

Pentecostal Pastor Seeks Clemency For Alleged Wrongful Imprisonment

Thousands of Christians across the nation are supporting pastor Dino Gentile's appeal for clemency

Thousands of Christians nationwide have written letters expressing support for a Pentecostal pastor serving a 41-year sentence for a crime he said he was coerced into committing.

Pastor Dino M. Gentile of Chatsworth, Calif., is seeking clemency from President Bush for his role in a 1998 bank robbery in Pensacola, Fla.

The 49-year-old former pastor of The Ark, a Chatsworth congregation affiliated with the Apostolic World Christian Fellowship Inc., said he was forced to drive the getaway car at the threat of harm to his wife and two children in California.

"Dino was in terrible fear [that] he and his family [would be] executed," said his mother, Emila Gentile Medeiros.

Gentile said he became involved in the robbery when Jeffrey Durham, now serving time for the Monsanto Employees Credit Union robbery, asked if he could accompany Gentile on a cross-country evangelism and fundraising trip.

Durham, who first represented himself as a mild-mannered Christian man and an agent with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, was eager to participate in

church activities and interacted closely with the Gentile family. By the time Durham revealed his plan to rob the Pensacola bank, Gentile trusted him.

“Gentile embraced society’s throwaways, an aspect of his personality that spilled into his ministry,” said Jennifer Elise Chase in a master’s thesis she wrote about Gentile’s case, which she titled “The Preacher Who Trusted Too Much.” “Dino believes everyone has redeeming value.”

But as he sat outside in Durham’s getaway car with a bomb on the seat behind him and a threat of death if he did not cooperate, Gentile said he was forced to make a decision. “He turned from a model saint in my church for eight months to this absolutely possessed young man,” Gentile told Charisma.

So instead of running to the police the minute he got the opportunity, Gentile drove Durham back to California. “He was screaming at me the whole time we drove back to Los Angeles,” Gentile said. “I had to wonder what he was capable of.”

Durham was arrested for the robbery in 1998, and FBI agents later linked Gentile to the crime, charging him with aiding and abetting. Gentile claims his attorney failed to introduce evidence that would have supported his version of the events. Within 15 minutes, a Pensacola jury convicted Gentile. He received 30 years for his alleged use of an automatic weapon, and 11 years for the abetting charge.

Since then, friends, relatives, former parishioners and members of his 3.2 million-member denomination have written some 3,000 letters and faxes requesting clemency. Supporters repeatedly describe Gentile as a man of integrity and

devotion.

"This good and decent man has suffered enough," wrote Bishop Samuel L. Smith of the Apostolic World Christian Fellowship. "His community work has been exemplary. Helping the poor, the down and out, was a particular passion of this humble man."

Linda Oakland, senior pastor of The Well Foursquare Church in Northridge, Calif., agreed. "All of his life and his work reflect the testimonials, one after another, of people who came out of difficult circumstances, who now serve as vital people in our community," she wrote. "...We are anxious to have Pastor Gentile back serving our community in Southern California where he is so desperately needed."

Among those who received letters and petitions are California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Senators Mark Montigny and Bob Dole, the U.S. Department of Justice, former President Clinton and now President Bush.

In 2001, Justice Department pardon attorney Roger C. Adams sent a letter to Sen. Dole, saying Gentile's request for a reduced sentence was being processed. Four years later, the process is still not complete. Gentile is praying for a miracle.

For several years, Durham, who is serving a 120-year sentence in a Colorado prison, has been promising to exonerate Gentile. "Don't waive your right to an appeal, Brother," Durham wrote in a 1999 letter to Gentile. "That's what's going to get you out of prison—that and a statement from me. I have to wait until after my trial before I make any statements. I will do what I said, Brother. Just be patient and know that the truth

will set you free.”

Durham has not provided a statement to authorities yet.

Gentile said his appeal process has been exhausted, but a presidential pardon may still be available. White House officials won't discuss Gentile's case. “We do acknowledge when we receive a petition or application that is under review,” said Justice Department spokesman John Nowacki, “but we don't discuss anything during the interim process.”

Gentile has seen dozens of men saved since his incarceration, but he hopes his prison ministry will soon end and has asked supporters to keep writing and faxing the president on his behalf.

Michelle Lovato in Lompoc, Calif.