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Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo's focus on forgiveness

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today

"I say in all humility, mercy is the strongest message of the Lord," Pope Francis told a group of parishioners his first Sunday as pope. "The Lord," he said, "never tires of forgiving, never! It is we who tire of asking for forgiveness. Let us ask for the grace of never tiring of asking for forgiveness because he never tires of forgiving."

Mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation are central to Christian identity. The word "forgive" appears two times in the Lord's Prayer. ("Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.") Yet the idea is vexing to many. The process of forgiveness -- and it is a process -- seems, at times, even unnatural. The question, then, is: How do we arrive at forgiveness?

I have been pondering the role and complexities of forgiveness in recent weeks as I have listened to a series of reflections on the subject by *NCR* columnist Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo. More on this in a moment; first, some background on D'Arienzo.

A member of the Mid-Atlantic Community of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, she has served as president of the Brooklyn Regional Community of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas (1993 -- 2001) and as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) (1998 -- 1999).

New York-area radio listeners have been hearing -- yes, religiously -- her weekly reflections on 1010 WINS, the oldest of all news talk radio station in the U.S., for 40 years now. Her radio voice is a singular hallmark of the renowned station's airwaves.

NCR readers have grown familiar with D'Arienzo through her bimonthly interviews on this website with Catholics who share the ways they integrate faith and life.

Those who know the woman know she's a listener; they are familiar with her soothing voice. Further, they know she's a free spirit and speaks her mind. More than a few bishops have been scolded by this Mercy sister face to face. An unwavering feminist, she's never kicked an injustice down the road. Nor does she often overlook or fail to touch the brokenness or hurt many bring to her. It should surprise no one that D'Arienzo has a long history of prison work.

One of my earlier personal contacts with her came during an LCWR gathering some years back. She had an exhibit focused on prison ministry. We spoke. That's when I learned about one of her creations, a prison Christmas card project in which the profits go to needy children.

Founder of the Cherish Life Circle, D'Arienzo has long worked to end capital punishment. She has circulated the Declaration of Life, which allows individuals to affirm their own personal opposition to the death penalty.

Since 1998, she has served as spiritual adviser to David Paul Hammer, who is on death row in Terre Haute, Ind. He had been looking for a spiritual counselor. When no one else stepped forward, D'Arienzo did.

Listening to this woman, you will find the notion of forgiveness at the core. It's one of her passions. Forgiveness, of course, is at the center of Christian teaching.

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Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (Matthew 18, 21).

D'Arienzo dropped the idea like a bomb into the context of clergy sex abuse some five years back in an essay in *America* magazine. It caused an uproar. In a subsequent interview, D'Arienzo had this to say:

I've had enough of hurt in my own life, and I have witnessed enough in my very long life, to know that as long as we hold on to the thing that has hurt us, and hatred for the person who has perpetrated, that we remain to some degree in the grasp of the evil that we should escape. ... Forgiveness sucks the hatred out of the situation and allows us to go forward, that's what I have been trying to say, not because I am the smartest one, but maybe because I am the one in the providence of God who at this moment feels called upon to break the silence. ... [Forgiveness] does not mean forgetting, nor does it rule out punishment appropriate to criminal behavior. To be forgiven from the sin doesn't carry with it pardon for the crime.

If you want to explore the idea of forgiveness and you want D'Arienzo to be your guide, it is now possible. Recently, she published a number of reflections on the subject. They are available on five CDs or as a digital download. *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption* explores Scriptures, other literature and a number of stories about people who have struggled with forgiveness in their lives. I've found them helpful and thought you might, too.

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