

Fr Flanagan of Boys Town

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I was delighted that RTÉ One television broadcasted the feature documentary *Heart of a Servant: Father Flanagan* on 6 July. This is an excellent production, focusing on a very important personality in our recent faith history. It recounts, with great attention to the historical detail, the challenges and successes, against the odds, of an exemplary Irish-American priest.

Today Fr Flanagan serves as a role model for clergy, lay people and for wider society in terms of the Gospel-inspired priority that he gave to child welfare. Nurtured by his faith, he worked for the well-being of young people and resisted the prevailing societal pressures of sectarianism and racism. In the polarising early twentieth-century Mid-Western United States, that was no mean feat. Fr Flanagan was never afraid to speak truth to the powerful, and this bravery suffused his gentle, conscientious and hardworking ministry.

Fr Flanagan's work formed the basis of the 1938 Academy Award winning movie *Boys Town*, retelling the story of the community that he established to protect and house orphaned and impoverished children in Omaha, Nebraska, during and after the First World War. In a time of crisis for families, when many children

were living rough on the streets and getting in trouble with the law, Fr Flanagan founded Boys Town, which flourished to become a place where young people could feel at home and have all the advantages of a solid education and formation for life.

Fr Flanagan stood up against the sectarianism of many in the establishment in the 1920s and 1930s, including the racist ideology of the Ku Klux Klan. He welcomed young people to Boys Town on the basis of their need, irrespective of race or creed. In addition, during the Second World War, when Japanese workers and their families in the United States were all interned as 'hostile aliens', Fr Flanagan arranged for many of them to be set free to come and live in Boys Town, where he provided them with a home and with employment. When the war was over, he devoted what remained of his life to visiting some of the countries that had been most impacted by violence (The Philippines, Japan and Germany) in order to support efforts to provide the best possible care for homeless children. It was during one such visit in Germany that he died of exhaustion on 15 May 1948.

Fr Flanagan's virtue emanates from many aspects of his life. One was the courage with which he pursued his



Fr Edward Flanagan was a visitor at the White House in 1938. He was introduced to President Roosevelt by Joseph Keenan, the assistant to the attorney general.

vocation to the priesthood, in spite of difficulties with ill health. Another aspect of his holiness was his desire to help young people realise that they are loved by God. He expressed this in his own actions as a ‘father’, and in his statement that he never knew a child who wanted to be bad. He said, ‘Kindness and love will open the heart of any a boy.’ Fr Flanagan was adamant that ‘there is no such thing as a born bad boy’ and was firm in the conviction that one must hate the sin but love the sinner. He was convinced that there ‘are delinquent environments but never delinquent boys’. This was not just naive optimism, rather it was rooted in the conviction that every person is created in the image and likeness of God. On a visit to Ireland in 1946,

he raised serious questions to much opposition about the incarceration of juveniles in penal institutions and the conditions in which they were forced to live and work.

2026 has been an exciting year for Fr Flanagan’s faith legacy. On 23 March last, he was one of six people declared ‘venerable’ by Pope Leo XIV, thus recognising holy lives and heroic virtue and making them potential candidates for sainthood.

Fr Flanagan prayer cards and medals are available from the the Fr Flanagan Visitor Centre, Ballymoe. Fr Flanagan was born on 13 July 1886 in Leabeg, Co. Roscommon. See also the RTÉ Drama, *Fr Flanagan of Boystown* – an excellent feature on his life, his work and the spirit of the man.