

9. WITNESSES TO THE FAITH: THE VENERABLE EDEL QUINN



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Your Eminence(s), Brother President, brother priests, fellow legionaries, first of all I would like to thank Tommy McCabe and Concilium for inviting me to speak on the Venerable Edel Quinn. To be honest I was quite surprised when asked to speak on Edel Quinn because when I heard that the other two speakers were personally acquainted with the subjects of their talks, Frank Duff and Alfie Lambe, as one who never knew Edel personally, as is fairly obvious, I am sure there were more qualified people than I. But I appreciate the honour and hope that what I say will at least pay some homage to this remarkable woman.

My first introduction to Edel Quinn was through my aunt. She has been an Auxiliary legionary for years and it was through her that I heard of the Legion and of Edel Quinn. As a young boy she would tell me about Edel, the young, sick Irishwoman who left everything to spread the Legion in Africa and I was fascinated. When I became an Auxiliary myself I bought a copy of Cardinal Suenens' biography and found myself being quite charmed by this 'slip of a girl' and her heroic work. As the years passed I kept a passing acquaintance with her, dipping in and out of books, and my admiration for her grew particularly when sensitive events not recorded by the Cardinal, for obvious reasons, were revealed. I realized that we were dealing with a woman of extraordinary holiness and significance: a walking miracle, a real Catholic missionary and an authentic model for all of us and in particular the laity. I was delighted to know someone who knew her in life – Sr. Magdalen, one of the Medical Missionaries of Mary in Drogheda – indeed one of Mother Mary Martin's first companions. In conversing with Sr. Magdalen I have learned much more about Edel, but also tasted something of the experience of knowing her in the flesh.

With the limited amount of time available, even a brief biography of her would not be possible. Thankfully the Legion has a number of wonderful short biographies, and Cardinal Suenens' remains the standard – a real gem of a read. In these short talks we are considering three Legionaries as witnesses to the faith and indeed as models for the faithful. As priests we have a duty to present to those we minister to models of holiness to inspire them in their day to day living of the Catholic faith – this was part of Pope John Paul II's ministry and God granted the Church numerous miracles

throughout his pontificate to allow the beatification and canonization of many heroic men and women. Edel is still waiting: one has to wonder why since she has so much to say to the men and women of our day – particularly to the faithful in Ireland: God, however, knows the time.

Who was Edel Quinn? Or more correctly, who is she? – in terms of the Communion of Saints she is still alive and active. Those acquainted with her life story will recognize a woman of remarkable ability; one who was burdened by illness – TB; and a Christian of profound faith and a missionary of heroic standards. Edel is one of those rare souls who come into our midst and in a hidden way change us. Like a glacier she moves through the world and when she has gone you realize that something has happened, something has changed in your life for knowing her. This, I believe is as true now to those of us who know her best through prayer as for those who knew her in life. Edel was hidden: the words of St Paul come to mind: "hidden with Christ in God" and now she is being revealed. Many have compared her to St Thérèse of Lisieux, and certainly in their apparent ordinariness that is true. Sr. Magdalen told me in conversation that she seemed to be "very normal" and yet we now know that her spiritual life was profound. She tried to hide it, yet friends and acquaintances managed to catch a glimpse of the holiness, of the serenity, of the beauty of her soul. Perhaps if she had not gone to Africa and blazed a trail as an envoy, she might never have been revealed to be the saint she is. Thanks to his chains, the holiness of Matt Talbot was revealed, thanks to the Legion, Edel Quinn was revealed. Sr. Magdalen said that it was the Legion of Mary which made her a saint: she is the proof that the Legion system is one which can help sanctify. But she is also proof that holiness can be found in the ordinariness of life. Edel was on the way to holiness as she walked the streets of Dublin serving the poor and the lonely. She was on the way to holiness when she knelt in the Carmelite Church in Clarendon Street at Sunday Mass. As priests, we offer this woman to our people as one who shows us how to live as Christians, and in this we can discern a number of themes.

The first has to be her spiritual life. Edel wanted to be a nun – it was not to be. As she accepted God's will in this, she realised that she could live that life of prayer in the world. As Cardinal Suenens observed, as nuns lived their vocation of prayer in the cloister, Edel would live hers at the typewriter. Here we come into contact with the sanctification of ordinary life, of where we are. This is what Vatican II was speaking about. In recent years, in the cacophony of arguments over the Council this insight has been lost: as Catholics argue over their various political agendas the call to holiness has been forgotten. As priests we are called to lead people to holiness: this is what we are called to do: it is at the heart of the Legion's teaching and system, and is what we see first of all in Edel's life. She got it right. At the heart of her day was prayer, and at the heart of that was the Eucharist – Mass and Adoration. In recent years we have seen numerous documents coming from Rome calling the Church to be renewed in its devotion to the Eucharist – Edel in her spiritual life provides an example of how this devotion can be lived. As priests she can teach us a renewed reverence for the Eucharist, and remind us how to offer the Mass – with devotion and fidelity, and from our example we can inspire those we care for. She answers that question we often hear: how can I live a deeper prayer life while living and working in the world?

