

# HEART CENTERED SPIRITUALITY

## Edmund Rice Christian Brothers North America

A PROVINCE OF THE CONGREGATION OF CHRISTIAN BROTHERS

Volume 1, Issue 1

December, 2009

### JOURNEYS OF THE HEART

#### *Heart-Centered Spirituality*



**Br. Kevin  
Griffith**

The 2008 Congregation Chapter in Munnar, India encouraged all Brothers to deepen their understanding of the Seven Insights from *The Heart of Being Brother* and “to build healthy, compassionate communities living a heart-centered spirituality and supporting one another in mission.” (*The Spirit Moving in Our Midst: Be My Disciple*)

For the past several years I have reflected a great deal on what I believe heart-centered spirituality to be. What follows is an adapted excerpt from my recent dissertation entitled: *Heart-Centered Spirituality in the Tradition of Edmund Rice and the Christian Brothers: An Emmaus Journey*. This particular excerpt focuses on the relationship between heart-centered spirituality and compassion.

As I see it, the heart-centered spirituality of Edmund Rice emanated from his compassionate response to God’s call in his life and to the poor and marginalized of his day. It manifested itself in his determination to transform Catholic society in Ireland by establishing an order of religious Brothers whose primary focus would be the education and evangelization of poor Irish boys. The establishment of a Catholic educational system to address the injustices facing Irish Catholics was a direct manifestation of Edmund’s heart-centered compassion for the weakest and most vulnerable members of society.

In practice, heart-centered spirituality calls for an openness on the part of each Christian Brother to spend time alone with God in prayer and contemplation in order to discern at the deepest level where God is calling him. Heart-centered spirituality calls for each Brother to respond, as Edmund did, with a generous and compassionate heart to God’s call in his life. Heart-centered spirituality allows for a sharing with others in community the depth of one’s lived experience, faith life, and relationship with God.

Heart-centered spirituality is most fully expressed in the Edmund Rice *Charism Statement* which reads in part:

Deeply aware of the Father’s providential presence in his life, Edmund Rice was moved by the Holy Spirit to open his whole heart to Christ present and appealing to him in the poor.

Edmund Rice’s spirituality flowed from his compassionate response to the events affecting his life and Irish society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Christian Brother spirituality today is undoubtedly driven by Edmund’s heart-centered compassionate response to those events. Thus, the heart-centered spirituality of the Christian Brothers today manifests itself in the response of the Brothers to the new and emerging needs facing today’s world.

In the story of the two travelers from Luke’s Gospel on the road to Emmaus, when the travelers asked, “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24: 33), were they not saying that their eyes had been opened and that their hearts had been transformed as they came to

recognize Jesus in their midst? Was this not Edmund Rice's lived experience as well, as his heart was transformed through his encounters with Christ in the poor and oppressed people of his day? Is it not true for each of us that our lives are transformed as we develop our own personal relationship with Jesus, especially as expressed through our encounters with the poor and marginalized?

In order to be genuinely transformed one must be willing to see and experience God in the present and be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in his life. To be open to the promptings of the Spirit, we Brothers must allow Jesus to enlighten our minds and warm our hearts which will in turn lead to an appropriate reading of the signs of the times that will induce a faithfulness to the founding charism and spirit of Blessed Edmund. If today's Christian Brothers are to emulate Edmund's heart-centered spirituality, then, like Edmund we must face mourning and loss in our lives. It was because Edmund had experienced heartfelt loss and mourning in his life that he was able to respond with a compassionate heart to others who had experienced hardship in their lives. Compassion is indeed a key component to Edmund's heart-centered spirituality, as Edmund lived a life marked by compassion. As such, following the death of his wife, he worked tirelessly for the poor and marginalized of Ireland. His heart reached out to them in every way.

Edmund's compassion was certainly evident in his ministry as well, as he continually made himself available to those in distress; even as he experienced distress in his own life.

With regards to the relationship between compassion and heart-centered spirituality, it is quite clear that compassion was the hallmark of Edmund's heart-centered spirituality. A life marked by compassion calls for both a deep personal relationship with Jesus and the willingness to act on behalf of those who suffer injustice. Edmund's life gave witness to this. For Christian Brothers today, action on behalf of the poor and marginalized is imperative in being faithful to both the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth and the charism of Blessed Edmund, as Edmund's heart-centered spirituality emanated from his compassionate response to those in need.

