

## **Interview with Mario Marazziti**

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*Mario Marazziti is a leader in the Community of Sant'Egidio, one of the "new movements" in the Catholic church, and a key figure in the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty. NCR senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. spoke with Marazziti in New York where he was waiting for the United Nations General Assembly to vote on a resolution calling for a moratorium on executions "with a view to abolishing the death penalty." The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty was instrumental in lobbying for the resolution, which the assembly did ratify Tuesday, Dec. 18 by a vote of 104 to 54, with 29 abstentions. The text of Allen's interview follows.*

### **NCR: What's the importance of this resolution?**

**MARAZZITI:** The call for a moratorium, leading to abolition, does not create an obligation on the member states. The point, however, is that it's been 15 years that opponents of the death penalty have been trying to bring such a resolution to the General Assembly. It was presented for the first time by Italy in 1993 and lost, though not by a large number of votes. Then in 1999 Europe brought another resolution to the General Assembly, but they withdrew it because there were killer amendments led by Singapore and Egypt. This year, it became possible because there was a real synergy among many different forces. We advised Italy and Europe not to go forward as 'Europe.'

### **'We' in this case being Sant'Egidio?**

Yes, Sant'Egidio. There was a meeting on August 6 in Lisbon with the European presidency. I strongly encouraged them not to present the resolution as a European resolution, but to co-author it with other countries. I mentioned which other countries [would be willing], and how to bring aboard South Africa and Russia. The resolution thus became a real cross-regional resolution, presented by 37 countries and co-sponsored by many others. It was introduced to the General Assembly's Third Commission on Nov. 1. In the meantime, over the last two years, I and Sant'Egidio have been working hard with African countries and Central Asian countries. Over the last couple of years, Sant'Egidio has had a direct impact on at least six countries that changed their position: Rwanda, Burundi, Gabon, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

In this moment, we have about 90 countries that have abolished the death penalty, and there are 43 countries that are de facto abolitionists in that it's been at least ten years since they executed anyone. Until 1977, only 17 countries in the world had abolished the death penalty. In other words, for 20 centuries only 17 countries had formally abolished capital punishment. Over the last 20 years, more than 50 countries have abolished it, so the acceleration has been dramatic. Over the last two years, we focused on Africa and Central Asia. We have had two international conferences with 15 ministers of justice from Africa, and accompanied some of them in the process [of abolishing capital punishment.]

### **Why those two places?**

Africa is the place where the climate on the death penalty is changing the fastest. Previously, there were only four countries that had abolished it. Two years ago, that number was 13. Then

Senegal did so, and this year Rwanda, Burundi, and Gabon have all abolished it. Gabon specifically mentioned the work of Sant'Egidio, and we accompanied some of these countries in the legal process or in the parliamentary process.

Central Asia was the closest place to Europe to have the death penalty: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. We have been working there with “Mothers Against the Death Penalty,” who are fantastic women ... lawyers, activists, and so on. In Uzbekistan, they didn't even say where they put the body after an execution. Now, Uzbekistan is going to abolish the death penalty by the end of the year.

### **Why is this happening?**

For one thing, we've created strong relations with Europe. We have explained that capital punishment is not so effective. Some of these countries strongly want better international relations. We invited the President of the Senate of Kazakhstan to our World Meeting of Prayer for Peace in Naples, and they are now going to declare a moratorium.

### **So they see abolishing the death penalty as important to their foreign policy?**

There are different reasons. Some countries have reached the conclusion that they cannot have internal reconciliation with the death penalty. Rwanda and Burundi are examples. Abolition becomes a tool to prevent future violence. They have 800 people on death row, and if they kill them, another cycle of violence could begin. It's the same rationale as South Africa or Cambodia. It's very interesting that the three nations with the greatest genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rwanda, Burundi, and Cambodia, without the death penalty. That's a strong argument in international conversation.

Other countries want to have stronger relations with Europe. Others have simply changed their minds, which is the case of the Philippines. They had a moratorium, then the death penalty was reintroduced, then they abolished it. They were very active in the General Assembly in favor of the moratorium.

