

Getting Found by God:

A Conversation with Sister Helen Prejean

On September 22, 1996, Sister Helen Prejean, the author of the best-selling book and inspiration for the film, *Dead Man Walking*, took the pulpit in the Cathedral of Richmond, Virginia before a packed congregation to give a spell-binding talk about her work with death row inmates and the Christian duty to abolish the death penalty. Sister Helen has been speaking to hundreds and thousands of people in churches and universities across the country for years. Nominated repeatedly for the Nobel Peace Prize, she has become the William Lloyd Garrison of our times, a new abolitionist.

I have been blessed to know this great nun from New Orleans for years. She can convince thousands of people that we must oppose the death penalty and all forms of injustice, but even more, through her ebullient spirit, she invites people to the fullness of life itself. Sister Helen is full of life. She is the best of New Orleans, the best of the church, the best of the peace and justice movement in the United States.

We invited her to Richmond that evening to help the people of Virginia see the injustice of the death penalty. She urged the crowd that night to lobby the state government to grant death row inmate Joseph O'Dell a new trial because she and his lawyers believed he was innocent. In the end, he was executed, like so many thousands before.

On March 14, 2000, I spoke with Sr. Helen about her great campaign.

Since 1984, you have visited death row in Louisiana's Angola prison almost monthly. Even with the success of your book "Dead Man Walking" and your constant travel, you still visit death row. How many people have you accompanied over the years?

I'm with my sixth person on death row now. Five have been executed: four from Louisiana and one, Joseph O'Dell, from Virginia. To me, the visiting and accompanying of people on death row is not an extra. It's like the hub of the wheel of what I do. That, and visiting the victim's family members.

I'm currently visiting Manuel Ortiz, a Salvadoran on death row in Louisiana. He's been on death row for five years. He's accused of hiring someone to kill his ex-wife. I'm not at all sure of his guilt. I just talked with his lawyers yesterday, the ones taking care of his appeal, to encourage them. So we'll see what happens with him. He's also someone whose religious faith means a lot to him.

How do the guards and chaplains on death row treat you after all these years?

After fifteen years, I've known a lot of the guards. Next time, I go to Angola, I'm bringing more copies of my book, because they keep asking me for more copies and asking me to sign it. Sometimes they get mail for me, "Sister Helen of Angola." It's a joke in my community; they call me "Helen of Angola." I know plenty of the guards and the warden. He called me the other day to help raise funds to build chapels in

the prisons of Louisiana, and I try to collaborate where I can and treat him with a lot of respect.

Very early on, when I first started going to death row, I sensed it would be important to relate to the guards with as much dignity as I did to the inmates, and that has proven to be true.

I remember you once said that the warden orders the condemned man to have a last supper with him and to pray together an hour before the execution.

It's not so much he orders. It's that he tries to be a good guy, to show that he is a Christian. And so two people I accompanied actually had that last supper with the warden. They held hands and prayed, sang hymns, and ate together. But when it came to Dobie Williams, who was executed last year, he asked me to ask the warden if he could not go to the meal. As he put it, "It's not real Christian fellowship because at the end of the meal, they're gonna get up and kill me."

I keep thinking about Dorothy Day said: "We have to build a society where it is easier for people to be good." That includes wardens, guards, politicians, governors--everybody. Everybody involved in the executions is trying to be a good guy, right up to the execution. "I'm only doing this because it's the law," they say. "I'm only doing this because it's my job." Can we build a society where it's easier for people to be good? Can we help people not have to do that?

Texas Governor George W. Bush has presided over 118 executions, including a recent execution of a grandmother. Can you tell me about your visit with her shortly before the execution?

Her name was Bettie Lou Beets. I visited with her two weeks before she died. She had been a battered woman. She had a terrible attorney. Not only was he inefficient, but he had a contract to make a movie about her. He neglected to bring out vital information to the jury, including her life of being beaten and battered.

What struck me the most about Bettie was that only when she got a good attorney from the appeals, when she got expert witnesses, did she realize that she was a battered woman. As she said, "I didn't know about learned helplessness." She told me she had been silent for fifteen years on death row. She had given no interviews. But then as it got close to her death, she said, "I am going to speak out. I am going to tell my story because it might help one woman somewhere who is battered and doesn't know it. Perhaps my death can help her to recognize her situation."

