

A conversation with Fr. Michael Doyle

Tom Roberts | Dec. 8, 2009

21st in the series

In mid August, I spent a day with Fr. Michael Doyle at his parish, Sacred Heart Church in Camden, N.J. He's been there for 35 years and has become a bit of a legend in the city and well beyond for innovative ministries and for programs that have begun to transform areas of South Camden. He and I had a long conversation, only portions of which could be used in the profile that appeared in the print edition of *NCR* and online. (See [A love for transformation](#) [1]) as part of my "In Search of the Emerging Church" series.

I thought many readers would enjoy his more extended comments about such matters as the nature and purpose of a parish, his view on art and beauty, on peacemaking, liturgy and on honoring the poor. Below is an edited version of the conversation. As possible, I've tried to break up the interview into topic sections.

--Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large



The Church In The Inner City

NCR: You were telling me that once there were nine parishes in Camden and that number is now down to six.

Doyle: Six parishes where there were nine, and then the bishop is talking about making a new entity that is from Saint Bartholomew's, an African-American church established in 1945, and Saint Joan of Arc. That's one that will probably get a new name. Saint Joan of Arc is small but is mostly Latino. Then he was talking about that eventually Sacred Heart would cluster with this new entity. So I don't know how that could work.

NCR: Who makes up your congregation?

Doyle: That's not an easy question to answer because in Camden, there's only a small number of Catholics. Most of our people come in from outside the city and from Philadelphia.

NCR: In all of these parishes?

Doyle: No, but it's interesting, the number of people that come in. In Saint Bartholomew's, the African-American church in Camden, 90 percent of the congregation is from outside the city. They all moved out, but they didn't move away from their church. They were Saint Bartholomew's people. The church became their mother, and that's where they go.

NCR: So, the flight from Camden was both white and black. It wasn't just white flight.

Doyle: Well, it's mostly white flight, but then there's a constant moving away from Camden. Fatima up here used to be Mount Carmel, the Italian church of Camden. Then it became Latino. Then that church, 50 percent of that church is coming in from outside the city.

NCR: So all over Camden, people are coming in for church on Sunday?

Doyle: Yes, all over. At the cathedral, it's the same thing. The cathedral has no resident population at all. They're all coming in from outside. Saint Joe's is a big parish up there ? in East Camden, and that's all Latino, but for the most part, that's residential Camden. There are some people coming in. At Saint Anthony's, it's the same. Those two Latino parishes have a good [resident population].

NCR: But everybody else is --

Doyle: Everybody else beyond those two. It's the same thing with the Polish church. There are no Polish people in Camden. That's not quite true, but it's just a smattering.

NCR: Do you have any resident congregants in your parish?

Doyle: We have some.

How Camden Failed

NCR: But the majority is from outside?

Doyle: The majority has -- for all these years -- like, the people left here massively when the ship yard closed. Camden had the biggest ship yard in the United States and built eight ships at a time. That was the source of income for all these people. When it closed, it was the beginning of a whole change. I went to St. Joseph's in East Camden, the one I was talking about, back in 1968. That's when I came to Camden. In that parish back in 1968, there were 25 families a month leaving the parish.

NCR: Twenty-five families a month?

Doyle: A month, were leaving that parish.

NCR: In 1968?

Doyle: In 1968. So they were leaving en mass, going, going, going and so, Camden is an interesting place. If you studied it you kind of know what happened in America. It's a very interesting place.

NCR: Why do you say that? In my short ride through here, Camden is one of the bleakest urban landscapes I've seen in a long time.

Doyle: It is.

NCR: So 25 families a month leaving this place in 1968. You're left with essentially a very, very small resident Catholic population. ...

Doyle: Campbell's Soup began here. It started in Camden in about 1869. Then they closed out the whole operation here. At one time, Camden probably had more jobs, more industry per capita than any town in the whole world. It was the most incredible place.

NCR: So in that way, it is the picture of America because all of that is gone?

Doyle: All that's gone and interestingly enough, when Camden was incorporated in 1828 as a town, it had only 1,100 people but they built the last leg of a railroad down through New Jersey from Perth Amboy down Bordentown and finished it at the river banks. The Delaware River flows between Philadelphia and Camden. It's 200 miles flowing by the time it gets to Camden, and it's almost another 100 miles to Cape May.

The original name for Camden was Cooper's Ferry. It was ferryboats, ferryboats, ferryboats to get from Pennsylvania to the shore, which was down here, and then there were people from New Jersey crossing to the big city of Philadelphia. When the railroad met the ferry boat, that was the conception of Camden.

The population doubled every 10 years. If you want to make anything in this country, make it in Camden because it moves to a big -- at that time, one of the biggest centers of population in America was Philadelphia. On the other end, it went up to Perth Amboy and other ferry boats across to Manhattan.

NCR: What caused the collapse?

Doyle: The conception of Camden came from the meeting of two methods of transportation. The beginning of the destruction of Camden was in 1926, when they built the Ben Franklin Bridge what I say was in the wrong place. It landed in Camden one block from City Hall. It amputated North Camden which had water. The Delaware elbows around Camden. The Cooper River comes in from the east.

It put a flow of traffic and no overpasses on the south end, and amputated North Camden, which began to fester immediately. It began going back into the '30s. That's where Sean works today is in North Camden. There was no high school. If you had to go to high school, you had to cross through this flow of traffic. If you needed a hospital, resources or City Hall, everything was cut off.

Philadelphia could take a knife through it, but Camden couldn't. It was too small for the size of the knife. That's what happened. It's kind of an interesting story in the sense that its conception and birth was transportation, but its destruction was also transportation. It was the Ben Franklin Bridge being built in the wrong place, and it cut Camden in two, and it never got over it.

NCR: In that example, that's several decades before 25 families a year leaving.

