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Former death row inmate drawn to faith by Catholic activism

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During the October Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization, Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson argued that the church?s social teaching is a powerful missionary tool, with the capacity to draw people to the faith.

If you need proof of the point, look no further than Curtis McCarty, who spent nineteen years on death row in Oklahoma before eventually being exonerated, and who now seems to be making a journey of faith toward the Catholic church because of the anti-death penalty activism of the Rome-based Community of Sant?Egidio.

Sant?Egidio hosted an international meeting of ministers of justice in Rome to discuss global abolition of the death penalty on Nov. 27, where the soft-spoken McCarty was on hand to share his experience.

Sant?Egidio is a Catholic movement founded in Rome in 1968 and dedicated to conflict resolution, ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue, and promotion of the other elements of Catholic social teaching. Of his encounter with the group, McCarty says bluntly: ?They saved me.?

McCarty was released from prison in 2007, after a forensic analyst whose testimony was crucial in convicting him not once but three times was found by a judge to have fabricated evidence, not only in his case but scores of others.

McCarty said he was angry and adrift after leaving prison, but meeting a leader of the Sant?Egidio gave him a sense of purpose.

Though nobody from Sant?Egidio pushed the faith on him, McCarty said he now attends Mass on a daily basis when he?s in Rome, and ?probably? considers himself a Catholic.

?Something?s growing in me, no doubt about it,? he said.

McCarty sat down for an interview on Nov. 27 on the margins of the Sant?Egidio conference. The following are excerpts from that conversation.

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Tell me your story.

In December 1982, a young woman I knew in Oklahoma City was attacked and murdered. Her father was a police officer. There was an intense investigation, and I was one of many young men interviewed because of my conduct at the time. I was a drug addict and a pretty criminal. They were unable to solve the crime, and it remained unsolved for three years.

I continued to live a life of addiction and crime. In 1985, the police heard a rumor that I had told someone I knew who did it. They weren?t happy with me anyway and didn?t like me very much, because I wasn?t a

likeable person back then. ? Before I knew what was happening, I was charged with capital murder. I spent the next 22 years fighting for my life.

You were convicted three times.

I?d win appeals based on government misconduct, I?d go back to trial, they would repeat that misconduct, and I?d go right back to death row. It was a terrible ordeal for everybody ? my family, the victim?s family, everyone. By 2001, I had given up hope. I was running out of appeals, and I?d stopped winning them. There was a change in law and politics and public attitudes. The appellate process had been truncated by the U.S. Congress, so I was running out of time.

Fortunately, there were abuses committed against another man on death row by the same people. They falsified a DNA test report that had been prepared by the FBI. When the FBI found out about it, they came to Oklahoma City to find out what was going on. Somebody inside the police department basically saved me. Off the record they gave a few names to the FBI, saying this is not an isolated incident, and I was at the top of the list. It took five more years, but I was eventually exonerated.

I was removed from death row and taken back to Oklahoma City for a few more years while everybody argued over the details. Finally in May 2007, I got to go home to my family.

I wish I could report that it was a good day, but it really wasn?t. For 22 years, I?d been unable to hug my mother or my father. We could only visit through glass or on the telephone. That was one of the best things that ever happened to me, being able to hug them, but even mom and dad agreed that after all the damage that had been done to us, and to the victim and her family, that there really wasn?t much of a reason to celebrate.

Have you had contact with the victim?s family?

No. It?s unfortunate. I don?t know how they?re feeling right now. I think it?s always important to note that as bad as things were for me and my family, it was much worse for her and her family. They lost their daughter, and they were betrayed by the government that lied to them about the circumstances.

As part of the misconduct, the entire body of evidence in the case was removed from custody. Court seals were broken, and it?s been ruled they did that to prevent DNA testing so that I couldn?t prove my innocence. As a result, that evidence is never admissible in court ever again. The man who killed Pam got away with it. He can?t be prosecuted.

How did you meet Sant?Egidio?

Shortly after I was released, in January 2008, the Innocence Project sent me to San Jose, California, to a national conference on abolition of the death penalty. I met Mario [Marazziti, a leader in the community.] I think it was probably what saved me a second time. I was so angry after I got out about what they had done, and I didn?t know what I was going to do with myself, how I was going to get back into society and the community and participate with some meaning. I met Mario, I met Sant?Egidio, and they saved me.

Were you Catholic?

I wasn?t. I didn?t have any religion at that point, because I?d lost my way in every respect.

