

## We Must Know Edel Quinn

This talk has been given the title: 'We must know Edel Quinn'. This brings the question: Why must we know her? It is because she brings spiritual stimulation to everyone who learns something about her. In fact people seem to become interested at the very mention of her name. She has a distinctiveness of her own among those who have been acclaimed as in the order of sanctity. It is hard to put one's finger on the precise cause of this influence. If I were forced to pick something, I think I would say that it is her modernity. She strikes that note firmly, and yet she died in 1944 which seems like an age ago.

Likewise she exercises an extraordinarily wide appeal, seeming to have a message for many classes. She was an invalid who held her illness at bay for sufficient years to stage one of the unique achievements in history. I knew a doctor who ordered a book on the life of Edel Quinn to be given to a patient who had lost the power to fight through. The patient read the book and spirit came back. I would believe that Edel would work the same psychology

on every sick person. The moral would seem to be that they should receive the same prescription.

### **A Compelling Example for Men and Women**

What is every missionary likely to feel who studies Edel? Taking into account the health angle, it seems to me that it would be impossible to set before them a loftier, more compelling, more galvanic headline.

All the feminine virtues shine forth in her. She was as remote as she could be from being a mannish woman, but she was able to teach men in lines that are supposed to be their own. She was able to command their respect, their devotion, their obedience. It would be wise for women in authority, especially the Legion where they enjoy plenty of it, to analyse Edel from this latter point of view. How did she exercise her remarkable sway without riling the men? And we must add, the women too. It is easy to answer by saying that it was her modest manner, but that answer would only skim the surface.

And of course every legionary owes it to himself and his membership to try to discover her secret. For she was a total product of the Legion, one might say the quintessence of it. I explain that this word represents the process of ultra-refining. In a strange way she stands for the Legion boiled down into a person. If you can understand her and imitate her, you have certainly got to the heart of the Legion. And never forget that the Legion has been paid one of the most exquisite compliments ever uttered. Pope John said that it represents the true face of the Catholic Church.

### **She Was Genuine**

One has not to probe deep into her to be favourably impressed. Her beauty and charm confronted you straight

away. But here I have to make some reservations. Her beauty was of a delicate order, and her charm was not a mere glamour; neither was it a veneer or the product of deliberate care. There was not a trace of the artificial about her. And possibly in this we are touching bedrock, getting near to what counted most in her. When she stood there before you, you knew that you were not looking at an unreality. You were not going to be treated to a salesman's approach. She was what she looked. She was genuine.

As we now know, the element of character was always in her. Her parents discerned it from her earliest age. Perhaps its first decisive dawning was when reverses came to her family. She did not indulge in any childish bemoaning's over the cutting short of her education. She knew what she wanted to do. She went home to Ireland and got a job to produce the money which was needed.

### **Wooed but Not Won**

This landed her into her one-sided love adventure. It was not on her side but on that of her young and very worthy French employer who was completely smitten by her. This might have developed naturally but for the fact that her mind was already, so to speak, booked. The intention to become a Poor Clare, when circumstances permitted, was already in possession.

It was about then that the Legion presented itself to her. You probably know the story, but it must be repeated for it is intrinsic to the picture. She met a girlhood friend and invited her home. The other could not come on the evening proposed because it was her Legion of Mary meeting.

Legion of Mary! What is that? Those few words and the explanation which they produced changed Edel's life and

the lives of many; made her a world force and a legend. We may confidently hope that the culmination will be the Church's seal of sanctity. The important Vatican official who is guiding her Cause wrote recently: I never work on her papers without rising up refreshed anew by the inspiration of this wonderful life.

### **Appointment with Destiny**

What is the Legion? That question brought her to her first Legion meeting, which according to her own declaration suddenly set before her eyes what she had unconsciously been looking for. But she did not realise that it was the most important moment of her life. Her destiny offered itself. She accepted it and adhered to it with a complete conviction. And she never looked back.

