

# TALK ON MISSION TO AMERICAN LEADERS

URUGUAY, 2024

It has been an honour and a joy to spend these days with you. I am so proud of you all. I am deeply grateful for your passion, generosity and kindness.

I also thank you for giving me this time to speak. It is a real privilege.

In my hour today, I hope to offer some stories and reflections on two separate but related topics:

- A Spirituality for Mission through the lens of Presence, Liberation, and Compassion
- Some Priorities for Mission in the Edmund Rice tradition

Some here have heard me speak in other contexts before, but my hunch is that most have not. I apologise if there are any stories you've heard or read before, but I'll try to include a few new ones as well.

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For the past 5 years, it has been my privilege to serve as the Global Ambassador for EREBB.

It is better to speak with a common heart  
than with a common tongue!

Rumi

The poet's words speak to the dream we hold for Edmund Rice Education Beyond Borders.

The dream has its roots in our attempt to answer a question:

Can we participate in God's mission together, crossing borders, with the richness of shared cultures, united by common beliefs about education which stem from our commitment to Gospel priorities, the vision of Edmund Rice and the legacy of the Christian Brothers?

From what I can see, through the gatherings, the relationships that have been formed and the celebration of our global identity, we have answered and continue to answer this question with an emphatic yes.

In their unconditional support of EREBB since its inception ten years ago, the Christian Brothers have challenged us not to guard a museum but to plant and water a garden. A garden that will write new chapters and find fresh language in the expression of the vision of Edmund Rice in education.

This is exactly what you are doing here in this gathering.

The 'good news' of EREBB is that we tend this garden together, guided and strengthened by the wisdom of our rich and diverse cultures and a passion for the vision which unites us: our Common Heart.



Our EREBB family is multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-lingual.

Some in our family are blessed with many resources, while others struggle for survival. Some work with communities of privilege, while others work with people who face extreme challenges. Many of our students, educators and leaders come from a faith background other than Christianity.

And so, what can we learn about faith and spirituality, about justice and about what is most important for Catholic education from our global family?

We learn that....

- God, the ineffable essence of love and compassion, is so much bigger than the words we use to talk about God.
- Our great world traditions of faith and spirituality are all a call to the mind of the One God, different roads converging upon the same point. And that the scriptures of these traditions can all reflect the same divine voice in different languages.
- The enemies of religions are not other religions. Rather, the enemies of faith in a God of love are poverty, injustice, exclusion, and all that subverts God's promise of fullness of life for all people.
- Authenticity and excellence in Catholic schooling have little to do with the number of Catholics enrolled or the standard of our buildings and resources. But rather, on the resolve within a school community to see the world with God's eyes and embrace solidarity with the marginalised and the excluded ones.

We learn that...

- Passing on faith is not the transmission of a set of beliefs and practices, but rather helping and encouraging people to experience the Divine in their lives in the most expansive way possible.

Joseph Campbell once reflected that more than knowledge about God, what people really crave is an experience of God.

Human lives are not transformed by tinkering with ideas, beliefs, and formulations; rather, transformation happens through a change in consciousness.

More than adherents of religious systems, our world needs more people who embody the teachings of love and compassion, which abound in all faith traditions.

The highest expressions of any faith are kindness, compassion, and a commitment to justice.

The Dalai Lama was once approached by a monk who had spent 18 years in a Chinese gulag. The monk confessed that there were times when he felt in danger. His Holiness asked the monk what the greatest danger he had experienced was. The monk replied that the greatest danger he had experienced in the gulag was the danger of losing compassion for the Chinese guards who oppressed him.

In a hotel I once visited in Uruguay, there were two sets of goldfish. In a tank inside the lobby, the goldfish were small and confined, while in a pond outside the front door, the fish were large and swam freely. I was told that they were all the same variety of fish and that goldfish can grow to be small or large, depending on the space they are given to develop.

I think that there is a lesson here for the formation of the young.

The 'pond' of spirituality and religious experience in which we educate them should be a large one, allowing them to grow, explore and maximise their spiritual potential.

The opposite is to confine and limit, small fish in a small tank.

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I have been gifted hospitality, often by people who have little, that redefines for me the boundaries of human generosity and humbles me to the core.

Our communities continue to teach me about gratitude and valuing the small things in life.