### **How important was the Church in this transition?**

Very important. The Catholic Church, especially under John Paul II and continuing with what it's doing now, has had a real role in accompanying this change over the last 20 years, and the Philippines is one of the cases where you see that most clearly. Peru is supposed to vote in favor of the resolution [in the General Assembly], and this is probably due to the Catholic Church. [Editor's Note: In the end, Peru was one of five nations registered as “not present” for the vote on the moratorium.]

We work side-by-side with Cardinal [Renato] Martino [President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace] on this. He gave me a short interview to be used on Nov. 30, when we had our “Cities Against the Death Penalty” event. He said something to us that I think has never been said at such a high level before. It was: “The death penalty is homicide.” It is the strongest official statement ever. Unfortunately the media didn't pick up on it, but the clear meaning is that you can't answer one crime with another.

Then there is also the impact of Europe, which has been dramatic over the last 20 years. Also, there is a larger movement of public opinion worldwide against capital punishment. Now we have more than 700 cities in the world in favor of abolition, for example.

In 1999, I took part in the first national conference in the United States against the death penalty, in San Francisco. The movement was completely divided, between those who were in favor of a moratorium and those supporting complete abolition. Working together with others, I tried to help unify these two currents.

In 2002, the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty was founded in a meeting at Sant'Egidio. It brought together Amnesty International, Mothers Against the Death Penalty, International Penal Reform, and other international groups, along with some American groups. From that point, I was on the steering committee.

**This would be the first truly international anti-death penalty coalition?**

Exactly. From 2002 to today, the 13 groups that made up the World Coalition at the beginning have now become 60.

**These groups already existed before 2002?**

Almost all of them existed before 2002. Some of them in African or Asian countries are new.

In 2007, we held the Third World Congress against the Death Penalty in Paris, in February. We still had the problem of this strong division between those in favor of a simple moratorium and those seeking outright abolition. By way of background, it's important to understand that ten years ago, we began to collect signatures on a petition against the death penalty, for the first time bringing together Christians, Jews, Muslims ... in other words, an international inter-religious moral front, also secular. This went forward more energetically in some years than others, but in the end we collected 5,200,000 signatures in 153 countries in the world. In Paris, it was decided that this petition of Sant'Egidio would become an international appeal. From then until October, an additional 160,000 signatures were collected from the world, alongside the 5 million we already had.

The important part of all this is that we worked very hard to construct a paragraph in the final document that made the idea of a moratorium the theme of the global movement. We thought it would be a grave error if this international grassroots congress didn't mention the moratorium, which would have suggested that this European initiative, this institutional initiative, wasn't important. Therefore, we mediated between Amnesty International, which didn't want to take the issue to the General Assembly because they were worried that it was premature, and others who wanted to move immediately.

**'Premature' meaning what?**

After 1999, Amnesty International had consistently advised against going to the General Assembly, out of fear of losing. The problem is that in the General Assembly, it's not enough just to add up the number of countries that are against the death penalty. Politics also enters into it.

We were in favor of going to the General Assembly, but in an intelligent way ... not out of desperation, but on the basis of serious advance work. Then there were the radicals and groups such as *Nessuno Tocchi Caino* (“Hands off Cain”) that wanted to go to the General Assembly no matter what, because whether they won or lost, they’d be on the front pages. So there were three different logics completely.

In Paris, together with an American group, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, I physically mediated between these two other positions. At the end, between phone calls to New York, London, and so on, in a restricted committee with Amnesty International, we wrote a key phrase: “Given that a successful resolution approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations would be of incredible importance towards the final abolition of the death penalty, we call upon member states to do all they can to work towards it.” This compromise introduced the idea of a moratorium as a global theme. At this point, we all started to work towards the same goal.

From that point, we were in weekly contact with all the NGOs to coordinate how to carry out the lobbying in the various countries ... who was stronger in one country, who was more effective in another, and so on. We wanted to avoid that it would be seen as a project of the European Union, reflecting a neo-colonial vision of human rights. For that reason, we ended up with Brazil and Mexico as the initial supporters, and then in the Third Commission, the resolution was presented by Gabon, which was the last country to sign on.