In recent years, you have helped to launch a moratorium campaign.

The moratorium campaign is a worldwide international movement calling for a moratorium on all executions. The United Nations High Commission on Human Rights has called for a moratorium on executions for the last three years. Each year, more and more countries support it. Last year, I was in Geneva and watched as countries spoke out for the moratorium.

In the United States, there are two groups working actively on the moratorium campaign: "Moratorium Now," run by the Quixote Center, tries to get endorsements

by city councils, religious groups and others. "Moratorium 2000"--which I work with directly--has a petition asking individuals to sign a statement calling for a moratorium on the death penalty in the United States. Those petitions will be delivered to the United Nations, Congress and state legislatures, so they can see the mounting number of names.

The Coliseum in Rome has become the world symbol for ending the death penalty. I was just in Rome two weeks ago and did a press conference in the Vatican. The Coliseum so far has been lit up ten times since Human Rights Day, December 10th, 1999. Whenever a country abolishes the death penalty or calls for a moratorium, or when there is a stay of execution or when another million signatures are added, it's all lit up. Europe already has two million signatures for the moratorium.

Why is the abolitionist movement growing so quickly in Europe?

Europe has always been light years ahead of us. The countries in Europe are older and have been at this much longer. England had the death penalty six ways to Sunday before they finally abolished it. In Charles Dickens' time, they were hanging people for stealing bread or being pick-pockets. Then they noticed it was not deterring people that well. The people attending the hangings of the pick-pockets were picking the pockets of each other.

Europe is older, been around longer. We're a young, adolescent country. They've been through war. They know what happens when you give governments too much power. They've suffered. And so they're keener about human rights. The people of Italy are just outstanding. I spoke in Parma to 2500 young people, and their consciousness about human rights is just very highly developed. It's the ambiance they live in. They don't just take it for granted.

Part of your journey has also been walking with the family members of murder victims. How do family members learn to forgive and find healing?

The rhetoric of the death penalty and the way politicians try to legitimize it says we must have the death penalty to bring justice for the victim. They've lost a loved one to murder and the only way we can have justice is to demand the death of the one who killed their loved one.

But first, you have to remember how few victims' families are given this so-called "justice." There are 17,000 homicides every year in this country and 1.5 percent to two percent of people are sentenced to death. It's a very small percentage.

Second, the nature of the death penalty itself. We cannot presume that victims' families are all of one mind about the death penalty. I know a family in Baton Rouge that is split right down the middle. Their sister was killed. The brothers are for the death penalty and write letters to the editor. The sisters are against it. It has divided the family. The poor mother who lost her daughter--and it was terrible murder--now has her children divided and not speaking to one another over the death penalty. We can no longer presume that families are monolithic and are all of one mind.

The healing that I have found comes from love, community and faith. It comes from the chance to have someone accompany them who will listen as they vent their loss,

their grief, and their outrage; who can give real help when they lose their job; or health care, or counseling. Those are the real things that make a difference to people.

My friends and I talk a lot about Dr. King and his critique of what he called "the triple evils of war, racism, and poverty." How do you see the death penalty as part of the larger picture, this whole culture of violence, these triple evils?

I didn't know that Dr. King had said that. I say in my talks that the death penalty epitomizes the deepest wounds in our society, beginning with militarism. We've got a social problem? Send in the marines. We target the enemy, dehumanize the enemy, then, terminate the enemy. It's that same warmaking and militarism that's in the death penalty.

Poverty? The death penalty is riddled with poverty. Only poor people are on death row, and there are 3,600 of them chosen for death.

And racism permeates the death penalty in two ways. Eight out of every ten people on death row are there because they killed white people. You look at the history of racism in this country: it has always been considered the most terrible offense to commit a crime against a white person, or white people's property. In reverse we see that when people of color are killed, there is often a shrug of the shoulders. Investigators aren't even sent out. Who cares? There is this great nonchalance about the death of people of color.

Everybody knows about Columbine. Those were all white kids shooting at each other. Drive-by shootings in the inner city have gone on for ten or fifteen years. Why isn't there the same outrage over that? Is it that we expect violence from "some" people of our society?

