

Dr. Donald A. Doyle: A Tribute to a Defender of the Catholic Faith

By Jane Gilroy, PhD, President, Long Island Chapter of University Faculty for Life

I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak about Dr. Donald Doyle, a colleague and friend. Don was an outstanding lay Catholic, educator, and family man, a person who brought his Catholicism into every area of his life. He taught social studies at junior high school level in South Huntington for 30 years, where he also served as chairman of the department. One of the reasons Don chose to teach in public school was he believed the Catholic influence was very important there. For the same reason, he served as a member, vice-president, and president of the Commack Board of Education from 1963 to 1978, even though he did not teach in that district nor did his children attend public school there.

Don's Catholic influence was manifested through his willingness—and even eagerness—to debate hot issues that came up, such as sex education in the schools. Although he was often in debate situations, people aptly describe Don as non-confrontational in manner. He was always so gracious and respectful in a debate, presenting his opinions with clarity and humility that even those with opposing views found it easy to listen to him. Yet it was very important to him that the truth be stated and moral principles upheld. Indeed, one of the reasons he pursued his doctorate was that he realized it would add more weight to his positions.

I first met Don in the late 1960s when he and my husband, Francis, were active in the Intra-Church Relations Committee. That was a group of speakers—and later writers—who defended the liberal, moderate, or traditional views on various Church issues. During that post-Vatican II era, Church issues were much in debate, and Don participated early by speaking for the group, taking the traditional viewpoint. Later, Father Paul Driscoll, the moderator, who became a great friend of Don's, started an Intra-Church newspaper column, which was published nationally. Don again offered the traditional viewpoint. He had studied the documents that had

come out of the Vatican Council and believed they were not so much a departure from the past as “a renewal of our roots.”¹

Don believed that the teachings of the Church were a great gift to humanity. He took them seriously, and he was able to defend them joyfully, having the great gift of not taking himself too seriously. For example, he took great delight when a liberal diocesan newspaper² cancelled the column because of one of his articles. In it he had criticized Church organizations that maintained known dissidents on their staff, and this paper had one. He seemed to take the cancellation as a compliment.

Later, we were all involved in the beginnings of the Right to Life Party. Don and his wife, Arlene, and many of their friends out in Suffolk began working on Pro-Life campaigns in the late 60s and early 70s, trying to bring the pro-life message to as many people as possible. Because of Don’s avid interest in politics and his teaching ability, he played a valuable role in bringing other volunteers into the movement. We were working in a similar manner in Nassau County. Father Driscoll, who was then one of the Human Life Coordinators for the Rockville Centre Diocese, helped bring the groups together. Eugene McMahon, a lawyer who volunteered countless hours to help us in our Right-to-Life efforts, provided the political expertise needed for these campaigns. When the Right to Life Party was incorporated in July of 1970, it was Don, Ellen McCormack, and my husband, Francis, who signed the incorporation papers.

After retiring from the public schools, Don taught history and political science at Molloy College in Rockville Centre for twenty years, where he also became Chairman his Department. Together, Don, Dr. Kinpoitner, the chairman of the English Department at Molloy, and I worked on founding the Long Island Chapter of University Faculty for Life. We belonged to the national

¹ Interview by Stuart Vincent, “At ‘Seder,’ Catholics Go Back to Roots,” *Newsday*, 8 Apr. 1993, Nassau and Suffolk editions. :4.

² *The Brooklyn Tablet*, ed. Don Zirkel

group, which was founded in 1989 to promote a scholarly approach to life issues by fostering research, dialogue, and publication among faculty members who respect the value of human life from inception to natural death. We wanted to encourage this scholarly approach in our own area. Don became our first Vice-President, serving faithfully until he began having problems with his health.³

At one of our conferences, Don spoke on a subject dear to his heart: “The Crucial Distinction between Civil and Natural Rights.” He considered an understanding of natural rights basic to the pro-life position, which was founded not simply on religious principles, but on ones that applied to all people. Don had previously appeared on Cablevision⁴ and on Nassau Community College’s *Catholic Alternative Radio Show*, and had had writings published in *The Long Island Catholic*, the *Social Justice Review*, and *The Catholic Social Science Review*. In addition, he was a founding member and first president of the New York Chapter of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists.

I recall how excited Don was about the Society and its speakers. We would talk in the hall between classes, and he would tell me about them. I began to understand that his connection with the Society was part of the reason he was so well versed in the social teachings of the Church and knew of so many outstanding Catholic scholars, whom he admired greatly. Working with Professor Eduardo Echeverria, then of Molloy, he helped bring such distinguished Catholic speakers as Ralph McInerny of the University of Notre Dame and Father George Rutler of New York City to Molloy and Nassau Community College. Their initiative served the community at large since these talks were open to all.