Doyle: Absolutely, but that was the beginning of the destruction, and then people started moving away from North Camden because their children were unsafe going to school or things like that. That's what happened. That was the beginning of it, and of course, it had the same story as every urban center where the rubber industry, the oil industry and the automobile industry were behind the big roads.

On Church Mergers And Cutbacks

NCR: You're talking about more demographic changes and the church reacting to them by merging and closing.

Doyle: That's just now in the last year.

NCR: Right. Are you in agreement with that?

Doyle: I think that I would wait longer to do it. I wouldn't do it now. I would wait until the people felt the problem, and then the people would be with me in trying to find the solution. I wouldn't come and say, "In 15 years, there will be X number of priests." People don't give a hoot about 15 years from now. I would wait. That would be my approach to it. I would wait until the people felt the problem.

NCR: But is it a matter of the number of priests, or is it also a matter of economics?

Doyle: I think the real, driving force is not having a priest.

NCR: There are some who would say that the church has been blind to that problem for so long and hasn't planned anything in terms of either dealing with the problem or dealing with the fact that there aren't going to be enough priests to cover the parishes.

Doyle: The nose dive of vocations to the priesthood has been particularly in the last 15 years or so. It's fairly recent, that reality. So I don't know the answer to it. It's a very difficult thing.

NCR: You said you would wait until people felt the problem a little more. How is that? How would they feel it?

Doyle: They would feel it when there weren't priests to do the things. They just couldn't have the Masses. They would begin to be cut and then they would say, "We've got to do something about this." That's my thinking on it. I would rather have them with me, wanting to do it because we have to do it because they wouldn't want to do it unless they had to do it. That's my thinking on it, but I might be wrong on it. That's just Doyle talking.

On Saving Catholic Schools

NCR: Do you think Camden is an example of the church abandoning the inner city?

Doyle: I don't think so. Bishop Galante is eager to create great ministries in Camden. It doesn't necessarily follow that you'd have a parish operating on its own, but he's very eager that it would be a great place of extraordinary ministries. He has that in his head, and he also wants to save the Catholic schools in Camden.

NCR: How many are there?

Doyle: There are four in the city, and there is one in Pennsauken, which is over the edge. To put them into a consortium of one entity, that is what is going on right at the moment.

NCR: Is there a school board?

Doyle: They are creating a board and an entity that would run the schools, not the diocese as such, but under the diocese. The entity would run them and raise the money for them. At Sacred Heart, I told you what would happen because schools were closing. Eight Catholic schools have closed between the two bridges.

The Walt Whitman Bridge is just down the street here. Between the Ben Franklin coming into Central City and

the Walt Whitman coming into the south end, in between those two points, eight Catholic schools have closed over the years.

NCR: In the last 20 years or 30 years?

Doyle: Well, it would be like 30 years time but for Sacred Heart, I could see that we didn't have the Catholics, so therefore what would usually happen in those days was I was often times fighting to keep a school open, but the diocese was funding a good portion of it. The diocese would announce, "This is the amount of money we have," so you had to cut the school to fit the money. I could see Sacred Heart would be the one that would be cut. Then I said, "We'll go on our own," and we have succeeded.

NCR: So you have been raising funds outside the parish boundaries and outside the diocese?

Doyle: Right. This year is the first year the cost for our little school has sailed right over a million dollars to run it.

NCR: You're making that money up in donations?

Doyle: I started a sponsorship program 25 years ago this year, asking people to give \$300 to a child in Camden, and I never changed the amount. I kept widening the circle, and last year we raised \$700,000. Across the country, we have sponsors. We have just a few in Europe, Germany, Australia. Those are just a few but it works. I write a letter every month

NCR: I know that.

Doyle: Do you? The letter asks twice a year for the sponsorship to sponsor the children. Then it asks at Christmas time to help with our baskets. We give out 1,000 baskets at Christmas with 1,000 turkeys, and we ask for them to help with that. The rest of the year, I don't ask for anything. That's it.

NCR: So you've never taken any money from the diocese for this?

Doyle: For the school?

NCR: Yes.

Doyle: Not a penny ever.

On Protests And Peacemaking

NCR: I understand you landed in Camden because of your protests against the Vietnam War.

Doyle: Correct. That was in '68, and that's how I got to Camden. How I got to Sacred Heart was different.

NCR: Okay, so where were you in Camden at that point?

Doyle: Where was I in '68? I was in St. Joseph in East Camden. I got moved down in the middle of January. I never knew quite why I was moved. I didn't know why I was moved, but in May, I discovered why I was moved. The man that I was replacing was going to marry the nurse.

NCR: The priest?

Doyle: Right, and he did, so I had to fill his place.

NCR: It was a long time ago.

Doyle: The Camden 28? [The Camden 28 was a group that broke into the local draft center to remove draft files. They were arrested when one of the participants cooperated with the FBI in the run up to the breaking. But the group, which mostly defended itself, was acquitted by a jury after being permitted to give their moral arguments in court regarding why they committed the act of civil disobedience] It was '71 and that's a long time ago.

NCR: When you did that, the bishop said what?

Doyle: Well, the bishop was all right with me. He was a very conservative man, Bishop Guilfoyle, but he came to see me. I was in prison for a bit. I was there after we did it. Not long, a couple of weeks or so, but he came to see me and that sort of thing. Then when we were acquitted, I was in a little parish here. It's not there anymore. It was St. George.

It was a little Lithuanian church, and I lived there while I was on trial and so on. So the trial was three months. When we were acquitted, we had a Mass there and we had a party that evening in the hall and just kind of carried on. So the marshals [from the court] came. All these people came. They all liked us so they came to the party.

Anyway, that very night the bishop called me up and he congratulated me on being acquitted. He said that he wanted me to come in to see him the next day. He said, "I want to get you back as soon as you can to your priestly duties." So I go in the next day to see him. I walk in the door, and I must have had a very indifferent face on me.

