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Irish Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh prays near the tomb of Venerable Fr. Edward Flanagan

Irish Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh prays near the tomb of Venerable Fr. Edward Flanagan, founder of Boys Town, at Dowd Memorial Chapel of the Immaculate Conception in Omaha July 16, 2026. The parish serves the village of Boys Town. (OSV News/The Catholic Voice/Riley Johnson)

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Fr. Edward Flanagan's life advocating care and concern for troubled youth still serves as an inspiration to the world, said Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, primate of All Ireland.

The impact of Flanagan, an Irish immigrant, Omaha priest and founder of Boys Town, had been fading into the past in Ireland, Martin said in a July interview with the Catholic Voice, the digital media outlet of the Archdiocese of Omaha.

But the news on March 23 that [Pope Leo XIV declared Flanagan venerable](#) breathed new life into the Ballymoe native's story and allowed more Irish Catholics to discover "this amazing man" and "his prophetic, Christian witness," the archbishop said.

"Way before his time, he was treating young people who were sadly in very difficult situations with absolute dignity and respect," said Martin, whose archdiocese serves faithful in Northern Ireland as well as the Republic of Ireland.

The archbishop made a special visit to Boys Town July 16 while in Omaha for the national convention of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Irish Catholic fraternal organization. During his visit to the village of Boys Town's Catholic Church, Dowd Memorial Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, Martin prayed at Flanagan's tomb and joined Archbishop Michael McGovern of Omaha in blessing medals to encourage Flanagan's intercession.

"The life of Father Flanagan bridges Ireland and America, a life that inspires people in both places by his example of serving youth on the margins," McGovern said. "The encounter with Archbishop Martin at Boys Town is a great example of the renewed appreciation for Father Flanagan and how his example speaks to us in our time. We need more people like Father Flanagan in our world today to accompany our youth on their journey in life."

Martin echoed that sentiment, saying Flanagan's message was a powerful witness to the Gospel: that young people may be broken, but they are not 'bad.'"

Early in his priesthood, Flanagan's ministry to the homeless spotlighted the toll of growing up in broken homes and inspired him to seek change.

Flanagan opened a home for boys in 1917 to better care for youth caught up in the juvenile justice system. His work expanded and led to the development of the current Boys Town site in 1921, ultimately impacting 6,000 youths directly.

Flanagan visited Ireland in 1946 and expressed his concern for the mistreatment of youth by so-called reform institutions, condemning practices of corporal punishment and exploitative labor by facilities run by the government as well as the church.

He unsuccessfully implored Irish leaders at the time to take up the Boys Town model, according to the Father Flanagan League, which put forth his cause for canonization in 2012.

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Tens of thousands of Irish children, who were orphans, truants or from poor or dysfunctional backgrounds, suffered physical, emotional and sexual abuse in these youth care institutions, according to a 2009 Irish government report on historical child abuse in Ireland.

That report recognized Flanagan's criticisms as justified, the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints notes in its biography of Flanagan.

"Father Flanagan's story speaks very strongly to Ireland because we've become aware of the awful sins and crimes of abuse against young people and vulnerable people," Martin said. "Incidentally, his cautions to Ireland were perhaps not taken seriously, and we have reaped the fruits of that neglect."

Martin has himself addressed the legacy of institutional abuse publicly, offering what he called an "unreserved apology to all those who suffered" in church-run institutions.

[Pope Francis' visit to Ireland in 2018](#) also brought the reckoning with the abuse more sharply into public view. At a Mass attended by thousands in Dublin, Pope Francis asked for forgiveness for the "abuses in Ireland" and offered a penitential prayer for crimes committed in Church-run institutions.

Ireland, like many countries in Europe and in the West, finds itself struggling with a sense of identity, unmoored from its foundations in faith, family and human respect, Martin said.

"Father Flanagan can be an inspiration not just to Ireland and the United States, but to all the countries in the world, in finding the most beautiful way to love young people, especially those who are struggling," he said.

It is fitting Flanagan's cause moved forward during the pontificate of Pope Leo, who has placed human dignity at the center of his Petrine ministry, Martin said.

The Holy Father wants the world to realize the inherent value of every life, he said.

"Father Flanagan hopefully is reminding all of us to treat these young people with respect and with a deep sense that they are precious in God's eyes," Martin said.