News
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As Fr. Michael Doyle shows the statue he calls "Breakfast on the Beach with Jesus After the Resurrection," the new and old combine in Sacred Heart Parish in a way that expands the idea of Catholic community. (NCR photo/Tom Roberts)



by Tom Roberts

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***Editor's Note**:* Msgr. Michael Doyle, an Irish-born priest who served in Camden, New Jersey for decades, died on Nov. 4. Below we are republishing former NCR editor Tom Roberts' report about Doyle's ministry, first published in December 2009.

A statue situated under a stained glass window on a side of Sacred Heart Church in South Camden might hold a key to understanding this most unusual place and its legendary pastor. It is a striking bronze sculpture of a clean-shaven young man holding a piece of bread, a fish cooking on a spit nearby.

The pastor, Fr. Michael Doyle, calls it “Breakfast on the Beach with Jesus After the Resurrection.” It’s one of his favorite scripture stories. The statue was done by a friend, the late Fr. Leonard Carrieri, an Italian priest and Missionary of the Sacred Heart, who died last June at age 94. Carrieri had started sculpting in his late 50s and, like so many others, was drawn to do some of his work in this corner of South

Camden, where redemption can seem to occur at a breathtaking pace.

You begin to feel this place lure you to an awareness of a reality that is counter to the one that hits you in the face on the drive from outside the city, through the city's burned out neighborhoods, past despairing clumps of young people on street corners and stoops, through the smell of neglect.

Writing about the misery of Camden is the easy part. The evidence in this most broken of American cities is everywhere. Seven years ago it was the target of the largest municipal takeover in the history of the country -- a $175 million project that essentially allowed for preempting the failed local government -- and the initiative has foundered. A recent series on Camden by The Philadelphia Inquirer started with a description of the city as "so broke, so unable to perform the basic functions of government" that it can't even begin to think about repairing a century-old brick sewer system that leaks into people's homes.

"The glory of it, or the attraction of a Camden," says Doyle, a poet, a peace activist once arrested for stealing draft board records (and ultimately acquitted), and a native of Ireland, "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."

One morning in August, we stood before Carrieri's statue, this young Jesus with a look of near wonder on his face, gazing beyond his left shoulder as if he hears or sees something interesting in the distance. And from one viewing angle, in the background was another statue, a much more traditional rendering of the Sacred Heart, a full-length, bearded figure in post-Resurrection robes.

That seems to be one of the bits of magic about this place. Doyle isn't about taking anyone's church away, but rather expanding everyone's idea about what a Catholic Christian community can be. And it's all done with a bit of Irish whimsy, with a deep sense of how art gives life, and with such a profound connection to humanity, that he doesn't need glossy brochures or mission statements to get the point across.

Doyle's been pastor at Sacred Heart a long time, 35 years, and he just turned 75, setting off speculation about when he'd be forced to retire and about what will happen at Sacred Heart should he leave.

If the future of the church will be lived out, as many experts predict, in circumstances of greater scarcity -- both in terms of material wealth and numbers of clergy -- then Doyle's experience might be instructive. At a time when parishes are leaving the inner city and Catholic schools are closing by the score, Sacred Heart and its elementary school are thriving.

The school more than survives because for decades Doyle has been sending out monthly letters (4,600 at the moment) to sponsors all over the country. He started a sponsorship program 25 years ago, asking people to give $300 to a child in Camden. He's never changed the amount, just widened the circle of donors and last year raised $700,000.

The parish thrives because it has attracted young people who have taken up bold and inventive ministries and because Doyle has succeeded in incorporating middle-class parishioners from Camden's suburbs into his poor congregation.

The primary objective, said Doyle, is not to be a church to help the poor, but to be a church "to honor the poor."

A bit of food, a bit of art, prayer, photographs everywhere of visitors, famous and little known. It begins to add up. A children's chapel was remodeled in recent years, about the same time that the Heart of Camden, a parish-based nonprofit that "takes over abandoned houses and transforms them into livable housing, and then sells them," was building a greenhouse for a young urban farmer. Things here connect one to the other until you understand, by dint of all the activity and people gathering around, that this is an extraordinary parish.

A rock for an altar

The children's chapel is handsomely done, and there's a huge rock at one end of it -- and another story. When they were digging out the plot for the greenhouse, this huge rock emerged, said Doyle, and he asked workers if they could haul it the block or two to the church and slip it through the chapel windows, which were in the process of being replaced. Of course they could. Things just get done around here, a real contrast to the rest of Camden.