He said, "What's the matter with you?" I said, "I am upset with you." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "It's because of what you said to me last night. You said that you wanted to get me back to my priestly duties. I want to tell you something. I was about my priestly duties. Every day I was." He said, "I didn't mean that. Did you tell the priests that?"

I said, "I certainly did. I told every priest that was at this gathering what you said," He said, "I want you to go back and tell them I didn't mean that." Anyway, he was decent enough to me even though he was very conservative.

On Priesthood

NCR: There was never doubt in your mind from a very young age that you wanted to be a priest.

Doyle: No.

NCR: You never regretted it?

Doyle: Well, sometimes I would think to myself was I really suited for it? Sometimes I would think about that. However, I do feel I was blessed because I ended up in Camden. I don't think I would make it if I was in fancy parishes. Do you know what I mean?

NCR: It would be an easier life.

Doyle: Yes, but at the same time, there's sort of a cutting edge about what I feel about things, and I don't think that the church that's not connected to the poor is really a valid operation. I don't think so.

Effects Of Living In Poverty

NCR: You said in the video [Poet of Poverty] that there was a point when you were back in Ireland, looking over your fields. It's gorgeous landscape that is so disconnected from this. This is just chaos. You said that you were able to do this ministry because you were grounded there in Ireland and you said, "Here, I know who I am."

It made me wonder what young men growing up here, what do they come back in 40 years to look at and what do they say about who they are?

Doyle: That's hard for them, because they have a feeling they were neglected. One of the things that has happened here is that the county has dumped on it as it has in Chester, Pennsylvania. Every entity that would hurt real estate in Camden County is placed in the city so it's very harsh for them.

I don't think that they'll have a huge desire to come back and walk the streets that they lived on. One of the things that drive me is that I just want to create some beauty. I think that one of the greatest tragedies for young people and children is that they don't grow up in scenes of beauty. They were created to see beauty, and mankind had wrecked their garden.

I find that very hard for them. That's very sad for me that children don't see beauty. You'll watch that little kid walking in that movie and you'll say, "Oh, my God." Yet, at the same time, children jump out of the thing and are skipping rope on a broken sidewalk. The denial of beauty to the children of America is a crime because America could create beauty. It has the wherewithal to do it.

On Parish Life And Liturgy

NCR: Unlike in the past, when there were lots of Catholics in Camden, you really don't have a community gathered around you everyday that are residents.

Doyle: Well, the thing about it that is interesting is that in the last few years now, there are a bunch of Catholic people who have moved in around here.

NCR: What's their motivation?

Doyle: I think they are connected to Sacred Heart and its ministries. The advantage that Sacred Heart has is that the mission is right there. You don't have to go very far. We feed people every Saturday, about 100 people we feed and I want every family that comes into the parish to come in here with their relatives and their children and feed the people. That's a connection between the poor and those who are here.

NCR: The nature and the purpose of the parish has certainly changed dramatically.

Doyle: Absolutely. The purpose of the parish is to create a legitimate connection between people who are outside the city, middle class that are doing okay, and people who have been trapped here in these conditions. I think of American people as generous people.

NCR: Is the purpose to convert people?

Doyle: No. No, it is to serve.

NCR: I have become fascinated with some of these circumstances where the Catholic presence as a whole is gone. What does the Catholic imagination have to insert into the culture where it is poor and foreign to

the local culture?

Doyle: Well, you speak to people with a plate of food. You speak to people with a bag of food. You speak to people by building a house that people could live in. You speak to people by creating beauty for them. One thing that I wanted when I came here was that I wanted to say that this is some place. This is not no place. I want to make this place known, that this place is some place.

I sat at the end of this table for 30 years once a month with our liturgy committee. For 30 years, I've sat here. That's not an exaggeration. I've sat here once a month for 30 years. The liturgical committee gather and they work on the major feasts, they attend to them. They expand them so that the creation of good ritual and good liturgy is the core reality here.

Then the basic principle is that liturgy leads to justice. If you break bread on Sunday, break it on Monday. Just do that. That's the core reality and tending to it, we try to make it as wonderful as we can. We try to bring nature in and celebrate. I think about this explosion of knowledge that we have today. We are drowning in the amount of knowledge that we have.

We don't need any more knowledge because it's at our fingertips. What we do need is a ritual that touches the heart and that transcends so that Tom Roberts's heart just lifts from itself, not from what I say to you but something that we're doing together. That soul will just lift. That's what the people need. We work on that.

The first Sunday of Advent every year for the last 33 years, we bless expectant mothers. I bless them. It's simple. We created it ourselves. "I bless you and the child within you, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." They're giving a candle as they come up by an elderly woman, lit from the Advent candle.

They come across and I say the blessing. Then, there is a blessing for everyone who has ever expected a child or who didn't have the privilege of biological conception, but for every nurtured dream. Then we turn them around and we have Barbara Dever [an opera performer] who has been singing here for over 30 years. I met her in 1965 in my freshman year religion class. We've been friends ever since.

NCR: Do the authorities in this diocese send you young priests to learn from you?

Doyle: They don't send priests but they have sent seminarians here. All of them that came here were very happy here and you wouldn't think they might be happy. I'd be wondering were they happy; they were really happy. Our website says (it's a little thing right in the beginning of it) that we're trying to make Sacred Heart at least as friendly as an Irish pub. I use that.

Sometimes I say, "A pub is a great little place because if you have a couple dollars in your pocket, you're as good as a Rockefeller." Everybody is equal, everybody is welcome, everybody is caring a bit about each other, so it's a good image for the church because life, particularly now, you go to the supermarket or you go to buy at the food store and nobody knows your name. Nobody cares a hoot about you except your money.

It's kind of a lonely world in a sense. The community organizers talk about the air conditioning has destroyed the stoop and got the people of the porch, so we're not talking. Because we're not talking, then we can be manipulated with the boys on TV. You have to drink a lot of coffee to talk.

