

## **Father Edward J. Flanagan – A Saint for all Children**

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Edward Joseph Flanagan was born in County Roscommon, Ireland on July 13, 1886. He was the eighth child in a family of eleven children. Since he was born premature, Flanagan was very frail at birth. It was reported that his parents were hard-working farmers, intelligent and very devoted to their religion. Father Flanagan wrote this about his home: "The old-fashioned home with its fireside companionship, its religious devotion and its closely-knit family ties is my idea of what a home should be. My father would tell me many stories that were interesting to a child --- stories of adventure, or the struggle of the Irish people for independence. It was from him I learned the great science of life, of examples from the lives of saints, scholars and patriots. It was from his life I first learned the fundamental rule of life of the great Saint Benedict, *prayer and work*."

As Flanagan grew older, his father assigned him to take complete care of the sheep and cattle. His duty was to keep the animals from wandering into the dangerous peat bogs that bordered their property. This pastoral work gave him much time to think, to study, to read and to pray. In an April 1942 letter, Father Flanagan wrote: "You also may not know that I was a little shepherd boy who took care of the cattle and the sheep. That seemed to be my job as I was the delicate member of the family and good for nothing else, and with probably a poorer brain than most of the other members of the family. I was sent away to school to study for the Priesthood, because I wasn't much good for anything else; so, my job as a shepherd boy filled in very nicely in preparation for my life's work afterward."

Edward Flanagan emigrated to the United States in 1904 and became a citizen in 1919. He attended Mount Saint Mary's in Emmitsburg, Maryland, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1906 and a Master of Arts degree in 1908. He studied at Saint Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie, New York, continuing his studies in Italy and Austria where he was ordained a priest in 1912.

His first parish assignments were in Nebraska. After a devastating tornado which left many men homeless, Father Flannigan started the Workingman's Hotel, which was a shelter for down-and-out workers and penniless men. His conversations with these men prompted him to write down notes on this man's life and that one's story. Over three years, he compiled notes and records on 1000's of men and found that the causes for their troubles were almost always the same. Their boyhoods were all very similar. After many months of this, Father Flanagan began to realize that this hotel was only a temporary refuge. A stopping place for only a few days and weeks. He could not hope to do much of anything of lasting good for them. Those who could be placed in jobs had hope but the rest would wander through life from place to place. These men had developed bad habits, now deeply rooted, which would lead to useless lives. These men would reflect on their lives and say to Father Flannigan "It's too late now Father". Which made him wonder "What am I doing for them?" "How can I change them?" He had little hope of helping these men live well but he did have hope in helping abandoned boys, giving them the proper education, so they can live independent lives and accept the responsibility of citizenship. Father Flanagan believed shaping children's behaviors and ideals at a young age was the only way to guide them towards productive adult lives. He did meet some resistance as people thought there was no hope for a bad kid. However, by his own words "I have yet to find a single boy who wants to be bad."

So, after three years, he asked the Bishop if he could change his ministry and devote his time to help rehabilitate troubled young boys. He understood that mistreated or orphaned children were at high risk of turning to delinquency and to a life of crime.

So, Father Flanagan borrowed \$90 from a friend and turned an Omaha boardinghouse into a residence for homeless and neglected boys. On December 12, 1917 he began with 5 boys, 3 from the court system and 2 from the streets. Within a year *The Home for Homeless Boys* enrollment soared and with that grew a need for more space. With financial assistance, Father Flannagan purchased Overlook Farm, just ten miles on the outskirts of Omaha and moved his Boys' Home there. *Boys Town* grew to be a large community with its own boy-mayor, schools, chapel, post office, cottages, gymnasium, and other facilities where boys between the ages of 10 and 16 could receive an education and learn a trade. He encouraged every boy to pray; his famous quote was "Every boy should pray; how he prays is up to him."

You might have heard "He ain't heavy, Father...he's m' brother." These iconic words have symbolized the spirit of *Boys Town* for decades. But many people don't know how it originated. Back in 1918, a boy named Howard Loomis was abandoned by his mother at Father Flanagan's Home for Boys. Howard had polio and wore heavy braces. Walking was difficult for him especially when he had to go up and down the steps. Soon, several of the Home's older boys were carrying Howard up and down the stairs. One day, Father Flannagan asked Reuben Granger if carrying Howard was hard. Reuben replied, "He ain't heavy, Father...he's m' brother."

Father Flanagan and Boys Town became internationally known with the help of the 1938 movie, "Boys Town" starring Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney.

But, there was one country that was not very generous to him and you might be surprised by which one that is. Father Flannagan's success in Nebraska gave him courage to address reform in the country of his birth where atrocities of the juvenile justice system were far greater than that of the United States. In 1946, he returned to Ireland and gave public speeches denouncing the church and state-run industrial schools calling them institutions of punishment. While the crowds cheered, the government not only publicly denounced Father Flanagan with criticism, they later expunged nearly all records of their native son.

Father Flanagan became an acknowledged expert in the field of child care, and toured the United States discussing his view on juvenile delinquency. After WWII, the federal government called on Father Flanagan to help children internationally as well. President Truman was so impressed with his report on orphaned children in Asia, he asked him to travel to Germany to help lay the groundwork for the care of tens of thousands of children orphaned by the war. It was during this arduous extended trek that Monsignor Edward Joseph Flanagan suffered a heart attack and passed away in Berlin on May 15, 1948 at age 61. Before he died, he said "Often it has been said that youth is the nation's greatest asset. But it's more than that—it is the world's greatest asset. More than that, it is perhaps the world's only hope." Today, he is entombed in the *Boys Town* village to which he dedicated his life.

Father Flanagan pioneering efforts to save children from neglect, abuse, poverty, illiteracy and lawlessness are as relevant today as they were when he first began building the community which tens of thousands of boys, and now girls, call home. He became a social reformer and a true visionary for changing how America cared for its children and families, passionately speaking out and acting on social issues that few dared to address. He believed that children had the right to be valued, to have the necessities of life and be protected. Father Flannagan's life mission should be an inspiration and a model to all people, including priests, as a guardian angel to boys and a protector of children.

Based on his good works and ministry as a protector of children, an official cause to a path to sainthood and the canonization of Father Flanagan has been underway since 2015. It is most fitting and proper that the Catholic Church pay homage to this great man.