

Living the Gospel in Today's Unforgiving World

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I would like to begin by thanking Father Martin and this Benedictine community for inviting me to deliver one of their jubilee presentations. Mount Saviour's jubilee coincides with my golden jubilee as a Sister of Mercy. This monastery for more than half my religious life has nurtured my soul and I always experience a sense of homecoming in this homeland of my heart.

My other home, the convent in which I live with three other sisters in Glendale, Queens, has a flat roof from which I can see the Manhattan skyline. It is hard to look at the void where the twin towers stood until September 11. My two nephews, both New York City policemen, have spent the weeks since then sifting through the rubble left by the terrorists. Some of the rubble was human remains. All over were the ashes of incinerated innocent men, women, and children. Michael and Ronnie had a separate agenda: they were searching for their lost cousin, an electrician employed at the site, a good and decent man who left a wife, a toddler, and an infant.

It is impossible to ignore the consequences of that attack in a presentation about forgiveness and reconciliation. That event has been part of talks on numerous subjects. The highly respected public broadcaster Bill Moyers justified its inclusion in a keynote address before an Environmental Grantmakers Association on October 16. Moyers acknowledged that the events of September 11 have changed us all. He says that they will unite Americans in the same way Pearl Harbor did his parents' generation. For people of his generation and mine it was the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, the dogs and fire hoses in Alabama.

Moyers explains: "For this generation, that [defining] moment will be September 11, 2001—the worst act of terrorism in our nation's history. It has changed the country. It has changed us." He continues:

That's what terrorists intend. Terrorists don't want to own our land, wealth, monuments, buildings, fields, or streams. They're not after tangible property. Sure, they aim to annihilate the targets they strike. But their real goal is to get inside our heads, our psyche, and to deprive us—the survivors—of peace of mind, of trust, of faith; they aim to prevent us from believing again in a world of mercy, justice, and love, or working to bring that better world to pass.

"This is their real target," he adds, "to turn our imaginations into Afghanistans, where they can rule by fear. Once they possess us, they are hard to exorcise."

Like many thoughtful people, I long for justice for the perpetrators of the attack, but not for a war inflicted on innocent civilians. And I pray for ways to resist inflicting the kind of violence that could transform us into the enemy we despise. This desire is what draws us to communities of faith where we can find direction and support for the lessons learned from Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. As we come with this common wound inflicted on September 11, we come also with our personal hurts. We look for ways to prevent them from becoming cancers in our souls.

It is with a mix of trepidation and inner peace that I dare to address today's topic: Living the Gospel in Today's Unforgiving World. I have been around long enough to have experienced personally and vicariously a wide range of miseries. I have marveled at the capacity of some people to overcome evil with goodness. Conversely, I have seen the intensification of suffering that occurs in those who cannot let go of the griefs and injustices that have bruised and battered them.

My desire is to examine those circumstances and actions that wound us, to consider the limits and possibilities of forgiveness, the nature and consequences of reconciliation, and the struggle to

be faithful in an environment that considers this enterprise naïve or foolish. I will share what I have learned from others, from the deep reservoir of faith, and from life. I will draw on stories, all true, that have formed my thinking. I invite you to accept what is useful or productive for your own spiritual development and to cast aside that which is useless and to forgive my limitations.

I begin with the blessed words God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, words that are breathtakingly beautiful, emotionally stirring, intellectually compelling. God asks:

Is this not the sort of fast that pleases me—
 it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks—
 to loose the bonds of injustice,
 to undo the thongs of the yoke,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 to share your bread with the hungry,
 and shelter the homeless poor,
 to clothe the one you see to be naked
 and not turn from your own kin?
 Then will your light shine like the dawn
 And your wound be quickly healed over.
 (Isaiah 58:6-10)

Isaiah's values are the values Jesus embodied. They are the goals of his followers. They are beautiful to consider and difficult to apply in a world so often wounded and wounding. God promises that when we immerse ourselves in the concerns of others, our own wounds will be healed; however, we often need to work on ourselves before we can enter the sufferings of others.