At church, the way we begin on a Sunday is that people come in and they all greet each other and meet each other and we have the Blessed Sacrament [inside chapel 2:53] and that's very deliberate because it works for the baptized children and it works for the people. They meet and talk and chat like that. They're expected to be there before it starts because they should be creating?

Now that wasn't needed in the church that I grew up in because everybody knew each other on the road.

So church is somewhere where people could come to a point of, not information -- it's good for leaving your head at home.

Forget about the head and the intellect. Come with your soul. Come there and be a child and let your soul be lifted. That's what I think about it and then I preach. I say to them, 'I am preaching to you not to teach you anything. I'm preaching to you, just going over the ground so maybe you have a better idea. I'll go over the ground of the readings and maybe you, if you'll just stay with that, you'll have a better idea than I have in that way.'

NCR: So you're not here to provide answers?

Doyle: No. I'm here to provide help and facilitate the possibility that they would enter into moments of lift to God, that's it. If we work hard on the liturgy to remove obstacles? The thing I hate is when the priest says, 'Please sit.' I would never say those words, ever, in a church because it's an interruption.

It would be the same as a conductor saying that in the middle of his orchestra performance.

They will learn. They'll never hear a direction from me, ever, because direction is not liturgy.

NCR: But there is a growing emphasis in some areas of the church to provide answers?

Doyle: I think if you create a good meal, they'll eat it and the eating of it is the joy of the moment. Our job is to provide a good meal. We can do our very best with liturgy, but the lift of the soul to God is God's work. We take away obstacles and make it flow, and I use music a lot as an image of what liturgy should be. It should flow and it shouldn't have sudden interjections of something that has nothing to do with God. I think, for example, the peace-giving is in the wrong part of the Mass.

NCR: Do you put it in the right part or do you leave it there?

Doyle: I put it in the beginning.

NCR: Not in the middle?

Doyle: No, because you're at a very transcendent level there. Around this table in the morning, I stand here, other priests come here, they sit. I stand because I'm kind of old-fashioned. I like to genuflect. When that moment comes it's very meaningful to me, so I stand for that reason.

But we come to the Our Father -- we're sitting around here and we hold hands right around this table -- and they still hold on to the hands until I say, 'And the peace of the Lord be with you all,' and then you squeeze your neighbor's hands and that's it. It doesn't intrude, it doesn't damage the moment. So I tie the peace-giving with the penitential.

I go out first in the beginning of the Mass and I start at the pulpit. I come out and say, 'Good morning, everybody. Welcome to Sacred Heart. If you're here for the first time, very welcome. If you're here some of the time, very welcome. If you're here all of the time, very welcome.'

We call that our chit-chat. It's the same way as if I went to your house for dinner, you wouldn't march me to the plate. There's a ritual that goes before that and I took that from that very thought of, 'How do people normally act?' They don't march people to the plate. They bring them in and they do their ritual, and then we

get around to getting to the plate.

When I do the penitential, then I say, "Jesus told us that we should not come to the altar with our prayers, intentions or gifts without first making peace, especially with anyone who has anything against us. May the peace of the Lord be with you." Then they all greet each other from across the aisle and I come down the aisle giving peace.

I arrive at the back, put on the chasuble, the cross comes out, the book comes out, the candle, the whole thing, and then the procession in. We have cleaned the slate. We have made peace with God and humanity.

NCR: You haven't had complaints from those who are known to go around to parishes and look for liturgical incorrectness?

Doyle: No. Somebody did say a couple things a few years ago. Somebody had complained, not about that; they complained about some of the people that always say, "This is the word of the Lord," it's sometimes said, "This is the word of God." So they complained about that.

NCR: Do you consider yourself a liturgist?

Doyle: No. I consider myself a person that knows a good meal when I see it.

NCR: One of the scenes in the video is a striking ceremony in your church, a liturgy for those killed in Camden

Doyle: We have over 50. That would be those who died. We put it in November because November is the old Catholic time for remembering the dead. It will list those who were murdered in this town since we did it last year.

NCR: I presume a lot of those people are not Catholic.

Doyle: Right, most of them are not Catholic.

NCR: You had a church full of people?

Doyle: Well, see, you won't get a huge number of them. I send a letter to them, invite them, but not expecting them to come. Maybe out of 45, you'd get 16 families, which is perfect. They come and then you wear a tie with the name of the person that's dead. The family wears that and walks up and gets a candle and stands until we have a horseshoe around the church.

And then where there's not a family member there, then if you were in the church, you would do it. You'd put it on and you'd take that home with you and you light a candle from the paschal candle and then go around until they're all standing -- about 50 people standing. Then I come down out of the pulpit and get the paschal candle and hold it up and then they put their candles up and everybody in the congregation sings "I Will Raise You Up."

NCR: This seems like Catholic imagination applied to a very particular place around a very particular need.

Doyle: That's right. That's reality, and then those poor families, once it's in the paper and there's a funeral, nobody remembers. There's another church that used to do it in Holy Name when the Jesuits were there and they would light a candle and put the candles up for the whole day, and then people would come at any old time, make a visit and see their candle.

They do that every year too. We would do it within the Mass because I feel that they have to be lifted up into the saving blood. So that works out every year. Again, it's connecting deeply with reality here.

How Doyle Would Deal With Drugs

NCR: Have those kind of killings continued?

Doyle: There's less this year, much less than last year, but it does fluctuate. It's strange how that goes, but the basic cause of it is drugs and the basic cause of the selling of drugs in Camden is economics so it's all connected to the poverty of Camden. I think there's no way to stop drugs.

They say that the best law enforcement can reduce drugs by 15%. What difference does that make? It would be far better to make it a health problem and not make it a criminal problem. The world has changed. We have the best communication systems in the world and the best transportation systems and there's big money in drugs.

America is a place the world sees as a place with money so they'd be coming here, but if you take the money out of it, it'll wither. The way you take the money out of it is to let it go, decriminalize. If you look at prohibition, it failed, but the big difference if prohibition failed, then drugs would surely fail because liquor is bulk.

