
Interview: Helen Prejean



Catholic activist discusses fight vs. capital punishment

Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., the internationally acclaimed author of Dead Man Walking, spoke with Nina Ogden and Marianna Wertz on Oct. 30. The interview was held in northern Virginia, where the Louisiana-based Catholic nun spoke at George Mason University that evening on the death penalty. Sister Helen had just returned from speaking tours in Northern Ireland, Italy, and Japan.

We publish excerpts of that interview here; additional excerpts were published in the Nov. 10 New Federalist newspaper. The interview began with a discussion of her speaking tours. In Northern Ireland, she was invited by Don Mullen, a Catholic leader, to talk about her life and missionary work with the social gospels in the context of the hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, known as the Little Flower, a saint whose life is dear to Sister Helen, whose middle name is Teresa, after the Little Flower. (St. Thérèse's first test of the efficacy of prayer, as recounted in her autobiography, Story of a Soul, was for a man sentenced to death.) In Italy, Sister Helen was invited by Tom Cahill, author of How the Irish Saved Civilization, to speak to the Community of St. Egidio, of which he is a member. In Japan, where the death penalty is still law, she was invited by Amnesty International and the Jesuits, to speak about human rights and the path of forgiveness and reconciliation that stems from Christ's teachings.

EIR: There is the notion of the seamless garment, that the right to life extends from conception to death. The issue of capital punishment has to be seen as a passionate commitment to the right to life, as does economic justice, as do all of these questions.

Sister Helen: In my letter to the Pope [see *Documentation*]*—I don't know if you read the article in The Tablet, where I talked about the Latin version of the Catechism and the change that came out in dialogue with the Pope around Joseph O'Dell [the Virginia death-row inmate who was executed in July of this year and whose execution became a cause célèbre in Italy]. The Pope, as you know, got very interested in Joseph O'Dell. Joseph O'Dell's wife, Lori, visited Italy in January [before he was executed], and she brought a letter to the Pope from me. I'd been wanting to write a letter to the*

Pope about the death penalty, to share these experiences. I was waiting, and this was the moment.

She brought the letter and he read the letter. She gave it to Monsignor Gabriel Caccia, who is under the Secretary of State at the Vatican. When Lori went to the Vatican, she went into his office and he said, I understand you have a letter for me. The Italian newspapers had picked up on that, because they know me through *Dead Man Walking*, and they knew that she was bringing the letter. So it got advanced heralding. Anyway, he asked her for the letter as soon as she walked in, and he gave it to the Pope to read.

The Pope, in *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*, still had the words, even though he was pushing the death penalty to the edge, still had the words, "the death penalty should be rare if not non-existent," and can only be used in "cases of absolute necessity." He kept that in there. Then, in the 1992 version of the Catechism, in Section 2266, that deals with the death penalty, it had the statement that, "in cases of extreme gravity," the death penalty can be used. I was able, in this letter, to quote the district attorney of New Orleans, who was actually using the Pope's words to confirm what he was doing. He said he's for the death penalty, and he said he can't get enough death penalties. They're rare, if not non-existent. He didn't give the reason, but the main reason he can't get enough of them is, that over 50% of the people of New Orleans are black, and if you get too many black people on the jury, you can't get a death penalty. He didn't go into that. He quotes this Catholic paper supporting it. Up to this point, Catholics have been able to stand in this tradition.

EIR: Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who supports the death penalty, is a Catholic.

Sister Helen: And Clarence Thomas. Both of them. And they both attend eucharist regularly. So I was able to show him, and I said, your words are being used in a culture of death. As long as those words are kept in the teaching, they will be quoted.

The letter was delivered on Jan. 22. On Jan. 29, I heard that Cardinal [Josef] Ratzinger made a statement that in the teaching on the death penalty, there'd been a substantive development. Of course, I don't know what that means. I also

don't know what it's connected to. Somebody sent me an Italian article, but I couldn't translate the Italian. So, I'm waiting. Then, in April, Cardinal Pio Laghi, in Toronto, speaking to the educators, prepared them for this change that was coming. He said, in Section 2266, the words are going to be removed about "in cases of extreme gravity." Then, I knew.