Within the Third Commission, with 192 countries just like the General Assembly, there was a ferocious debate. The first effort was to say that this is a matter of the internal affairs of nations, and not of human rights. It can’t be discussed because it’s an internal question. Once they lost on this, the opponents argued that it shouldn’t be voted on by the U.N. because it’s something that divides nations rather than unites them. Of course, that would mean never doing anything, because everything is divisive in some sense. The third point was that it represents the imposition of a Western vision of human rights on other countries.

There were three principal centers of opposition: Singapore, representing some Asian countries; Egypt, for the Arab and Muslim states; and finally Barbados, for the Caribbean countries. The Caribbean countries were ferocious ... they’re tiny, but they put up a fight line-by-line, word-for-word.

At one point, they proposed an amendment to add a paragraph saying that in the name of always defending life, it’s also necessary to be against abortion. It was presented by Egypt, in the name of the Arab states. The response came from the Philippines, saying that this is a very important theme, and if there’s a consensus we should present a new resolution on this subject, and we will be a co-sponsor. It has nothing to do, however, with this resolution.

The Vatican also responded ...

**By ‘the Vatican,’ you mean in this case Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the nuncio of the Holy See as a Permanent Observer to the UN?**

Yes. He said the Holy See supports the defense of life in every circumstance, but on this very important subject we don't want to see [the resolution] instrumentalized for other questions. We don't want to be in the position of deciding which lives are worth defending, thus responding both to those who support abortion and to the Arab countries that have the death penalty. It was a very interesting position. Of course, the Vatican doesn't vote at the UN. Nevertheless, they said the defense of life is an important subject, but exactly for that reason it has to be without exceptions. In substance, the point was that the Holy See doesn't support the way some say, 'We have to abolish the death penalty' but don't care about abortion, and meanwhile those who were now proposing something again abortion were doing so in effect to support the death penalty. The point was that we shouldn't get into deciding which lives are worth defending. It was a very sharp, well-constructed position, and I thought it was quite clear.

In the end, the vote [in the Third Commission] went well.

Right now, there's a growing division among Singapore, Egypt and the Caribbean countries, because the Caribbean states want to fight line-by-line in the General Assembly. Egypt doesn't think it's wise to lose more than once on the floor of the General Assembly in an overwhelming fashion.

### **In the end, what does this result mean?**

First of all, the death penalty has officially become a question of human rights. From the point of view of the international community, this is new. The text of the resolution calls upon the Secretary General every year to report on the implementation of the resolution. It becomes an instrument for monitoring what's happening in the individual states. It should also accelerate the momentum in some states for passing from a *de facto* moratorium to a moratorium established by law. It fixes an official standard of justice without death. Even if it's not obligatory, it creates a moral standard. It will become ever more embarrassing for those countries that still use the death penalty.

From an American point of view, of course, one could say, 'Who cares with the United Nations says?' But this puts the United States officially in the company of Iran, Iraq, China, and so on. The United Nations has now said, 'The international moral standard is something else.'

Interestingly, the United States and China were not really proactive in this debate. They let things go forward, and in the end it was almost a position of neutrality. The theory of the United States was that because some states in the country have the death penalty and others don't, officially the government is agnostic on the question.

In the past year, China has removed the authority to impose the death penalty from some lower courts, which technically should reduce the number of executions by 30 percent. Two months ago, the Supreme Court intervened to say that the number of offenses for which the death penalty can be imposed should be reduced. In China right now, there are some 60 crimes for which a criminal can be executed. (One of them, by the way, is not paying your taxes. I once joked in a conference that if this were applied in Italy, it would be a genocide!) The Swedish Foreign Minister criticized China some months ago, saying that China should suspend the death penalty during the Olympic Year. The Vice-Foreign Minister of China responded, very unusually, by

saying that naturally it's inappropriate for a foreign country to engage in lobbying concerning the internal affairs of another state, but it's not impossible that sooner or later China will also get rid of the death penalty.