If I send you out even for \$300 worth of liquor, I would know whether you had it when you came back. I could send you out for \$10,000 worth of drugs and I wouldn't have a clue whether you had it or not. If that be the case, the stopping of drugs is impossible. The money that's wasted on it from the judge's clerk to the jailer is colossal money.

There are 11,000 people in prison in Philadelphia and 85% of the 11,000 is drugs, and most of them return so it's useless. There's a lot of people making a living on it, but not knowing that they can stop it and if they do some big thing over here, well then they're back over here. It should be rethought, the whole thing, but most of the killings come out of territory. They're all fairly young.

On Turning 75; Opening A Theater

NCR: How old are you?

Doyle: Seventy-four.

NCR: When is your birthday?

Doyle: November.

NCR: So in November you have to write the big letter, right?

Doyle: That's what they say.

NCR: What are you going to do?

Doyle: I don't know whether they'll make any exceptions. I'd like to stay at least another year, I would, because there are some things I want to finish and I'm very happy doing what I'm doing. Thank God my health is all right so far. I like creative people around me.

NCR: Do you have creative people around you here?

Doyle: I have huge numbers of them around me.

NCR: Tell me more about how art and culture plays in to this parish. You're a poet yourself?

Doyle: No. I poke.

NCR: You write a lot.

Doyle: I write the monthly letter, which is a bit of a job because it's hard to find a subject that I haven't written about before. You know about that yourself.

NCR: You have performances here?

Doyle: We have a little theater company.

NCR: Is that the primary thing you do here?

Doyle: Well, theater and promotion of the ? Brother Mickey McGrath, whom you would know of, I would say, he's an Oblate brother and he has done wondrous, I would say, religious art. He gives retreats and his art is part of his retreat. He has a website, which is BeeStill.org. He was in Washington and then Philadelphia.

He's a story in himself. Last year he was reading Dorothy Day's diary and he began to realize that he's in the wrong place. He wanted to come a little nearer the poor. We knew him here. He had been here a few times and so forth, so I had a house across the street that somebody gave me and I fixed it and there he is, that's his studio. He's in Washington today, but I'll show you his studio. Now we have a resident, well-known artist.

NCR: You knew him from before and cultivated a friendship?

Doyle: I did, and then Susan, who runs an awful lot of things here (you met her out there taking the pictures), she had him here. She does a wonderful thing called [?Women's Spirit Rises,? a one-day retreat for women, who were here Saturday, 98 women. They were here all day.

NCR: What is her background?

Doyle: Her background is that she's a social worker. These several years now, she's working for Hospice. She attends Mass here every day, morning prayer every day. She prays for her dying patients. Great work she does. Great people do wonderful work. She would know him through that too.

NCR: Was he from around here?

Doyle: He was from North Philadelphia. That's a painting of his there, that's Thea Bowman, that wonderful nun. What is wonderful about his work is that he's playful, like he always has a little bird somewhere.

NCR: Please tell me about the theater.

Doyle: What the world needs now is inspiration and whatever inspires will save. Camden people may be poor, but put them on a stage and they own it. African-American people on a stage, they're ready to get on stages and sing and dance. Our children will be able to go over there?the theater is huge-looking, big, but the actual stage and theater will seat 98 people.

Of course, you have to keep it under 100, otherwise the equity union will force you to pay and then kill you if

you couldn't pay, the only way you can have a volunteer theater. There's a theater in East Falls that's in its 85th season. It's where Grace Kelly learned to act and they've been volunteering and doing it for 85 years.

That corner there had a bar on it and it was originally called Walt's Café -- Polish people. It was here, like in the '60s and it was here when the shipyard closed and shipyard workers, that was a great haunt of theirs there.

Their grandson, Joe Paprzycki, has been writing plays. He came to see me years ago and he put on a reading of a play that he wrote. I said, "It's great," and the name of the play was "Last Rites."

"Last Rites" is about the death of a neighborhood and it's situated in Walt's Café. There are two priests in it, having a pint as well, from Sacred Heart. There are Sacred Heart priests in the play, "Last Rites." It's incredible. Out of that, came this idea. We built a little, simple stage in the cafeteria and the first play we put on was "Last Rites."

NCR: When did you build that stage?

Doyle: About three years ago, and then we've done several plays since. Every season we have plays.

NCR: Are these mostly African-American, local, amateur actors doing these?

Doyle: No. We put on "The Old Settler." That's a great African-American play. Everybody in that was African-American but they were from Philadelphia. We have had some from Camden in our plays, African-American people, and some of the schools are interested. Woodrow Wilson High School is looking at our theater and a new theater in Camden. I want to see some O'Neill in there, I do. He said "there's no truth without tragedy." How Irish can you get? I want to see Dorothy Day done there.

NCR: Another insertion of Catholic imagination into the culture here?

Doyle: Right, it is.

NCR: Not as it was before because there isn't this great Catholic population.

Doyle: No, and you sort of keep going with the inspiration. That's the key to it -- to stir the core of people and not let them be flattened by TV images, like everything done for them, sitting there like a zombie. Get them active and singing and acting and participating and talking, and all that stuff that would go on.

NCR: Do you do any music here?

Doyle: We do. Every year we have a Celtic (for some reason) spring concert in this church. We've been doing that for 20 years.

We build a high stage so you can see the Irish dancers. We could have maybe ten musicians on the stage. We raise money for the Heart of Camden housing. We tell the people that it's free to get in, expensive to get out. We have a great night.

NCR: How did you get the money for the theater?

Doyle: A man who has a foundation was a dear friend of ours, of the Heart of Camden, myself and so forth, and when we began talking about this idea of a theater, he said that he would get a good piece of the money.

NCR: This was recently, obviously.