After some time word came to us of this young girl whose spirit was unusual. We had not yet met her. We sent for her and chatted for an evening. She exhibited no sign of delicacy and she did justify the good report about her. Our verdict was 'first class'. Just about then word came along that the Praesidium which visited the low-down women's lodging houses required a president, who had to be 'quite super-duper' as the current slang puts it. Edel was sent to it. Her arrival caused shock. The members concealed this but got together after the meeting. Then they commissioned their Spiritual Director, the late Dr Dempsey to go to headquarters to protest against a child being sent to lead them. He did this and then reported back that he had cut no ice, but he had been told that they would soon find out how lucky they were. And this they did in due course.

Then – like a thunderclap came her failure in health. Her stay in the Sanatorium, her resumption of work, her



Welsh expedition – and Africa. All so brimful of interest and lessons. For these I pass you over to Cardinal Suenens' book<sup>1</sup>, which is a masterpiece, commended by the popes themselves.

### **Africa Odyssey Which Reverberated in China**

The journey of a thousand leagues, says the phrase, begins with a single step. The step of joining the Legion took her off on a Peregrinatio for souls which covered many thousands leagues, led her to Africa, made her a missionary to missionaries; and enabled her to expand to her full dimension. Nor was it Africa alone which was to be the beneficiary. Cardinal Riberi explains this when he says that: Lost in the depths of the African jungle she was affecting the religious history of China. She furnished the inspiration which launched the latest bid so far for the conversion of that most populous country in the world.

For sheer faith, courage, patience, cheerfulness, zeal and every other quality which one might write down, her African journey places her beside the great saints of history. And perhaps even among that distinguished company she was unique. Not so many of them produced such a multiplication of energy and activity out of such meagre physical resources.

Every step she took must have required conscious effort. Yet in a state of weakness which was permanent and in an exacting climate she worked incessantly. Though she began her day more tired than most people finish it, nothing daunted her; nothing cast a shadow on her cheerful demeanour.

1 Leon-Joseph Suenens, *Edel Quinn: Envoy of the Legion of Mary to Africa*, Dublin: C J Fallon, 1955.

If at intervals her onward march was interrupted, it was because her body could no longer respond to her will. Too many moments could be applied those words she used: 'It is not that I will not but that I cannot.'

As an episode of frightening quality, I recall that time when nature broke and she lay helplessly in bed. But word came that a bishop whom she wished to see had just returned to his territory. It accomplished the impossible. She rose and travelled one hundred miles to see him. Then back to bed and renewed collapse. But for how long? Not too long, for the moment life would begin to stir in her again, that peremptory march would be resumed.

### **Faith and Firmness but No Hardness**

But here I pause, because in spite of my intention I may be projecting a false image of Edel. This could easily arise from the over-stressing of a particular aspect to the detriment of the others. Perhaps I may have been painting the picture for you of a woman of iron will, hard on herself and on everyone else, defying nature and pushing mountains out of the way. That would not be an attractive rendering of our subject, and it would be far removed from the truth.

There was no hardness in Edel even though there was principle and firmness. In fact, I think it could be said that she was not deliberately hard even on herself, and unquestionably she was not hard on others. I think that she trod her severe ways out of love and not out of penance, and that love after faith was the great ingredient in her. Furthermore, in the overcoming of her physical deficiencies she did not have to do the degree of violence to herself which we might be led to imagine. As I guess at what was taking place, she was powerfully driven on by a set of motives and these almost took over from her

will. She wanted to do things which others have to force themselves to do. What was bright and attractive to her could be repellent to us. In the generality of people the supernatural has to struggle for its due place. In her I do not think that such was the case. She realised God easily and clearly. She loved Jesus and Mary with every fibre in her, and she passionately sought after what she thought they wanted. It is complimentary to the Legion, and a sort of guarantee of it, that her whole mind accepted it from the moment she saw it. It represented for her a code of thought and method according to which Jesus and Mary wanted her to operate. Especially it taught her the doctrines of the Mystical Body and Our Lady's motherhood of grace. She dwelt on these until they became the atmosphere of her soul.

### **Alleged Imprudence**

She referred to Jesus and Mary every idea which presented itself. As a consequence her mental processes and decisions were good and sure. There did not seem to be any arraying of motives. No struggle took place. The selfish or improper appeared to perish in its very birth. But if it were a holy thought, even one hurtful to nature, it was alluring to her. Sometimes it swept her away. This explains her alleged imprudence.

