

**Address to EREA Principals
Canberra, 20th May 2010**

After-dinner speeches are often risky events for both speaker and audience. Members of the latter are generally at saturation point after a long day of work and concentration, while the speaker comes to the podium generally not having enjoyed his dinner because he has been trying to gauge the receptivity of those in front of him.

In this context, I'm reminded of the centenary dinner of the Balmain-Rozelle Christian Brothers Old Boys Association at which one of our Brothers was invited to propose the toast to the ex-students. He had barely begun to speak when a voice was heard from the back of the auditorium: "What bugger brung him?" Well, in my case, I can point the finger at your Director, Mr Wayne Tinsey.

I'm also reminded of an incident that occurred in my early teaching years in Goulburn. It was school holiday time and the Brothers had gone down for Sunday mass at what was then the cathedral church of the Canberra-Goulburn Archdiocese. The Cathedral Administrator had a reputation for starting mass late and for speaking interminably at the homily. True to form, he was almost 10 minutes late for the scheduled 7.00 a.m. mass and was walking towards the pulpit to begin the homily when a small child broke away from his parents, ran to the base of the pulpit and looked up at the priest who was just getting into position. The child took in the scene, turned to face the congregation and in a very audible voice announced: "Hey mum, it's the bugger who talks too long." Tonight I'll do my best not to emulate that particular priest by giving the topic of my address adequate attention in as brief a space as possible.

I have been commissioned tonight to offer some reflections on how you as school principals might give creative and authentic expression to the Edmund Rice charism as you go about your ministry of school leadership in an era in which only a handful of Christian Brothers are still in EREA schools.

Let me say at the outset that the Christian Brothers' Oceania Province Leadership Team (OLT) has great confidence in you and in the EREA executive and endorses the value and expertise of our lay leaders. The fact that the Brothers have moved to establish Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) is eloquent testimony to that, despite the fact that our action in establishing EREA would appear to make some of our Church leaders just a tad nervous. The OLT subscribes to a belief in a lay Church and is committed to pursuing shared leadership with other lay men and women. I say "other" because the Congregation of Christian Brothers is itself lay in character.

We also subscribe to the belief that Christian Brothers do not have a monopoly on the charism of Edmund Rice. His charism is living and ever-evolving and will, as a consequence, find a variety of new expressions according to the insights and decisions of those people who generously take responsibility for nurturing and applying that charism. By accepting leadership of an EREA school, you have generously embraced such responsibility. You are also aware of the fact that every responsibility has a corresponding accountability.

Before I put to you some matters for your consideration, let me share with you just how I understand the Edmund Rice charism entrusted to you and how I see the environment in which you are being asked to express it. Like all religious charisms, the Edmund Rice charism is a gift of God's Spirit. It is an insight into the Gospel of Jesus given to a particular man who lived his life in an Irish social context in which Irish Catholic youth had little or no access to basic education. Edmund Rice put his talent, his energy, his insight and his material fortune into righting that injustice. Those who have followed in his footsteps over more than two centuries have sought for ways of taking that Gospel insight and giving relevant expression to it in real-life situations that have cried out for practical justice. Under their nurturance and stewardship, the charism has continued to evolve and has found creative expression in a variety of ways.

Now, let me say a little about the context in which you lead your school. You and your school are part of a Church in which many of your students and their parents are not at home. Indeed, many of them are quite simply unchurched. You are part of a Church that is very clearly in transition and, in many places, is struggling for credibility. It is a Church that often seems obsessed with religious observance and forgetful of the Gospel. On the other hand, you are dealing with a generation of young people that is fearful about the future, concerned for the health of the planet yet paradoxically intent on instant gratification of felt needs as it yearns for an experience of real community. They likewise look for guidance that will assist them to make meaning of their lives and to deal with loss, grief and the prospects of a bleak future. Deep down, they long for a coherent value system that will guide them to live meaningfully in the present, that will help them to make their relationships and marriages work and will give them guidance in raising their children. Practical expression of the Edmund Rice charism can offer some degree of hope for this current generation of young people who fill the classrooms of your schools.

Now let me shift your attention to an Antioch youth rally in St. Mary's Cathedral, Sydney in the early 1990s. I was returning to my car after a Sunday afternoon meeting in the city and heard a commotion in the cathedral. Out of curiosity I ventured in, and my attention was immediately caught by a gangly youth standing on one of the back pews. He had his back to me, and the T-shirt he was wearing proclaimed: "Jesus is not dead, he's not even sick!" To this day, that young man does not know the impact that his message had on me. That afternoon, I realised, more than I ever had before, that Jesus is as alive, as well and as active in our world as you and I make him. Our mission as Christians and as leaders in EREA schools is to make Jesus and his Gospel attractive and relevant to the lives of all the people with whom we engage, especially those who belong to our school communities, for they are the ones for whom we have some clear responsibility and to whom we are accountable. Deepening our appreciation and understanding of the charism of Edmund Rice will surely offer us some clues as to how best to exercise that mission.