Perhaps my greatest teacher of gratitude was an old woman who suffered the terrible effects of leprosy.

I was with a group of people from our schools in Australia, and we were about to visit a community of people who suffer from leprosy in India.

At the entrance to the colony, we encountered a woman who had a very advanced case of leprosy and found it very difficult to walk. She greeted us with a warm smile and was very excited.

We found out that this woman had travelled for four hours, walking with her 2 sons to support her, to reach the colony so that she could receive a pair of sandals fashioned especially for people with leprosy. These sandals were made from discarded truck and car tyres.

Since people with leprosy lose the feeling in their limbs, stronger protection is necessary, particularly on the feet, so that people don't suffer from infection caused by nails and other cuts to the feet.

After some time, I visited the small workshop in the colony where these rough sandals were made and found the same woman, overwhelmingly happy and full of joy.

I spoke with the cobbler, and he showed me the sandals that the lady was about to receive. I must admit that I was taken aback when I first saw the sandals, as the left foot seemed to be of normal size, whereas the right foot was only of sufficient size to cover the stump that this lady had where her foot used to be.

I was privileged to be in the same room and to see the delight and gratitude she expressed when she was presented with this basic footwear. It was as if she had won the lottery!

Not far from my house in Melbourne, there is a very expensive shoe shop where people can pay hundreds of dollars for a pair of imported shoes.

I wonder how long I would have to observe the happenings in that shop before encountering anyone who would express anything near the delight that this woman showed at the receipt of her simple sandals.

In fact, I think I would see some angry and disappointed looks on customers' faces simply because the half size isn't available, the shoe doesn't quite fit, or they have to wait for service.

There is an ancient Persian saying: 'I wept because I had no shoes, until I saw a person with no feet!'

Clearly, the most important arithmetic to master is the kind that enables us to count our blessings and be grateful for them.

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The terms Presence, Liberation, and Compassion are often used to understand mission in the Edmund Rice tradition.

Our physical presence in mission is a tangible sign of our solidarity with those we serve and their plight. Our presence brings dignity and hope to those whom we serve, a belief that their lives do matter, that they are persons of worth.

Our call to Presence also speaks to the consciousness that moves us in the mission we embrace.

An opening to this sense of presence begins when we reflect on questions such as:

- Who are we?
- What is our essential nature and identity?
- What is the nature of our relationship with the Divine, with each other, with the cosmos?
- What do our answers to these questions mean for our sense of mission?

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We are inextricably linked through a sacred spark within each of us, delivered from stardust, tending toward hope, and lit by love.

These words from Iranian/American writer Melody Moezzi lead us beautifully into reflection on these questions.

All creation has its source in the Divine.

There exists a spark of divinity in every one of us, and we are not separate from God or from each other.

As the leaf emerges from the tree and is an expression of the tree, so do we emerge from God and are an expression of God.

As Meister Eckhart expressed it:

At the heart of who you are is the  
endless source and boundless centre  
where God dwells.

In the words of the Indian saint Kabir:

As oil is in the oilseed  
As fire is in the flint  
As fragrance is in the flower  
As air pervades all space  
My Lord is living in every human being.

In India, this truth is recognised every time we use the greeting 'Namaste': the Divine in me honours the Divine in you.

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This photo was taken in Damascus in 1899.

The photo depicts a very short man named Samir. He is a Christian and cannot walk. He is being carried on the back of another man. He is a Muslim named Mohammed, and he is blind.

Mohammed relies on Samir to tell him where to go, and Samir uses his friend's back to navigate the city streets. They were both orphans and lived in the same room. They were always together.

Samir had the gift of storytelling and told stories to the customers of a cafe in Damascus. Mohammed liked to listen to his friend's stories.

One day, when he retired to his room, Mohammed found his companion dead. He wept and mourned his friend for seven days straight. When asked how they got along so well, being of different religions, he said only this, while pointing to his heart:

"In here, (pointing to his heart) we were the same person!"

In the way of love, the self and the other are one.

Since we share the same divine essence, we are all brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the Divine. 'Otherness' is an illusion.

Einstein spoke of the thought of separateness as 'an optical delusion of consciousness'.

'Love your neighbour as yourself,' could easily be altered to 'Love your neighbour because she or he is yourself.

