

Someone asked the **Master** what “disinterested action” or “selfless Action” meant. He replied, “Action that is a gift of love and done for its own sake, not for any approval or profit or gain”.

The Officers who went into the twin towers in New York to rescue their fellow human beings on that fateful day (9/11 as it's become known) had such a gift. They volunteered and did so because they thought it was the right thing to do and certainly not for any gain on their part. Unfortunately, most of them sacrificed their lives. That's disinterested action at work. I firmly believe Edmund Rice also had this gift and it drove him to give not only his wealth but himself until there was no more to give. To me **Charism** is more than what a man did or even the way he did it. It's also what motivates and energises him and a lot more things besides. Br Peter Hardiman adds this important aspect to Edmund's Charism *“Edmund used all the talent at his disposal in fulfilling his call to the margins. And to me that is very much part of his ‘radical discipleship’. He became a saint through the just and generous use of money—a very difficult thing to do! Another way to describe it is to say he reinvested his money with the poor. There was much risk involved and the Brothers were very critical of him for it thinking he would bankrupt the order by so doing, but there was still £6,000 left when he died! More than he started with!”* This was very much selfless action by Edmund. **Charism** may well be those special personal qualities that give an individual influence over many people, not only while they are living, but more importantly, when they have long gone. The more powerful the Charism the longer it will linger. Tens; yes! Even Hundreds of years after the individuals have left this mortal life for another eternal one. All founders seem to have had this God given gift and our founder, **Blessed Edmund Rice**, was no exception. He had it by the bucket load.

The **Master** went on to tell the story of the axe man who was offered a fortune to chop his wood by a researcher, *“Do you see that log lying there? Well I want you to go through the motions of chopping it – only you must use the reverse side of the axe, not the blade. You will be paid a hundred dollars an hour for that.”* *The man thought the researcher was crazy, but the money was more than he could earn in a year, so he started to work. Two hours later he came to say “Mister, I'm quitting” “What's the matter? Don't you like the pay you're getting? I'll double your wages!” “No thank you,” said the man. “The pay is fine. But when I chop wood I've got to see the chips fly!”* He took his time, but finally the woodman realised what really motivated him was the personal satisfaction and the good feeling of doing something worthwhile. He discovered it was more important than a bank full of money. Well the purpose of the researcher was to find the answer to the meaning of “Selfless Action”, he found his answer, and I guess the whole point of the story is that it also gives us an insight into what motivates normal people to do great things? What causes an average person to become a Saint? What causes someone to actually put their own life at risk for the other? The researcher knew only too well what

motivates 90% of the human race - wealth and power - basically self-interest, which is after all a natural quality which we all need to survive in this mad world. But when this self-interest drives one into the greatest trap of all; namely **greed**, we have a problem and this ends in the majority having next to nothing and the few having the rest.

We were told that Edmund Rice's Charism was being able to see a call from God and so doing, answered the need staring him in the face the best way he knew how. We are told that his Charism was brought to life through his work as an Educator of poor boys, but I suspect his Charism is much deeper and richer by far than that even. Charism is hard to nail down, especially if the man we are trying to appreciate lived more than 150 years ago. We are at the mercy of our story tellers and story writers of which there has been plenty. Edmund is well known through literature and the very fact that he has been beatified speaks volumes for the amount of work that has been done in the last few years to get to know this man. Thanks to these wonderful men and women who researched and wrote about Edmund, we have not only discovered the man, but also unwittingly fired up a generation with his very Spirit. Ah! There it is - SPIRIT/CHARISM - there must be a connection here and this is what fired me up to write this, though I have to admit a quiet hint did come from Rome too.

