



The Benenson Society

Campaign against the death penalty for the killer of two elderly nuns in Mississippi

The recent murder in Mississippi of two elderly nuns was a tragic loss to the community they worked for. Sister Margaret Held and Sister Paula Merrill had worked regularly as the Lexington Medical Clinic, where they often treated poor and uninsured patients with diabetes and other chronic conditions. The clinic and the nuns' home in Durant are in Holmes County where 44 percent of the population is living in poverty

Rodney Earl Sanders, 46, has been charged with the murder and it is likely that Mississippi will seek the death penalty This would be a disservice to the lives of the sisters.

We join the sisters' religious congregations in urging the State of Mississippi not to seek the death penalty in the case against their alleged killer. (article and details of Governor of Mississippi below the photo)



Sister Margaret Held, 68, of the School Sisters of St. Francis in Milwaukee, and Sister Paula Merrill, 68, of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Kentucky, are pictured in undated photos. (CNS/School Sisters of St. Francis and Sisters of Charity of Nazareth)

What can we do?

Please contact the Governor of Mississippi asking that District Attorney Akillie Malone-Oliver not seek the death penalty in the State's prosecution of Earl Sanders.

You can email Governor Bryant directly from his site: www.governorbryant.com

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 139, Jackson, MS 39205

Governor Bryant

As a member of the Benenson Society, may I respectfully ask that the State of Mississippi not seek the death penalty in the case against the alleged murderer of Sister Margaret Held and Sister Paula Merrill.

These two sisters had dedicated their lives to the service of the most in need, and it would be a travesty to their memory, if the death penalty was sought for their killer. Their religious congregations and families have urged that vengeance not be sought in their name.

Yours sincerely,

Murdered nuns recalled for their generosity, service in Mississippi

By Maureen Smith
Catholic News Service

JACKSON, Miss. (CNS) — The deaths of Sister Margaret Held and Sister Paula Merrill demand justice, but not revenge, Franciscan Father Greg Plata said during a memorial Mass for the women religious in the Cathedral of St. Peter the Apostle.

“I truly believe with all my heart that Margaret and Paula would tell us that we need to keep loving,” said the priest during the Aug. 29 Mass. Father Plata is sacramental administrator of St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Lexington, Mississippi, the parish in which the sisters were active.

Sister Margaret, a member of the School Sisters of St. Francis in Milwaukee, and Sister Paula, a member of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Kentucky, were recalled by family and friends in prayer services and Masses in the days after they were found dead Aug. 25 in the Durant, Mississippi, home they shared.

Rodney Earl Sanders, 46, of Kosciusko, Mississippi, has been charged with two counts of capital murder, larceny and burglary in connection with the incident.

The day before the Mass, representatives of the sisters' religious communities and families issued a statement opposing the death penalty for the suspect charged in their deaths.

"Many people will be dismayed, even angered at the joint statement the School Sisters of St. Francis and the Sisters of Charity made stating that they are opposed to the death penalty that could be imposed on the person who committed this terrible crime," Father Plata said at the Mass. "But think of the powerful statement that makes. At the heart of Christianity is forgiveness. 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' "Forgiveness isn't something we do on our own. It is something we choose to do with God's grace," the Franciscan said.

During a brief vigil at the sisters' home Aug. 27, representatives of the religious orders called for a period of reflection and remembrance. Sister Susan Gatz, president of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, and Sister Rosemarie Rombalski, of the School Sisters of St. Francis, went into the women's home prior to the ceremony for prayer, closure and reflection. In the kitchen, they discovered a loaf of bread in a bread maker. The simple act — typical of the sisters who were known for being generous with their good food — turned into a life-giving symbol for the communities.

"Marge and Paula really had that sense of offering bread to each other. The bread of life, the bread of energy, the bread of hope," Sister Rosemarie said. The Sisters broke the loaf in half to share with their respective communities in Milwaukee and Nazareth, Kentucky.

About 300 people gathered at St. Thomas Church the evening of Aug. 27 for another vigil. In addition to the more than 100 people packed inside the tiny sanctuary, another 200 watched a video feed from a tent on the lawn. Bishop Joseph R. Kopacz of Jackson presided over the service, but Father Plata offered a homily. He remembered the sisters as great cooks, gardeners, generous souls and hopeful women of the Gospel. "As Christians, we only have one choice, to move on in hope," he said.

As the families cope with the loss of their loved ones, they also worry about the people of Durant and Lexington. "A big hole in the universe and in our hearts," is how Annette Held described losing her older sister. "Sister Margaret was a wonderful and gracious person, always a concerned about others and certainly the spiritual leader of the family. This tragedy is leaving a big hole for us. We are also worried because there is no one to carry their

ministry now and that has been very important for so long for the community they lived in and for our family too. We keep wishing we knew what will happen next at the clinic.”

Rosemarie Merrill, Sister Paula’s sister and who made the trip to Mississippi from her home in Stoneham, Massachusetts, expressed a similar concern. “(Sister Paula’s) faith was very strong. And she was a wonderful nurse,” she said. “I feel so bad for the people of Holmes County because they’ve lost so much. The care they provided leaves a huge void. They would do anything for their patients.”

Contributing to this report were Elsa Baughman of Mississippi Catholic and Marnie McAllister, editor of The Record, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Louisville, Kentucky.