



## Coming of Age during the “Troubles”

When Edmund Rice was born in June 1762, Irish Catholics had been oppressed by the infamous Penal Laws for about a century and a half. Catholics were not allowed into the legal, banking, or teaching professions. Because office holders were required to profess beliefs contrary to the Catholic Faith, Catholics were effectively banned from holding public office. Inheritance laws prevented Catholics from owning sizable portions of land at a time when land meant power. Because the Protestants running the schools denigrated Catholic children and attempted to proselytize them, Catholic parents kept their children out of school. The Penal Laws were designed to keep the Catholic Irish majority poor and powerless.

Edmund’s family, however, was fortunate because in Callan, the local Lord Desart, was quire tolerant and generous to his tenants farmers. Robert Rice, Edmund’s father, worked a farm of about 175 acres. Their home, while not luxurious, was much larger and more

comfortable than the huts and shacks of most Catholic families. They had plenty of good food to eat, the nine children were able to enjoy their games and fun, and their mother, Margaret, and their father raised them in the Catholic faith. Anyone who needed a meal and came to the door was treated with gracious hospitality.



The Rice boys probably attended a hedge school, an illegal Catholic alternative to the Protestant schools. As a teenager with an aptitude for business, Edmund was sent to Kilkenny to a business academy. Having acquired the knowledge and skills required for a career as a merchant, he was then sent to Waterford to train as an apprentice to his uncle, a ship chandler.

He worked hard, helped his uncle to grow his business, and became very successful. He had many friends, enjoyed the entertainments of the day, and wore fashionable clothes. He met, fell in love with, and married Mary Elliot, and they enjoyed a rich social life.

While clearly enjoying the blessings of success however, Edmund realized that his comfortable life, with its bright future, was out of reach of most Catholics in Ireland. Following the death of his wife, he realized that “the way things are” had been bad for many years, and were likely to remain so. Poverty-stricken people were everywhere; their homes were hovels, frequently without windows or chimneys. Dirty, smelly children, half-naked, and hungry, wandered the streets. What was worse was that there was no hope.

## Questions for reflection and sharing:

1. What struck you in this story? What is of special significance for you personally?
2. How does Edmund's character develop during his childhood and early adulthood?
3. What connections can you make between Edmund's experience and that of your current students?
4. What does this story suggest about Essential Element # I "Evangelize Youth within the mission of the Church?"

## Prayer

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

***Leader:***

- In gratitude for the many gifts Edmund received from God: his nurturing parents, his grounding in the Faith, his business acumen and drive, and his growing social consciousness, we pray to the Lord. ***Gracious God, ...***
- That we may recognize our students' gifts and give them opportunity and encouragement to develop their talents, we pray to the Lord.  
***Gracious God, ...***
- That we may help our students to become grounded in the Faith, with awareness of their suffering brothers and sisters, 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.