As pilgrims and searchers we struggle to find authentic places where we can bring our deepest hurts and find the spiritual and psychic energy to shed the chains that bind us, to shake the oppression that keeps us from freedom of mind and heart. It is amazing how many of us are impelled to share those sacred places we carve out for ourselves with those we care about. Centuries ago, Seneca, pondering the grandeur of the earth, the splendor of a sunset, described his urgency to share his discoveries with others. He concluded:

Even the best and most useful gives me no pleasure if I alone may know it. If all that is best and beautiful were offered to me on the condition that I keep it hoarded up within my own soul and share it with no one, I would refuse it. We cannot enjoy a treasure without a companion to our joy.

For many of us, Mount Saviour Monastery has been a treasure we have been compelled to share with others. My guess is that most, if not all, have told others about this holy mountain and have invited them to see for themselves what we cherish and to find for themselves what they need.

Twenty years ago, *Mount Saviour Chronicle*, marking the fifteen hundredth anniversary of the birth of St. Benedict and the thirtieth of this monastery, carried an expression of appreciation for the hospitality discovered here. At that time I wrote:

We who come here walk through many worlds. We're college professors and laborers, educated and unlettered, rich and poor, broken and healers, and, as the late Henri Nouwen put it, "wounded healers." We're celibate and wondering if we've really served the Lord in our barrenness. We're married and anxious that we've not sufficiently prepared the children we've brought into the world. We're young and restless, old and discouraged. We're young and discouraged, old and restless.

We come, for the most part, as strangers, bonded only by the qualities that draw us like magnets to this monastery. . . . This monastery, your community of Benedictines, acts as a kind of centrifugal force that pulls us to seek God. We come in search of a credible evidence of faith from which we can draw strength and encouragement.

What we find in you is openness and easy hospitality. We find more. We find constancy—a handful of men who in good times and bad praise God, in the presence of outsiders, in the privacy of community.

You may think of yourselves as weak, imperfect, tired, discouraged, anxious, at odds with one another . . . less

than exquisitely successful. You may be all that, but you are real. The regularity of your lives, the predictability of your prayer is a sign of God's fidelity to all creation, to each of us who live today and come to you because we thirst for living waters. You speak to us of Jesus Christ and image him in the fidelity of your lives. You help contemporize the Gospel message. You compensate for much of what is weak and shallow in the Church. You support many who are good and who want to be better, many who are weak and long to be strong.

Wisdom teaches that joy is an infallible sign of the presence of God. So many times good humor has burst forth in the midst of monastic trials. Some years ago, I recall, word was out that the crypt at the monastery was flooded. Fixing the problem would be costly. My local convent sent a small donation. The response came on a postcard from Father Martin. His physician's scrawl, deciphered, read: "Thanks for your contribution. That entitles you to one canoe ride in our crypt."

Old photographs, going back to 1975, remind me of the women and men I have transported. On a wall in our convent is one of Brother Luke's original paintings. It is a gift from a man I brought here more than twenty years ago because I didn't have sufficient strength to help him myself. I will call him John Ellison.

John was a brilliant, thoroughly eccentric teacher in my department at Brooklyn College. He lived in Greenwich Village with a talented photographer about half his age. John was estranged from the church; Brad had no religious connections. One terrible night Brad committed suicide. John went berserk. I helped as much as I could, identifying the body at the morgue, preparing a funeral service held at the crematorium on a dark December day.

John's behavior deteriorated. He frightened his students and was in jeopardy of losing his position. I didn't know what drove him. I think guilt, a sense of abandonment, and fury at God were part of the mix. He agreed to let me bring him here for a week during winter break. I thought he might find solace in the services and solitude. In fact, he came to few services. He spent a lot of

time with the cows the monastery then had and a great deal of time with the late Brother Ansgar. One or the other, or both, restored his sanity. He got on with his life—never fully healed, but relieved of the consuming anger that would have destroyed him. Brother Luke's painting holds that memory and my gratitude.