The second theme we can discern from her life is her vocation as a lay person. Edel is a worthy model for the lay apostolate. Since Vatican II there has been an emphasis on the vocation of the laity and this has led to some wonderful initiatives and also to a number of misunderstandings. In Edel we see a model of how lay men and women can take a more active role in the Church. We also see a model for the role of women. Many of the recent debates on the role of the laity have centered on their active participation in the liturgy and unfortunately we have seen in some places a clericalisation of the laity which has led, in fact, to an undermining of the vocation of the laity, taking them from their mission in the world into the "confines" of the sanctuary. The debate concerning women has been centered on whether to ordain them or not – unfortunately in that debate many have lost sight of what women can do in the Church: Edel can speak to the Church here. Anyone who knew her knew her not be a 'suppressed woman' but neither was she in revolt: her life was marked by fidelity. She loved the Church and wanted to spend her life serving it and she did, admirably. She embraced Frank Duff's teaching on the vocation of the laity and found within her life and where she was the opportunities to preach the Gospel and bring Christ to those who had not met him. Her genius was to understand her role in following the command of Christ to teach all nations. As a lay person she could go where the clergy could not; as a single person she could do what the married could not (there is in her the revelation of the vocation of the single life, an area which needs more attention in the Church). As priests we need to avoid the contentious issues and re-present the models of active lay service in the Church: Edel is one who can teach the laity how to reflect on their lives and to identify those areas into which they must bring Christ. Edel looked to Mary as her model, and saw within the vocation of the Mother, the vocation of the daughter and indeed the son – this is of course the genius of the Legion. Turning to the greatest lay Christian of them all, Mary, they discern their lay vocation by sharing in hers.

Edel can also speak to the young. While TB ravaged her body and she looked much older than she was, Edel died young – she was 37 when she died. Her life was that of a young person and as a young person she was chosen as Envoy – she was 29 when she left Ireland. Her life was marked by that youthful joyfulness and vivacity; eager and enthusiastic, she had much to offer the Church and the Church accepted. In his homily for the inauguration of his pontificate Pope Benedict reminded us that the Church is alive, and she is young. She does listen to the voices of the young and for those young people who are properly catechized there are endless possibilities. Each year the Legion holds a Youth Conference and invites the members of all the youth movements in Ireland, among them Youth 2000 and Pure in Heart, who are involved in successful programmes and evangelisation. In coming together these movements seek to form apostles for the new century and they look to Edel Quinn and other saints to inspire them. As a teacher, I know young people are interested in the saints, particularly in the heroic ones and the young ones: saints they might be able to identify with. (St Joseph of Cupertino is very popular in Ireland at the moment now we are in exam time!) In Edel we have one who is a young witness to the faith who might inspire others. The Legion, as the Church, still needs envoys and extension workers – our most recent envoy is a young man – Edel reminds young people that they have the energy and time and

vivacity the Church needs.

There are so many other themes: Edel's message to the sick and their vital role within the Church is profound in an age when euthanasia is posited as a solution to extreme illness, but time does not permit further reflection on this. But if I were to choose one last theme to present before you, it must be that which touches my heart the most: her joy. Edel Quinn, like St Francis of Assisi and St Philip Neri, was an Apostle of Joy. Living in difficult circumstances and situations, those who knew her remember first of all her joy. I sometimes think we live in a joyless age. Edel's joy, I believe to be supernatural in origin. Apart from her natural vivacity, she was imbued with that joy which only the Holy Spirit can give – a joy which emerged from her faith. If we are bringing Edel Quinn to the world, we must first reveal that joy and how it is centered in her faith: it is her joy which confirms her as a profound witness of the faith.

Last year, I suggested at the Legion's Youth Conference last year that Hollywood should make a movie about Edel – and what a movie! If a good actress could play her as she was, anyone who would see that movie, I am convinced, would fall in love with her and be touched by sheer delight. If they turn to her in prayer, they will immediately experience that joy and Edel, missionary she is, will bring them to the source of that joy: Jesus Christ and his Mother. So here we see that Edel has an important role to play in the New Evangelisation: her work is not over – it has only begun. I believe she will be as popular a saint as St Thérèse or St Pio as soon as the news gets out and we priests can find in her a powerful ally in our ministry: her attractive personality, her 'ordinariness', her heroism, her joy will draw people to faith. Perhaps that is why we are not seeing millions of miracles – God does not want her to be another wonderworker, but rather an inspiration – when people come to her it will not be to ease the pain in the back or find the glasses, or help Frankie in the Leaving Cert, but to come to a friend who will teach them about Christ and Mary and share her joy which will inspire and comfort them in the day to day difficulties of life, and in this she can help us in our ministry.