

**Ministry of Sr Gerard Fernandez  
Singapore  
*Pastoral care for women and men  
on death row***

**Interview regarding Chai Yee Wei's short film, 'Sister'**

SINGAPORE - A painful moment comes midway through Chai Yee Wei's short film 'Sister' when the sister of a murder victim confronts the nun who has been counselling the murderer's accomplice.

"Why do you have to do this? Why do you have to counsel someone who has done so much evil?" Margaret Ng, then in her late teens, asks Sister Gerard Fernandez in an agonised and impassioned plea. "How could you help them?" she wails.

Her sister, Agnes, was only nine when she and another child, 10-year-old Ghazali Marzuki, were murdered in a ritual killing in a Toa Payoh flat in 1981. Temple medium Adrian Lim and his two "holy wives", Catherine Tan Mui Choo and Hoe Kah Hong, were sentenced to death for the killings. Their lurid story of sex, superstition and murder gripped the nation for years.

But it is the story of the nun who took pity on the women and met them every week for seven years, who walked with them on their final journey to the gallows in 1988, that Mr Chai chooses to tell in his film. It was made for the 15 Shorts project, a biographical series about 15 Singaporeans who have gone to extraordinary lengths to help others. It is put together by the non-profit National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC), local film company Blue3Asia and 15 Singaporean film-makers.

Instead of defending herself to Margaret in that moment, Sister Gerard kept silent. Words were not needed, she told *The Straits Times* in an exclusive interview before the public release of the film. Instead, she shared in the young woman's pain by looking her in the eyes and hugging her.

The stigma and intense emotions that surround death row counselling are also poignantly portrayed in 'Sister'. A pioneer in death row counselling, Sister Gerard, 80, co-founded the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry in 1977. By releasing new details about the women's incarceration, the film adds an extra dimension to the public understanding of the high-profile case and the little-known realm of death row counselling.

Apart from showing the confrontation between Ms Ng and Sister Gerard, the film also reveals the two women were able to put on blue satin dresses with sashes and white shoes before they were hanged. Back then, it was standard protocol for death row prisoners to be

hanged in their prison garb of beige clothes and slippers. But Sister Gerard wanted dignity for the women in their deaths and managed to persuade the prison authorities to allow the dresses to be worn.

When they were told only three days before their sentences were carried out on Friday, November 25, 1988, Sister Gerard rushed another nun to stitch the dresses in record time. "They asked me as they wore their dresses, 'How do I look?' They were appreciating themselves, after having repented and forgiven themselves for what they had done. I was touched by the change and transformation I saw in them," said Sister Gerard.

The film shows how she placed rosaries in their hands and sang the hymn "How Great Thou Art" with them as the two women walked down the corridor to the gallows. Tan had returned to her childhood faith of Catholicism in prison, and Hoe also eventually asked to be baptised a Catholic.

Outside the gallows chamber, Sister Gerard heard the lever to the trapdoor being pulled as she continued to sing.

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In her 40 years of counselling prisoners until she stopped in 2017, Sister Gerard met 18 inmates who were on death row. Tan was just the first, and others included individuals like Filipino domestic worker Flor Contemplacion, who killed a fellow domestic worker and her four-year-old charge, and the Australian heroin trafficker Nguyen Tuong Van.

It was common for Sister Gerard to be questioned about her work. People would ask: What is the point of counselling doomed prisoners? Why visit them at all? Or the question that Tan herself asked after the nun wrote her a letter in prison, requesting permission to see her: "Sister, how could you love me after what I have done?"

Sister Gerard's answer, she told The Straits Times, was always: "The condemned need hope. We may condemn them, but God condemns no one. "Everyone has the ability to change and someone needs to be there to journey with them and not give up on them." She said death row counselling differs from other forms of counselling in two ways.

First, its purpose is to prepare prisoners for death. Only one out of the 18 death row prisoners she met was successful in having the death sentence commuted to life imprisonment after an appeal for clemency.

Second, it is crucial for the prisoners to admit that they have broken the law so they can work through the shame and guilt to come to a place of forgiveness, acceptance and peace.

In her experience, the top three regrets of someone on death row are the shame that they caused their families, the mess they made of their lives and the freedom they have lost.

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Each prisoner she met has wanted to be reconciled with their families, experience healing and be given a second chance to prove that they can change. "I always see that transformation in their lives and all of them face death calmly, peacefully and sometimes, happily," said Sister Gerard.

There were eight executions in 2017, all for drug offences, according to latest data from the Singapore Prison Service. It was the highest number in 10 years.

"I'm glad the film shows the women in a kinder light. The public sentiment in the 1980s was such that it is hard to imagine any other judgment than to hang all three because people were so aghast at the cruelty of the child killings," said former deputy editor of The Straits Times Alan John, who wrote a book, *Unholy Trinity*, on the case. "Today, I think the courts and the public might be more willing to see that Adrian manipulated and abused the two women to such a great extent that even though they assisted in the abductions and killings, they did not deserve to be executed as well," said Mr Alan John.

Sister Gerard said she turns to God and prayer whenever she is sad or burdened by a case. One particularly difficult one was that of Flor Contemplacion, whom she counselled before she was hanged on March 17, 1995. Although Contemplacion never denied her guilt, her case sparked intense anti-Singapore feelings in the Philippines, which damaged diplomatic relations and affected investments and tourism between the two countries.

Stressed by the public attention and the calls she was getting, Sister Gerard prayed for a sign that Contemplacion was in heaven. Though it was raining heavily that day, Sister Gerard saw a silver lining around the dark clouds.

"I don't know where I get the strength and courage to do this work but my strong relationship with God helps," said Sister Gerard. "It is a privilege to walk with them till the end and see the beautiful change that comes upon them."

**The public can watch the film at [www.15shorts.com](http://www.15shorts.com) . The film is dedicated to 70x7, an initiative within Prison Fellowship Singapore that promotes restorative justice. Support the cause on Giving.sg at <https://www.giving.sg/web/70x7>**  
**15 Shorts Official Trailer**