Having given you some idea as to where I am coming from, I would now like to invite you into a flight of fantasy. Imagine, if you will, that you have been invited to establish and lead a new school in the Edmund Rice tradition, with the freedom to design the curriculum from scratch, with no State Education Department requirements. Of course, you will include numeracy and literacy and music, because every child has a right to those. But which other subjects will you include in the programme? What will the co-curricular offerings look like? Will it be compulsory to participate in co-curricular activities? What kind of enrolment policy will you adopt? Will you give preference to children of ex-students? Will you reserve places for children whose parents don't have sufficient language to read and complete the application form? Will there be places for newly-arrived asylum seekers? Will you make a place for service-learning in your school? The range of questions you could put to yourself is almost endless, but I suggest that posing and exploring such questions is a valid and worthwhile way of reviewing what you are currently doing and lead you to articulate for yourself the essential characteristics of a school in the Edmund Rice tradition.

One current expression we use for encapsulating the Edmund Rice spirit and charism is a phrase Denis McLaughlin gave us: "Presence, Compassion, Liberation". These, of course, are Gospel challenges and values which I, for one, sometimes have difficulty putting handles on. What might they mean in practice and how might we transmit them?

Presence: Modern living can put extraordinary demands on our time and energy, especially on those who are parents. And many of you fall into that category. Work and family demands are such that you are constantly on the move. How does one model presence in this context? The challenge is to discipline ourselves to give our full attention to every student, staff member, parent and visitor we encounter each day, to treat each of them with dignity and respect, to welcome each of them as guests who have something to offer. That is how we can be present to God present in everyone we meet. And those around us will notice and learn something about presence as we model it.

Compassion: Compassion is learned through human encounter. That's how you and I learned it. Students have a right to be exposed to experiences that will shift them from self-interest to noticing others and their needs. Our young people are generous and can easily be motivated to reach out to others in need and to find practical ways of responding to such need. That is where immersion experiences and service learning can be most valuable, for they widen students' experience and open their eyes to the fact that there are real people in great need. Such experiences, of course, are of limited value unless we educate students and their parents to ask why others are in circumstances that demand our compassion and to explore how they can respond in practice. The logical next step is to give students and parents access to some of the tools of advocacy. While immersions into other cultures are valuable, don't lose sight of the fact that one does not need to go half a world away to find them. East-Timor and Papua New Guinea are on our doorstep, and communities of indigenous Australians are all around us. Some schools forge strategic links with schools in other countries. Is there room in your planning for forging such links with a school in a developing nation? Do you know where the nearest detention centre is located? Have you ever thought of making overtures to the appropriate authorities to see if games or other activities could be organised between your students and the children in a detention centre or the children in a special school?

Where might care for the earth and education for sustainable living fit into your curriculum? Do you regard these as expressions of compassion?

If you choose to include economics and the social sciences in your programme, will you ensure that there is a place for exploring the ethics of monetary policy or applying critical skills to policies of population control, free trade and aid for developing countries? Will you teach students elementary research skills?

I encourage you to do some dreaming about the kind of school you would like to hand on to whomever it is who succeeds you. And having done the dreaming, share the results with your executive, encourage them to do likewise and then share with one another the outcomes. After all that, decide if there is anything you would be prepared to introduce in the school community within the next twelve months. That will almost certainly mean that you will have to shed something in order to make room for the new. The introduction of daring change, when well managed, will ultimately be liberating.

Most EREA schools are resource rich but closed for as many as 16 hours a day. How might we make some of our facilities available to the wider community, especially to those who are less fortunate? I am well aware that there are insurance implications and OHS challenges to be addressed here but there are surely solutions to such matters. In reaching out to others, we may well be making a contribution to providing the kind of human interaction on which community is built. And community and connectedness are experiences for which all too many people here in this country are searching. Compassion wears many guises.

Liberation: Have you ever pondered what it is that imprisons the minds and hearts of our young people? It is true that many of the students in our schools are healthy, balanced and well-adjusted. But there are also many who are not. They are imprisoned by the expectations their peers put on them and by the expectations of success that come from parents. They are also crippled by fear - fear of failure, of not being accepted, of becoming victims of violence, terrorism and war, of being bullied, of maybe being gay. Rightly or wrongly schools end up with some responsibility for helping them to develop healthy self-esteem, to make fulfilling career choices, to find what will give their lives meaning, to address their search for spirituality.

