support his mission—and, of course, his daughter. He started in an old stable, turning the downstairs floor into a classroom and moving out of his comfortable home to live upstairs. The teachers he hired to assist him quickly gave up, for the boys were wild and rough. But other helpers presented themselves, wanting to join him not just in his work but in his dedication to God. And so the Christian Brothers—and our close associates, the Presentation Brothers—came into being.

Soon, in response to requests, Edmund's brothers spread all over Ireland and then beyond the sea. They first went to Preston in England in 1825 where they opened a school and training house for new brothers. Gradually they spread to other parts of the world – Gibraltar, India, Australia and North America. In more recent years they have opened communities in Africa and South America. Before he died in 1844 Edmund Rice sent his brothers to several cities in England – Manchester, London, Sunderland, Leeds, Salford, Birmingham and Liverpool. In 1977 Father (later Bishop) Kevin O'Connor invited the Christian Brothers to join him in St Anne's parish, Overbury Street, Liverpool. Father Kevin saw the value "of a community of priests and brothers living in the parish with a developing involvement with small groups of young people, perhaps initially through the liturgy, and that this witness and contact might be the beginning of winning their involvement again with the Church." A brothers' presence was maintained in Overbury Street until 1999, when they removed to Grinfield Street,

Edmund and his brothers were known for their very practical and all-round response to the needs of the young people they served—they fed those who were hungry, clothed those who were in rags, prepared them for the world of work, educated them to think, nurtured their faith, and encouraged them to love God and respond to those in need. For over 200 years, the Christian Brothers have continued to be brothers to the young and also to others out on the margins of society.

In 1996, all those inspired by Edmund Rice were greatly encouraged when the Church named him "Blessed", and we are confident that the process will soon lead to his being publicly recognized as a Saint, a model disciple of Jesus.

The Christian Brothers are one of the Catholic Church's all-brother groups — which means that none of us become priests. In this we are different from congregations such as the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Jesuits, and so on. Our vocation is simply to "religious life" - that is, to seek God, living as communities that reflect and pray and work together. We feel called to follow Christ in his way of loving people as their brother, rather than as their husband or father or boyfriend. This is the reason why we choose not to get married, and it is also why people call us "brother". We walk and work alongside others as their brothers. Our starting-point is God's love—responding to this. Our special passion is young people, who are so special in God's plan. We believe that through every new generation God gives the human race another chance, a fresh start.

As you read this, perhaps you are a Catholic young man who feels concerned—as we do—about the kind of world into which young people are born today, and all the false values and distortions that seduce and poison them. Perhaps you believe—as we do—that the secrets of true happiness are to be found in Jesus—in how he lived and in what he taught us. Perhaps you are willing—as we are—to give up having your own marriage and family, your own possessions, and total control of your own career, in order to devote yourself to bringing into the confusion of youth the life-giving message and values of Jesus. Perhaps you are called to join us.

### **Edmund Rice Prayer**

*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.*

### **Prayer for a Favour**

*O God, you inspired Blessed Edmund Rice to follow your Son in a life of consecrated  
service of the poor and of all in need of a Christian education.*

*Grant through his intercession, the petition I now make.....*

*I ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

