



Friday, October 19, 2007

Fr. Mike Kennedy: Prayer and social justice at Dolores Mission

By Ellie Hidalgo

[text only version](#)

*somehow
jesus' presence
alive in this room
feeling the oil
burn in her hands
transforming pain into healing
hope to go forward
that everything has not ended
how god can bring
light out of darkness*

--- from "Jesus the Risen Prisoner"

When Jesuit Father Mike Kennedy completed 13 years as pastor of Dolores Mission Church in Boyle Heights --- a community deeply affected by gang violence --- he left behind a legacy of healing Eucharistic liturgies as well as a parish embracing restorative justice at every turn.

The tall, slender, silver-haired priest was recently honored with the Della Strada Award by Ignatian Volunteer Corps of Los Angeles for his direct service to the poor and for working towards a more just society. The mostly Latino immigrant parish in East Los Angeles has been frequently featured in the press because of its active public stands for immigration reform, for better community policing or for juvenile justice in the prison system.



The commitment to social justice begins with the parish liturgy --- the "source and the summit" of all Christian activity, as stated in Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and reiterated in the archdiocesan Synod. The Mass is "a place where people can come and be nurtured," said Father Mike as he reflected on his ministry in an interview with The Tidings.

With an emphasis on healing, Mass often included moments to bless those with serious illnesses or parents with children in prison, or to offer the congregation a guided contemplative meditation towards mending family relationships and a blessing with sacramental oil.

"It's not just preaching at people, but it's creating that community and providing an atmosphere of prayer so that Jesus is connected to people's lives," said Father Mike, 59. "I think we have a healing medicine in the church that's unused. All of us are wounded. All of us all our lives need to be forgiven and forgiving."

As people heal internally, he observed, they begin to see the needs of the community around them. "I mean I think a deep spirituality moves you to look at the other person," he said. "It's the health of the community when you are outward looking."



For Father Mike and the community, the parish didn't end at the edge of the Dolores Mission property. It extended into neighborhood homes where Christian base communities --- the core of the parish --- met weekly to read Scripture, reflect on the meaning of the Gospels for today, and decide how to take action and put the message into practice. It meant the parish extended into the barrio streets for outdoor Masses encouraging peace and into juvenile facilities that housed dozens of troubled and violence-prone young adults.

It meant a poor parish could offer hospitality to recently arrived immigrants as well as raise money for sister communities in El Salvador, Mexico or Peru facing even greater poverty and natural calamities like earthquakes and hurricanes.

However, the parish community often had its heart broken. Seven years ago, Stephanie Raygoza, 12, was playing in front of her home one October evening when a fleeing gang member ran past her. Shots were fired from a pursuing car and a stray bullet hit the young girl in the chest; hours later she died. Her mother, Norma, was devastated.

The tragedy galvanized Father Mike and the parish staff to organize large community peace walks and to insist that the police and local politicians work more closely with the community to stem the neighborhood violence. The priest was continually present to the family.

"He accompanied us. He was at the hospital and at the house. He never left us alone. He was always with us," said Norma Raygoza, 43, in Spanish. "He talked a lot with me. He told me to 'live for your other children.' We will always be grateful. We will always remember him with a lot of love."



Two years after Stephanie died, Norma's grown nephew was killed. Again the community accompanied the family.

In the midst of tremendous fear, Father Mike preached that for peace to prevail justice had to be holistic, said the staff. It meant bringing healing to all the people affected by violence, poverty and racism --- victims and perpetrators.

"He felt the pain of the community because of the violence. He entered very deeply into this," said Arturo Lopez, parish pastoral assistant. "And he motivated the people to also feel the pain of the young people who were in prison. It wasn't just about healing the hurt of the community and of the mothers, but also how we could also help the young people to heal as well."

