

Monica Yant Kinney: Film portrays Camden's rebel priest



By Monica Yant Kinney

Inquirer Columnist

In 1968, the Rev. Michael Doyle was sent to Camden to be silenced.

The Irish priest had spoken out against the Vietnam War to his Holy Spirit High students in Atlantic County, and after he condemned a decision to have the school band play a war rally, Doyle's superiors handed him a one-way ticket to a city coping with white flight, economic collapse and political prostitution.

"I came to Camden as punishment," he's fond of saying, "but it really was a blessing."

The forced relocation didn't shut Doyle up. Over 40 years, especially the last 33 at Sacred Heart parish in the ravaged Waterfront South community, he has been one of Camden's constant, most vocal champions.

At community rallies and political protests, Doyle speaks for people choking on dust from the trash incinerator and gagging from the smell of the sewage treatment plant. From the pulpit, he cries for a city whose residents have been numbed by violence.

Next month, Doyle's voice will be channeled by *West Wing* star Martin Sheen in a documentary film called *Poet of Poverty*.

A prickly priest being played by the president? This can't be the penance Doyle's superiors had in mind.

Speaking his mind

We watch the film in a room just off the kitchen in Sacred Heart's rectory. It's his second viewing, and Doyle, 73, says it sounds strange to hear a Hollywood superstar speaking *his* mind.

Poet of Poverty opens with a boy walking to school past a fire hydrant leaking water, past boarded-up rowhouses and mountains of trash. The youngster is not afraid of foreign foes in a post-9/11 world because "if the terrorists flew over Camden, they'll think they have done it already."

Quoting Doyle's letters, Sheen narrates: "The threat to the future of this nation is not Iraq, but in the inner core of our deadly cities. If only we had a National Guard with hammers and saws, and Marines who did nothing but plumbing."

This is not Doyle's first taste of fame. In 1971, he was one of the Camden 28, a group of war protesters caught breaking into a federal building to destroy draft records. (The group was tried and, triumphantly, acquitted.)

In 1983, Doyle proclaimed in a profile on *60 Minutes*: "I often think of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. He would scream over Camden."

The inspiration for *Poet of Poverty* has an even bleaker title, *It's a Terrible Day . . . Thanks Be to God*. The 2003 book compiled letters that Doyle had sent to friends over the years about his adventures in Camden, monthly ministerial missives that supporters encouraged him to share with the world.

Dutch journalist Freke Vuijst started receiving Doyle's letters after meeting him in 2000 while reporting on the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. Through his words, the filmmaker and her two codirectors found a way to ask "Why is there such poverty in America?"

The \$30,000 documentary may wind up on PBS, which has aired other films by Vuijst. This being a political year, she hopes for more.

A poet on pause

"It's the *Poet of Poverty*," Doyle admits at the end of our screening, "not the *Poet of Breakthroughs*."

After 40 years, Doyle remains furious at what has happened to his city, but he does see hope amid the hurt.

He's especially fond of the scene in the film in which neighborhood kids christen a new fishing pier.

"The Delaware River is the mother of this city," Doyle believes, "and water equals money."

Someday, he predicts, homes will replace the prison that blights the North Camden waterfront. South Camden may yet escape its industrial straitjacket.

"Camden," he says, "has a view of Philadelphia you can't get in Philadelphia." The city

doesn't have much, but its location is priceless.

If only Doyle had time for a sequel with a happy ending.

In two years Camden's rebel priest will be 75 and, under church rules, required to retire. "Unless," he jokes, "I become pope."

Monica Yant Kinney: If You Go

The premiere of *Poet of Poverty* is set for 7 p.m. June 14 at Gordon Theater at Rutgers University-Camden. For tickets and information, contact the Heart of Camden at www.heartofcamden.org

camden.org or 856-966-1212.

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