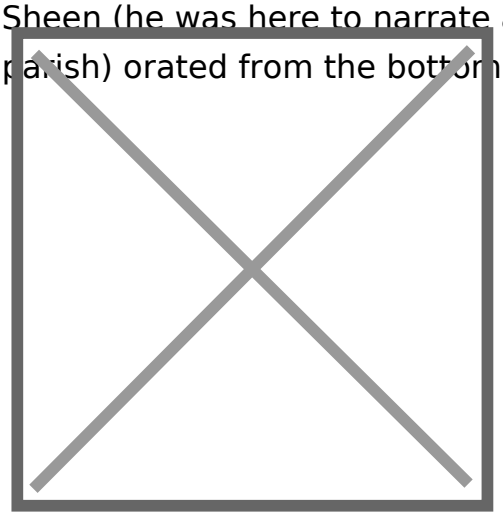
Doyle asked the workers if they could carve out a level spot on the top of the rock to accommodate a chalice and other sacred vessels. They could. So he has an altar for liturgies for the little ones. "I can stand up here and slap this rock," he said, "and tell

the children that this rock is older than Moses!” An idea about creation comes into clearer perspective in the basement of Sacred Heart Church.

The walk around the parish continues, and one gets caught up in an intricate web of stories -- of efforts and people, of mission and conversion, of endless despair being constantly transformed.

Just outside the children’s chapel is a large room, a cafeteria that has been outfitted as a temporary theater in which plays and other performances are staged. In the not too distant future, such productions will be held in a far more professional setting in a theater that the parish is building across the street from the church. The pastor has also had a poet’s walk constructed. Someone gave him a brick that supposedly came from one of Henry James’ homes in Ireland, and that inspired a brick patio of sorts, fittingly next to the theater, with an arched gate in front and the names of literary figures inscribed in the bricks that make up the walk.

The theater idea began with one of many “dear friends” of Doyle and of Sacred Heart. When conversation turned to the possibility of building a small theater, the friend said he’d take care of the bulk of the fundraising. Someone else tore down the existing structure for nothing and several unions volunteered labor, and so it goes around here. The theater site received a sort of special blessing when actor Martin Sheen (he was here to narrate a video, “The Poet of Poverty,” about Doyle and the parish) orated from the bottom of the pit before construction began.



“What the world needs now is inspiration,” said Doyle, in explaining the theater, “and whatever inspires will save. Camden people may be poor, but put them on a stage and they own it.”

A brick, a conversation, a need, an encounter, anything is likely to trigger Doyle’s imagination, a very Catholic imagination that spills out all over the neighborhood

and in all directions. Some of it is very visible, like the peace monument constructed on public land at an intersection just across the street from the church, or the church itself and the public art that surrounds it, or the courtyard setting that he sees as a peaceful space for meditation.

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Creating owners

Some 30 years ago, Doyle was talking to a poor man who lived in a home nearby. The man told Doyle he had to move because the landlady was selling the house. Doyle asked for her name and called her and asked how much she needed. She told him $2,500. “So I gave her $3,100, I gave her $600 more than she asked for it and then I took the house over.” He put the man back into the house and said, “Just give me so much per month and in three years, you’ll own the house.” And that’s what happened.

Doyle 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 simply a guy having to move, and out of that came the Heart of Camden.” So far, the organization has rehabbed and sold about 130 homes.

The list grows. “I was talking to the bishop [Joseph Galante] one day,” said Doyle, “and he said, ‘We’ve got to work with 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.” So right now, the Heart of Camden is involved in transforming an old movie theater into a gym.

A former convent is being remodeled into a Center for Transformation “with a view to bring the church into deeper connection with environmental transformation.”

There’s a thrift shop selling used clothing that was faltering until the poet pastor came up with a business plan: sell diapers cheaper than anyone, but put them at the back of the shop. It worked “So they come for the diapers and then they buy things for 50 cents. … It’s a ministry to people. They can get good clothes.”

At the foundation of it all is liturgy and ritual: for those killed by violence each year, for pregnant women, for the unveiling of a new statue, and Sunday Mass. “Are you a liturgist?” Doyle knows, he said, that church is a place to “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, and then I preach. I say to them, ‘I am preaching to you, just going over 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.’”

He’s not here to give answers, he said, but to “provide help and facilitate the possibility that those attending a liturgy would enter into moments of lift to God. That’s it.”

A conversation with Fr. Michael Doyle

Read the transcript of an extended conversation with Fr. Michael Doyle about liturgy, peacemaking, bringing beauty to the inner city, what went wrong in Camden, how to solve the drug problem and much more.