



Edel Quinn

Brendan Comerford SJ, writer, author and retreat director, recounts the life of a well-known Legionary of Mary. His book, *Disciple of Courage* forthcoming by Messenger Publications.



'She was terribly impressive, very girlish but a very refreshing experience.' 'She is like a wild bird. You cannot keep her in a cage.' So said Frank Duff, founder of The Legion of Mary, about Edel Quinn. But who was Edel Quinn?

Edel Quinn was born near Kanturk in County Cork in 1907. Over the first ten years of her life, she lived in five different towns throughout Ireland in a family of three sisters and a brother.

They moved around because Edel's father, Charles, worked for the then National Bank, eventually being promoted to manager of the National Bank in Tralee. Edel's mother, Louise, attended Mass every day and used to take Edel with her, giving Edel the foundation of a habit that was to last all her life.

In the summer of 1923, Edel was approaching her sixteenth birthday. Her parents decided to send her to

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a finishing school for the last two years of her secondary education. She was enrolled as a pupil in Upton Hall, Cheshire, under the care of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. Edel was a keen hockey and tennis player, enjoying her time at Upton Hall.

Suddenly, all was to change. Edel's father could no longer afford to keep her at Upton Hall.

His hobby of betting on horse-races had become a compulsion. Mr Quinn had been using bank money for gambling. He was to lose his job as bank manager and was appointed to the bank's head office in College Green, Dublin as a simple 'ledger clerk', one of the lowliest posts in the banking hierarchy. The family had to move again – this time to live in a second floor flat in Monkstown, Dublin.

It was essential that Edel get a job as soon as possible and contribute to the family finances. She went to commercial college, qualifying as a shorthand-typist, and secured a job with the Chagney Tile Company in Dublin. There Edel met a young Frenchman, Pierre Landrin. Though Pierre and Edel formed part of the same set – meeting together, playing tennis together, dancing together – Pierre did not know of Edel's intense prayer life or that she felt drawn to the life of a contemplative nun and was planning one day to enter the

Poor Clares.

Pierre proposed to Edel but she told him that she was promised to someone else – Jesus.

A friend of Edel's, Mona Tierney, told her about the Legion of Mary, which had been founded in Dublin in 1921. Edel went along to a meeting of the Legion at 6 Gardiner Place.

She was immediately accepted as a member of the Legion. After work, in the evenings, Mona and Edel would visit the poor living around Mountjoy Square and the neighbouring streets.

People began to notice how the Legion was taking over more and more of Edel's life. Frank Duff asked Edel if she would be willing to take the position of president of a Praesidium (a basic unit or parochial branch) of the Legion. Edel worked at the Sancta Maria Hostel in Harcourt Street where street girls could be housed and given a chance to rehabilitate themselves.

At this stage, Edel's colour was poor and she was coughing a lot. She was losing weight. She had no idea that her lungs were already infected by tuberculosis. This necessitated her staying in a sanatorium in the foothills of the Wicklow mountains from February 1932. Sometime before Christmas, Edel decided to leave the sanatorium.

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was enthusiastic about this idea. Because of Edel's health, Duff faced a barrage of criticism. He was accused of sending Edel to her death. Duff remained firm and so Edel arrived in Nairobi, Kenya in November 1936. One of the problems that Edel quickly encountered was the difficulty of getting white, brown and black people to work together. In Nairobi, she tells us that she received staunch support from Fr Tom Maher, an Irish Spiritan. She wrote of him, 'He is a very zealous priest and also very practical and shrewd.' Fr Tom happened to be a cousin of my father, and Edel's description of him is very accurate!

From 1937 onwards, Edel travelled in four countries then under British control – Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika (now Tanzania) and Zanzibar, establishing the Legion. She bought a Ford Coupé for £65 which she christened the 'Rolls Royce'. She also visited Mauritius, Malawi and flew to South Africa. We can marvel at her continuous travel and dedication to her mission of establishing the Legion, especially given the fact that her health was rapidly deteriorating. She spent time in a sanatorium in Johannesburg in May 1941. The word Fiat ('Let it be') was often on her lips – meaning a total submission to the will of God.

In late 1943 Edel returned to Nairobi for the last time. She stayed in the

Carmelite convent. Her last surviving letter was written to Frank Duff on 9 May 1944, three days before her death. Edel died on 12 May 1944 and was buried in the same cemetery in Nairobi as Bishop Joseph Shanahan.

More than 600 of Edel's letters still survive and they enable us to follow her movements in Africa in great detail. Another major source is the testimony given by eye witnesses for her canonisation process during the period 1963 to 1971. The words love, joy, peace appear in almost every testimony.

The late Belgian Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens of Brussels-Malines wrote a biography of Edel with the title *Edel Quinn – A Heroine of the Apostolate*. This book has been translated into many languages and has made Edel's life-story widely known.

In 1957 the Archbishop of Nairobi initiated the process for her Beatification and many witnesses were examined, mainly in Africa and Ireland. The Vicar General of Mauritius was speaking for many when he said, 'I want to lay special emphasis on her constant joy; she was always smiling; she never complained; she was always at people's disposal, never stinting her time.' Her cause for canonisation is still under consideration.

On 15 December 1994 Pope St John Paul II declared Edel Quinn 'Venerable'.💕



1940's Ford Coupé