It's a terrible day...Thanks be to God!

Jim Williamson

OVER THE YEARS many people, lay and clerical, have left this region to fulfil their destinies on foreign shores. My own aunt spent her whole life, from the age of sixteen, as a nun in Australia. In the 20th century many went as missionaries to Asia, Africa and the Americas. In more recent times more lay people have gone to many of these areas working for aid organisations and other NGOs. Back in the 19th century, a girl named Margaret Gaffney from Tully, Carrigallen, ended up as a successful entrepreneur and giver of aid in the city of New Orleans. The subject of this article is also one who left here as a young priest to work in the diocese of Camden, New Jersey, USA. His name is *Fr Michael J Doyle.* Even though I knew some of his relatives and also his brother the late Fr J J Doyle, and was vaguely aware of his career, I have never met this man. This is his story.

Michael's mother was Rosetta (Rose) Creegan, one of thirteen children born and reared in the townland of Drumkeeran in the parish of Cloone. His father John was a small farmer from Rosduff in north Longford. Michael was born November 1934, educated at Pulladoey National School, Moyne Latin School and ordained in 1959 from St Peter's Wexford.

■ *Fr Michael Doyle at home*
PHOTO JOE MCDONAGH

Five of Michael's mother's siblings emigrated to the US. He has many relations on both sides of the Atlantic. He worked as a curate in various locations in Camden and taught in the Holy Spirit High School, during his early years there. His priestly education, even though prior to Vatican II, would have exposed him to some of the new ideas in the church and from his writing and poems we can see how aware he was of the great minds of the 20th century.

Like many Christians the debacle of US military involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s was causing Michael increasing concern. John F Kennedy was in office and the US was gradually getting sucked into the internal struggle in Vietnam. Kennedy didn't want it but due to many other problems, he let it develop. After his assassination, Lyndon Johnston continued the same policies with the result that by the mid to late '60s the US was totally committed to war in Vietnam. I remember it vividly myself from that time. Every month according to Robert McNamara, Sec. of Defence and General William Westmorland, Chief of Operations south Vietnam, the US were on the up, always needing more troops and air support and gaining victories all the time. It was America—they were strong, they wouldn't lie, and they were fighting the evil menace of communism. What fools we were to believe them!

Fr Michael Doyle and many of his friends didn't believe them. The more body bags coming back and the more Vietnamese civilians, young and old, being slaughtered, bombed, and burned with Napalm, the more they were convinced that something had to be done to stop this carnage. At that time the Press had free access to the combat regions, but not any more. Journalists, and their crews, have to be 'embedded' with the attacking force, so they're not free to report what is

■ *Fr Michael Doyle with his New Jersey team in front of the Peace Sculpture at Ballinamuck.*

■ *In this picture are Fr Michael's relations including his mother, Rosetta, front second from left.*

really happening and film it. Watching these gruelling scenes on TV was too much for these Christian people and they decided to react. Jesuits Fr Daniel Berrigan, his brother and friends were already protesting by burning draft cards.

Fr Michael's team decided to break into a government (federal) building and post office in Camden and take and destroy draft cards. They were called 'The Camden 28', and included Fr M J Doyle, Fr Murphy, a local Episcopalian minister and also a very able individual Bob Hardy. He was the practical man of the group, a convert to Catholicism received by Fr Michael and as it turned out, their Judas. Loyal to his country he reported them to the F B I and the F B I supplied him with all the equipment including radios for the break-in.

Of course, they were all caught in the act, and twenty-seven were arrested but no Bob Hardy. He redeemed himself somewhat later as the F B I promised him that the others would be released, but they weren't and Hardy gave evidence for the defence at the two and a half month trial two years later. Fr Michael's mother Rosetta Creegan Doyle originally from Cloone, sat knitting throughout the trial. A Juror, observing her, said afterwards "when things were going bad for the defendants, her needle sped up and slowed when the case was going their way." They were all acquitted.

Here is an excerpt from Michael Doyle's closing statement at the trial in 1973. The judge said it was the best summation he had ever heard.

'What do you do when a child is on fire in a war that was a mistake and you can't extinguish the flame – the napalm flame with water or anything else? What are you to do about that? What do you do with an old man whose bones are splintered by anti-personnel weapons in a war that was a mistake? It's a terrible burden on us little people. We have no answer to that. There is no answer in the law for a child on fire in a war that was a mistake'.