There did not seem to be the play of fear and it was impossible to say if she was moved by the ordinary likes and dislikes. The emotions must have been strong in her, because of the acute sensitivity of her nervous system. But all that was kept in its place without trouble so far as one could judge. She had a great love for her family and for her friends, but when the moment came she left everybody without any intention of ever seeing them again.

But why? Would it not be laudable to pay a visit, which they and she would so much desire? Here another consideration enters in. She was not advancing in health as she left us to suppose. She was losing ground all the time and she feared that if she made that joyous homecoming, she would not be permitted to go out again. So she put the happy prospect from her as if it were no better than a temptation.

You will recall the episode of the exhaustion of the petrol in the jungle. Her driver went off on a trek to try to get some. Returning after being a long time away, he must have been expected to find her in utter panic. No, she was working away on her correspondence and she greeted him with her usual smile. There could be only one explanation for that effortless control; the heavenly Ones were with her and there was no room for the weak thoughts.

Some might see here that note of the inhuman which I have already repudiated. Certainly there would be few on earth who could maintain so resolute a course. But it was what the compass of her soul indicated to her, and everything had to yield to that bidding.

### **Utterly Considerate of Others**

One theorist said that she showed inconsiderateness in moving about for nearly eight years with her lungs in such a bad state. The inference was that she was casting infection around. Actually it has never been suggested that anyone who was in touch with her contracted that disease. She herself must have had some inner light on the point because if she had believed she was a danger to others she would have retreated into a desert.

I would declare that considerateness for others was a basic ingredient in her. I simply could not imagine her as



displaying the slightest degree of want of consideration for anyone. In the interview which Cardinal Suenens had with all the members of her family, he asked the question: What was her special characteristic? The mother replied unhesitatingly; 'Her unselfishness'. The cardinal then enquired at what age this had begun to manifest itself. The mother's answer was that it was there from her earliest days. The cardinal demurred, remarking that very young children were selfish little animals who had to learn correct values from the adults. At this the whole family united in the insistence that they had never known Edel to be anything but unselfish.

There is a story which illustrates another aspect of her. It was before her envoyship, when she had broken down and was in the sanatorium. A patient had died unexpectedly during the night and the young nurse in charge rushed for help to Edel who was in bed asleep, instead of her more obvious recourse, the matron. There is a strange significance in this. Edel was the thought which rose instinctively in the mind of the startled young nurse. But the same feature was found in her parents who always took her into council in the family emergencies.

### **Joy unto Merriment**

What was she like in company? It would be a total error to think that she was a damper. The opposite was the case. She exercised the effect of putting other people into good form. Her sweet personality poured itself out and produced a benign atmosphere. I cannot recall an occasion when a group of which she was part was glum or disorientated – by which I mean at a loss. They would always know what to do, and moreover the tendency was towards cheerfulness and even merriment.

It was not that she forced herself on the attention. She did not. She never sought to assert herself. She spoke little, perhaps less than anyone else. It was a case of a happy, holy personality shining forth; sending out influential rays.

I think it could be said that there was no time when humour was completely turned off in her. It even showed itself in what she thought was her last moment when Bishop Julien told of the splendid funeral which he would arrange for her. She astonished him by laughing heartily.

There was that other precious tale of the cow. It was her practice when moving on from one village to another to offer a lift to anyone who needed to go. Someone wanted to send a cow. An hour or two was consumed in the catching of the nimble animal which was then bound down in the car trailer. On arrival over a cup of tea, Edel explained to the missionary what was entailed in the starting of the Legion. In mock dismay he raised his hands to Heaven and exclaimed: 'Why had that cow to come to this place?' 'Father,' replied Edel in her typical manner, 'you are making a mistake, it was not the cow which brought me. It was I who brought the cow.'