Edmund was indeed driven by his compassion for the poor boys he encountered on the streets of Waterford. In these boys he saw the very image of the loving God he sought to serve. We Christian Brothers today are called to no less. We are called to encounter God in the poor of our day and to respond with compassionate hearts, as Edmund did in his day.

**"Edmund opened his whole heart to Christ present and appealing to him in the poor."**

Edmund was a heart-centered leader who placed himself at the service of others. His caring, discerning, and loving leadership was a by-product of his heart-centered spirituality. His wisdom, courage, and compassion allowed him to serve others with an authentic humility that defined his life.

As the third millennium continues to unfold, the charism of Edmund Rice continues to be a gift for the Church and the world. As such, Al Houihan, in *Overcoming Evil with Good: The Edmund Rice Story*, asserted:

The life of Blessed Edmund Rice has much to say to the world as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century dawns. He speaks not in so many words but by the way he lived in a time and place every bit as challenging as the modern era is for today's people...He was a human being who was called by the Lord, endowed with special gifts to be shared with people and sent to them as a sign of God's love for them. Blessed Edmund Rice was called, gifted and sent to persons then and now.

Edmund Rice's compassionate heart-centered spirituality lives on in the lives of his Brothers and in all those touched by his charism and spirit. Edmund was indeed a man raised up by God to transform the plight of poor Irish Catholics in eighteenth and nineteenth century Ireland. The compassionate response of his Brothers to the

plight of today's poor continually gives witness to Edmund's heart-centered spirituality. It is a spirituality that like Edmund himself transcends the ages!

Being a member of the PLT, I share in the responsibility of challenging myself and our Brothers to continually seek ways of engaging with the poor and marginalized in our midst. The Province Center here in Elizabeth, NJ is located in a working class multi-ethnic neighborhood where many people struggle to make ends meet. In challenging myself to respond to the call of the Chapter, I have begun (as have others on the PLT) to volunteer at a local soup kitchen and to serve as a companion to detained immigrants at the Elizabeth Detention Center. It is my hope that these experiences of responding to the needs of the marginalized at my doorstep will touch my heart in a way that will allow me to tap into the wellspring of compassion and concern for others that so marked the life of Blessed Edmund.

As a Christian Brother in the twenty-first century, I am called to witness to and emulate the heart-centered spirituality that characterized Edmund's life and animated his charism in allowing him "to be moved by the Holy Spirit to open his whole heart to Christ present and appealing to him in the poor." I pray for God's grace to open my heart that it may be one with Edmund's and with Jesus' as I attempt to be faithful to God's call in my life.

Brother Kevin Griffith, C.F.C.  
Elizabeth, New Jersey

---

## PRAYING WITH OUR HEART

"...Pray continually and never lose heart." (Luke 18:1)



**Br. Barry  
Lynch**

Jesus often encouraged his disciples to "take heart ... have courage". As Jesus went about building the first apostolic community, he prepared them for the joys and sorrows, the many challenges and struggles that are involved in building the reign of God. During Jesus' life, he modeled for his disciples a life of prayer, community and ministry. As Jesus met people of amazing faith, people struggling with restless and unfinished hearts and people who were blinded by values of an unjust and disordered society, he challenged his followers to "...Pray continually and never lose heart." So it is that we are called to stay in touch with our hearts and to live with consciousness and growing awareness of the Mystery of God in our lives and in all creation.

Our recent Congregation and Province Chapters have called us to continue our journey of heart-centered spirituality and to deepen our awareness of the Mystery of God through living our brotherhood in community and in mission. As I reflect on these challenging calls, I am reminded of a line from a poem by the Carmelite poet, Jessica Powers, "To live with the Spirit of God is to be a listener. It is to keep the vigil of Mystery, earthless and still." My experience of the vision of our Chapters has been a call to open my heart more fully to our Living and Indwelling God revealed to me by the Spirit of the Risen Jesus. This Presence is also revealed to me by the poor and marginalized who have come into my life as gift and by my growing consciousness of the Mystery of God in all of creation.