Fifty percent of all homicides are against people of color in this country. And yet, overwhelmingly, the race of the victim is the first place we see racism in the death penalty.

Second, we see a disproportionate number of people of color who end up on death row and in prisons in general. People of color make up twelve percent of the U.S. population, yet forty-eight percent of the people on death row.

What is your understanding of nonviolence?

I don't see nonviolence as a passive thing of what you don't do. Nonviolence means you don't kill, you don't practice violence. But I see it as a very proactive way of life in which you seek justice because that's the only way you can really have peace. Violence is not just shooting people with guns. Violence occurs when people need open-heart surgery and can't get it. Violence is when they can't get health care. Violence is when you're forced to live in a neighborhood where there's shootings and drugs and you can't move your kids out of there. Violence is structural.

So justice means people having everything they need to live a decent and full human life, and that is the meaning of nonviolence for me.

What can ordinary people of faith and conscience do to help abolish the death penalty?

They can put their name down on the Moratorium petition. They can write a person on death row. They can pray for and envision the day when the death penalty and all violence will end. They can educate themselves, and read *Dead Man Walking*. They can show the film, and the film, *Hurricane*. They can study it and see how it might look like justice, but it isn't. If they live near prisons and death row, they can go and visit someone. They could accompany one person on death row. They can talk to their pastors and ministers about organizing educational forums and have evenings to sign the petitions.

As you continue to work for the abolition of the death penalty and accompany inmates and families, where do you find God?

You get found by God more than you find God. God is not this project, "Let me find God. Go to Door A. Oh, God's not there. Go to Door B. Oh, God's not there."

You get taken over by God. You know you are in the presence of God. Dobie Williams, an African-American man with an IQ of fifty-nine, I believe was innocent. His last words were to forgive his persecutors: "I just want everyone to know I don't have no hard feelings against anyone." You watch that grace in a human being. You watch his courage to walk to his death. I knew him for seven years. I see this in human, that strength and peace in him to meet his death in this courageous and loving way--that's God!

Also the energy and the commitment within myself, this passion that won't stop in me, that's God. People say, "You've been at this for fifteen years, doesn't this drain you? Aren't you getting tired of this?" The energy just keeps unleashing itself inside of you, and you know this commitment in you is strong and it's not going to die. That's divine love, the force of divine love that won't quit, that keeps us going.

To me, God is a life force, a love force. It's strong and unrelenting and full of compassion. All of these are ways that I sense the presence of God.

Where do you see signs of hope?

We are just beginning to see a thaw in a huge glacier of ice that we've been locked into with the death penalty since 1976. At least six states have initiatives for a moratorium, most recently in Illinois. Polls show that even when the question is asked in the abstract about supporting the death people, support among Americans for the death penalty is dropping. It's down to sixty-one percent from seventy-five percent. In 1999 it dropped five percent.

I think people are more aware of the eighty-seven innocent people that have now come off of death row, that the supposedly best criminal justice system in the world has a lot of flaws in it.

Look at the conservative Republican Governor Ryan of Illinois. It's not that he doesn't believe in the principle of the death penalty. He just sees how it's applied. And he wants to be fair. In Nebraska, a Republican introduced legislation and the

legislature has approved a moratorium on executions. He found out that there were ten people on death row and 170 others who had committed murders just as bad, and were in prison. He said, "It's not like I'm not for the death penalty; but not like this." People want to be fair.

There's much more consciousness about the death penalty now, that we have a very frail and flawed system. And I think it's giving being pause and raising consciousness about the death penalty, and how we don't need it. More people are aware now that if people are not executed, that they are not getting out of prison in a few short years, that in many cases, it really is life without parole, or fifty years, like in Kansas.

I've found that for most people, the desire to be safe is different from the desire for vengeance. One of things that fuels the death penalty is that people have been told to think that if we do not execute people we will not be safe, but now people are learning that that is just not true.

I think it's very important to bring the spiritual dynamics of faith, from all religious persuasions, to issues of justice and human rights, to wherever human beings are being hurt and life is threatened. I believe the death penalty is one of the essential moral issues of our time.