Then, the Pope, in announcing the Latin version on Sept. 8, said there has been a lot of interest of people in the Catechism. There's been a lot of dialogue.

The impact of this is already beginning to be felt. The Red Mass here [in Washington], for the Supreme Court justices, whoever presided at the Mass spoke out against the death penalty for the first time. All the Supreme Court justices and [Attorney General] Janet Reno were sitting there.

Then he also said, just because there's popular support for the death penalty, that does not make it good. That's a first. That's because of the church. It cut off the faucet. Scalia and those people can say they're for the death penalty, they can quote their interpretation of the Constitution, but they can't stand on their faith anymore. That's a very significant development.

EIR: That's very important, because Scalia had been at a meeting in Rome and said that what is right doesn't matter, all that matters is majority opinion. Even on things that I am against, he said, like abortion, if it's majority opinion, I have to go with majority opinion. A member of the audience jumped up, who was from Germany, and said that's the argu-

Why the use of the death penalty should be ended

Extracts from Sister Helen's letter to Pope John Paul II.

Dear Holy Father,

... I have already accompanied three men to their deaths in Louisiana's electric chair and I have "seen with my eyes and touched with my hands" the suffering face of Christ in these "least of these" as they went to their deaths. I have seen the death penalty close up and have no doubt that it is the practice of torture. What all of the men I have accompanied have said when at last they died was: "I am so tired." Conscious human beings anticipate death and die a thousand times before they die, no matter what the "humane" method of death may be, even lethal injection, which is supposed to just "put you to sleep." . . .

The death penalty is very much a poor person's issue (99% of the 3,200 souls on death row in the United States are poor), and I have found that, as a general rule, those involved with justice for poor people readily oppose the death penalty, whereas those separated from poor people and their struggles readily support it. They are more prone to see poor people as the "enemy" and to be willing to inflict harsh punishments to "control" them. . . .

Your words on the death penalty in *Evangelium Vitae* have come as a fresh breeze. Your strong words on behalf of life, even of violent offenders, encourage church leaders to be more courageous in voicing gospel values in opposition to the death penalty, and hopefully these words will make their way into classrooms and pulpits. . . .

As Amnesty International has amply documented,

whenever governments around the world punish criminals by killing them, they claim to act out of "absolute necessity." By way of contrast, one of the first acts of the constitutional court of South Africa was unconditionally to forbid state executions. The leaders of South Africa understand all too well that, when governments are given the right to execute their citizens, invariably the deepest prejudices of the society exert full sway in the punishment of those considered the "dangerous criminal element." . . .

How can any government, vulnerable to undue influence of the rich and powerful and subject to every kind of prejudice, have the purity and integrity to select certain of its citizens for punishment by death? Even in a so-called developed country such as the United States, for example, we are discovering how much the status of the victim plays a part in the decision to seek death as a punishment.

The vast majority of people on death row in the United States—85%—are chosen for death because they killed white people; whereas, when people of color are killed (fully 50% of all homicides), not only is the death penalty seldom sought, but often there is not even vigorous prosecution of such cases. A society and its government would have to care equally about the life of all of its members to be entrusted with the death penalty, and we know that on this earth no society can make that claim. . . .

"I just pray that God holds up my legs," each of the condemned said to me as they were about to walk to their deaths, and from the depths of my soul, from Christ burning within me, I found myself saying to them: "Look at me. Look at my face. I will be the face of Christ for you." In such an instance, the gospel of Jesus is very distilled: life, not death; mercy and compassion, not vengeance. Surely, Holy Father, it is not the will of Christ for us ever to sanction governments to torture and kill in such a fashion even those guilty of terrible crimes.

ment that was used to justify Hitler. We've really made a point of going after Scalia on this. In fact, you can say, it was his vote that sent Joseph O'Dell to his execution.

Sister Helen: Oh, absolutely.

EIR: And that's why Mother Teresa had us deliver this tape to Scalia.¹ Then, it was a couple of months later that the change in the Catechism was made.

On another subject, the Texas bishops last week issued a statement, I'll quote to you from it: "As religious leaders, we are deeply concerned that the State of Texas is usurping the sovereign dominion of God over human life by employing capital punishment for heinous crimes." I believe this is the most forthright statement which the bishops have made on the issue.

