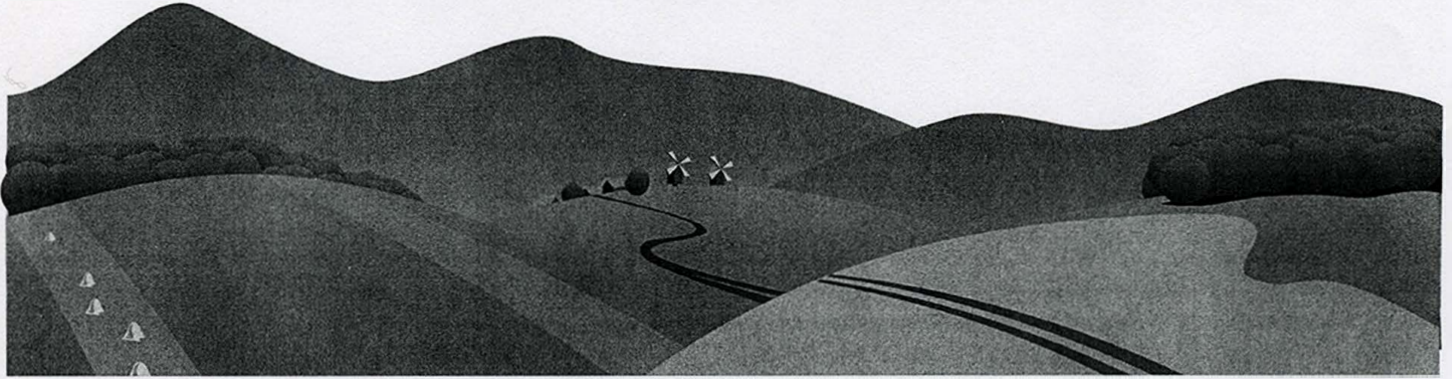


LEADERSHIP & COMPASSION

Four women religious leaders whose congregations experienced a tragedy reflect on both leading from a place of compassion and being the recipient of compassion.



‘Pray for Those Who Persecute You’

Susan Gatz, SCN

The quiet of a Thursday afternoon in late August 2016 was shattered by a phone call from the priest in Durant, Mississippi, “There has been an apparent break-in at Sisters Paula’s and Margaret’s house. and the police have found two bodies inside.” We made quick phone calls to confirm with police and the coroner that our Sister Paula Merrill, SCN and Sister Margaret Held, OSF, companions in community and ministry for more than 30 years, had been brutally stabbed to death. Holding our own shock in our hearts, our leadership and communication teams quickly began to let the community know, trying to stay ahead of the media. In the motherhouse chapel we shared the little we knew of the horrifying situation. As I invited the sisters to pray for everyone involved, the gospel call to, “Pray for those who persecute you.. ” rang in my ears. What in the world did that mean to me, to us, now? I said, “Because we are gospel women, we pray even for the perpetrators.”

Less than 48 hours later the police arrested Rodney Earl Sanders who had confessed to the crime. A face, a name.

Three days later, after the memorial service at the cathedral in Jackson, Mississippi for those two compassionate women, several of us were with Sanders in a small courtroom at his first arraignment with bewilderment, anger, and deep sadness in our hearts. And Jesus’s call to “love your enemy” was asking for a home there as well.

Two long years later in June 2018 he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life without parole. This time in that courtroom we -- leaders of the two communities, their families, friends, and a representative of the clinic where they ministered -- had a chance to face him, tell him what we felt, and ultimately offer him forgiveness, something he had probably rarely known in his more than troubled life. That experience was both gut-wrenching and deeply inspiring and brought some measure of closure.

When I was asked to write about these deaths for this article through the lens of compassion, I was reluctant to open up that sorrow again. But looking through that lens that both heals and creates community proved to be a gift, inviting me

to reflect on the graces woven into those dark days as memories of compassion given and received flooded my heart.

- Sharing the shock and sorrow drew the SCN and OSF communities, and the families and friends of Margaret and Paula, into a deeper communion as we searched together for the ways to support one another and respond to the unfolding story, taking our lead from the Gospel and Paula’s and Margaret’s lives. We attended the memorial services, wakes, and funerals for each sister. Compassion was hugs shared, tears shed together, memories gathered and spoken messages, texts, and phone calls that still go back and forth. Relationships that began in a common tragedy blossomed into friendships on Facebook and beyond.
- The communities and families spoke out against the death penalty only days after the murders. Compassion looked like a desire for justice based in respect for life and not revenge.
- A woman from another denomination was serving at the reception after the memorial service at the par-



Sisters of Charity of Nazareth gather at the provincial house in Patna, India, to remember the slain sisters.

ish. She came because, "I knew they would need help."