³ Doyle was Vice President from Fall 2000 until Spring 2004.

⁴ Cablevision (Nassau and Suffolk), Channel 55 (New York City), and Channel 12 (daytime news Long Island)

Above all Don was a family man. He loved his wife, Arlene, their four sons and two daughters, and their thirteen grandchildren. Prof. Doyle delighted in speaking about them, and proudly displayed their pictures in his office. He beamed when he showed off two of his grandchildren sitting on Cardinal O'Connor's lap. Don's prize possession was a calendar his children gave him with pictures of his grandchildren for every month. While he loved teaching and had great intellectual interest and concern for current affairs, and was, as one colleague stated, of one mind and heart with the organizations to which he belonged, his family always came first. At times family plans superseded attendance at conferences or other scholarly pursuits, allowing him to achieve a healthy balance. Perhaps that was why Don was such a happy person. Several of his colleagues commented how thinking about Don made them smile. In fact, those who worked with him said he brought joy to the office every time he opened the door.

Don's secretary recalled how he was always "upbeat," even about his cancer, and because she was battling it at the same time, they would laugh and share and commiserate together. Another comment that came up frequently was that he was a gentleman, with the emphasis on "gentle." Dr. Doyle respected his students and they respected him, regretting it when they heard of his retirement. He was always available if they had problems, and he really listened to them. His secretary also remarked that he could be a good friend to faculty members, even when they disagreed about almost everything, because he could see beyond the disagreement to how good the person was. He had the marvelous attribute of not letting their differences block their goodness. Don's attitude towards those who disagreed with him, especially regarding social justice and the teachings of the Church, was, "They were missing the boat." He believed they were losing out on the good things that the Church brought to the world, especially its guidance,

its hope, and its opportunities for renewal. Don wanted everyone to discover or rediscover the treasures it had to offer.

Another recurrent phrase was “committed Catholic.” You couldn’t know Don long without knowing he was committed to the Church. For example, he was excited about a group formed at Molloy to study the newly translated *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. They met at lunchtime and discussed several items each week. He was quite enthusiastic about it. Father Madigan and Prof. Echeverria, as well as several others, were in it. Since I had a conflict and couldn’t join, Don would come and tell me a little bit about it.

As a teacher, Prof. Doyle’s commitment to the Church was reflected in the classroom, where he would bring in the Popes’ social encyclicals as part of his courses. He believed it was important to do so, although he would bring in other views also. When he taught “Women in Politics,” a popular course, he would discuss Ellen McCormack’s presidential campaign, something most of the students had not heard about. And so what he brought to his class was refreshing, and he was eager to hear his students’ views about it.

Sometimes when we praise people we like to speak of them as unique or inimitable, beyond the scope of most of us. I think one of God’s gifts to us through Don is that many of the good things he did are imitable. While his approach was intellectual, he was, as one colleague said, an educator rather than a scholar. He earned his doctorate, but he would be the first one to tell you that it took hard work and humility. When I was struggling with my dissertation, revising it again and yet again, Don said to me, “Watch, I’ll show you how I did it. He lowered his head and then he said, as though talking to his mentor, “Oh that is what you want! Of course.” He said, “Once you get it, then you can do what you want, but until then, do whatever they tell you.”

Indeed, Don set a great example for all of us. His love of Christ and the Church showed in every aspect of his life. He did as Mother Teresa recommended, “little things with great love.” Above all, he said “yes” to the challenges of life, yes to marriage, yes to raising a family, yes to participating in and even initiating political, social, and pro-life groups to further the good of the Church and society. He courageously upheld the teachings of the Church and the right to life of the unborn in a world that too often derides such beliefs, either subtly or in an outright manner.

At Don’s funeral Mass, His grandchildren handed out an insert with all the family names and on the reverse side a brief description that captured their grandfather’s goodness, and I’d like to conclude by reading it:

Donald Doyle’s journey through his Earthly life has been a testament to the potential of the human spirit to seek and act on the side of good more than on the side of evil. It has been a pilgrimage to holiness, filled with thoughtfulness, compassion and honor. At every milestone, the markers of respect, truth and love were evident. Perfection was never to be, but always in his sights. Don was always a witness and a standard-bearer for freedom, responsibility and the Christian mission. He took his steps humbly and remained focused on his final and glorious destination.

Thank you.