Were all our individual stories compiled, they would rise like incense from the sacrificial lives of the monks who make a place for us here.

There are, of course, many people we would like to bring here, and can't. It is possible that we may *become* the places accessible to them, that we may be the ambassadors of peace and mercy, healing others' wounds. And yet, before we behave expansively, we must be introspective. We bear the wounds of our hurts, from wrongs inflicted from the outside, but also from our own sins, private or public.

I invite you to enter into a moment of silence. Recall, if you dare, your most humiliating experience—shameful because you committed the deed. How did you handle it? How long were you able to conceal it? Is it resolved today in your human family? Have you been honest and fair about it? How would you feel if that sorry affair became the news of the day? Suppose that and that alone were the matter by which you were known and judged?

The prophet Jeremiah reminds us that "More devious than all else is the human heart . . . who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:8). Only when our shameful deeds are forgiven can our "wound be healed over." Who does the forgiving? In his homily last Sunday, Father Martin drew from the sixty-second psalm, reminding us that God's love is greater than life. Surely we long for forgiveness from the God of the prodigal family, the God who never tires of waiting for our return, who knows we can repent and reform and grow in grace and spiritual beauty. We learn from that parable to extend the same attitudes to others.

Some thirty years ago I learned the power of that attitude from a tearful woman in St. Cecilia's Church in Detroit. Its vibrant, charismatic forty-seven-year-old pastor, Father Ray Ellis, had died of a heart attack. He was significantly important in that city and his death was the lead story on the evening news. The woman, like myself, had immediately headed for the church. As

I was leaving, overwhelmed by the testimonies of that black congregation, I found her trembling and weeping in the vestibule. "I want to go to his coffin, she said, but I can't like this." She wore a strapless red mini-dress, leaving little doubt as to her profession. I lent her my jacket and when she returned it she spoke words that sank deep into my heart: "He was the only man who ever thought I could be more than what I am."

Somewhere in the formula for forgiveness there ought to be an expectation, an encouragement for the offenders, ourselves included, to be more than what they are. We also need to beg forgiveness of ourselves and of those whom we have hurt or betrayed. Sometimes it is too late for the latter. How do we then enter into God's generous economy to make restitution in some alternative way?

The sacrament of reconciliation invites us to a homecoming, to return to God with our whole hearts. Christ's gift of redemption is about giving sinners, ourselves included, a second chance to live. The parable of the Prodigal Son consoles us with the message that God's love far exceeds our capacity to sin. We believe in God's forgiving love more than we do our ability to emulate it.

An old woman I know once asked, "Who wrote the Our Father?" I explained as best I could. She countered, "Whoever wrote it down got it wrong. It is too hard to forgive. Jesus would never expect that of us." For many, it is too hard to forgive unaided. The psalmist reminds us, however, "God draws near to all who call on God." It is another reason we seek community. This person has something in common with unhappy people I have known in all walks of life: a refusal to relinquish the hurts of her life. In the childhood she shared with eight other siblings, she alone remembers relentless poverty. Despite trips and parties and holidays prepared by family members, she insists she has never had a happy day in her life. Out of her rage have come numerous prescriptions for causing unhappiness in the lives of others. She has no friends. The anger and discontent by which she has defined herself prevent her from enjoying the present or planning the future. She continues to give power to yesterday's evils. We see this situation in many families whose members refuse to speak to one another, to resolve the issues of alienation.

Two weeks ago today, the Cherish Life Circle, which we established to address the painful issue of capital punishment, hosted its fourth annual service for families and friends of murder victims. About two hundred people, representing thirty families, attended the interfaith candlelight service in Our Lady of Refuge Church in Brooklyn. Father Michael Perry is pastor there and a member of our Cherish Life Circle.