Michael Doyle didn't think the Holy Spirit High School band should cele-

■ *Fr Michael Doyle with Siobhan McKenna & his cousin Johnny Creegan*

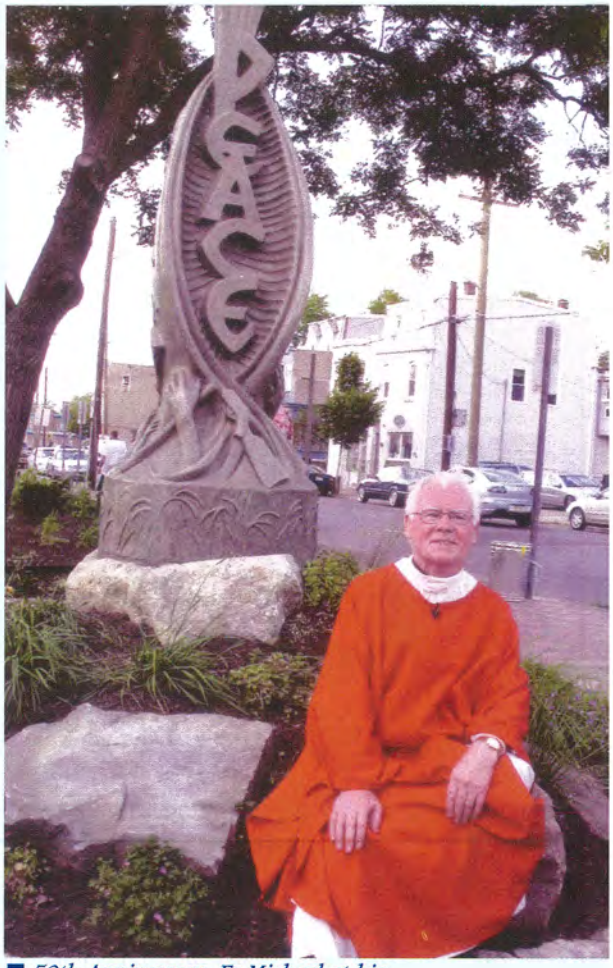
Michael Doyle is a historian, and a poet of the everyday life around himself and his parish. He is a poet of his home place, his youth and his ancestors. His poetry is easy to read and recite yet it is most profound. Here is a verse from his poem 'The Birth of a Pig' and an excerpt from the death of his father.

Her body heaved,
Her feet kicked against the straw,
I could see the pain race across
Her body like dark clouds in an
Irish sky.
I rubbed by hand along her belly
And talked to her aching heart
She grunted in a hoarse and tender
way.
She knew I was there,
And that was all I wanted her to
know

My father's time from whose loins leapt
The blossom of my eager growth
The hips and hands that transubstantiated
clay
To blood and bone to build my chance
To walk upon pleasant unploughed fields
He weakening now. The Aran banners dug
Enough to feed the future when he's gone.
His tired feet eased out this final time,
The weighted 'brógs' aside for another day,
please God!
Prayers. Friendly words. Bed. Five minutes.
He was dead.

Since his toes went cold that Wednesday
In potato-picking time when October was
eleven
In the fall of sixty-seven.
His empty shoe. Unlaced, Green almost all
the way with moss, moist
In all the sad departed years since he walked
away.

Rows of Aran banners, long, laid out
White, clean, even, not one nicked or
cut in two
So keen his eye for where to dip his spade
And lever out on that old left knee
The happy harvest of all his labouring
years.



■ *50th Anniversary, Fr Michael at his memorial statue in Camden, New Jersey*

brate men coming home from the Vietnam war. His bishop gave him the choice to stay or move. He moved. For his trouble he was made pastor of the Sacred Heart parish in south Camden in 1974, one of the poorest, run-down areas in any city in the US. He took up the challenge and has been there ever since.

He had a great interest in the local school, Sacred Heart, and the people of the area. He wrote and studied the Irish situation at the time to such an extent that 'The Philadelphia Inquirer' asked him to come to Northern Ireland in 1980 and do an in-depth piece for them, Headed 'Days of Wrath, Nights of Fire,' his article was a comprehensive summary of the situation in the north at the time. It was during the hunger strike and he was at Bobby Sands wake and funeral. He interviewed Cardinal Tomás O Fiaich with his friend Fr John McNamee from Philadelphia, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, Seán McBride, Andy Tyrie head of the UDA, Fr Denis Faul chaplain to the Maze prison, (he also visited the prison).

Michael's great grandmother's people were McKennas from Ballinamuck (a few miles from Cloone) and were present at the time of the battle in 1798. The Irish general Blake, hanged by the English, was waked in their house which still stands. His father's people survived the famine and the landlords. His mother's people, the Creegans, originally left Tyrone with O'Neill and O'Donnell to fight at Kinsale in 1601. The Creegans settled in Kerry and Limerick and a hundred years later one of them came up to Leitrim

As a priest Michael J Doyle has accomplished much. He promoted the Sacred Heart School and raised enormous amounts of money for its survival. He writes monthly letters to hundreds of people to raise funds. Some of these have been compiled into a book called 'It's a Terrible Day . . . Thanks be to God,' (an expression of his grandfather Pat Doyle).

He started 'The Heart of Camden Housing Project' run by himself, the

■ *Fr Michael with his family and relations. Ordination Day at St Peter's Seminary, Wexford. May 31st 1959*

late Sr Peg Hynes SSJ, and now by Chris Auth.

They buy a derelict house, rip it out, totally refurbish it and supply it to a family. So far they have over 130 houses renovated. There are 3000 derelict houses in south Camden. He has now a small park and fishing area developed between the sewage works and a large scrap yard. Despite a huge waste disposal incinerator plant, a sixty million gallon sewage facility for all of Camden (population 80,000), massive metal scrap heaps for export to China in the vicinity, he has a greenhouse, garden and small park program going strong in the district. He has many locals including the youth growing flowers, veg and trees, throughout the area. One girl who is a horticulturist and works for him called him "a poet-farmer-priest." He has a medical centre run on a voluntary basis by medics and staff. He has also a thrift store operating.

I'd need a book to tell you the full story of this man. He is quiet and humble, obviously deeply committed to his faith. Religion for him is as much about this life as the next. He fights poverty and injustice every day. He recognises the nobility of every single person and this year he celebrated his 50th year as a priest. Through the spiritual Hubble Telescope (if they have one yet) on the edge of heaven, they will surely see another shining jewel on the rim of our Milky Way.

Peg Sheehan, Ballinamore pictured with the late Michael J Fox, the first editor and founder of the Leitrim Guardian, at Poll an Easa, in the early days of the Guardian.

Peg has been a valuable contributor to the Guardian over the years