Through the practice of "Prayer of the Heart", I have been blessed, sometimes through painful experiences, with a growing love and trust in the heart experiences of my life of brotherhood and mission. Jesus was aware of his heart and was conscious of the presence of God in the people that he met and with whom he ministered. Sometimes Jesus' heart was hurt and he experienced pain. Sometimes his heart was grateful because he

experienced deep compassion of the heart. Jesus stayed in touch with his heart and grew to know it as a place, a space where he was in communion with the loving Mystery of God. With Jesus, we are invited to know our heart as a place of wound, of wisdom and of wonder.

“Prayer of the Heart” is a form of centering prayer that invites us to open our minds and hearts to the presence of God dwelling within each of us. It is a way of connecting with our heart, surrendering our “ego-self” and awakening to the gift of love that is our “true-self”. When we take time to pray with our heart, we open ourselves to the Spirit of the Risen Jesus dwelling in our heart and we bring into the Spirit’s presence our joys, our fears, our loves and our hurts. As we hold these heart experiences in the presence of the Indwelling One, we trust that our heart’s deepest desire, to be embraced by God and to live with others in love, will be nurtured.

“With all your heart, turn to me, for I am tender and compassionate.” (Joel 2:12) Our God desires to be a living, compassionate, loving presence in our heart. As a brother to others, I am called to believe that the Spirit of the Risen Jesus is present in my hopes and desires, in my brokenness and confusion and in my joys and celebrations. This is the living and incarnate God that Jesus revealed to us. “I am sure that I shall see the goodness of God in the land of the living.” (Psalm 27) As I continue to open my heart to living brotherhood in the Spirit of Jesus’ Gospel and in the charism of Blessed Edmund, I know that I must heed the call of Jesus to stay awake and be alert. In my life in community and in ministry, I encounter many people and experiences that I am invited to bring to prayer. The “Prayer of the Heart” presents me with one way to “Pray continually and never loose heart”. (Luke 18:1)

The regular practice of prayer provides each of us with the blessed opportunity for the Spirit to nurture habits of our heart. I have found that the practice of “Prayer of the Heart” encourages me to bring into God’s Presence people, feelings and experiences. When I am in ministry with someone who is a source of joy or who may be a source of hurt, I bring them to my heart with God in prayer. This practice involves the following four stages:

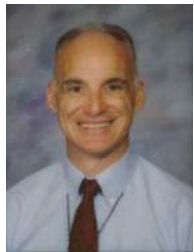
01. Relaxing our body, mind and emotions, we open ourselves to God’s presence.
02. Focusing on your breathing in and breathing out, we may notice but do not judge any thoughts or feelings that may surface.
03. Remembering a heart experience, we breathe in a particular person, feeling or experience One that is personal and real. Breathe in the name of the person, the feeling or awareness. Breathe out the grace/gift that the Spirit seems to desire for that person or for you.
04. Recalling that the feelings, longings, awareness that we are experiencing are also shared by many other people or groups of people. Breathe them in ... Breathe out a blessing.

“Open up the door of your hearts. Let this Lover, into your being.” (John of the Cross) Heart-Centered spiritual living involves real human life. As we continue our journey of brotherhood, we encounter people and circumstances that truly are instruments of God’s grace. Yes, we are challenged by very human situations that call upon our gifts of empathy, patience and even tolerance. Yet, as brothers of Blessed Edmund, we are encouraged to open up the door of our whole heart and “Let this Lover into your being.”

Brother Barry Lynch, C.F.C.  
Elizabeth, New Jersey

**"We are sent by the Holy Spirit to be signs of God's love and compassion for all our brothers and sisters, but especially for the poor, the powerless and the oppressed." (Constitution 4)**

## Transition: The Heart's Call to Conversion.



Br. Peter  
O'Loughlin

The last two years have afforded me a unique opportunity: moving from the comfortable into the realm of the unknown. When I was asked to consider moving into formation ministry my first response was “no way” and “there are more spiritual and qualified men than me.” But those responses really didn't sit well with me. So I was forced to ask: “God, what are you calling me to do in this time and this place?”