One family that came early and from some distance consisted of a husband and wife in their late fifties and a boy of about ten. Over refreshments he told me his story: Four years earlier his twenty-six-year-old son, Kenny, had been shot to death. Kenny's brother, unable to cope with the death, has become a street person. A few weeks after the murder a woman from the south appeared at the couple's door with a child of six she said was Kenny's son. They didn't know they were grandparents. She didn't know Kenny had died. Two months later she was murdered. The child they brought with them was an orphan, having lost both parents to killers.

This grandfather who was raising the boy had suffered a stroke. He said he and his wife can barely cope. They haven't celebrated a single holiday since their son was killed. He said, "The stranger who murdered my son killed our whole family.

Sometimes grieving for a lost child or parent or spouse can be the stone at the door to the heart that locks in the love required by the living, like the ten-year-old boy. It is clear that until that desolate man can let go of the suffering, he will continue to increase it in his life and the lives of those he cares about.

This situation only hints at the complexity of forgiveness. Permit me now to share my perceptions, fallible and incomplete, on the nature of forgiveness, its context and implications, and the limits of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not abstract, disconnected. It is rooted in pain, injustice, loss, and a sense of betrayal, abandonment. Are there limits to forgiveness? I think so—at least to a person's right to forgive. It is insensitive to suggest that we must all forgive everybody everything. If someone kills your best friend, I have no right to forgive that killer.

I hope the following story will provoke some serious thinking. I draw from the core of Simon Wiesenthal's book, *The*

Sunflower. Simon Wiesenthal was a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust years. The title of the book comes from his memories of rows upon rows of sunflowers in a cemetery where German soldiers were buried. Jews he knew who died in the gas ovens, including all the members of his own family, had no definable resting place, no tombstones, no sunflowers. The story has five elements: a prisoner, a dying man, the context, the evil and the response.

While imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, Wiesenthal was taken one day from his work disposing of medical waste at a hospital, to the bedside of a tortured, dying Nazi soldier. The young patient's face was wrapped in bandages. Only his eyes showed and they were haunted by his crimes. In the absence of a priest, the soldier wanted to confess to—and obtain absolution from—a Jew.

Wiesenthal was at the bedside under protest. The soldier described the way he and his comrades had herded a large number of Jews into a building, locked the doors and set it ablaze. Trapped inside were women and children and old people.

"Forgive me," the dying man implored.

Struggling with his own rage, an appalled Wiesenthal said nothing. Back at the camp, he argued the matter with other prisoners. Years after the war had ended, Wiesenthal wondered if he had done the right thing.

What would you have done? Plagued by uncertainty, Wiesenthal includes in his book responses from fifty-three individuals: theologians, political leaders, jurists, psychiatrists, human rights activists, and victims of genocide in Bosnia, Cambodia, China, and Tibet.

One response credible to me was this: "I don't have it in my power or heart to forgive you. Throw yourself on the mercy of God in whom you believe. Ask God's forgiveness."

Hans Habe, a Hungarian reporter and newspaper editor during the Holocaust years said, "Forgiveness is the imitation of God. Punishment, too, is in imitation of God. God punishes and forgives, in that order. But God never hates." Those last three words speak volumes to me. "God never hates." Not hating implies creating an environment where the offender can pursue

virtue if he chooses. Not hating means removing obstacles to reformation.

There is a second part to that story. The dying soldier asked the prisoner to deliver a letter to his mother back in Germany, if the prisoner survived the death camp. Months later, Wiesenthal carried the letter to the German mother. He may have intended to reveal his hatred of her son and the deeds he perpetrated as a soldier. However, when he found the widow, grieving for her only son, living in postwar squalor, with little understanding of what happened, he could not hurt her more. He pretended to have received that letter from someone who had met her son. In fact, he again chose silence.

For the purpose of this reflection, I offer the dictionary's definition of forgiveness: 1) to give up resentment against or the desire to punish, stop being angry with; pardon; 2) to give up all claim to punish or exact penalty for an offense; 3) to cancel a debt.

How many times can we do this? Seventy times seven?

Forgiveness sets the sinner free. It also frees the forgiver from lugging around the burden of anger. It allows her to devote her energies to worthier enterprises.