South African culture also has a word for this consciousness: Ubuntu.

In Ubuntu, we become fully human only in relationship with others. My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours. What humanises you, humanises me. What dehumanises you, dehumanises me.

I think that children know these things instinctively.

I was once in a restaurant here in Latin America.

As people were eating, a poor man, accompanied by his little son, entered the restaurant and began offering sweets for sale as a way to earn some money in a semi-dignified manner.

As some patrons of the restaurant complained to the waiter about this 'intruder', the staff began ushering the man out of the restaurant.

As he was leaving, I couldn't help but see out of the corner of my eye that his little son, dirty and unkempt, had struck up a friendship with a boy of a similar age who was the son of one of the well-off patrons.

Whilst all of this 'class battle' was happening between the adults, these two little boys became friends and were playing together in the corner. They were totally unaware of any distinctions between them or any societal or class norms that they were breaking.

The Gospel makes it clear that unless we become like these little children, our potential to see God and God's vision for the world will be clouded.

If we allow exclusion and discomfort with 'the other' to dictate who we call our neighbour, we will continue to miss the teaching of the Gospel, and our humanity will continue to be impaired and incomplete.

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Accepting that our true identity has its source and essence in God and each other, what then are we to do? What is our mission?

We are the embodiment of Divine love, compassion, and justice in the world. We are vehicles for God's presence.

The more we live in the transparency to the Divine light within us, the more we become a source of peace and healing for those around us.

St Teresa of Avila said that we are the eyes, the feet, the hands and the face with which divine compassion embraces the world.

In a moving scene from 'Society of the Snow,' the movie we watched yesterday, Arturo speaks of his belief in God made visible through the actions of his friends:

I believe in the God that Roberto keeps inside his head when he comes to heal each of my wounds. I believe in the God Nando keeps in his legs, the one that lets him continue walking no matter what. I believe in Daniel's hands when he cuts the meat. And Fito gives it to us without saying which of our friends it belonged to.

To be instruments of Divine mission; the embodiment of divine love, compassion, and justice. This is our mission.

When our heart burns at the sufferings of others, that is God's own heart within us. When our eyes strain to see others happy, God sees through these eyes. When our hands toil for others' relief, these hands move only by God's will.

I am a hole in the flute that God's breath moves through. Listen to the music that God makes through me.

Hafiz

The aim of the mission is not to get people to believe the right things in order to get to some special place. It is about inspiring people to embrace the model of Jesus' lifestyle and see the world with the eyes of God.

Mission is about inspiring people to look at the world through human eyes but to see it through hearts of love, compassion, inclusion, and justice.

The life and ministry of Jesus rendered Divine love visible and concrete. Fully alive with the life of God, totally loving with the love of God. When people encountered Jesus, they had a complete experience of God.

In the same way that Jesus and other sages and prophets have done, we too are called to reveal to the world the God of love and compassion enshrined in our hearts.

A grandmother was out shopping for some gifts for her grandchildren. While she was at the toy store, going through her list and selecting

gifts, she noticed a small homeless girl outside, looking through the store window. The grandmother's heart went out to this little girl. She invited her into the store and asked her to pick out a gift for herself. As they walked out of the store, the little girl held the grandmother's hand, looked into her kind eyes, and asked, 'Are you God?' The grandmother, somewhat embarrassed and somewhat touched, replied: 'No, dear, I'm not God.' 'Then who are you?' continued the little girl. Grandma thought for a moment and said, 'I am a child of God.' The little girl, fully satisfied and smiling, said, 'Yes, I could tell that there is a connection.'

When people come into our lives, do they see this divine connection in us?

We were created from love by love to love.

Our life's mission and purpose, and that of our churches and schools, is to be the loving, compassionate, just, and inclusive face of the Divine to all who encounter us.

To experience and manifest the presence of god.

I think that this is the most important praise or worship that God asks or requires of us.

You are the soul of my soul...my life is an instrument of your purpose.

Hindu Mystic Shankara

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I am often asked to speak about which priorities mark the distinctiveness of the Edmund Rice mission in education.

Edmund Rice once famously said: Give to the poor in handfuls!

When our hands are full, there is little room for anything else. I think Edmund was saying that we must centre the poor in our mission; make their liberation and inclusion our prime concern.

