

Repentance on Death Row

Roman Catholic nun Sister Gerard Fernandez visited countless prisoners over 35 years as a pioneer volunteer counsellor with the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry. She became a Death Row counsellor after Tan Mui Choo was sentenced to hang. In January 2016 Sister Gerard, 78, spoke to Alan John about her experience counselling Mui Choo and Kah Hong, and how they prayed for Adrian Lim to repent before they went to the gallows.

The child murders of 1981 shocked all of Singapore, but hit home especially among the Good Shepherd sisters, a community of Roman Catholic nuns who run schools, a vocational centre for girls and a shelter for women. They knew the first victim, Agnes Ng Siew Heok, whose family were devout Catholics. And when the police arrested three people for killing Agnes and Ghazali Marzuki, the sisters were distressed to learn that one of the suspects was Tan Mui Choo, who had attended their Marymount Vocational Centre and whom they knew by her baptism name, Catherine.

No one was more disturbed than Sister Gerard Fernandez. “I knew Catherine, she was one of our girls. She came from a Catholic family, her parents were very religious, and we knew them too,” she recalled. Sister Gerard was aware that the young woman had fallen into bad company after leaving the vocational centre. As the sensational case unfolded before the courts, she also knew of all the terrible details that emerged, including how Catherine’s younger sister and brother had also been tricked by Adrian Lim.

When Adrian, Mui Choo and Hoe Kah Hong were sentenced to hang on May 23 1983, Sister Gerard felt she had to act quickly. “I thought they were all going to hang the very next day!” she said. Some years earlier, in 1977, she had joined Redemptorist priests Father Brian Doro and Father Patrick John O’Neill in

starting the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry to visit detained drug offenders and prisoners. She had never met anyone sentenced to hang, but now asked the director of prisons, Mr Quek Shi Lei, for permission to meet Catherine on Death Row. "He gave me permission, but only if she was willing to meet me. He said, 'She must want to see you, and right now she doesn't want to see anybody.' So I wrote her a letter right away and I included a beautiful picture of Jesus. I think it touched her." But Sister Gerard's letter went unanswered for six months. Then, out of the blue, a reply arrived one day from Catherine. Sister Gerard recalled: "Her first words to me were, 'Sister, how could you love me after what I have done?' And she signed her letter, 'Your black sheep, Catherine.' I immediately went and got permission to see her. It was the beginning of a period of healing for her."

That was how Sister Gerard began her weekly visits to Mui Choo, who was among a number of condemned women criminals in Changi Prison. The nun had been mistaken in thinking the trio's hangings were imminent. In fact, Catherine, Kah Hong and Adrian remained on Death Row for almost seven years until the women exhausted all avenues of appeal, and were executed in 1989. Sister Gerard would go to Catherine's cell each week and stay half an hour, although she was not allowed to enter the cell. They would hold hands and chat, pray and sing hymns together. Catherine asked to make her confession, which is when Catholics tell a priest their sins, express sorrow and ask for forgiveness. "After that, her life changed," Sister Gerard said. "Catherine spent hours in prayer, and looked forward to the times when Father Doro would come and say the Mass in front of her cell with me, and she received the Eucharist."

Catherine's family had been devastated by her arrest, the courtroom revelations and her being sentenced to death. She had been estranged from her parents, and closer to her grandmother. Sister Gerard recalled that it took some time to persuade Catherine's father to visit her in prison. "I spoke to him and said look, she's done wrong, but she is still your daughter." He

eventually came round “He went to see her, and there was a moment of forgiveness,” Sister Gerard said. That meeting took place just in time, because not long after, Catherine’s father had a stroke and he died before she was hanged. Her mother visited her in prison and attended Father Doro’s masses too. Sister Gerard said she saw a real change in Catherine over the years. Initially sad, upset and full of guilt, she gradually returned to her Catholic faith. Sister Gerard said: “Once she was able to see that she had done wrong and admit it, and know that God forgave her, she was able to let go. She drew strength from God coming back into her life. Catherine was a lovely person, always happy and nice to all the prison wardens.”