We are all wounded people. Who wounds us? Often those we love, those who love us. At times we feel abandoned, betrayed. Why weren't you there for me?

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. The memory, even the wound may stay forever. How do we forgive parents who have abused us? How do children forgive their parents for divorcing, or parents their children who have betrayed their values? How do people forgive doctors for their bad advice, friends for their insensitivity to our suffering? How do we forgive God for the death of a loved one or a crippling disease?

The way in which we cope with suffering alters us, making us stronger or weaker. Many of us know the story of the poet Maya Angelou. When she was six, she was raped and hurt and hospitalized. She knew her attacker and identified him. He was captured, jailed, and released. The next day his body was discovered. He had been beaten to death. Now the young Maya blamed herself for her rapist's death because she had spoken his name. At that point she stopped speaking. For the next six years

she read everything she could get her hands on. She memorized the works of the great poets, all of Shakespeare's sonnets. When she decided to use her voice again she had much to say and the tools with which to say it. In a symposium on the problem of evil hosted by Bill Moyers some years ago, she shared this story and her formula for self healing: "Name the evil, forgive it, and let it go."

How does one forgive a murderer? Some cannot. Some, like Bud Welch, who lost his twenty-three-year-old daughter Julie in the Oklahoma City bombing, had to, both to honor his daughter's memory and to save himself from self-destruction by rage. Bud Welch's public forgiveness of Timothy McVeigh had an impact on Patrick Reeder, who lost his wife in that 1995 bombing.

For months he harbored consuming hatred and a desire to kill the bomber himself. He could think of no other goal. He lost an enormous amount of weight, turned to drink and disruptive, violent behavior. Bud Welch's comments in the media first disgusted, and then challenged him. Mr. Reeder felt himself in a black hole of rage and revenge and sorrow. He told the *New York Times*, "I was turning into a beast. I started to think, Who is a better person, McVeigh or me?"

In the end, Reeder was one of the few of his family members who opposed McVeigh's execution last June. He remained bothered by the bomber's lack of remorse. He believes, however, that executing him removes the impetus to examine his own complex feelings about justice and forgiveness. He said he understood the desire of many to eliminate McVeigh, adding, "I felt that way myself. I wanted him silenced. But I also wanted my own conscience silenced."

Let me tell you about Marietta Jaegher Lane. More than twenty years ago she was with her family in a camping trip in her home state of Montana. One night while all were asleep, someone cut a hole in the tent and snatched her seven-year-old daughter, Susie. A massive search yielded no clues. After about six months Marietta had a dream, which convinced her that her little girl was in heaven. Six months later, on the first anniversary of the abduction, she received a taunting call from the abductor. He told her he was holding her daughter captive and was teaching her to forget her family. Marietta, who had accepted the child's death

and prayed for the gift of forgiveness, gently asked, "How can I help you?" The caller hung up and Marietta reported the call to the police.

Encouraged by her sympathy the man called back, allowing the police to trace the call and to capture the killer. The twenty-eight-year-old Vietnam veteran had taken the little girl to an abandoned farmhouse where he kept her locked in a closet, sexually molested her, killed her, and ate some of her flesh. Only by offering that description can I convey Marietta's incredible courage. She did not have a chance to forgive the man because he committed suicide in prison. But she had to forgive him for her own sake. This is her explanation: "Forgiveness is a letting go of the desire for punishment and, instead, taking up the idea of restoration, of putting things back in some good order, although it might not be the same order." "Forgiveness," she adds, "means feeling concern, even love for the offender."

Today Marietta Jaegher Lane is a prominent member of Families of Murder Victims for Reconciliation. Like you, I marvel at her capacity for forgiveness. There is nothing more personal than the murder of a loved one.

Many of the evils we experience are communal, societal. We suffer and react as part of a group or nation. Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh suggests a way of proceeding:

Reconciliation is to understand both sides, to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by that side; then to go to the other side and describe the suffering endured by the first side.

