



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION
OF THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS**

Friday, 22 March 2002

*Dear Brother Garvey,
Dear Brothers in Christ,*

1. "Peace to all of you who are in Christ!" (1 Pt 5:14): with the words of the Apostle Peter, I greet you on the occasion of the Twenty-ninth General Chapter of the Congregation of the Christian Brothers. I am especially happy to welcome you in this year when you are celebrating your Bicentenary, for it allows us to praise God for the charism which came through Blessed Edmund Ignatius Rice and continues to this day in you who are his sons and brothers. It is an opportunity for me *to thank you in the name of the Church for all that the Christian Brothers have done through the course of two centuries in educating the young.*

2. The story of grace which you celebrate in this General Chapter began at *a time of great social upheaval in Europe and deep distress in Edmund Rice's native Ireland.* Through your Founder's earlier life, the Continent was shaken by the storms of revolution, which saw the collapse of an old order and the rise of a new, which emerged with such difficulty from the bloody wars which so troubled Europe at the dawn of the nineteenth century.

In Ireland itself, these were years of poverty and religious persecution, when the great traditions of Irish Catholic life were indeed imperilled. Instead, these traditions flourished in new and remarkable ways when God stirred people like Edmund Rice to take up the task of educating the young, otherwise condemned to a material, intellectual, moral and spiritual poverty which demeaned not only them but an entire society. In responding to God's call, your Founder was not only obeying the deep impulses of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us all things (cf. Jn 14:26). He was also upholding *the way of the Catholic Church, which has always put education at the very heart of*

her mission to preach the Gospel. Moreover, Edmund showed himself faithful to the ancient tradition of the great monastic schools of Ireland which had forged a profound link between sanctity and learning, humanity and education, to the glory of Europe and the entire Christian world.

At the same time the crisis which Edmund faced was not just social or national; it was *a grave personal crisis* which released in his life the grace which brought your Congregation to birth. When his young wife died in 1789, he thought first of retiring to a life of contemplation. But this was not to be. Instead, it was *a life of action rooted in contemplation* to which Edmund knew himself to be called by God. His was a vocation to undertake "a new 'creativity' in charity" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 50), which was the true revolution in a revolutionary age, a revolution born not of violence but of *quiet and patient listening to God.*

3. Edmund's contemplation of *Christ the Teacher* shaped him more and more in the image of the One who in the Gospels "is at once majestic and familiar, impressive and reassuring" (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 8). The One he followed knew "what was in man" (*Jn 2:25*), and was compassionate though unafraid to speak the truth, authoritative without ever being authoritarian, rooted in tradition yet imaginative in meeting the needs of his own time.

To these same heights, dear Brothers, you are called by Christ and your Founder as you set forth into your third century; and there, like Edmund, you will discover "a face of sorrow" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 26-27), *the face of the Crucified Lord himself.* Now more than ever it is upon him that you must fix your gaze: *the Suffering Servant* upon whom lies the punishment that brings us peace (cf. *Is 53:2-9*). To the one who was pierced for our faults you must bring your own wounds and sorrows; to the one who was bruised for our iniquities, you must bring your own failings. Who but the Lord of all mercy will heal our wounds; who but he will turn our sorrows to joy; who but he will turn even our sins to new life? I say this to you, dear Brothers, on the eve of Holy Week, when the whole Church celebrates the mystery of the Lord's Cross, which is the key to all the mysteries of life and death.

It is Calvary that teaches the truth of your own history: from crisis, your Congregation was born, and it is from the crisis of these times that your future, God's future for you, is being born even now. Therefore, with the Apostle I say to you, "Rejoice in the Lord always!" (*Phil 4:4*), because in the light of Easter we understand what Saint Paul means when he says, "When I am weak, then I am strong!" (*2 Cor 12:10*). With God's help, there is no wound that cannot become a fountain of new life. This is the reason for our hope: this is the source of our joy!

4. From Waterford in 1802, your Congregation spread to every corner of Ireland, of the Irish diaspora and beyond. Now as your numbers diminish in some places, they increase elsewhere. And beyond the bounds of the Congregation itself, the Edmund Rice Movement is stirring new energies among lay men and women who share in your spirit and work. *The flame of faith lit by*

your Founder burns brightly still, and it is now your task to ensure that this "fire on the earth" (Lk 12:49) is as creative now as it was in the past. At a time when many cultures are experiencing a crisis in communicating religious and moral values to the young, *the educational mission entrusted to you is more important than ever*. Yet it is also more challenging, for this is a time when, as Pope Paul VI observed, people "listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41). You have always been excellent teachers; now you must be still more renowned for *your courageous and joyful witness to Christ before the young*, as the whole Church undertakes afresh "the great adventure of proclaiming the Gospel" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 58) in the work of the new evangelization.

As you listen to God through the days of this General Chapter – giving thanks for the past, seeking to understand the present and planning for the future – I ask the Lord to pour out his Spirit upon you in new and effective ways. Entrusting the Congregation of the Christian Brothers to the loving care of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and to the intercession of your Blessed Founder, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of endless mercy in Jesus Christ, who lives for ever in our hearts.