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Prison, hospital ministries help Padre Pio devotee live out faith

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Apr. 30, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Don Zirkel, whose conversation from a year ago [1] drew the most responses (all positive) of any of the 40 published to date, called from Florida to encourage me to interview Harry Hunt, a man whose life inspires many. Since Don was editor of *The Tablet* in Brooklyn, N.Y., when I was young and on his staff, I've often followed his advice. So far, he's not led me astray.

A prison ministry is one the many ways in which Harry, 73, with the support of his wife, Anna, lives out his Catholic faith. Our first phone conversation found us both celebrating the Holy Thursday ceremony during which Pope Francis washed the feet of young women along with those of some young men incarcerated in a detention center on the outskirts of Rome.

Sr. Camille: Harry, why did this inclusion, which distressed some traditional Catholics, delight you?

Hunt: When I heard where the new, humble pope was going Holy Thursday night -- a juvenile detention center -- it brought tears to my eyes. Most people avoid such places, including the families of those who are incarcerated. My wife, Anna, and I are volunteers in a women's prison 14 miles from our home. Every Monday night, we offer a Catholic service, but people of all faiths are welcome. One inmate, Danielle, used to play the guitar with me. She once sent me a birthday card I treasure. The message she added said, "Dear Harry and Anna, thanks for bringing life into the place of the dead."

Danielle's mother never visited her while she was in prison. She's been released now and her mother's back in her life.

What is your Monday night service like?

We distribute booklets that contain Scripture readings: "The Word among Us," "Three Minutes A Day" by the Christophers and "Our Daily Bread." We give out rosary beads and teach people how to use them. We supply notebooks, pens and other spiritual treats in English and Spanish. We tell them stories about other inmates who've turned their lives around and we listen to their own stories and concerns. We consider them all good people who've made bad choices. We show up, and God does the rest.

What was your early life like?

I was born Aug. 3, 1939. Two years earlier, my mom gave birth to my sister, who lived only one day. The doctors warned my mother that another pregnancy would kill her and the child she carried. If you wonder who knows better -- the doctors or God -- here I am at 73! I play tennis twice a week, golf as often and swim and bike ride almost every day.

My parents raised my older brother, John, and me in a 20-family tenement in the heart of New York City's Hell's Kitchen. We had four rooms with a tub in the kitchen and a toilet in the hall that we shared with another family of five. My family was desperately poor. My only pets were cockroaches and mice, but we laughed quite

often.

I went to a good public elementary school that attracted wealthier kids, including a Vanderbilt. Although I didn't realize it, I must have been pretty intelligent to keep up with those who were much better off.

What were you like as a teenager?

When I was in my teens, my father came home only when he felt like it. I was the only one in my family who went to church. As a child, I went to different churches and felt God's presence in my life. But when I was 14, I started hanging around with a different crowd very similar to that in "West Side Story." I became part of a gang.

What set you on the right path?

My wife, Anna. We got married on June 8, 1963, in Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. She was a secretary in Manhattan and a very spiritual person. I learned much from her. After a few years, we joined a Padre Pio prayer group in St. John's Church, across from Penn Station where I worked. In 1967, we were happily married, but without children. In October of that year, we decided to spend a week to see if we should volunteer in the Christian Appalachian Project. We decided against that. The next year, we spent a month in Italy, increasing our devotion to Padre Pio.

What happened during that time?

I tried to meet Padre Pio day after day without success. An hour before we were to leave for home, a monk came to our room and invited me to the monastery where the saint lived. Another monk met me at the door and asked if I spoke Italian or Latin. I did not. He took me to the second floor and told me just to kneel before his chair, quietly offer prayer requests and Padre Pio would bless me.

"Wow!" I thought. After two years of showing slides about Padre Pio and learning about him, I was face to face with the saint!

My prayer was that Anna and I would have children. Well, nine months later, we adopted our son, Harry Pio, from Catholic Charities. He was seven and a half months old. In May 1970, we adopted our daughter Rosemarie Pia, and then Anna got pregnant and gave birth to our daughter Cathy Pia on Oct. 1, 1971.

What spirituality increased your relationship as a couple?

We attended a retreat on Long Island where we met Pauline and Hank Jason, who were part of Teams of Our Lady. They invited us to a gathering at Naomi and Art Fonseca's home. I'd have to say Teams of Our Lady changed our lives. When we moved to Florida, we founded several teams and continue to be surrounded by spirit-filled married couples.

What did you do before you retired?

After I left the railroad, I became a general home improvement contractor**.**

What did you do next?