We are told that Edmund Rice experienced God 'appealing' to him in the poor, and this evoked in him a 'conversion of heart'.

Conversion of the heart does not require rejection of one's religious belief system in favour of another. It is accepting responsibility for bringing to reality the Reign of God, the Divine vision for how the world should be.

Conversion of heart is a commitment to see with the eyes of God.

Edmund recognised that the God of love, compassion and justice wishes fullness of life for all. That living in an inhuman situation of poverty and exclusion, disposable and forgotten in the eyes of the world, is contrary to God's will.

Our voice in Edmund Rice mission must amplify the voice of the poor and the forgotten ones of the world.

- Those for whom mere survival is a constant challenge.
- Those who lack the basic resources to live a dignified life.
- The victims of structures and decisions that exclude and oppress them.

How can we show these people that they are children of the loving and compassionate God who wills their inclusion and offers the fullness of life to everyone?

How to tell these people that God is love, and that this love makes us all brothers and sisters?

We recognise, serve and worship God most completely in our service to the poor.

We are told in the scriptures that our prayers, our liturgies, and our theologies are meaningless and incomplete if we fail to practice justice and stand with the marginalised.

This message was brought home to me some years ago when I travelled to Sri Lanka to meet theologian Fr Tissa Balasuriya.

A friend and I arrived at the sprawling compound where Fr Tissa lived and were met by this tiny little man with scraggly long white hair.

“So, you’ve come to talk theology!” Fr Tissa said when we first met. He promptly led us out of the room, down the stairs, across the compound, into the street, into a rickshaw, and before we fully realised what was happening, we had travelled for 45 minutes to the outskirts of Colombo to a slum area in which he had built a school for the poor.

He took us to an area on the unfinished roof of the school, right in the middle of the slum, sat us down and said: “Now we can do theology!”

Fr Tissa didn’t need to say any more; his message was so clear.

We see the face of God most clearly in the poor. Ignoring the poor means ignoring God.

We cannot reflect on the Reign of God, God's vision for a just and inclusive world, without focusing on the plight of the poor and what the Gospel's 'good news' means for them.

After his conversion, St Oscar Romero warned that:

... a church that doesn't provoke any crises, a Gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, isn't really the Gospel but rather, very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone!

Mission in the tradition of Edmund Rice is not simply a call for a generous action to alleviate misery, but a demand for building a more just social order.

It takes sides, becomes political and asks disturbing questions about the way things are and why this is so.

At a time when many of the families we serve seek our fruits but not our roots, the greatest risk for our schools' authenticity is to soften or drift from the core imperatives of their mission as mandated by fidelity to the Gospel and simply become another 'fine' group of schools, embracing a tame and domesticated mission.

Pope Francis once said that: 'The Gospel of the marginalised is where our credibility is discovered and is revealed.'

United Nations diplomat Sergio Viera De Mello expressed it equally bluntly:

The way we look at them (the poor) will determine the way the whole world looks at us.

Some might say that it is easier to embrace radical inclusion or an option for the poor, in India, Africa and places where material poverty and exclusion are so visible.

We know that this is not true.

When tempted to think this way, however, let's remember the words of Mother Teresa:

Calcutta can be found all over the world if only we have eyes to see.

Our task is to find Calcutta wherever we are.

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Most people are consumers of other people's definitions of what constitutes a happy, successful, well-lived, and meaningful life.

An Edmund Rice education committed to liberation will help our young people look deeply into the world's recipes for success, happiness, and wholeness, and be selective and critical about what they accept.

It will challenge versions of the world that define success solely in terms of money, accumulation of things and an overemphasis on status and security.

It will encourage young people to live independently of others' approval or good opinion; to unshackle themselves from unexamined opinions and inherited prejudices.

The Greek roots of the word suggest that the hero is one who can choose. The hero interprets life through her/his own experience. The hero's journey leads to questioning and interrogation of the culture in which one lives. Who am I? What is valuable? How do I find peace and happiness? What does it mean to live justly?

The hero is suspicious of easy answers that are readily on offer in the dominant culture.

I think that an Edmund Rice education for liberation is about creating heroes!

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I once heard it suggested that another monument should be built alongside the Statue of Liberty in New York, a Statue of Responsibility! This is a reminder that freedom and service are inextricably linked, and with the privilege of liberty comes the obligation of social responsibility.

