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Add meaning to your Christmas card wishes

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

Want to add more meaning to this Christmas season? Want to help a prison ministry with each Christmas card you pen? Consider supporting the Christmas card project, a ministry of the capable and caring Mercy Sister Camille D'Arienzo.

Many Catholics are already familiar with D'Arienzo. Writer, teacher, radio commentator, former Leadership Conference of Women Religious president, she is also founder of the anti-death penalty group, Cherish Life Circle. The group is perhaps best known for its Declaration of Life.

Signers of the statement agree in the presence of witnesses that if they are killed by a violent crime, they do not want their killers to face the death penalty.

Circle members conducts dialogue about capital punishment in a nonjudgmental manner, D'Arienzo said, because they recognize that many good people support the death penalty.

"I understand very clearly that those who oppose the death penalty and those who support it have a bridge that connects [their convictions] -- the cherishing of life," she said in a 2004 *NCR* interview. Or, as she said in a 2003 prayer service in Indiana, "There is something in us who so reverence life that we want to punish those who take it."



D'Arienzo traces the Christmas Card project back to 1998 when she went to Allentown, Pennsylvania in response to a letter she received from David Paul Hammer, a death row inmate. He sent

the letter after hearing from a relative about the Declaration of Life. It was addressed simply to "Dear Cherish Life Circle," and began, "My name is David Paul Hammer. I am scheduled to be executed by the United States government on Jan. 14, 1999, at 10:00 a.m."

Hammer asked for two things from Cherish Life Circle: first, prayers for his victim, Andrew Marti, and for Marti's family. Hammer killed Marti, his cellmate, in 1996. He had originally gone to prison in Oklahoma for various crimes, including attempted murder and kidnapping. Hammer's second request was for spiritual guidance during the last weeks of his life.

D'Arienzo, unable to find anyone available to visit him, went herself. She found him full of remorse, wishing to make amends for the suffering he had caused others. They became friends.

After that first meeting, D'Arienzo continued as Hammer's spiritual adviser. When he expressed interest in becoming Catholic, she asked him why.

"He said because in the course of his life, the people who had been most helpful to him had been Catholics, and he wanted to die one of us." He eventually joined the Catholic church.

In a 2001 visit with Hammer, "knowing that he wanted to do something positive with what seemed like a wasted life," D'Arienzo came up with the idea for the Christmas Card Project. She suggested to Hammer that he use his artistic ability to design Christmas cards for which she would write the verses. They would market the cards to help children in need.

Since they began the project, the team has raised more than \$30,000. Beneficiaries of 2009 Christmas card project proceeds included institutions caring for impoverished and troubled children on the islands of Jamaica and Haiti as well as children in local agencies including Mercy Home, Hour Children and the Dorothy Bennett Mercy Center. Donations have also helped children in Peru, Guyana, the Dominican Republic and Kenya.

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The cards the team promotes make a point of preserving the sacred of the holy season, D'Arienzo says. Order forms can be secured by e-mailing Christcard@aol.com. Also, those who might not need cards, but want to help can send a check made out to Sisters of Mercy. Mail to: Camille D'Arienzo, 72-25 68th Street, Glendale, NY 11385-7216.

And as they say, "Act now. Don't wait." After all, Christmas is only one month away.

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