

EDMUND RICE FEAST DAY 2021

FROM STRANGER TO FRIEND

*Our neighbours, near and far, friend and stranger
"challenge us to listen compassionately and creatively to the hidden silences..."*

John O'Donohue

5 MAY 2021

Recently a group of young children living in an apartment block decided to celebrate International Neighbours' Day. They sent invitations to everyone in the building. They made cupcakes and brought out some water and a few chairs for those who needed to sit.

It was a beautiful autumn day; the sun warmed the crowd as they greeted one another. The fresh smell of rain and the gentle breeze brought life to the garden. The neighbours gathered - the youngest was 6 the oldest 93. The small gathering was representative of many diverse and colourful backgrounds. The conversation encompassed the practical, the playful and the spiritual.

The neighbours began the day as strangers, but they left as friends. Life in the apartment block has changed - the expression of community has been enhanced to include care and respect for others.

Covid-19 has taught us that much of what is needed is for us to look beyond our own needs – our very survival and safety depends on how others are faring. In 2013 in the Augustine Collective, Tony Farias, wrote an article called *A Papal Perspective on Community*. The article celebrated Francis' first six months as

Pope and highlighted his commitment to community as church and society. Francis provided a roadmap outlining three critical themes, necessary in building community.

"First, humility is an essential virtue, not only for serving others before yourself, but for being able to value and take pride in the small things that you do and that are done for you.

Second, beliefs grow the most and values are strongest in harmonized communities where members work in service of each other. Communities need to search for common threads in values and beliefs and focus on coming together around that common ground.

Third, communities must think critically about what their strongest selling points are and then advertise those most strongly at first, tailoring these points according to who the potential members are."

So, what has all this to do with Edmund and how we celebrate his feast day?

For Edmund to have achieved what he did he needed community. He saw the children around him deprived of the very basics of life.



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The hope of their future depended on Edmund's capacity and commitment to involving like-minded people in his endeavours. You can imagine the local suspicion and negativity, as he gathered the young urchins together.

What if these were your new neighbours? Edmund's courage and determination must have been powerful drivers of change. This change demanded a shift in values, great humility and as Francis said: "a community recognising its strongest selling points."

The growth and development of EREA is a grand story. A story of gratitude to the Christian Brothers for continuing to animate Edmund's work and perpetuate his dream that, through education, the young ones in his care have a hope-filled future. We have much to celebrate and celebrate with pride. Thankfully our story also comes with challenges. The challenge is to not only live within a powerful value system but to grow through it and continue to create communities of love, a love expressed through responsibility and care.

Edmund's charism and mission is ours – ours to shape and to turn into a dynamic, contemporary force. Such a force is very much needed in our complex and fragile world where both its peoples and its environment need the protection of a courageous loving hand.

**"This is the time to be slow.
Each of us is an artist of our days:
the greater our integrity and awareness,
the more original and creative
our time will become.
Be the mind that dreamed the day."**

John O'Donohue

What does this mean for EREA and for those of us privileged to belong to such an organisation?

Three questions come to mind:

1. As an organisation how do we build community?
2. Are our schools inclusive of all and do all experience a strong sense of belonging?
3. In our world, our Global Village, how can we, as part of EREA, be good, responsible and caring neighbours?

To help us answer these questions, Pope Francis has given us a roadmap. Start with humility and all that that demands - patience, tolerance, compassion. Work together to create a harmonised community so that shared values and beliefs become the drivers rather than our own needs.

Finally, encourage others to join the powerful positive community being created.

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near and far, friend and stranger "challenge us
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hidden silences ..."**

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Could it be that we are called to sensitively seek such 'hidden silences' that may exist between us – making possible the erasing of the space between stranger and friend.

Thank you for all you do and for allowing your head and heart to be the drivers of our EREA mission.

Joyously celebrate Edmund Rice's Feast Day and imagine how we can live up to the challenges of his story.

Kathy Freeman and David White

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