**Of course, the U.N. passes resolutions all the time that have little practical effect. Isn't it fairly easy to see this as hollow symbolism?**

My response is that if this is truly meaningless, then why was there such fierce opposition for 15 years? There was strong, at times almost violent, debate in the hall. The best of the UN got involved, first as individual states and then as groups, going over the resolution line-by-line and word-for-word. It was extremely arduous work. It's hard to imagine so many senior people would have invested this much time and effort on something that's absolutely worthless.

**Could this have happened without Sant'Egidio?**

Maybe yes, maybe no. The initiative at the very beginning was Italian, and Italy was pressured by "Hands off Cain." Then there was the momentum after the death of Saddam Hussein. So it could have happened. But in my opinion the numbers in the General Assembly would not have been the same, because at least six countries changed over the last months as a result of a direct intervention of Sant'Egidio. I'm not sure the result would have been the same. At the beginning, this was a project of the Italian government and the European Parliament, then the European government, but then they stepped back to make it a cross-regional effort. Somehow we were part of a general picture, where the real success has been synergy. That's what we've been working on for so many years. I would never say it's a victory of Sant'Egidio, but it's certainly a victory with Sant'Egidio.

**In your work on this issue, does the fact that Sant'Egidio is Catholic help, hurt, or make no difference?**

We have many reasons to fight against the death penalty, and even if I have a religious reason, I don't need to use that argument to convince people. When we collected the five million signatures, we probably spoke over that period of time with 50 million people in meetings, assemblies in schools, universities and so on. [Being Catholic] may help with those who say, 'But the death penalty is in the Bible,' or who point out that many Christians support it.

In the end, the death penalty can be justified only by a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. Using Scripture in an intelligent fashion, it's very clear that the death penalty is a great violation. It begins with the idea of a disproportionate vendetta ... seventy times seven. Then comes the law of one-for-one retaliation ... an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. This, by the way, was great progress. It wasn't something terrible. Then with the Book of Job, the idea began to grow that life is a breath in the hand of God, and only God has a say over life. With Jesus, not only the death penalty but even smaller acts of violence were rejected, and of course in the end Jesus himself was condemned to death. Hence the trajectory is very clear. In a certain sense, the Bible reflects the story of humanity with regard to violence. For virtually all of its history, humanity regarded the death penalty as something normal. Recently, a different sensibility has begun to take hold. For this reason, the fundamentalist defense of the death penalty strikes me as incoherent, although of course I know that there are many fundamentalists.

John Paul II's clear public position was, "Never again the death penalty,' even if the *Catechism's* refusal of capital punishment is more practical than radical. In a conversation I had with Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard of Bordeaux, France, he said he thinks, like me, that a total refusal of the death penalty would also reinforce the church's position on abortion and the defense of life. For Sant'Egidio, life can't be divided. Life must be defended wherever it's vulnerable, without exceptions. For this reason, I believe that our friends at Amnesty International, and I have said this publicly, have made a serious mistake in using the word 'right' with regard to exceptional cases of abortion for women who have suffered violence. According to us, abortion can never be a right. It might become a terrible necessity, but that's something else. From our point of view, the position of Amnesty International on human rights hasn't been strengthened by that stance, but weakened.

**You would agree that in Europe, the death penalty is seen as a human rights issue, whereas in the States the opposition is more often practical?**

Yes. In the Second World War, Europe experienced more death than at any other time in history. After WWII, we started to imagine a world without war and without state-sponsored death. This is, in a way, a gift of Europe to the world. In America, on the other hand, the arguments are usually that the death penalty is too expensive, and that there are too many people who are innocent that are killed. It's not about whether the death penalty is right or wrong. Many Americans think it's just obviously right, but perhaps it's not very efficient, and, at the end of the day, if there are alternatives, maybe it's better not to risk a mistake. Yet I also sense that in America, there's a change in the feeling of the population — not against the death penalty, but against the necessity of using it. I think the Catholic church in America has played a role on this.