Doyle: Well, it has actually been slowed a little bit. A couple of unions that were kind of good to us, had promised that they would come forth with electric and plumbing, but then with the downturn in the economy, they're not as able to do that now. So it's a little slower, but that doesn't matter. I don't care how long it takes because we have the theater going anyway.

More On The Purpose Of Parish

NCR: What is people's fascination with this place of what most people would say is desperation?

Doyle: In 1961, I was assigned to a beginning parish in Cherry Hill, St. Peter Celestine. It was three months old, and I was being sent to Villa Nova. So I was sent up to kind of be within car reach of Villa Nova. I lived in a split level house in a development in Cherry Hill

NCR: As a priest?

Doyle: As a priest -- it was rented as a rectory. There were two of us there, but I came to the conclusion that if I was reared here, in that spot, I would be delinquent. I would probably end up in jail or something because everything was done. Every bloody blade of grass was the same length.

Everything was done. There wasn't one little bit of room for a little peasant of Ireland in that scene. So, when you look at the Book of Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was waste and void. That was the starting ground, waste and void, and God said, "Let there be light," and it started, that imagery of waste and void.

The glory of it or the attraction of a Camden is the fact that there's so much there to be transformed. The human being has a great love for transformation, and loves to take something and bring out of it what's there. There was a parish in Cherry Hill that came in and did a house here back when Sister Peg was here. She was killed, poor Sister Peg. She ran The Heart of Camden for 20 years. She was a St. Joseph Sister from Chestnut Hill, Sister Peg Hynes, and she led The Heart of Camden.

NCR: What happened to her?

Doyle: Well, she and two friends had gone to Westmont to see a lovely woman out there. It was near Christmas and they went for dinner to her house. They spent the evening there and then the couple was taking Sister Peg back to her convent. They were having a great chat and talking, and they came down Burnt Mill Road. It has a bend that goes sharply like that.

A guy came up the road facing them, driving the car with his knees and trying to us a drug pipe. He went straight across the thing into her and killed Sister Peg. A drug addict in Cherry Hill killed her and she died almost instantly. It was an enormous reality for us. Sister Peg was a wonderful woman, so we kind of never got over it.

NCR: You said a group from Cherry Hill came here to build the house.

Doyle: Right. I am getting to that. They came here and they were working on a house down there on Viola Street. I went down there on a Saturday. They were from a parish that just had built a new church, St. Mary's in Cherry Hill. This man who's name was Bob, came up out of the basement.

He was white with dust and I shook his hand. He had huge, big hands, and I shook his hand and said, "Bob, I thank you for what you're doing." He said, "Don't thank me. We built a church in Cherry Hill. We became a

church in Camden.? There?s something about that individual connection with transformation.

Maybe all he did was to pull the bloody plaster down, but he was engaged in that work. Then we would have a blessing of the house later with Sister Peg. Whoever worked on the bathroom, you?d sprinkle the bathroom.

The Heart Of Camden, A Housing Organization

NCR: Tell me about The Heart of Camden. Is that something you started?

Doyle: It is.

NCR: Tell me about it.

Doyle: There was a funny, little guy who lived here on the next street, Andy Orsini. He was a trip. I was talking to him one day and he said, ?I have to move.? I said, ?You have to move? Why?? He said, ?Because the land lady is going to sell the house.? I said, ?Who?s the land lady?? So he gave me a name. I called the woman up and said to her, ?How much do you need for the house??

She said to me, ?I need \$2,500.? This is like 30 years ago. ?I need \$2,500.? It was a brick home on Iona Street. So, I gave her \$3,100. I gave her \$600 more than she asked for it and then I took the house over. I put Andy back into the house and said, ?Just give me so much per month and in three years, you?ll own the house.? So he did.

He was a poor man and I realized then that there wasn?t a huge amount of money sitting between rental and owner, and we set out to create owners. If you want to have a neighborhood, you?ve got to have owners. That was no big, genius thought of mine to start The Heart of Camden. It was a simple guy having to move and out of that came The Heart of Camden.

NCR: What does it do?

Doyle: It takes over abandoned houses and transforms them into livable housing, and then sells them.

NCR: How many have you done?

Doyle: I?d say about 130, but we?re not big. There are bigger places than us. Now, of course, we?re working with money from the Department of Community Affairs, monies like that and so forth. Our next project is transforming an old movie theater, going back to the silent movies, into a gym. We?re on that now.

NCR: Downtown where?

Doyle: Right down the street here.

NCR: Why are you doing a gym?

Doyle: I was talking to the bishop one day and he said, ?We?ve got to work with the youth.? I said, ?There are three words to go with that: gym, gym, gym. A gym is what you need. You?ve got to get kids into something where they?re brought under a roof and play basketball, the boys and girls, and they connect with coaches that help them and so forth.

People are eager to help kids. Right now, the kids from our school here go out to Haddenfield to play ball. They go out to the fancy town because they don?t have a place of their own. The man bought us a van and they get

driven out there to do that. So we'll have our own gym.

The Heart of Camden is engaged in transforming abandoned houses into livable places. So, The Heart of Camden was eager about this idea of a theater and so forth. We pulled the building down and we had a big hole in the ground out there. Martin Sheen was coming to visit us here a year ago.

NCR: Do you know him?

Doyle: I do. He's the one reading in the [Poet of Poverty] video and so, his pastor at Our Lady of Malibu for the past 40 years is from my parish in Ireland, John Sheridan. I sent a letter out to John. I was going to Ireland and I got a letter from him in Ireland and he says, "Martin and John were over here last night for dinner. He'd be glad to do the documentary."

Martin came here. I went over to Philadelphia. They came in on the train from New York but before I left, I said to the fellow you met out there at the arch, Donnie, who works here, "Donnie, put a podium in the hole." The hole was the just a big hole in the ground from where we tore down the building.