### **A Sense of Urgency**

Everyone felt the radiation from her. People were half won over just at seeing her, before she spoke at all. Her course was one of conquest. A particularly effective section of the Suenens' Life is where a succession of places through which she had passed is given. They were very varied in type and no doubt the missionaries had very different outlooks. So each new stop meant a fresh problem. But the result was the same in every case. The Legion was started. But at what a price. The grinding work of talking

and persuading and instructing would be completed, and there would be no period of relaxation. The next place was waiting and urgency was the note. But why? What was the deadline? Nothing could be more grimly appropriate than this latter conventional expression. For she felt her hour was near and she wanted to squeeze in a few more places. How many would she have time for? Yet no place was caused to feel that it was dealing with a worn-out person. For each she had the same brightness and interest, just as if it were the only one.

But of course that could only end up in one way. That list of places ended in Lilongwe where the missionary received the envoy whom he had heard was heading in his direction. He was looking forward to seeing her. Greetings fulfilled, she began to explain her mission. But he was looking rather than listening, and looking with consternation. 'Miss Quinn,' he interjected, 'do you not realise that you are dying? You should be preparing for it instead of going about like this.'

He was right. She was on the point of death. As if his words were the signal, she collapsed. Then followed the extraordinary episode of the bishop coming down to say Mass for her and telling her that he would see that she got the funeral of the great apostle that she was. Yet she survived and lived on to accomplish a second stage of her incredible performance.

### **A Completely Normal Person**

But once again I am afflicted with the misgiving that I have been exhibiting to you a figure larger than life and that your reaction may be that of thinking that there is exaggeration. Or else that Edel was a super human figure who forms no example for us. As to that I do not think I have been



exaggerating. I have been just telling you the things that have been certified in respect to her and which are standing up to the critical examination of Rome itself. Therefore they are accurate; there is no adornment of the tale. Does that then indicate that she was a super human figure?

Here I am going to be venturesome and to claim that she was a completely normal person; that she was originally endowed with much the same set of qualities that any really well inclined person possesses, and no more. Is it the inference that any person as devoted as she could do as well? Let us look at this intriguing question.

Edel showed none of that formidable aspect in the earlier stages of her life. I would not claim that she was of superior intelligence or exhibiting qualities which would inspire observers. When she became a self-supporting individual she did not give herself to devotion or to higher pursuits. She indulged in the usual after-work occupations with the extra one of helping in the girls' club. In that there was nothing to suggest the superwoman and it must be remembered that Mona Tierney, viewing the Edel of that time, judged her as unlikely to make a legionary. But in the twinkling of an eye Edel assumed the complexion which afterwards she bore. The cause was her entry into the Legion. Therefore it was a new set of motives and not any great quality of genius or abnormal ability which were subsequently set at work in her. What happened was that she opened herself fully to what the Legion offered her. Then grace began to operate. There was a process of visible, even sensational growing.

### **Perseverance in Unlimited Giving**

Nowhere did she interpose a barrier. Never did she say: enough! So she continued to go until necessarily she achieved that stature which we call superhuman, where



her will, her judgement, her devotion, her intelligence, and everything else in her looks bigger than, and beyond nature.

But it resolves itself down to cheerful, unlimited giving and persevering to the end. To others who would similarly give without stint, the same would be available. So it would be a fatal mistake to remove her from the common category and to dub her a saint, meaning thereby that she is outside our ken.

### **Reflecting Mary, Presenting Jesus**

All that stated, the fact remains that Edel through her policy of never holding anything back from Jesus and Mary did achieve what looks like the superhuman. And surely it has to be admitted that in her African adventure Edel touched heights which baffle us. We cannot see how they could be surpassed. As she unceasingly moved along the highways and byways and out to the ends of the jungle paths of her continent, might it not be thought that everything about her would be befitting of the behaviour of even Our Blessed Lady herself.

Our Lady was the habitation of the Holy Spirit, but she did not transcend the limitations of the human state. She was inconspicuous and unassuming. But now that she is in Heaven it is to be her purpose to project herself through those who serve her, even to the extent of making them veritable transcripts of herself. The lives of the saints are full of instances where sometimes they become transfigured with the appearances of Jesus and Mary. So would it not be quite permissible to modify that exclamation of St Paul and place it on Edel's lips: 'I am trying to give Jesus to the people, no, not I, it is his mother who is using me to give him.'