On July 4, 1989, Anna and I took early retirement and moved to Florida with our three children, who were 18, 19 and 21. Within a couple of weeks, I became a volunteer chaplain at the local hospital. I left that 10 years later to devote my time to prison ministry.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage or Gospel story?

I have several, including John 15:15-17 [2]: "I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant doesn't know his master's business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father. You didn't choose me; no, I chose you and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last ... What I command you to do is to love one another."

Does it affect your life?

Yes, in many ways. It even finds its way into songs I write, such as "I Chose You." That passage moved me to add this verse:

I chose you to help and heal the brokenhearted

I chose you to love the lonely and the lost

I chose you to guide the hopeless and abandoned

I chose you to lead the prisoners to my cross.

Can you name people who have served as heroes or role models?

My first was my mom, who died at 49, six weeks before Anna and I were married. She, in spite of her tortured life with my dad, was so kind and loving to me and my brother. They said she died of hepatitis, but I know she died of a broken heart.

My wife is my lifelong hero and encourager. She's a gift from God.

Kairos communities, as I've known them, assemble to discover what God is asking of one's life. They, singly and with others, decide what to do about it in order to better to live as Jesus demonstrated. I'm told a Kairos weekend is something like a Cursillo weekend. Please describe what you experience.

Our Kairos teams usually consist of 25 to 30 volunteers, including ministers, deacons and priests. We average about 36 inmates every weekend -- six at each table. The main purpose of Kairos is for the men to create prayer and share groups where they are accountable to one another. I provide guitar music on all of them and also give one of the 11 talks. When needed, I sit at a discussion table. That's where the action takes place. Laywomen, sisters and ministers conduct similar weekends for women prisoners.

How does your wife feel about your time away from home?

When I serve on men's Kairos weekends, I'm away from home, but I come home every night, an hour's drive.

At one time, I was serving in three prisons, and she said if I get involved with another, I'd be a dead man! But they shut us out of a fourth, so I'm still here.

Do you have children and grandchildren?

Three children and five grandchildren; all live in Kentucky. The grandchildren range in age from 8 to 23.

What do you want for them?

Every day, I pray for them to come to know the Lord and have a personal relationship with Jesus.

While there is undoubtedly satisfaction in the work you do to bring God's love to others, I wonder if you have a memory that encourages your care for others.

There are so many stories! I remember one night of hospital rounds when from the corridor I noticed a woman in a pink nightgown in bed.

Because she was young and alone, I hesitated to go into her room, but she was staring at me. So I went in and said, "Are you all right?" She answered, "I don't know." Eventually she told me she wasn't married, didn't have any children and had tried to commit suicide by shooting herself in the stomach. So I spent a long time assuring her that God loved and cared for her. I shared some of my own stories. At length a man came into the room. He introduced himself as her husband and said they had two little children. His wife suffered post-partum depression and was worried she wouldn't have enough money to pay for their college education.

I next said, "Well, I guess I'll leave you two alone, because we've been talking for two and a half hours." He begged me not to go because his wife hadn't spoken to anyone in months.

After taking my leave, I asked the unit supervisor if they had this patient on suicide watch. They hadn't, but I convinced her that the patient needed to be. The next week, I looked for the woman and learned she'd been brought to a mental institution. A month later, I got a phone call that went like this:

"Is this Harry?"

"Yes," I said.

"Is this Harry Hunt?"

"Yes," I said again.

"I want to thank you for saving my life."

I told her it was Jesus who saved her life.

What do you do in your spare time?

I have a lot of hobbies. I paint (oil and watercolor). I do and teach stained glass. I compose songs and raise butterflies. I enjoy caring for flower gardens and landscaping. I've had a variety of pets: dogs, cats, fish, snakes and turtles. Right now we're empty-nested, except for wildlife in the backyard. We live on a small lake and feed ducks, ibises, wood storks, cranes and great blue herons.

What do you want from the church?

What I want comes through on Kairos weekends. One talk is called "The Church," at the end of it, the presenter asks, "Who are the church?" And we all shout louder and louder, "We are the church!" It's very powerful because most people don't realize that we are Christ's ambassadors here on earth and we are to love him and serve him every day. That's why God created us.

What do you think you bring to the church?

I think I bring my brothers and sisters the love and joy of Jesus, for when much is given, much is expected. I

pray that God will one day say I may sit with the sheep and not the goats.

Anna and I ask each other every morning when we pray, "Why are we so blessed?"

Perhaps it is so you can keep on blessing others. Thank you, Harry.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [3] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, "Conversations with Sr. Camille," is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [4].

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