



Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ

Respecting the Sanctity of Human Life

Sister Helen Prejean was born on April 21, 1939, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille (now known as The Congregation of St. Joseph) in 1957 and received a B.A. in English and Education from St. Mary's Dominican College, New Orleans in 1962. In 1973, she earned an M.A. in Religious Education from St. Paul's University in Ottawa, Canada. She has been the Religious Education Director at St. Frances Cabrini Parish in New Orleans, the Formation Director for her religious community, and has taught junior and senior high school students.

Sister Helen began her prison ministry in 1981 when she dedicated her life to the poor of New Orleans. While living in the St. Thomas housing project, she became pen pals with Patrick Sonnier, the convicted killer of two teenagers, sentenced to die in the electric chair of Louisiana's Angola State Prison.

Upon Sonnier's request, Sister Helen repeatedly visited him as his spiritual advisor. In doing so, her eyes were opened to the Louisiana execution process. Sister Helen turned her experiences into a book that not only made the 1994 American Library Associates Notable Book List, it was also nominated for a 1993 Pulitzer Prize. *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* was number one on the New York Times Best Seller List for 31 weeks. It also made the International Best Seller List and has been translated into ten different languages.



In January 1996, the book was developed into a major motion picture starring Susan Sarandon as Sister Helen and Sean Penn as a death row inmate. Produced by Polygram Pictures, the film was directed and written by Tim Robbins. The movie received four Oscar nominations including Tim Robbins for Best Director, Sean Penn for Best Actor, Susan Sarandon for Best Actress, and Bruce Springsteen's "Dead Man Walkin'" for Best Song. Susan Sarandon won the award for Best Actress.

Sister Helen and *Dead Man Walking* have been the subject of numerous media stories and reviews in the U.S., Canada, Spain, Holland, England, Scotland, France and Australia. She has been featured in the New York Times Magazine, Vogue, Good Housekeeping, and numerous other print media.

Her broadcast appearances include 60 Minutes, NBC's Today Show, ABC World News Tonight; the Tom Snyder Show on CNBC, Larry King Live (radio), the Phil Donahue Show, the BBC's Everyman, ABC's Prime Times Live, and PBS' Frontline, to name a few.

Fifteen years after beginning her crusade, the Roman Catholic sister has witnessed five executions in Louisiana and today educates the public about the death penalty by lecturing, organizing and writing. As the founder of "Survive," a victim's advocacy group in New

Orleans, she continues to counsel not only inmates on death row, but the families of murder victims, as well.

Her book *Dead Man Walking* was on the New York Times bestseller list for 31 weeks. It was also on the International bestseller list, translated into ten different languages.

Adapted from “Helen Prejean, CSJ”, Sr. Helen Prejean Official Website, Retrieved on September 3, 2011 from: <http://www.prejean.org/Background.html>

Reflection Questions

1. Sr. Helen Prejean spends time with both convicted killers and the families of victims who have been killed. Who do you think she should spend more time with? Why?
2. What is your opinion of capital punishment? Should it be abolished completely or used for certain circumstances? If the latter, under what circumstances would you choose to execute a criminal?
3. Read the online article written by Sr. Prejean, “Would Jesus pull the switch?”, published in the *Salt of the Earth* magazine:

<http://salt.claretianpubs.org/issues/deathp/prejean.html>

After reading the article, did her reflection influence your thoughts in responding to question 2 above or would your response remain the same?

Answer the extended reflection questions below.

Extended Reflection Questions: Would Jesus pull the switch?

1. In the article, “Would Jesus pull the switch?”, read the passage section, “Vengeance is whose?”. What is Sr. Helen Prejean’s image of Jesus and God? How does it compare to yours?
2. How does the loss of a child affect the parents’ relationship with each other and with friends?”
3. According to Sr. Prejean what are the three deepest wounds of our society? Describe what she means for each.
4. What is Sr. Prejean’s hope for the role of the Church on the issue of capital punishment?
5. Do you agree with the Church’s stance that governments, in principle, should have the right to kill criminals (but this should only be for cases that are absolutely necessary)? Explain. If your response is yes, give an example of a case that might be absolutely necessary.
5. Sr. Helen Prejean states, “The secrecy surrounding executions makes it possible for executions to continue. I am convinced that if executions were made public, the torture and violence would be unmasked and we would be shamed into abolishing executions.” Do you think executions should be made public? Frame your argument with regard to how the

prisoner and victim's family might feel. Do you think the public viewing an execution would call or an end to capitol punishment? Explain.