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A different kind of courtroom drama

by Patricia Lefevere



Sr. Muriel Curran (Patricia Lefevere)

Religious Life

BALTIMORE -- When a grey-haired School Sister of Notre Dame stretched out her hand offering forgiveness to the 22-year-old assailant who had knocked her to the ground and stolen her handbag in April 2005, the legal system held its breath in Baltimore County Circuit Court last year.

Courtrooms are frequently the unscripted settings for high dramas. No surprise that film directors and television producers covet such premises. But what happened in County Circuit Court April 30, 2008, was not the enactment of a screenplay. It was simply the rendering of the Gospel call to forgiveness.

The principal characters in the courtroom were Sr. Muriel Curran, 78, dressed in a navy suit and white blouse, and Charles Dodson, clad in a dirty T-shirt.

Three years earlier Dodson had mugged Curran on a spring night as the nun was returning to her Baltimore apartment following a trip to Dallas. It all happened so quickly, as these things often do, Curran

noted in an interview with *NCR* in July.

While she was holding the door leading to her apartment for another sister who was already carrying her suitcase upstairs, Curran felt a hand at the back of her neck. Next thing she knew she had been thrown onto the cement platform in front of her door and then onto the grass; her handbag had been snatched and she could feel blood oozing from a cut next to her eye.

The assault netted the thief \$70 -- folded inside a birthday card addressed to the nun. Curran suffered five broken ribs, a rotator cuff tear, cuts and bruises to her face and arm, and permanent disability to her right arm. In the hospital doctors had to delay giving her pain medication, because it would interfere with the blood thinner prescription drug she was taking.

Yet this woman, who now uses a cane, startled the judge, prosecutor, police and court onlookers when she held out her hand to her attacker and gave him a card in which she had written the words of the Prophet Jeremiah: "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe, plans for a future full of hope."

Before handing Dodson the card, Curran turned toward her assailant, telling him: "That is my hope for you, Charles. I would like to give that to you." She also asked the judge not to send him to prison.

Upon hearing her words, the bald and tattooed Dodson, a convicted robber during adolescence and a heavy marijuana user, hung his head and cried while asking Curran for the forgiveness she had already dispensed. He apologized, saying that his actions that night had haunted him. In the courtroom, his aunt and grandmother wept too.

Breaking the rules

Curran admitted she broke all the rules by touching the defendant and then handing him a letter of reconciliation. Prosecutor Leo Ryan Jr. failed to caution Curran against such gestures, later telling *The Baltimore Sun* that the nun's forgiveness "was the single most profound thing I have ever heard in the courtroom." Ryan is the Baltimore County deputy state's attorney.

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In Curran's first meeting with the prosecutor, more than a year after her assault, the two disagreed on the kind of punishment the defendant should get. Dodson had been arrested in West Virginia following a lead from a suspect in an unrelated case. The nun wanted Dodson sentenced to community service in a home for the elderly "so he could grow in appreciation of older people and gain compassion for them," she told *NCR*.

The fact that Dodson had earned his GED, held a full-time job and was studying to become a glassmaker at the time of his arrest, and that he had a steady relationship with his girlfriend and his baby daughter impressed Curran. A former teacher, the nun said she'd seen many youths grow up and transform their lives even in the grip of negative circumstances. She told the judge she felt Dodson's life held out hope, the possibility of rehabilitation and a changed future.

Dodson had pleaded guilty to robbery on the morning he was scheduled to go to trial, sparing Curran from having to take the witness stand. Judge H. Patrick Stringer Jr. said he thought the defendant did not intend to injure the nun, but added that such a violent act done to a 75-year-old woman bore consequences.

Stringer gave Dodson a 10-year sentence, suspending all but four and a half years and ordering him to serve three years of probation when he leaves prison.

Curran's act of forgiveness did not happen instantaneously. Just as her physical recovery and rehabilitation took weeks and months, so too did the experience of reconciliation. "The impact of that day is felt slowly," she said.

A retreat leader and spiritual director for many years, Curran had to take leave of her ministries following the mugging. Her injuries and need for some assistance required her to relocate from a small community to the motherhouse in Baltimore.

Although semiretired and looking forward to her 80th birthday and 60th anniversary of profession in 2010, Curran has returned to spiritual direction and, this past summer, led four retreats -- two in Maryland, another in Nova Scotia and a fourth in New Jersey. Since moving into the motherhouse, she has also coordinated a seven-month program for Notre Dame sisters, associates and laity. It is based on a seven-week course offered at the congregation's College of Notre Dame in Baltimore and is designed for those over age 50. In addition, recently she was asked to share her story of forgiveness with about a dozen women incarcerated in the women's penitentiary in Jessup, Md.

"I'm thanking God daily for another day in which I can speak, pray and move," Curran said.

What Curran has learned over the decades is to listen to God and to the message of Jesus. "Yes," she admitted, "even to ask oneself, 'What would Jesus do now?'"

"If I believe in the message of Jesus, then I have to live it," she said, noting that in each human encounter she tries to ask God to let the spirit of the other person touch her and to extend the message of Jesus' love and compassion. "We are all in some sense an echo of what was said and done in 33 A.D.," Curran said.

Reconciliation is "a lifetime journey," she said, adding that the initial step is being able to think of the other person as a human being -- even other people who try to harm you.

Asked whether she feared she might die, be crippled or disabled for life as she lay bruised and bleeding after the attack, she replied: "No, never!"

Why?

"Because I'm Irish," she said with a laugh. The Boston native and daughter of an Irish cop lost her mother when she was 8. Muriel, the youngest of five, saw in her dad's resilience "a strong belief that God's will could not be questioned."

Unable to stand or raise herself up after the mugging, she thought, "In God's planning, something good will come out of this," she said. "For me it remains mystery -- the mystery of finding God in all things."

Patricia Lefevere is a longtime contributor to NCR.

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