

## On the road again: New Mexico and Camden, NJ

Tom Roberts | Aug. 18, 2009

I'm winding up nearly two weeks on the road, another leg of reporting for the Emerging Church series. I visited the Archdiocese of Santa Fe and the Diocese of Las Cruces in New Mexico, as well as Camden, N.J., locations that are rarely referenced when the conversation turns to the future of the church. But maybe they should be given more serious consideration.

Among the realities shaping the church of the future are the priest shortage, the drop in the number of nuns, scarce financial resources, a dwindling church presence in the inner city, and the church's altered status in the general culture because of the sex abuse crisis, which has diminished the credibility of church leadership. The church is also being shaped by the growth of lay ministry and the increasing presence of permanent deacons.

Originally, I intended to go to New Mexico to attend a conference on the emerging church Aug. 13-15, but the more I looked into the situation of the church in that state the more I had a hunch that New Mexico might have something to offer the larger church because of its unusual history (for starters, it did not develop from a transplanted Irish church, as occurred in much of the East). It also never had an abundance of its own priests; its parishes and missions, at great distances from any central authority (still the case today in much of the state) have a history of autonomy; the local church historically had to take responsibility for its own survival; and it was never a rich church.

Even today, the face of the church in this corner of the Southwest is humbler than that in much of the rest of the country. It never had the opportunity or wealth to heap up great monuments of granite and marble. That doesn't mean the church here lacks for moving and artful places of worship.

Much of what I found in Camden has to do with injecting the Catholic imagination, in a transformative way, into the mainstream culture. I spent much of one day with Fr. Michael Doyle at Sacred Heart Parish, a long-standing beacon of hope amid the chaos and despair of North Camden. I will be spending much of another day with the folks at Hopeworks in South Camden, a program aimed at transforming the lives of young people through a program of education and training. It was founded by Jesuit Fr. Jeff Putthoff.

I'll be writing at greater length and detail in the coming weeks about the people who bring the church alive in these places, including a report on the conference (a collaborative effort of the Dominicans at the Aquinas Newman Center at the University of New Mexico, lay leaders and the archdiocese), and interviews with Archbishop Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe and Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces. I was able to sit down with Franciscan thinker and writer, Fr. Richard Rohr, for an extended interview at his Center for Action and Contemplation.

I'll also be reporting in the weeks ahead on a sister in Albuquerque who now leads the parish she attended as a little girl; a Jesuit-inspired community organizer who's working with a wide array of the faith community in southern New Mexico to advocate on behalf of the region's best interests; and on lay leaders in the Diocese of Las Cruces who deal with everything from trying to make this far-flung church a more cohesive whole to the many sides of the complex immigration issue.

On another matter, I'd like to sincerely thank all of you who have sent emails with suggestions about where next I might go in this incredibly diverse church to tell more of the story. While it will be impossible to get to all of them in person (I'd need years and an enormous travel budget), I'll certainly get to some of them and, further down the line, will try to characterize as many as I can. Keep sending along information about what you think is emerging and pointing the way to the future in your area.

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