I said, "Put a podium in there," and when I came back, there was a podium right there. Martin Sheen entered that hole, walked right up to that podium and immediately launched into a recitation of Theore, the Indian philosopher. It was a beautiful piece. I'm sorry I can't remember the piece, but it's gorgeous.

It's about civic duty. He was getting into it and it was beautiful. People gathered. They went down in the hole and made a big circle in the hole, and they sang songs and hymns. Honest to God, it was just terrific. We had dinner right here. Where the theater is standing today was a big hole in the ground. There he was that day. He had a great time. He was delighted.

So that's the story and it's proceeding, We have a theater in Camden, a new theater.

NCR: I know what you mean. There's a well-known Protestant college over there. Is it Eastern Baptist? It's right across from St. Charles.

Doyle: There's a college called Eastern College, it's on the Main Line outside of Philadelphia. They were interested in the environment and they knew we were living in a place that's so afflicted by environmental injustice. So I went over and talked about it and other things. There was a young fellow there by the name of Chris Haw. He was off writing a book called Jesus for President. I don't know if there is a copy of it in here or not.

Doyle: So, I invited him to come over and he came over. He came over and he stayed.

NCR: Where?

Doyle: Here. We had a house, an old condo. We put him in there with a few people, and a few more people came. Today, he's married and living on Ferry Avenue. His wife teaches in our school. Then he brought over this other young girl named Andrea Ferrich. She's from Lancaster County and she's a farmer.

NCR: She lives here?

Doyle: She does. She's in a Heart of Camden House. She lives next to the theater. Her dream was to build a glass house [a green house] so we built a glass house, 55 by 21 feet. She got a little grant from a little family and built it. So she runs the glass house. She teaches the children. You saw it in the clip.

NCR: More transformation.

Doyle: Right, and a couple of guys came here for the summer through this gathering of young people, and the glass house was being finished. So this guy from the University of Texas came and stayed in the old convent. He worked on a design for watering the plants for Andrea. The water comes off the roof.

The first water does not go into the system. It washes the bird droppings and the twigs off. The next water comes down into the system and Martin Sheen was shown the greenhouse which I will show you. Andrea gets up on a bicycle in the greenhouse and starts peddling. She gives the hose to Martin Sheen.

Martin Sheen has the hose. The next thing you know, the water is coming out of the hose and he's watering, and dying. He was bent over because he's peddling and he's getting the water with not a bit of electricity. She's the electricity. It's a beautiful thing. This convent here behind us, I walk in there. It's been empty for 30 years. Now it's the Center for Transformation. It was empty for a long time. It was leased for 12 years. I couldn't lease it because anything that was coming was questionable, like with fellows getting out of jail. It was too near the school. So then I decided to create a Center for Transformation with a view to bring the church into deeper connection with environmental transformation.

The idea was to connect with Thomas Berry and that whole idea that the earth is sacred, and we have damaged it. I always think about that, about how we are as a Catholic church, that we are a sacramental religion, and we use matter -- water, olive oil, bread, wine, and we bring God to the ground with matter, with a piece of the earth. If we can do that, how could we dare ever make a bomb?

Why can't we apply the sacramental reverence that we have been fed on, to apply it to matter that should then be transformed into a weapon? How could we ever do that without a thought? A sacramental church, above all people, should say that matter is sacred. So I feel a lot about that. We want to make that big connection between matter and sacrament, and church and all that, to create a new attitude. Not that we have to create it. We're just applying it.

NCR: When is this convent going to be rehabbed for this purpose? Is it done already?

Doyle: It's in process of being done. The heating system has been put in and right now, they're pulling down a lot of walls and putting in new bathrooms. When all that is done, there needs to be some work in the kitchen.

NCR: This young woman from Lancaster County, she's going to be in charge of this whole thing?

Doyle: She will be, with some help. She is great, and she's teaching. I went over there on Saturday evening and she had about ten children sitting at an old table. They were all eating. They had potatoes and little vegetables, all grown here, and they were all eating. I got a plate, too.

They were eating at table, these children, from her garden and their garden. It absolutely is amazing. The things that we do, I always think that they're small, but they have meaning for people. We're not big. We're not big at all. We're little but there's a lot of power to those little things, that gardening and earth thing. She has a garden down across Fourth Street and then she has the greenhouse and all that.

NCR: How does somebody from the Irish church, which has imbued the American church with a degree of severity in the past, how did you escape that kind of formation?

Doyle: I don't know. Of course, the Vatican Council came in. It was a great thing like that at the time. John the 23rd announced the Vatican Council on the 25th of January, 1959, and myself and my brothers were on the last lap towards ordination. Funny enough, I remember listening to the radio and who would be Pope. I heard Angelo Roncalli, and I said, "Who?"

Not that I knew very much, but I wanted Montini. The reason I wanted Montini was that he was a friend of Suenens? from Belgium. I knew Suenens had supported and promoted the young, Christian workers. They had come to Ireland and I thought they were a great idea: observe, judge and act. It was incredible.

I wanted Montini, but we got this wonderful man, John XXIII. That affected me and then, I think a thing that I hated to do was go back to school. I didn't do that to get to go teach at high school. That affected me, too. I was teaching religion and Latin. Religion is a hard thing to do, but it gave me a lot of confidence to stand on my feet.

The thing that I set out to do for some reason, maybe because I'm from those fields that you saw, I always wanted to connect whatever I am teaching with some reality now. If I'm talking about Moses, I'm talking about Martin Luther King. I always wanted to connect it for myself and the children, so I did a lot of that kind of stuff like connecting in my head and my heart.

I think that kind of helped me, getting into the peace thing. That happened from school, too, because I was teaching the Sermon on the Mount. All I said to the children, the freshmen and sophomores was, you look at this. Moses said, "An eye for an eye."

I would go on to say that Lyndon Johnson said, "Equal retaliation." It's the same kind of principle, but looking at the Sermon on the Mount, you can't say that. All I would say to them because they can get up and walk out so you can't push things on them, but I would just say, "You can't square the Sermon on the Mount with military objectives in Vietnam."