Sister Helen: Could be. I'd have to look at their other words.

EIR: It was in response to the record number of executions in the state.

Sister Helen: Let me tell you where I think the ways need to be plowed. It is significant now that in the official teaching of the Church, people can't quote it. That's an important step. Now, this is what changes hearts on the death penalty. Because a change in Catechism won't change anything. What's going to change hearts is the preaching of the Gospel and coming to people about the death penalty.

Do you know about the conference that's going to happen, the 14th to 16th of November, the gathering of all religious leaders of the United States in Washington, D.C., envisioning a world without violence? It's to take the death penalty and to bring it to people in the pews.

What the bishops have not done, they've made statements, but they haven't taken any initiative, the priests haven't preached about this. So, they gathered together all the diocesan leaders yesterday in one of these meetings [on Long Island]. Priests were there, diocesan people for Justice and Peace, sisters, all kinds of folks. I was saying that for the Church, as we approach this, there are two arms to the cross. The death-row inmate and abolition of the death penalty; and the real need for the Church to also reach out to victims of violent crime.

1. Sister Helen first met the Schiller Institute in July of this year, when the Institute was involved in opposing the pending execution of Joseph O'Dell. Mother Teresa, shortly before her death, had made a tape-recorded statement, appealing to Gov. George Allen of Virginia and Justice Scalia to spare the life of Joseph O'Dell, which she gave to Nina Ogden for delivery to Scalia and Allen. In the statement, Mother Teresa said, "Let us not take away his life. Let us bring hope into his life, and into all our lives. Jesus, who loves each one of us, tenderly, with mercy and compassion, works miracles of forgiveness. To you, dear Joseph, I say, trust in God's tender love for you, and accept whatever God gives, and give whatever God takes with a big smile." Following O'Dell's execution, the Schiller Institute organized a prayer vigil at Norfolk airport, as Sister Helen and Lori O'Dell boarded a plane for Italy, to accompany Joseph O'Dell's body to its final resting place in Palermo.

I gave them as a model what they do in the diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana. It's being copied by other dioceses. It's a simple way to begin. Once a year in Advent, the bishop in Lafayette says a Mass for all victims of violence. The community gathers around them, praying for healing. Then afterwards, there's a reception, and out of that support groups begin to be formed.

What if, in every diocese, that happened? And then, in every parish, once a year? The parish community could gather its people together, the victims of violence. Many, many people suffer violence. After this talk last night at Holy Cross Parish, on Long Island, people who come up to get their book signed, it's almost like confession; they tell me things about their life, and at least four people in that congregation had had somebody murdered. A lot of times it's domestic violence, ex-husbands.

So, what this conference is about, is to take the death penalty, take the statements, then move it, start moving it to the pews. Special attention needs to be given to priests first. They really need to be briefed, informed, so that they can be leaders in this whole thing. Because to preach from the pulpit in this death penalty issue, is a very scary thing. In the sense that people say, what about the murder victims? Then the collection goes down.

EIR: And the majority is for the death penalty.

Sister Helen: So, what this conference is coming out with, is that people will go out into the grass roots, and they will have as their goal to have 50 groups, and to use as the tools showing the movie first, *Dead Man Walking*, which can bring people into a visceral experience. Then, a reading of the book, and then guided discussion through it, with people coming out on the other end with one decision: "I am for the abolition of the death penalty"—at which time, they sign the petition for the moratorium of the death penalty worldwide; "I still need to think about this issue"; or, "I'm definitely for the death penalty." But, it brings people to decision; it brings them to commitment.

EIR: Did you see the book being used for that when you wrote it?

Sister Helen: I didn't think another book needed to be written! But a book is a cloister. It's a private place. You're not in debate. You don't have to defend your position. And you can go back and read page 48 three times if you want to, go at your own pace. It has a great capacity to change people, because they get information, and they identify with the people they're reading about. They're using their own imaginations. It's not like TV, which doesn't make you apply it. This involves you. People cry. People change. Hardly anybody has seen the movie or read the book and come out unscathed. So, that's what this conference is about. To unleash in the grass roots religious humanity.