Meeting Mario led to being invited to the ?Cities for Life? campaign in Rome in 2009, where I met the rest of the Community of Sant?Egidio and got to see their work. I was able to volunteer at the kitchen they run, to see all their programs with the elderly and the infirm. It?s an amazing experience in light of what I?m used to in the

United States, how faith communities interact with the community regarding the death penalty, the poor, and so on. Those programs typically aren?t very well funded or well supported, but there?s an entirely different attitude here. It gave me focus and purpose.

Did it make you interested in the Catholic church?

Yes. I?m unable to attend Mass at home, but when I?m in Rome it?s Mass every night. I love the churches and I love the people.

Would you describe yourself now as a Catholic?

Probably. I?ve been asked about it before ? I guess I?m sort of a *de facto* Catholic.

Compared to other anti-death penalty groups, what?s unique about Sant?Egidio?

I think everything they do is unique. It?s completely beyond my experience in the United States, and that of my girlfriend. From fundraising to organization to public presentations, the whole thing is always thoughtful, well-planned, and well attended. They always pay attention to the smaller details that make these conferences meaningful for people. There?s also a spiritual dimension to what they do that?s unique. This isn?t just politics for them, but it?s about their faith and how they live the gospels.

Did Sant?Egidio ever pressure you about religion?

They never asked me about it at all. Other people would ask me about it, such as journalists and just ordinary people. They wanted to know how I made it through, and was it my faith that sustained me? At the beginning I had to pause, but I thought that probably the best course of action was to tell the truth. I said that I?m an atheist, I have no faith, and I can?t tell you what it was that sustained me through all those years.

That?s one of the things about Sant?Egidio I admire more than I can say. When I said that to them at the beginning, they didn?t care. They said you?re here to help, you?re trying to improve your life and to do positive things, and that?s all that matters. Everything else will take care of itself.

When people ask about your faith today, how do you answer?

I have to stop, because it?s become a more difficult question now. There?s something growing inside me, no doubt about it, because of what I?ve seen and experienced.

How do you describe Sant'Egidio's style?

It?s simple and direct. When asked about faith, they just say they live by the gospels. It couldn?t be more clear, or more instructive. In my experience, a lot of people who profess to be Christians in the United States really aren?t. They may want to be, but it seems they haven?t really read the gospels. They allow other people to tell them what the gospels say. If you do, there?s a clear instruction about how you?re supposed to live your life. It?s about service, generosity, love and support for the poor, the infirm, for everybody, and we have to look out for each other. The idea is to look at another person, no matter their race or religion, and say: ?That?s a human being, I love him, and I?ll do what I can to make his life better.?

In a way, it shames me to no end to spend time with the Community, because I really am embarrassed about who I was. What I?ve come to understand is that this is an opportunity to redeem myself.

While you were on death row, you surely met some guys who weren?t innocent. Didn?t you ever think a couple of them deserved to die?

That actually happened. When I first got there, I lived for about five years next to a serial killer. He killed women, men, children, without remorse or compunction or shame. I hated him as much as everybody hated him. If asked at the time, I probably would have said that this man deserves to die for what he did.

I could never understand why the nursing staff treated him so well. They were always kind, under all circumstances. There were guards who were the biggest threat we faced. They were extremely dangerous, because they can do anything they want to you without repercussion. We were vile, despicable animals, not a human being. We were cast out in every sense of the word. The nurses, however, were always kind. They maintained their humanity, even with this man, and it irked me at first. Most people would have let him starve in his cage.

A few years later, I had the opportunity to ask this one nurse why she was always kind to that guy. Her answer helped to get me thinking at a different level. She said it?s not about him, it?s about me. I hate what he did, but I don?t hate him. My task on earth is to be a good person, to live by the gospels, and to treat everyone with dignity no matter what they have done. It didn?t really register at the time, because it was too philosophical ? it was above me. Later, however, I watched men taken away to their deaths, and I thought about not what it was doing to them but what it was doing to us. How do we deal with violent situations, with people whose minds are twisted and broken. How do we deal with it? Do we respond in kind?

For sure, this man had to be exiled because he was shockingly dangerous. But does that give us some authority to abuse him or to kill him, to vilify him and use him as a political tool? Or do we try to gain some understanding of why it happened and use that knowledge for prevention purposes?

Why didn?t he deserve to die?

Because he?s a human being and we have no authority in this matter. It?s not within our power to make such decisions.

Also, I watched the whole process as this man grew older before he was eventually executed. In later years, he did begin to express some remorse and some understanding of what he did. He began to cooperate with the FBI and their profilers. He showed them where more victims were buried, to bring some closure to families who didn?t know what happened to their loved ones. When he was finally killed, I saw him come out of that cage wrapped in chains, completely defenseless, without hope and without family or any kind of support, no one to lean on. He had to walk down there with nothing. I could just feel it was wrong.

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