Like all Death Row prisoners, Catherine was in solitary confinement, and Kah Hong occupied the cell next to hers. At first Sister Gerard visited Catherine only, though they were aware that from her cell, Kah Hong would listen intently to everything they said. “Later, she asked to see me too, and I started visiting her as well.” Kah Hong eventually asked to be baptised a Catholic and she took the name Geraldine, after the nun who visited her on Death Row.

The women’s block was separate from the men’s block where Adrian was held. Sister Gerard said the two women spoke to her about the time they were with Adrian. “They made a mistake,” she says simply. “They were frightened of him. He used the electric shocks on them and they could not get away and they did not know what they were doing. But they were aware that they had done wrong. He was also a medium and he used that to fool them into doing a lot of things.” Sister Gerard believes Satan exists in the world and is able to get a hold on individuals who are not careful. Adrian, who had been raised Catholic, had a choice. “We have a power within us and we can use it for evil or for good. He just chose to do evil,” she said. Asked if the two women forgave Adrian for all he had done and how he had led them to Death Row, Sister Gerard said: “It took some time, but they did.” She had raised the subject, asking how they would feel when all three were led to the gallows, and Adrian would be

there alongside them. “I asked them, would you be able to forgive him? They said yes. And then they began to pray for his conversion. About a week before the executions, Catherine, Geraldine, Father Doro and I were singing Amazing Grace and praying at their cells, and they were saying to God, ‘This is the last week of his life, do not let Adrian go without him asking for forgiveness.’”

Sister Gerard said the men and women’s blocks were close enough for the male prisoners to hear them singing, and Adrian would have known Catherine and Kah Hong were singing that day. During all the years that he was behind bars, Adrian had refused to see a counsellor. Father Doro was a familiar presence among the male prisoners, including those on Death Row, and had accompanied many a condemned man to the gallows, staying by their side to the very end. “The prisoners loved him,” Sister Gerard said of the priest who died in 2015. “He had a beautiful sense of humour, and could make the prisoners laugh.” Although Adrian would have seen Father Doro over the years, it was not until that final week before the executions that he asked to see the priest. He asked for confession and communion. Sister Gerard said: “God works marvels. Adrian chose to repent, and God is forgiving.”

But why pray for a killer like Adrian, why hope that he would seek forgiveness for all the evil that he did? “If you ask me that,” Sister Gerard said, “then you should ask me why I visit prisoners at all. We may condemn them, but God condemns no one.” To those who question how she could spend her time helping criminals who have committed the most awful crimes, Sister Gerard said: “We believe in a God who loves us. There is no other reason.” She believes it was God who led her and Father Doro to work on Death Row. “Our whole lives are about reaching out to people, especially the broken, giving them back their wholeness and their identity as children of God.”

After 35 years of walking with prisoners, Sister Gerard said Catherine remained vivid in her memories for a number of reasons. “She was my first Death Row prisoner,” she said. What

was also unusual was that although prison counselors almost never meet the families of victims, in this case she knew Agnes' family, as well as Catherine's family. Sister Gerard and Father Doro sent off Adrian, Mui Choo and Kah Hong on the day they were hanged. Father Doro officiated and Sister Gerard assisted at the funeral mass, which was attended by Mui Choo and Kah Hong's mothers, some family members and Good Shepherd sisters. Sister Gerard and Father Doro also accompanied the caskets to the crematorium that day.

Sister Gerard joined the Good Shepherd sisters 60 years ago, at the age of 18. She taught and helped to run the Marymount vocational centre, but her work with prisoners and especially those on Death Row was to become a defining part of her calling to be a nun. She said people cringe when she tells them how a prisoner sometimes says to her: "Sister, I love you very much!" But that has helped her realise her gift as a nun and counsellor. "I have a capacity to give love and receive love." She has described this elsewhere, saying: "While I abhor the death penalty, the taking of a life, I realise God's call to me to walk with these vulnerable people is for me to remember that 'He loved us first,' and allow them to experience healing and forgiveness through my love for them. They are precious moments when a man who has committed murder says to me the day before he is hanged, "Don't worry Sister. I know God loves me! Tomorrow morning I will see him face-to-face." For Sister Gerard, accompanying prisoners through the hardest times of their life means living up to the words of the foundress of her order, St Mary Euphrasia, who said: "One person is more precious than the whole world."