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Petition drive asks Pope Francis to intervene in death penalty case

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NCR Today

Cherish Life Circle, the anti-death-penalty advocacy group, has begun a petition drive appealing to Pope Francis to intervene on behalf of David Paul Hammer, who faces a death sentence for the killing of a cellmate 20 years ago.

Hammer is in the Special Confinement Unit of the Federal Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Ind.

He experienced profound remorse during his 1996 trial, during which he said he recognized the impact of his crime on the victim's family, according to Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, who has been a friend, counselor and spiritual guide to Hammer for the past 16 years.

Hammer's life since then, D'Arienzo says, has been devoted to assisting others, especially children who suffer the poverty and abuse that characterized his own childhood.

Since 2000, D'Arienzo and Hammer have designed Christmas cards together, the proceeds of which go to aid children in protective care.

On Oct. 27, 2000, Hammer was received into the Catholic church by Archbishop Daniel Buechlein of Indianapolis.

D'Arienzo said she first heard of Hammer in the late 1990s.

She tells the story:

An Associated Press article detailing my opposition to the death penalty was brought to David's attention. He contacted me, asking for prayers for himself and his victim, Andrew Marti. Anticipating a Jan. 14, 1999, execution date, David was looking for someone to serve as a spiritual guide for the remaining weeks of his life. Unable to find anyone willing to take him on during the holidays, a friend and I drove to Allenwood, Pennsylvania on Dec. 30, 1998. When we arrived, we learned he had received his first stay of execution. Six months later he was transferred to the Federal Penitentiary in Terre Haute. In the years since that first meeting, David has become my godson and friend.

D'Arienzo, who is a regular *NCR* columnist, is founder of Cherish Life Circle. It is perhaps best known for the Declaration of Life, a document it circulates on its website. 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.

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

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