- The media who surrounded us in those first few days showed such sensitivity and tenderness, promising prayer and giving us hugs as they left.
- The district attorney was deeply concerned for us as she worked toward a plea agreement so that we wouldn't have to hear all the "gruesome" details of the murder at a trial. Her comment after the plea hearing was, "Your compassion challenges me in my own life."
- The outpouring of love and prayerful support felt like the world wrapping its arms around us – letters, flowers, emails, wind chimes that gently remind us of them, beautiful reflections that brought us the wisdom of the ages, pictures of our sisters holding prayer services in all the countries where we minister. We gathered in that compassion and let it carry us through those days and these past years.
- The court bailiff after the plea hearing went out of her way to give Sister Carol, Margaret's provincial, a hug and offer condolences.
- After the plea hearing the community members, family, and friends of Paula and Margaret gathered around Marie, Rodney Sanders' wife, who attended the hearing alone, as she

tearfully shared that her family as well had been devastated by this crime. She has found continued hospitality and support from the Daughters of Charity and the Sister of Charity of Halifax who now live in Paula's and Margaret's house and minister in the Durant community. The compassionate service they gave for so many years continues.

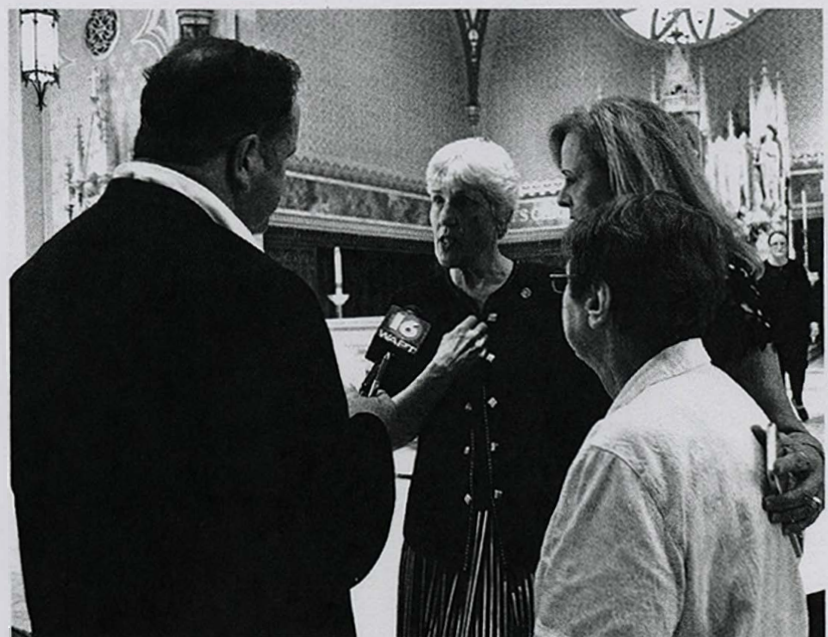
- Both the School Sisters of St. Francis and the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth have created teams of sisters to

write to Rodney Sanders regularly, letting him know that he is held in prayer. Compassion has forged a relationship where, from the world's view, none should exist.

- Margaret's and Paula's compassion flowed over us through little signs and coincidences that we felt were assuring us that they were at peace in the heart of God.

These experiences and many like them remind us over and over that evil does not have the last word. The Risen Christ, the Compassion of God, does indeed, as we sing at Easter, triumph o'er the grave. Reflecting on all that these years put in our path I have come to realize, among other insights, that sometimes compassion simply, easily flows out of us in response to pain-filled situations. But, sometimes we have to go deep inside and drag it up through shock, sorrow, disbelief, and anger. Living the gospel call to "love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you" led us to know in our very gut the cost of discipleship -- and how desperately the Crucified Body of Christ needs us to continue to pay that price.

Susan served as president of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth from 2013-2018.



Susan Gatz, SCN responds to questions from a reporter after the memorial service for both sisters at the Cathedral of St. Peter in Jackson, Mississippi.