The year spent learning, praying and growing in awareness of God's active presence in my life was a period of transition and growth that has touched me more deeply than I could have imagined. Over a relatively short period of time I came to the realization that I needed to say goodbye to the old ... not dump it or forget about, but rather reverence the old, in order to embrace the new. Joyce Rupp, in *Praying Our Goodbyes*, reminds us that “goodbyes are as much a part of life as the seasons of the year. The story of gain and loss, of joy and sorrow, of life and death, of union and separation, is inside each one of us.” (Rupp, 17)

We Brothers are very good at jumping in, rolling up our shirtsleeves and getting on with the work in front of us. We Brothers are not good at saying goodbye, of honoring our accomplishments and moving forward in freedom. Now maybe I'm not very good at doing that ... but I think it has a lot to do with “*putting our shoulders to the plough and not looking back.*” While this approach has served me and us well over the years, I have come to the realization that as I get older I need to look back, not in morbid or self serving way, but in a way that helps me focus on the present and ultimately the future. Rupp hopes that we will see that “hurts, pains and losses need not destroy us, but rather lead to a better understanding of life, a greater wisdom and compassion, and a deeper courage to continue the journey that will eventually take us home.” (Rupp, 19)

To live in the present is to be aware of God's active voice in my life. To think of the future allows visioning to play a role in future decisions. The movement into the unknown is really the call to on-going conversion of the Heart. The challenge for me, more because I am an extrovert, has been to take the time to stop, sit and listen to my heart.

"Fly free as Edmund did before you to new horizons, to the unknown, the not-yet-imagined." (Munnar)

Class work in the Institute of Religious Formation opened a new way of thinking about my relationship with God and the presence of God in my life. Learning to pray my goodbyes, to look at Jesus in a new and challenging way, to be open to new possibilities and to be willing to go beyond the ordinary were very important.

Regular spiritual direction has been a blessing. Now some of you might be saying ... “weren't you getting regular spiritual direction in the past?” The simple answer is no ... I was too busy teaching, coaching, marking history papers. Wonderful reasons, but excuses none the less. When all of the day- to-day activities were stripped away from me and I was given the opportunity to take advantage of spiritual direction and peer supervision ... a window into my heart was opened. I can't shut that window!

The Spirit is alive and well ... do I see it. Yes and no. The last two years have reawakened the desires, ideals and hopes that I knew were there, but that had been hidden behind my active and full ministry life. I just had to open my eyes to see what was very much in front of me.

What am I saying? The step to move into a new ministry, the willingness to experience change in my life has rekindled the passion of Brotherhood as a Christian Brother.

Rupp reiterates this feeling when she suggests that our lives really reflect a pattern of “hello-goodbyes-hello”. She suggests that the “springtime” of hello awaits us all. (Rupp, 114)

I know that no matter what ministry awaits in the future, the gift of awareness of the movement of the heart cannot be stilled. The challenge for all of us Christian Brothers, particularly as we are getting a “little older” is to be open to new possibilities, is to be open to our “Hearts” alive and active, and to be open to God’s presence working ... slowly, inexorably and powerfully. Edmund had it right when he reminded us to let *Jesus, Live in our Hearts ... Forever.*

Brother Peter O’Loughlin, C.F.C.  
Callan Novitiate  
Chicago, Illinois

Rupp, Joyce. Praying Our Goodbyes. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1988

*"I thank my God when I think of you. And when I pray for you, I pray with joy."*

Check out the following websites for more resources on the topics of Spirituality and Renewal:

[www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie)

[www.gratefulness.org](http://www.gratefulness.org)

[www.enlightenment.org](http://www.enlightenment.org)

[www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)

[www.diarmuid13.com](http://www.diarmuid13.com)



Introducing Brother Seán Whitty, C.F.C.,  
Chair of the Office of Province Life and Renewal.

Residence: Jericho House  
309 Beatrice Street  
Wellend, Ontario L3B 2Z9  
Email: [fswitty@hotmail.com](mailto:fswitty@hotmail.com)  
Mobile: 914-374-8108