Father Mike is quick to credit his parish staff and volunteers. "No one



- Home
- News
- Viewpoints
- Spirituality
- Liturgy
- Entertainment
- Calendar
- Sports



Search

- at google.com
- at the-tidings.com

THIS WEEK'S HIGHLIGHTS

News

- [St. Mary's School: Celebrating the 'human stones' of 100 years](#)
- [Adopt-a-Family: Making a magical Christmas for those in need](#)
- [Dramatic decline reported in L.A. church sex abuse cases](#)
- [Cardinal tells presidential candidates to focus on immigration](#)
- [Paraclete HS celebrates long-awaited new facilities](#)
- [St. Philip celebrates new school building](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [St. John's to create Manning and Levada chairs](#)
- [Pro-life official praises Senate bill aimed to help pregnant women](#)

Viewpoints

- [The God with an infant's face](#)
- [A Christmas meditation, 2007](#)
- ['IB' Program: A holistic approach to Catholic HS education](#)

Liturgy

- [Make room for Christ](#)

Spirituality

- [The Star of Hope Rises](#)
- [An invitation inside of Christmas](#)
- [Falling in love with courageous Mary](#)
- [Living in today's moment](#)

Entertainment

- [Christmas album a family affair for Catholic recording artist](#)
- [Movies Review](#)

Sports

- [CYO promotes PLC 'sports as ministry' program](#)

had all the answers. We tried to do it together," he said. "And so as a result, we were able to listen and to respond to the concrete needs of the neighborhood."

The women organized "Camino Seguro" (safe passage) to ensure that children walking home after school arrived safely. Youth ministry organized basketball and after school programs. The parish supported the work of Jesuit Father Greg Boyle and Homeboy Industries to assist former gang members to find gainful employment.

Wearing his trademark baseball cap and Guayabera shirt, Father Mike also visited youth in juvenile facilities and led them in guided meditations. The teens wrote letters to their mothers near Mother's Day, many asking for forgiveness.



"There's a very deep connection you make with these inmates and minors. The connection with God is right in the middle of that," he said. "I really learned that there is such a great need for pastoral work in the prison system. A prison is a parish."

Having completed his ministry as pastor of Dolores Mission a year ago and then going on sabbatical, he is now envisioning entering into prison ministry full-time. (Jesuit Father Scott Santarosa is now pastor.) Father Mike also plans to work on an advocacy level to move the mammoth prison system away from a three-strikes-you're-out mindset and more towards inmate rehabilitation and community restoration.

San Gabriel Region Auxiliary Bishop Gabino Zavala --- who has led numerous faith-based delegations to visit prisons and assess the work of pastoral ministry --- described Father Kennedy as being "an inspiration to me."

He credited the priest with understanding the depth of the need to restore a sense of wholeness and hope to those in prison. "If they are going to be able to do more and be more than what they are, spirituality is such an important thing," said Bishop Zavala during the celebration honoring Father Mike Oct. 14. "And he has gone with his own spirituality and his own spiritual programs, sharing that with those who are incarcerated, and that is a gift."

Sustaining the priest through moments of discouragement, and from having to see "how human life is wasted," is a rich prayer life, drawing with pastels and watercolors, long walks on the beach, dinner with friends, a good movie --- but especially words.

"I always like a writing project," said the author of several books on Ignatian-based meditation and contemplation (which, like his pastel-drawn cards and drawings, he often gives away). "It was a way to kind of connect what was happening in my ministry to what was happening inside of me and the connection to Jesus and the Gospels."



Currently, he is completing work on "Jesus the Risen Prisoner" to be published by Paulist Press in 2009. His has been a 30-year-priesthood of realizing the truth of what St. Francis of Assisi said about giving and receiving.

"I think at Dolores Mission we've received a lot more than we've given away," he reflected. "That's the whole paradox of the Gospel. If we're always worried about the paint in our church or how it looks, rather than who we're serving, then we lose. You give everything away, and then you receive."



 [click here](#)

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Spirituality](#) | [Sports](#) | [Calendar](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Liturgy](#) | [Viewpoints](#)
[About](#) | [Contact](#) | [Departments](#) | [Home Delivery](#)

copyright The Tidings Corporation ©2004
Contact us at: info@the-tidings.com