Abraham Heschel reminds us of another dimension. The prophet, he says, has to see human experience from God's point of view. Since Cain slew Abel, individuals and nations have resorted to violence to eliminate threats or competition or settle disputes. Most claim the right to do this, based on the perils and exigencies of any given time.

Here in Mark Twain country I am reminded of the wisdom of that author's remarkable parable published, at his request, after his death. It is called *The War Prayer*, a work he created in 1923.

The book is out of print now, but the Steele Memorial Library has two copies. Twain sets it in the context of patriotic fervor attending the start of a war. The parish church is filled to overflowing with citizens proud of their young men's willingness to defend their country. Their minister leads them in a rallying prayer for victory. He concludes, eyes closed with these words:

O Lord, our Father, our young and patriotic idols
 Of our hearts go forth to battle; be Thou near them.
 With them in spirit we also go from the sweet peace
 Of our beloved firesides to smite the foe.

When he opens his eyes, he finds before him an ancient, dark robed man, who cautions the congregation to beware of what they pray for. With each prayer, there is a shadow one. He intones the minister's unspoken second prayer. Here are some excerpts:

O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody
 shreds
 with our shells;
 help us to drown the thunder of the guns
 with the shrieks of their wounded,
 writhing in pain;
 help us lay waste their humble homes
 with a hurricane of fire;
 help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows
 with unavailing grief;
 help us to turn them out roofless,
 with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes
 of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst,

And so it continues through a host of images, and then:

We ask this in the spirit of love,
 Who is the Source of Love and who is the ever
 Faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset
 And seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

The old man then dares the congregation to pray the pastor's prayer now if they can. And he leaves the church. The story concludes, "It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic because there was no sense in what he said."

In our own real world, it is often true that we who seek and extend forgiveness, who encourage reconciliation in families and among nations, who believe in the limitless possibilities of redemption and repentance, and alternatives to violence, are also believed to be less than sane. As we recognize the affliction of being harshly judged, we can realize that our own harsh judgments can be impediments to reconciliation.

This presentation began with a tribute to the hospitality of Mount Saviour and the need for us to create safe and healing places. In fact, to sometimes be those places where people can come for solace. I would like to tell you about two children, both ten years old, one wearing brown shoes; the other with blood on his sneakers.

The first is a boy in brown shoes. He came hesitantly into the vestibule of the big Brooklyn church where we held our first service for families of murder victims. The boy was dressed in his Sunday best—right down to shoes, instead of sneakers. Thinking he was in the wrong place, I asked him why he had come.

"My mama sent me," he said. She had heard that morning about the service and couldn't come herself, so he came to represent the family. His fifteen-year-old brother had been murdered a few weeks earlier. Someone hastily wrote his brother's name on eight-and-a-half-by-eleven cards, which he, like the others, wore around his neck. We put him in a pew with some mothers.

After hymns, a scripture reading and a reflection by a woman whose son had been murdered, we called the names on the cards. Each bearer came forth, lit his or her candle from the Paschal candle, and formed a semi-circle in the sanctuary. When the little guy's brother's name was called, he walked out of the pew bravely, and then his shoulders crumpled and he started to cry as the mothers embraced him. What that child learned that day was the supportive, loving faith of a community of understanding and solace. This was a gathering devoid of calls for violence or vengeance. After the service, everyone retired to the basement for

refreshments. I looked for the child, but he had disappeared. He remains a reminder of the legacy of faith and forgiveness we owe our children.

And now the boy with blood on his shoes. He and his brother and sister suffered vicious psychological and sexual abuse at the hands of their drug-addicted, transient parents. One day a kind aunt gave the ten-year-old a puppy. Immediately the children bonded with the mutt. When their mother discovered the puppy, she put it in a burlap bag and as the children looked on, clubbed it to death. Then as the boy sobbed, she forced him to drag the bag to the river and dump the corpse. That's how the blood got on his sneakers.