I believe that senior students are well served when they are exposed to healthy vocational education that is based on the premise that one can find one's vocation by first recognising and then acknowledging one's talents and limitations and then matching the talents to their capacities to love, to be creative and to grow free. We all grow into our vocation in life as we make a succession of healthy choices which we know deep down are true to ourselves.

Personal liberation is the consequence of a succession of wholesome choices.

Engaging with the community beyond the school: This is something you are already doing and you are forever making judgements about how much is enough. But I will still put before you a couple of questions. Have you ever thought of establishing a Men's Shed (or a women's circle) for parents who are unemployed or between jobs and for grandparents who are retired? As well as meeting real needs, such a venture could be a source of very helpful volunteers. Would you ever think of offering morning or twilight retreats for busy parents in need of personal space or time out?

What might happen if you were to reshape your parent-teacher nights and have parents participate in a lesson or seminar that was part of the Religious Education programme for senior students?

Before I conclude with a couple of stories, let me say that, while nurturing a charism and leading a school present a considerable challenge to those brave enough to embrace it, you don't have to do it alone. Don't hesitate to tap into the Edmund Rice Network of which you are a part. Use the resources the Network offers. Invite Christian Brothers to work with your staff, plug into the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education located in Sydney and to the Edmund Rice Institute for Social Justice in Fremantle. Consider how the resources of the Edmund Rice Business Ethics initiative (Sydney) might be of assistance to your students and don't be slow to approach members of the Oceania Province Leadership Team to conduct retreats or reflection days for staff or to provide the occasional address at your Speech Night or other significant school gatherings. Above all, don't be slow to put into your diary as a priority some days for personal reflection, reading, prayer and dreaming.

Conclusion: Once there was a small farming town that could be accessed only by a narrow winding road. The last curve that had to be negotiated before entering the town was particularly dangerous and many visitors came to grief there. The parish priest often made mention of the accidents, using them to remind his parishioners to make sure they were Good Samaritans to anyone who was injured or in need of emergency accommodation. They responded generously and rostered themselves to assist accident victims. They knew that whatever help they gave was truly a religious work. One Sunday, a parishioner suggested that they buy an ambulance so that they could get the injured to the hospital more quickly and in greater comfort. So the parish priest preached and the people gave generously until they had their ambulance, for they knew that this was truly a religious work they were undertaking. Some months later, one of the parishioners who happened to be a member of the town council suggested to his fellow councillors that the road be widened and the dangerous curve be removed. Now it happened that the farm that bordered the dangerous curve belonged to the mayor who promptly rejected the proposal. The councillor then approached the parish priest and asked him to have a word with the mayor and even ask the parishioners to sign a petition to have the curve removed. But the priest and the parish council decided that they should stay out of politics. So, on the following Sunday, the priest preached on the Good Samaritan and encouraged the people to keep picking up accident victims and attending to them. And that's exactly what they did, for they knew that it was truly a religious work.

The second story I share with you tonight is one that keeps coming back to me. Just a year or two ago, a prominent Sydney oncologist was walking along Macquarie Street in Sydney when he bumped into a good friend and colleague. Before he could say hello, his friend challenged: "What the devil are you wearing that daggy old coat for? It's really grubby, the cuffs are frayed and there's a patch on your left sleeve.

Surely after all the years you've been practising, you can afford something better!" "That's true, Jack." The oncologist replied, "But there's a story behind this coat. You see, when I was on my first internship at St. Vincent's back in the early 60s, I came back to my flat in Newtown late one cold, wet winter's night and was settling down to relax for a while when there was a knock at my door. I opened it to find a young girl who blurted out: 'Daddy asked if you could come quickly because my little brother is very sick?' I grabbed my bag without hesitating and followed the little girl down the street to another block of flats and up a couple of flights of dimly-lit stairs to a one-room unit. Inside I found a small boy lying on a mattress on the floor. I did the best I could for him, Jack, but he died in front of me within a few minutes. I was in shock and did my best to offer some comfort to the grieving parents. There was no heating in the flat and I was shivering from the cold, but more from shock. The boy's father saw me shivering and said: 'You're freezing, doctor. I can't offer you anything for your help, but take my coat.' I was too embarrassed to refuse his kind offer, so I accepted his coat and put it on. You know, Jack. I wear this coat twice a year now - on the anniversary of that little boy's death and on the anniversary of my graduation from uni, just to remind myself of what it's all about."

All of you here tonight are professional people who carry serious responsibilities. What do you do to remind yourself of what it's all about?