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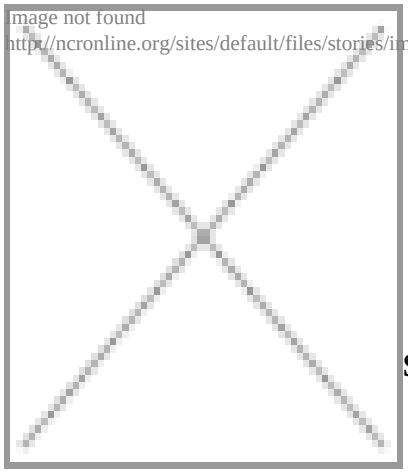
Favorite scripture passage inspires New Jersey monsignor's outreach

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Jul. 24, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Msgr. Robert T. McDermott, pastor of St. Joseph Pro-Cathedral in Camden, N.J., is an example of someone who, though in one sense running in place, has long been a mover and shaker of the world around him. Born 70 years ago, the second child of a typical, post-World War II working-class family attended elementary school in the parish he's led for 27 years. Camden, a city plagued by poverty and crime, is the beneficiary of this man's dedication.



Sr. Camille: Bob. Do you mind if I call you that?

McDermott: Yes, you may call me Bob. Most people do.

Thanks. Bob, how would you describe your childhood?
My childhood was typical of those days, simple and centered on our neighborhood and church. My parents had a close relationship with several priests, and so I was frequently around clergy.

One aspect of my early years was that I was born with eye problems. I've worn glasses all my life and probably hold the record for most broken glasses of all time. Despite my poor eyes, I loved to play sports and did so for most of my childhood and young adult life. The only lasting element is golf.

What inspired you to become a priest?

I think my early inspiration came from the respect and relationships my parents had with the church, as well as our family's closeness to priests. I honestly did not have a passion to do anything else. The late '60s was a wonderful and challenging time. I studied theology at The Catholic University of America and the Theological College in Washington, D.C. There were so many things happening in the world, our country and the church. It was a time of change: civil rights, opposition to the Vietnam War, *aggiornamento* in the church. All taught me a great deal about justice and liberty and about the freedom to which we must aspire.

To what do you attribute your leadership qualities?

During my childhood, every neighborhood had leaders. I was considered one of them. After passing through a period of shyness when I was a teenager, my seminary trainers cached and inspired me to develop my leadership qualities. I learned to trust my gifts and talents.

Did you have role models?

There were two seminary professors who had a great impact on my life. One was Fr. Murray Arndt, a Salvadoran priest in Waukesha, Wis. He saw in me talent and potential I never knew existed. He challenged me, especially in the importance of reading. One night, he called me to his office and asked me to read a one-page editorial from *Commonweal* on the Taft-Hartley Act. I read it. But when he asked me what it said, I didn't remember much. He challenged me to read a book a week and submit a report on each. I read 38 novels that year, and it made hungry for more.

Another professor in theology and philosophy, a Sulpician priest, Eugene (Geno) Walsh, taught me in St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore. During my six years with him, I witnessed his great passion for the post-Vatican II church and his understanding of what it would mean for us as we entered into priesthood. I'm afraid he's turning over in his grave today.

Who most influenced your belief system?

The person most influencing me over these last 30 years is Richard Rohr. He and I are the same age and have experienced similar changes in the church and our relationship to it. I've also been deeply challenged by Oscar Romero.

Please describe your parish.

The city of Camden is one of the poorest and most dangerous in our country. Ours is a diverse community of Anglos, African-Americans, Vietnamese, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and now Mexicans. Besides the ordinary sacramental part of a parish, we need to recognize the cultural richness of these growing communities. Our community of about 2,500 families experiences these cultural borders. Most are poor, uneducated, and not very well "churched."

What are the essentials of your ministry?

I've come to understand the need to change the focus of the church away from a "road to salvation" model to one of relationship-building with our brothers and sisters in the world today. It's about the present and not the future beyond this lifetime.