Our young people should learn that the freedom and opportunities that they might enjoy, through the good fortune of their births, are not a licence for them to do whatever they want. Rather, it should be freedom to do what they ought to do for the making of a fairer and more just society.

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Anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilisation in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks, clay pots, or grinding stones.

But no. Mead said that the first sign of civilisation in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken the time to stay with the one who fell, bound the wound, carried the person to safety, and tended them through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilisation starts, Mead said.

Compassion is a cornerstone of civilisation.

We are at our best and most fully human when we serve others.

As said beautifully by Albert Schweitzer:

There is no higher religion than human service. To work for the common good is the greatest creed. I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: The only ones among you who will be happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.

The Christian Gospel and the charism of Edmund Rice diverge from the message of many of our dominant cultures by saying that we find the

essence of a meaningful existence by looking outside our individual needs and concerns.

Life is most meaningful when it is lived for others, and purpose in life is most profoundly experienced through contribution to the common good.

Our young people should learn that, in the end, it is not how much we have done in our lives that is ultimately important. Rather, it is whether we have made a positive difference in the lives of others and contributed to the stock of the world's goodness.

As Mother Teresa said:

It is not how much we do, but how much love we put into the doing. It is not how much we give, but how much love we put in the giving. We need not do great things, but small things with great love.

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A great danger for education is that it becomes solely focused on helping young people fit into an economy. We must prepare our students for life, not merely teach them to make a living.

We must prepare the young to make their contribution to the future, not just as cogs in a cycle of production and consumption, but as citizens, lovers, agents of change, and contributors to the world.

Loreto Day School is a highly prestigious girls' school in Calcutta. It is one of the most authentic Catholic schools I know, where ironically,

there are very few Catholics enrolled. Sr. Cyril Mooney, the dynamic and charismatic past Principal, always referred to her school as a 'resource centre for the poor.'

For generations, this prestigious school has been the school of choice for many of the well-heeled people of Calcutta, regardless of their religious affiliation. Under Sr. Cyril, of the school's enrolment of 1500, half pay high fees and half pay nothing. This latter group are street kids, the poorest of the poor. They all wear school uniforms, and all are equal in this remarkable place. But that's not all!

In this school, all the children, whether they are well-to-do, the future leaders of India, or children of street sweepers, every day are required to teach street kids; kids from the villages and railway stations; kids who have nothing. It is compulsory, regardless of caste or family background.

I remember asking a very eloquent school leader, a high-caste young Hindu lady of about 15 years of age, why her dad, who could afford any type of education, chose to send her here. Since at this school she had to engage with people of a caste and family background very different from her own, contrary to the beliefs and customs of her caste.

She replied very eloquently: 'My father sends me to this school so that I can receive an education, not just attain a qualification!'

Integral to an education for that girl and her family was the call to be an agent of change, the responsibility to challenge dehumanising structures, and the commitment to the liberation of all.

Teaching skills, without offering the young a vision for a better future, is merely training.

Your schools are not engaged in Catholic training in the Edmund Rice tradition!

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In finishing, I thank you for your kind attention and ask God's blessings upon your leadership.

Gandhi once famously said that his life was his message. Wonderful things happen when the lives of leaders become their message.

Albert Schweitzer once said that there are three ways in which an individual can change the world. The first is by example. The second is by example. The third is by example.

The first task for the Christian leader is to have a vision for the type of world we want to leave behind.

Through our words and our witness, we must make bold claims about the future of our world, about justice, about the way in which we should relate to one another, about the true meaning of freedom, meaning and purpose. The leader will speak for the voiceless and the excluded.

As leaders, we can take inspiration from the words of George Bernard Shaw:

This is the true joy in life.... being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one.

Be a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments

and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I believe my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do whatever I can for it. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the more I contribute, the more I live.

Life is no “brief candle” to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I have hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

Thank you for all you do to be the loving, compassionate face of God.

Thank you for all that you do for the poor and the excluded.

Thank you for all you do to free our young people, for their happiness and the future of our world.

Thank you for all you do to water the garden of our Edmund Rice vision and bring new expression to the marvellous charism which unites us.

I'm sure that Edmund Rice would be very proud.

Thank you.

