

Advocate for peace feels the Spirit in every breath

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Feb. 4, 2014 | Conversations with Sr. Camille

Mary Eoloff

Age: 81

Lives in: St. Paul, Minn.

***Sr. Camille:* Mary, you were among those who purchased this year's Christmas cards designed by death row inmate David Paul Hammer. How did you discover them and us?**

Eoloff: Some years ago, we attended a Pax Christi conference on the East Coast, where you were selling the cards. I have empathy with/for prisoners and I loved your reflections.

When we first met via email, I asked you to tell me about yourself. Your response was: "I am an old woman with six children, 14 grandchildren and a husband!" That alone told me there is much more to learn about you. So here I am, back for more.

Your email address indicates connection with the University of Minnesota. What's that connection?

My husband graduated from the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. My Aunt Sue, who lived there in St. Paul, persuaded my folks that life offered more opportunities there. My two brothers were in the military in World War II, and my sister was employed there. Indeed, it was fortuitous for me, even though I thought my life was over when I had to leave my friends and the sisters I admired so much.

Can you recall an event or situation that gave direction to your life?

I believe three events were life-changing for me. My senior English teacher, Sister Marion, insisted I go to college (a first in my family), and I graduated from the College of St. Catherine (now St. Catherine University).

The second event was the Second Vatican Council, which changed me forever. It gave me permission to think for myself. Before the council, I had been a very obedient member of a rules-oriented church.

The third event was President Jimmy Carter's reinstatement of the draft in 1980.

Why did that affect you?

That was important because it made me reflect upon nonviolence, and I looked for organizations whose mission was its promotion. That year, Pax Christi USA met in Rochester, Minn. I attended the conference, and then several people from Minnesota formed Pax Christi chapters.

Why was that so important?

Our son was 18 years old, and I was shocked. We and a multitude of others had been keeping him alive for 18 years, and now my government was saying he could be a target and he could kill someone. With the pastor's

approval, a group formed in our parish and became the Peace Studies Task Force. We published a textbook for high schoolers about conscientious objection and did presentations in high schools.

Would you please describe your current family?

In 1955, I married Nick Eoloff and gave birth to three sons and three daughters. Paul and his wife, Anita, live in D.C.; Eric is divorced and lives in St. Louis; and Jonathan, our youngest, is gay and lives with his partner in Atlanta. My wonderful daughters live in St. Paul. They are Kristin, wife of Dan Kramer; Sara, wife of Bob Hyland; and Andrea Eoloff, a single parent. We have 14 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

What do you consider your everyday challenges?

A challenge for me is having congestive heart failure and emphysema. I have never smoked but inherited something called Alpha-1 antitriptyn deficiency. I use oxygen at night and when I do a 15- to 30-minute walk.

What gives you the courage and wisdom to address these ailments?

My faith gives me courage and wisdom as well as my experiences with others who have sustained much greater challenges.

As you look back on your life, what makes you happy?

I know that I am loved by the Spirit with every breath I take. That gives me energy. I feel blessed by my family, my friends and my medical doctors. I know that I am breathing in God and breathing out God. What greater consolation could one have?

Do you harbor any regrets?

I have no serious regrets. Looking back, I am happy that I was able to be the person I wanted to be.

Do you belong to any organizations or recreational groups?

I belong to Pax Christ USA, Middle East Peace Now, and the YMCA, where I participate in yoga classes.

Do you worship with a community?

I worship with the community of St. Frances Cabrini, where we have a part-time pastor. It is a dynamic, lay-involved parish.

How do you pray?

My form of prayer is meditation, a form first introduced to me by Jim Dolan at a retreat on Anthony de Mello. I have a monthly "agape" group of friends who formed after a series of retreats by a Melkite priest, Fr. Charles McCarthy, whose mission is Gospel nonviolence. Also, Pax Christi Twin Cities had a monthly meditation group.

Do you have a favorite Scripture story?

My favorite Scripture story is of the woman caught in adultery. I am comforted by its call to forgiveness.

Does it make a difference in your life?

For many years, I had the privilege of visiting prisoners in both a minimum- and maximum-security prison. I accompanied a woman lay pastoral minister for Scripture readings, song and sharing with Spanish-speaking

prisoners and with Fr. Larry Hubbard, who had been a priest in Venezuela, for Mass and sharing. I am godmother to Martin, a onetime prisoner of Oak Park Heights in Stillwater, Minn.

Where and with whom do you share your beliefs?

I think that I mentioned a group that formed after Charlie McCarthy's retreats. We call it the "agape" group, and we have been meeting monthly in each other's homes for over 20 years.

Does your husband share your interests?

Nick and I adopted Mordechai Vanunu, an Israeli who blew the whistle on Israel's secret nuclear weapons. He was held in solitary confinement for 11 years of an 18-year sentence, allowed one hour outside and without contact with other prisoners. Unbelievably, he is still a prisoner of the state of Israel, which issues annual restrictions forbidding him to leave the country. You cannot imagine the overwhelming sorrow of visiting a man who is held behind bars attended by two guards when you know he has walked out of a solitary cell and been denied the companionship of other human beings. The memory still weighs heavily on my heart.

What is your image of God?

My belief is that God is present in every being, human, animal and plant, the whole created universe. This is what excites me every day.

How has it changed?

My image of God has changed from being my heavenly Father, my Rock, and my Mother to Spirit -- the energy of the universe. I am thrilled with the image of the Spirit God in Diarmuid O'Murchu's book, *In the Beginning Was the Spirit*.

Who most influenced your belief system?

Priests and sisters have most influenced my belief system -- those mentioned plus Richard Rohr and Joan Chittister.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

I am perplexed; I cannot name a greatest accomplishment.

Is there anything in our Catholic church you would change?

I hope that women's ordination and same-sex relationships will be accepted and honored in our church.

What gives you joy?

My everyday exchanges with family and friends give me great joy.

What gives you hope?

Pope Francis' life of simplicity and priority call for compassion for the poor give me great hope.

How do you relax?

Being in the garden is my way to relax. I love the planting season, the nearly daily weeding session, watching the vegetables and flowers sprout and grow and then enjoying their flavor and their beauty in the house. Every

vegetable, every flower has a beauty of its own.

What else would you like us to know about you?

My, I have gone on and on. There's already a lot to know in this missive, but I would like to please give my greetings to David and to tell him how much I treasure his artwork.

I will surely do that. It was David's Christmas cards art that brought you and me together.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, [is available](#) [1] from Now You Know Media.]

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