There is another way to discover Edmund's Charism and I am talking about looking at the men who were called by God in the last 150 years to follow him and keep that Charism alive. Reading the lives of the Brothers brought this truth home to me loud and clear. Moreover I would go one step further and say we can see his Charism alive and well today and not only in his brothers, who have chosen to join his congregation as vowed members, but also in the hearts of thousands of people, young and old, who have been captured by this man's incredible Spirit and that same spirit urges them on to do incredible things. We see today his giftedness at work and the researchers, who are still probing this mystery of Charism, like Br Peter Hardiman, will open even more eyes to the truth of Edmund's goodness in the future. Believe me; his Spirit is here among us today; alive and very much visible. If we see what motivates these people, it will give us a glimpse of that ever illusive Charism that we have been trying to put a handle on in this reflection. Reading others interpretations of his life can be helpful, but after all said and done it's only someone's interpretation, no matter how learned or how researched the piece of writing may be. I would like to explore his Charism in his followers who are living among us today. It is in discovering what motivates the Edmund Rice Brothers and their fellow workers that we will discover the most **up to date version** of Edmund's Charism. Once again Peter Hardiman, on reading this, made an interesting comment worth quoting here "*I think you*

are on to something very fruitful here. For me this way is opened up when we consider Edmund putting all his talents to work for the poor that we, in imitation of Edmund put our talents to work in ways that are quite different but following his inspiration!" Now this may well cause some discussion as I am really saying Edmund's Charism is constantly changing and updating, as it must, to remain relevant to present generations.

When I first started this paragraph I realised what an incredible man this Edmund must have been and what a hopeless job I would do trying to record the works that have been generated by Edmunds Charism. I feel a bit like St John, excuse the presumption here, *"Now there are many other things that Jesus did. If they were all written down one by one, I suppose that the whole world could not hold the books that would be written"* Well if I was to record the doings of this man Edmund and his followers since 1802 to the present day, yes it would be impossible, so just let me pick out a four stories that have certainly helped me to understand the Charism of Edmund in the hope that my readers will be moved to explore even more stories for themselves. His family is now spread over 30 different countries around the World; eleven in Africa alone. Here I share with you, being aware there are literally thousands of stories worth recording, just to show that this Charism is alive and well not only in his vowed followers but also in the countless co-workers who are our unsung heroes and heroines today.

- The work of Brother Frank O'Shea and his loyal band of men and women in Arusha; Tanzania, had been a big eye opener to me when I visited him in 2005. Frank, like Edmund, grew up on a farm and I am sure he had no idea he would find himself in the middle of African helping educate the poor, when a little boy at Warrnambool, Victoria so long ago. What motivated such a young man to do what he did?
- Then we have Br Marty Sanderson and his loyal band of men and women who work in Murgan, an aboriginal settlement, in Queensland. As well as the wonderful band of lay people he has one other Christian Brother and two Marist Brothers helping him in his work. On my visit there I could not but be moved and impressed by the work done with those young indigenous kids and it was constant and demanding I can assure you. He too as a youth was inspired to do something with his life and chose to join Edmund's group. From the classroom he then decided to move to the Margins and I am sure the call was the very same as Edmund's call to help those poor kids on the streets of Waterford.
- Bro Philip Pinto has just returned from a short trip to Belarus. There he came across the work, begun by one Christian Brother, Liam O'Meara, who is from Ennistymon in Co. Clare. A young man of around 50. The kids there are all victims of the Chernobyl

disaster and are being assisted to live better and happier lives. Liam mirrors the Charism of Edmund in the work he does but that very same Spirit also motivates and gives him the drive needed to do such a challenging work. Also Br Ned Hayden, a Cork man, has involved a big number of Irish lay people in what Liam is doing. They have begun a Trust and have given exemplary service to some orphanages and adult asylums in Belarus. Liam has made a difference to these kids and they love him for it. (Sounds familiar) You can access their website: www.burrenchernobyl.ie as it is worth a visit. Liam chose to move out of his comfort zone in Co. Clare and take on this assignment and I am sure Edmund is looking down on him in sheer wonder and saying to himself “Is this really my spirit, my Charism at work here?” My answer is a definite yes Edmund. (I have added Philip’s full report to my website for those who are interested)