I don't know the name of the boy in brown shoes, but I do know the boy who had blood on his sneakers. His name is David Paul Hammer. By the time the boy, David, was sixteen, he was a drug addict bent on a life of crime. At nineteen he went to jail for armed robbery and attempted murder. With the exception of two jailbreaks, he has been incarcerated ever since. He is now forty-three and anticipating execution on death row in Terre Haute, Indiana. He came, uninvited, into my life three years ago and has changed me forever.

During the 1993 New York State gubernatorial race, in which the restoration of the death penalty was a key issue, a small group of us sisters, priests, and lay people formed a Cherish Life Circle. Our goal was to pray together and provide opportunities to examine the difficult issue of capital punishment. We wanted to add to the public discourse the gifts of civility, respect, and the teachings of Jesus. We circulated a Declaration of Life. That document says that if the signer is murdered, he or she does not want his or her killer executed. The Declaration is a catalyst for conversation. Many thousands have signed it.

Every few years some newspaper reporter finds it intriguing and does an article, which is widely circulated. David read about it in 1998. His letter began, "Dear Cherish Life Circle. My name is David Paul Hammer. I'm scheduled to be executed by the federal government on January 14, 1999. I am looking for someone to pray for me and my victim, Andrew Marti, and for the Marti family. I would like someone to serve as a spiritual adviser for the final weeks of my life."

I had never visited a prisoner. I had no desire to do so. I'm an academic. I wanted to write and talk about the death penalty. It was shortly before Christmas. No one seemed able to visit him. I went to Allenwood Penitentiary in Pennsylvania where he was. Soon after, David received a stay of execution and was transferred to Terre Haute.

With God's grace and the encouragement of others, David has confessed, repented, and is attempting some sort of restitution by raising money to help abused children. The Christmas cards in the portery are his effort, with my support, to do that. He knows, as does Marietta Jaegher, that it is impossible to change the past or restore the shattered order of things. He can only sow some seeds of love where hatred had reigned.

The death penalty, of course, would be the topic of another talk. I will say here only that I recognize the difficulty this issue poses for good people, including family members closest to me. I understand well the words that Jesus spoke to Peter in John's Gospel: "When you were young, you girded yourself and went where you chose to go. When you are old, another will lead you to places you'd not have chosen."

At this time, the Supreme Court has rejected all of David's appeals. He anticipates a 2002 execution date. At his request, I will be with him when he dies. That will be the hardest thing I have ever done. I have witnessed his conversion, his entrance into the Catholic Church last year, his confirmation and first communion, all on death row in Terre Haute, Indiana, in the presence of Archbishop Buechlein. It was the first Mass celebrated in Terre Haute's Death Row. The four men who attended looked out from separate cages, into which the Eucharistic Lord entered.

One final, somewhat related story. For the past seven years, I have begged family and friends to honor my October birthday by giving me men's white socks wrapped in Christmas paper. One of our sisters, Mary O'Connor, is a longtime chaplain in the Men's House at Rikers. She used to use her allowance to provide socks to the many who attend Midnight Mass. I usually help her distribute them. Last year a photographer came. On Christmas Day the *Daily News* carried a large photo of Mary handing a prisoner a package, with me looking on. One of my policeman

nephews had something to say about it on Christmas. These are Michael's words: "We're some family, Aunt Camille. I send them to Rikers and you give them socks." So in our diversity, in our varied experiences, we struggle to be faithful to the words of Isaiah, which hold a formula in a love song to heal our wounds. In conclusion, I believe:

We must be willing to name the evil that afflicts us, realizing that, to ignore or adhere to it gives continuing power to the person or evil that wounded us to begin with us.

Some sins are inexcusable.

There are some sins that we don't have the power to forgive. Only God has that power.

Our challenge is to learn from and move away from the sins that wound us.

Out of our efforts to remain faithful to God's redemptive love, we try to encourage other sinners to have faith, to reform their lives, and to replace evil with goodness.

Finally, I believe in a just and merciful God, a God who punishes and forgives, but never hates. It is in this manner that we are challenged to love God and our neighbor.

And then, only then, will our own wounds be healed.