I also want to say that during the first 15 years of my priesthood, I worked with the Marriage Encounter movement and learned a great deal about how to strengthen and develop strong relationships. I saw that what was being taught to couples applied to my relationship with God.

How do your respond to the greatest needs?

We have created a not-for-profit affordable housing program and have provided fully owned housing for more than 900 families.

We have both a Child Development Center for 3- and 4-year-olds and a Catholic grammar school from kindergarten through eighth grade. We have 350 students. We are committed to making sure they graduate from high school. For most, it's the only way out of poverty.

We have a social services outreach to the community several days a week and a very active youth program for more than 200 teens. We've also developed a retreat program in The Romero Center that weekly welcomes high school and college service-driven young men and women to engage in our "Urban Challenge" program. It has been hugely successful in helping these future Catholic leaders learn about the role of the church in the formation of a more just world. More than 1,400 students participate each year.

Just two years ago, we started a program for the homeless called the Joseph House Ministry. Homelessness is an enormous problem in Camden. Obviously, it takes a great deal of money to do all that we do. It cannot exist on the offerings of the people who attend Sunday Masses. We have to have an aggressive program of fundraising throughout the year.

If someone were to give you a million dollars, what would you do with it?

I would put it all in the ministries that we have created in this parish. In our world today, a million dollars won't get you far. What we have here is a liberating transformation experience that can set us free. I need to raise a million dollars every year to keep this alive and well.

Where do you find support for your efforts?

We have great leaders on the staff and in all of these ministries. We also have a diocesan bishop, Joseph Galante, who understands the need for all that we do.

Do you think current seminarians share your vision?

For the past 10 years, the diocese has assigned a second-year theology student to reside and work in the parish for a full year before they attend the final two years of seminary preparation. For most of these young men, it has been eye-opening to see the church among the poor, to apply their theological and spiritual training to their everyday life. Some have had difficulty, and one has left the formation process altogether. Unfortunately, so many of today's young priests are more clerically attracted and less invested with the people of the church.

What is your favorite scripture passage?

I am most moved by the New Testament passages that call us into the world and out of our churches to follow in the footsteps of the Lord. The most significant of these is Luke 4: 18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners. To announce a year of favor from the Lord."

Does it make in difference in your life?

Yes, it does. When I am challenged by the question I often asked myself, "Why am I a priest today?" These passages of being called and sent have great meaning to me. It's not about what I do or accomplish, it's about forgiveness and freedom and profound love that God has for all of us.

What is your image of God?

One of the things that I teach and preach about often is that when we were kids, we were taught that "we were created in the image and likeness of God." Too often, we have worked hard to "re-create God in the image and likeness of ourselves." God is about love and forgiveness, grace and mercy; so often we can only "love" so far, we can only accept some and not all, we only forgive those that the world might forgive. We are more comfortable with punishing than loving and forgiving. My image of God and his kingdom is caring for the world in which we live. So when we come together in prayer, it is important to begin not by asking God to be

present among us, but by thanking him for actually already being among us.

What in contemporary Catholicism distresses you?

We have become a church too controlled by the Vatican and behave in a way that is inhospitable. We need to stop deciding who should be allowed to worship or partake, and more closely follow the teachings and example of Jesus.

What in it encourages you?

There is still life in the body of Christ; it is present in the modern-day martyrs, the hunger for justice and the opportunities we have to be prophetic with the courage to speak truth to power. It is important for us to proclaim our love of life for God is present in all life.

Is there anything you would change?

I would want the church to revisit the teachings of the council, especially in the structure of authority and the hierarchy.

What causes you sorrow?

When I see the greed and stubbornness of our lifestyle in this country; when I see the addictions that have created a life-threatening culture; when I see how our family values have changed so much.

What gives you hope?

God's Spirit among us; I trust that this is his kingdom, and it, too, will be redeemed.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

I can't imagine that you've missed anything. Thank you so much.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audio book is available through the book's website, storiesofforgiveness.com [1].]

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