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Providence sister strives for peace and justice in prison ministry

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

It's been a dozen years since I first met Sr. Rita Clare Gerardot, 85, at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Ind. Her community, Sisters of Providence, generously gave me hospitality during the 30 or so visits I made to visit David Hammer, who is on death row in the federal penitentiary in nearby Terre Haute.



Rita Clare's friendship became an unanticipated gift when she agreed to

visit David more regularly than distance allowed me to do. I cannot introduce her to you without acknowledging her wholesome holiness, incredible energy and expansive generosity. The only gift she lacks is the ability to sleep late. Often she begins her day walking around St. Mary's beautiful campus while stars are still out.

Sr. Camille: Rita Clare, how does this fit into your daily prayer?

Gerardot: I begin my day with 20 minutes of quiet contemplation. My early morning walk is somewhat like a pilgrimage. At various shrines and locations, I'm mindful of certain people, especially those who are sick and suffering. Later in the morning, I meet with a small group. We use hymns, psalms, Scripture and we share our insights and concerns. In the evening, I join a group of sisters for Vespers. One evening a week, I gather with women for prayer and sharing. Once a month, if possible, I join the Women Church group for liturgy. I attend daily Mass and often serve as lector or Eucharistic minister. Spontaneous prayers arise throughout the day for others and myself. Prayer is my lifeblood.

What is your favorite Scripture passage?

Micah 6:8. Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.

Does this make a difference in your life?

Yes, it challenges me to make phone calls, write letters, sign petitions and take part in gatherings for peace and justice. It requires me to listen to those whose experiences and attitudes are different from mine and to act responsibly within the cycle of creation by living as simply as possible.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in a rural area on a farm 12 miles east of Fort Wayne, Ind.

How many were in your family?

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Mom and Dad had 10 children. I was seventh in the family with three older brothers, three older and three younger sisters.

What drew you to religious life?

I was taught for 12 years by two orders of women religious -- the School Sisters of Notre Dame and the Sisters of Providence. I enjoyed getting to know the sisters by helping them, especially in grade school; however, it was a personal invitation from S. Mary Clare, SP, during my junior year that made me seriously consider religious life.

Was this a comfortable choice for you?

The decision to enter the convent was a difficult one, but I truly felt this was what God wanted me to do. Those of us who entered our order in 1944 knew that we would never be allowed home for a visit except for the death or serious illness of a parent. I had six siblings married with a number of children. So leaving my big family was the hardest thing I had ever done.

How has that attraction remained?

I believe it's the relationships I've formed throughout my 67 years in religious life. We had to adjust to a very different lifestyle and a very demanding schedule.

How has that changed?

Vatican II changed our life dramatically. Prior to the council, our lives were much regulated and strictly governed. Individuals could make few independent choices. Personal responsibility became the hallmark of the years of transition.

What do you count the greatest blessings of living in community?

In the Sisters of Providence, I feel I have acquired a second family. The women with whom I've lived, prayed and ministered are imbued with Gospel values I see lived out daily. They have encouraged and supported me to live my life fully, using my gifts to advance our congregation's mission, which is to honor Divine Providence through works of love, mercy and justice in service among God's people.

What difficulties come with the blessings?

I've had to learn to live with the idiosyncrasies of others, realizing that others have to accept my quirks. At times I've been called to do things I'd never have chosen; however, each difficult experience deepened my trust in Providence.

How does your family figure in your life now?

My family is very important. I love spending time with my three sisters and many nieces and nephews on holidays and at family celebrations. I've learned a lot about service, compassion and justice from my parents and siblings.

Please describe your ministries.

I taught and was in administration in elementary schools for 32 years. This was followed by caring for my mom in the family home for a year and a half until her death at age 92.

Being able to live with and care for your mother was certainly a big change from the rules that governed religious life in 1944.

It surely was a blessing. Following this time with Mom, I served as a pastoral associate for eight years, and then an administrative assistant in one of our high schools. I spent four years as coordinator of health care services for sisters in our Motherhouse.

And how are you spending your retirement years?



I participate in area volunteer ministries in Terre Haute and West Terre

Haute and here at the Motherhouse. The SPs operate a free health and dental clinic, where I've been volunteering since it opened 15 years ago. Once a week I offer my services at Helping Hands, a used clothing and household store. Prison ministry has been part of my life since I began visiting regularly with a man on death row. In addition to these visits, I correspond with him and other inmates. I call attention to monthly executions around the country and arrange hospitality for family and friends who come to visit the Terre Haute prison. I serve on various committees and am active in a Pax Christi group.

Do you have a particular passion?

Yes, I'd say I have a passion for peace and justice. There's so much injustice in the world and far too many wars which never bring peace, only loss of millions of lives and devastation.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

My belief in a Provident God who calls us to become co-creators in bringing about the kingdom of God through works of love, mercy and justice. Also, more and more of us are aware of the interconnectedness of all creation and our need to care for the earth.

What does the Incarnation mean to you?

Jesus taking on human nature to teach us how to live.

What does Christianity demand of you?

The living out of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

What do you want from Catholicism?

Less clericalism, more acceptance that the church is the people of God. I'd welcome women priests, optional celibacy, a married clergy and good homilists, other than the presider. I'd delight in a church that welcomes the fullness of gifts of everyone and where everyone is welcome.

What in contemporary Catholicism distresses you?

Excommunication or threatened excommunication for those who with informed consciences speak and act on issues the hierarchy considers sacrosanct. I share with many distress over the sexual abuse scandal

and the cover-up by bishops who could have stopped the predators. I'm also saddened by the lack of inclusive language in the recent liturgical changes.

What causes you sorrow?

The pain that many dedicated, faithful priests and bishops must feel about the sexual abuse of innocent people.

What causes you joy?

All the many individuals and organizations reaching out locally and globally to help poor and marginalized people in our world. Locally, I witness a wonderful spirit of Christian churches working together on numerous projects. I rejoice that many committed people continue giving, giving, giving of themselves to help others.

Are you inspired by any saint?

Yes. St. Mother Theodore Guerin, who came to this country from her native France in 1840 and started an academy for girls within a year. This academy became Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, the oldest women's college in the United States. To our foundress, I would add my mom and dad, Lillian and Henry Gerardot. They're not canonized but are surely enjoying her company in Heaven.

Thank you for this conversation. For your reward, treat yourself to your favorite dessert, which is, of course...

Ice cream!

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, has written a soon-to-be-published book titled *Stories of Forgiveness.*]

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