

When Edmund Rice, a business man from Waterford in Southern Ireland, founded the Christian Brothers in 1802, he started something which was to have a profound effect on education, not only in Ireland, but in the English speaking world. In 1825 he was already beginning to look to England when he founded his first school in Preston, Lancashire. When he died twenty years later, there were 22 flourishing Christian Brother Schools in England:

- 6 in London - Soho, Wapping, Spanish Place, Holborn, Chelsea and Summerstown;
- 6 in Liverpool - St Patrick's, St Vincent's, St Peter's, St Mary's, St Nicholas' and St Anthony's;
- 3 in Preston - St Wilfrid's, St Ignatius' and St Augustine's;
- 2 in Manchester - St Patrick's and St Mary's;
- 1 in Salford - St John's;
- 1 in Bolton - Ss Peter and Paul's;
- 1 in Leeds - St Anne's;
- 1 in Birmingham - St Chad's;
- 1 in Sunderland - St Mary's.

One might ask what drove this man to found a Religious Community of Brothers and to dedicate his wealth and his efforts, as well as those of his Religious Brothers, to the education of Catholic children. It was because he saw a desperate need in the growing industrial cities of England. He felt compelled to do something to alleviate the lot of those who were a despised minority who were labouring under the double burden of being Catholic and poor at the same time. He was determined to provide them with the opportunity of achieving a realisation of their dignity as human persons and being educated to the highest standards at the same time.

The Brothers pioneered Catholic Elementary Education in England in conditions we would find intolerable at the present time. They taught, without salary, classes of between 120 and 150 boys between 9.00 a.m. and 3.00 p.m. and they then returned in the evenings between 7.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. to teach adults. Their sole remuneration was an annual Charity sermon preached in the Parish Church for their upkeep. They were poor living among the poor.

The Brothers were just responding in the same way as Religious Orders of Monks had done throughout the centuries to the need for education. The Catholic Church has always seen education not simply as a vocational preparation, but as a means of developing in the young, their dignity as human persons. The Church realised also that, as a good parent, it had the obligation of handing on the Christian Faith to its children and helping them to be true to that faith even when circumstances made it difficult or unpopular.

The Education Act of 1870 made elementary education more available to Catholic children but there it tended to stop: Catholic secondary education was almost non-existent. By 1900 the Roman Catholic Hierarchy were beginning to realise that unless the Church provided secondary schools, thus enabling Catholic boys and girls to go to university and teacher training colleges, then the Church would never have an educated laity. So at this time we find the Brothers gradually withdrawing from elementary schools and entering the arena of secondary education. Our first secondary school in England was St Brendan's College, Bristol, to be followed soon after by the Catholic Institute, Liverpool. Our mandate from the Hierarchy was to provide an educated Catholic laity with sufficient men and women of high calibre to become trained as teachers, and in the other professions.

The Brothers arrived in Plymouth in 1931 to develop St Boniface's College from a small school in Wyndham Square into a successful secondary school. That this was achieved is proved by the fact that the school was given Direct Grant status after the Education Act of 1945 and is now an established boys' comprehensive school for nearly 800 pupils. Many of our ex-pupils are teaching in a variety of schools in the area and throughout the country.

Today's Outlook

The efforts of the Christian Brothers in the time of Edmund Rice were directed towards a deprived Catholic population who were poor and illiterate. The Brothers' mission or vocation changed as Catholics began to take their rightful place in society and became a largely highly motivated and literate middle class. The state has made it unnecessary too for Catholic schools to be run by unpaid Religious teachers - either Brothers or Nuns. Voluntary aided schools promoted by church bodies have now been given 85% grant towards the

cost of building new schools and extending or repairing old ones.

For the last fifteen years there has also been a decline in the number of young men and women coming forward to offer their services to the church as Religious Priests, Brothers or Sisters. We have experienced during that time Religious Orders withdrawing from schools because of a shortage of suitably qualified personnel to continue to administer such schools. This trend is still continuing.

It is significant that in the case of the Christian Brothers during this period the Congregation has become more involved in areas of the Third World - Peru, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Liberia, Zambia, and Papua New Guinea. It seems that, despite our contracting resources, we have 'thrown our bread on the water' and gone where we are most needed.

Yet I believe that in England too, we have a role to play. More than ever before there is a need for Christian witness and for a Christian presence in our schools. For over a century, people have been valued in the West for what job they did. Professional men were more highly regarded than craftsmen who in their turn were more highly valued than manual or unskilled workers. As a result, Britain in the Eighties, at a time of high unemployment, is experiencing the disillusionment and alienation of the young. It is looking to the Social Sciences for answers to riots, violence and an increasing drug problem. When the very basis of one's value in the community is taken away - namely, one's ability to perform a useful job - it is not surprising that people lose their self-respect and resort to violence. Perhaps the West should ask itself how people in the Third World, despite poverty, hunger and apparent hopelessness, have managed to preserve a dignity and self respect, because of their belief that this importance derives from their being Sons of God and Brothers of Christ.