- Then the last little story is my own and I guess countless brothers all over the world can identify with this one: The call went out in Australia, at the personal request of our Congregational Leader, to send Brothers to the Philippines. Well Brothers Rod, Neil, John and Peter answered the call. Peter Hardiman, (I am sure the other three men also) saw this as a perfect example of Edmund’s Charism at work through our Leader and as such was compelled to respond. I, being brilliant at rationalization, did not respond. I thought that what I was doing was His work, and so it was; no argument there. Eddy’s Carpentry Shop was no push over to run and the Kids, who we classified “at risk”, really were responding and I did feel Edmund was present in what I was trying to do there. (Proof of that is my choice of name) However I had one problem which kept nagging me, and that was being painfully aware of how comfortable I was living and I even felt a little guilty about it even though I enjoy my creature comforts and especially my golf. I was mixing with Kids who had very little going for them and then returning home to what I perceived as an inconsistency. It would have been so easy to just stay doing what I knew best. The dilemma was that the work I was doing was inspired by Edmund, but the whole story was not knitting together. Fortunately twelve months later another call went out and this time there was no hesitation and in fact I practically forced myself on Br Laurence Needham, who was then the Provincial of the NSW Province. Well the rest is history. Yes I pained at closing the shop and a little bit of me died in the process and I pained giving up Golf which I love so much etc. Edmund also had his little Deaths too (The death of his beloved wife and the injury to his only child is still clear in my mind) so here I am in Hilongos trying to do something to help the very poor people here. My standard of living has slipped a few pegs but I have never been happier in my life. If

you answer the call to the Margins I can assure you God has his little ways of rewarding you.

You ask me “what Charism is?” You ask me “what do you mean by the Spirit of Edmund Rice?” My reply is: go out and find it all around you. It is everywhere, believe me, and it is getting stronger every day. It is a Charism (a gift) which has been given to this generation and they have responded in quite a miraculous manner, surprising even Edmund’s own vowed Brothers. I go back to the beginning of the 60s and marvel at what is now and what was hidden so long ago from us novices. (Yes sad to say we were not introduced to his Spirit or not that one revealed to us today at any rate) The Edmund Rice Camps is an organisation started by Br Tim Bilston, may he rest in peace, and a couple of his Victorian colleagues. Tim was in our Noviciate group and discovered Edmund’s Spirit through the creation of this movement, which seems to have been blessed by God in a very special way, as it has grown at an extraordinary pace and is now a worldwide phenomenon. The ERC Leaders will tell you that the Charism of Edmund is alive and in your face, so really it’s hard to miss and once more it’s now in all our Schools and just think how many students are now going to be influenced by the Charism of Edmund. It just about blows me away.

I finish with this short comment and that is: Edmund has been given credit for founding two Congregations of religious men, namely the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers. Not a bad effort from a man whose first path in life was the married state. The writers give him many titles, Student, Businessman, Married man, Widower, Parent, Founder, Religious Brother and Saint. I would say that’s enough for anyone to cope with in one life time, yet that was Edmund’s lot. The men that follow him today have been inspired by that story enough to give up all and follow Jesus the very same Jesus Edmund followed. If you ask the brother as I have done what made you join the answer is nearly always the same. “Brother so and so inspired me” Well here is some news: it was in fact the motivating Spirit that drove the Brother to do what he did that impressed you. It was Edmund Charism which you saw shining as brightly as a star, which moved you. It’s the



Charism of Jesus that was gifted to Edmund 200 years ago that has been gifted to his followers and co-workers today. Yes we have Edmund’s Spirit, but when all is said and done, it is the self same spirit that drives us all and that is the Spirit of Jesus himself. To put it simply, Edmund has led us to Jesus, indeed Edmund has led all the Edmund Rice family to Jesus. What a man and what an influence he has had.

(Wherever his followers are or wherever people are inspired and energised by Edmund there you will find his Charism) **Till**

next time: Br Peter T – Hilongos