So we have a Peace House here now, down the street here.

A Parish 'Peace House'

NCR: What do you do there?

Doyle: They would help people with conscientious objection. They have meetings.

NCR: Is it staffed regularly?

Doyle: It's one woman that runs it. She lives there and creates that space. She calls it Bridget's House. She might even be here now. I don't know if she is or not, but we promote peace constantly. That's part of the church's mission is to get into peace. That is part of it's responsibility.

The funny thing, Tom, is that way back in the First World War, the pastor here, John McCluskey, went from here to Redbank. St. James at Redbank is where he lived and where he is buried. He built our school. Those were the days in 1914 to 1918. He was a very active man, very powerful. He built that school in 1919 for \$100,000. That's no small change.

Anyway, he was the chairman of the draft board, the Third District Draft board, which was in the building that eventually became a convent. We owned the building before as a convent. He was honored by the Pentagon because he had sent off so many people and had lost only two.

His thinking at the time was that the only way for the Irish to participate in the American thing was to show that they were loyal. That was his thinking. It's kind of interesting that you have a peace group and someone who was considered a felon for a while. The way things move and change, people try to do the best with what they know and what the times are talking to them about.

We have that peace thing there, and we have a thrift store that is delightful. It's open on Saturdays. It's all little things. A thrift store is no big deal, but people come in there from ten to two, and there are a whole bunch of volunteers. I have no business head on me, but I brag about the fact that I came up with the business plan for it.

It wasn't doing very well at all. Hardly anybody went to it. So I came up with this. You would not put me over any business, but I said, "We will sell diapers cheaper." We lose money on diapers. We buy diapers and we sell them cheaper than we bought them. The diapers are in the thrift store at the back wall.

To get to them, you have to come through dresses and stuff like that. I'm telling you, it worked because everybody around here needs diapers. So they came for the diapers and then they buy things for 50 cents. The thing works and it's a delightful thing. It's a ministry to people. They can get good clothes. So that's going on

Doyle: We feed the people every Saturday. That's St. Vincent de Paul that's in charge of that. That's a great program.

NCR: You do that out of where?

Doyle: We bought a building across the street. I bought the building some years ago, not because I had great plans, but I was coming down the street and I saw this great building next to that convent that we owned.

At that time there were Jesuit volunteers in it, and it was linked to this building. This door was opened and it was abandoned. I went into it, went upstairs and there was one room, and there was a spent match on every square inch of that floor. I rushed to get an owner, and bought it without knowing what to do.

I wanted to take it over because we could lose next door. Then a dear friend of mine, Joe Pasara, he worked at Lourdes Hospital, which is down here in South Camden. The Franciscan Sisters ran it for many years. Joe was the conscience of the place. He was a dear friend of mine and he had a very bad heart. He died at age 55.

The hospital went into such sadness, so they wanted to do something. I said, "I have the right thing for Joe." He was very much about social justice. Take this building and make it into something. I wasn't quite sure what to make it into. They came over and said, "Put all the bottom floor into one space and put a kitchen in it."

I wasn't quite sure, but at least we had that. They spent \$100,000 on it, and we call it Joe's Place. That's where we feed the people.

Mother Teresa And Honoring The Poor

Doyle: I always feel that its difficulty and trouble would keep me from going real bad. Do you know what I mean? It's like a protection. You can turn out to be anything. John F. Kennedy said that any one human being can do the greatest good or greatest evil. Mother Teresa came here in 1976. She visited the church. I met her over in Philadelphia and I said, "I'm from a very poor place. Would you ever come and pray for the women of Camden?"

She said, "I'll come at the Eucharistic Congress." So she came. She came here and prayed in the church.

When she came to Philadelphia, the very first time she ever came, Cardinal Krol brought her, and she spoke from a big stage up in front of the Art Museum up in Philadelphia. She read from the Sermon on the Mount, that if you do good for one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you do it for me.

Then she says, "So, if you touch the poor, you will touch Christ. If you touch Christ, you will be saved. Touch

the poor.? That was her message. It was just perfect. So I see this place as a place whereby we can connect people, legitimately and honorably, with poor people. They can't just drive down the street and say, "I'm going to help you," but you come out of this legitimacy.

They are Sacred Heart and people are looking for a sense of something in justice, in that area. They want that so I think the poor are the call here, and the creation of opportunity and being able whereby you could touch the poor. We have one objective here; we don't always succeed. We're not a church to help the poor. We're a church to honor the poor.

We often fail at that, but that's the ideal that we set before ourselves, to honor the poor. Anybody can help the poor. When we give out food, we give it out to maybe 150 women who come. We discriminate against men in our giving out of food on the fourth Saturday of the month. One hundred fifty women come for food to our cafeteria.

They conduct a prayer service first. One woman who comes for food reads Scripture. Another woman says praise, as the Baptists can do so well and then somebody leads the singing. Then we have a thing we call a Prayer for Camden, and everybody says the Prayer for Camden. We say that at every Mass. I look at that and say, "Could my mother come in here?"

My mother was a woman with no money in her pocket, but dignity the way they all are. Could my mother come in here and not be diminished? Could she do it? That's the question. Are we creating a welcome and an honor where a woman who could use a bag of food could come in here? That's the effort. You fail, but you have that goal of a place where the poor will be honored. That's the word.

Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, is traveling the country reporting on church life. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org. Read the full series here: [In Search of the Emerging Church](#) [2].

Follow Tom Roberts on his journey "In Search of the Emerging Church." Sign up to [receive an e-mail alert](#) [3] when his stories are posted to this series. If you already receive e-mail alerts from NCR, click on the button that says "update my profile."

Source URL (retrieved on 07/26/2017 - 15:54): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/conversation-fr-michael-doyle>

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/16106>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/in-search-of-the-emerging-church>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>