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Sister Helen Prejean is pictured in Rome in 2016 (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Sr. Helen Prejean, a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph in New Orleans, is a human-rights leader known around the world for her advocacy to end the death penalty. Her 1993 book, Dead Man Walking*, based on her experiences serving as a spiritual advisor to death-row inmates, was made into a movie two years later starring Susan Sarandon. Her memoir,* River of Fire*, will be released in the spring of 2019.* Commonweal *contributing writer John Gehring interviewed Sr. Prejean by phone.*

John Gehring: Pope Francis made big news last week by revising the Catechism to declare the death penalty inadmissible in all cases. Why is this so significant?

Helen Prejean: Pope John Paul II said that the times when the death penalty could be justified were so rare they would practically be nonexistent. But this did reserve the use of the death penalty in cases of absolute necessities. Pope Francis has now established a foundational principle that no matter the severity of the crime, it's never legitimate. This is huge. In every death-penalty trial, the district attorney argues that because of the gravity of this particular crime the death penalty is required. So when the pope says it's never admissible, it pulls the whole rug out from that kind of argument. During my dialogues and correspondence with John Paul II, I always argued we needed a principled stance opposing the death penalty without any exceptions. In St. Louis on his visit to the United States in 1999, John Paul spoke about the dignity of life no matter the crime, but he didn't go as far as to establish the principle that under no circumstance is it acceptable. What Pope Francis did is just huge.

JG: A number of conservative Catholic commentators are upset about the pope's decision, arguing that church teaching can't change. What do you make of this opposition?

HP: Change happens when society grows and evolves, and we have alternative ways of keeping people safe. We've also learned from science. The fact that young juveniles' brains are not yet as fully developed as adults influenced the Supreme Court's decision to end capital punishment for juveniles. Teaching can change. The church endorsed slavery for a long time and quoted Scripture to do so. Jesus also had to deal with religious legalism. People were so attached to the letter of the law they missed the person and human dignity behind it.

Pope Francis also has direct experience with prisoners. In 2015, I got a call about Richard Glossip [1], an innocent man on Oklahoma's death row. We started a full-fledged campaign and I wrote a letter to Pope Francis. The pope got involved in the case by calling on the governor to commute his death sentence, which he did. I think Pope Francis helped save

his life. When I visited with Pope Francis in 2016, I delivered a letter from Richard thanking the pope for helping to save his life.

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JG: Do you really think the politics will change? Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts, a Catholic, said he respected the pope's views but is moving ahead [2] with the execution of Carey Dean Moore later this month.

HP: I think the way it may change is with the religious liberty focus. This is a religious liberty issue now. So when we get into jury selection a Catholic might say it's against my religion to support the death penalty. Prosecutors may try and get Catholics off juries. Issues will be raised about religious liberty and conscience. Or think about an assistant district attorney who goes to work for a district attorney, but says it's a matter of my faith that I can't support the death penalty. You begin to see all these repercussions throughout the criminal justice system. We have been waiting for this for a long time. It was Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in terris* who said that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would be the beacon of life for all of us to follow. The church was behind on human rights. Now faith is aligned with human rights on the death penalty, and that is a powerful thing.

JG: Polls show declining support for the death penalty over the past few decades, but more than half of Catholics still support it. How can we do a better job of convincing those Catholics that capital punishment is wrong?

HP: The Catholic Church historically has been tied into empire and government, so that meant a deference toward the right of the state rather than human rights and inalienable human rights. Since the days of Emperor Constantine, the church always had the rationale for the defense of society. Remember, the Goths and Visigoths were breaking down the gates. There was violence everywhere, and no prisons or criminal justice system. The Catechism always talked about the dignity of innocent human life, but when I'm walking with a man to an execution and he says, "Sister, please pray for me," where is the dignity in the killing of that man?

I wrote to Pope John Paul II in 1997 and made that point as they were doing the final editing on the Catechism. He really got it. For the first time, John Paul II made the death penalty a pro-life issue. He moved the envelope morally not just toward the dignity of innocent life but of all human life. Pope Francis is the first to say the death penalty is contrary to the Gospel. But it's going to take more than a statement from a pope. Social justice has to be an integral part of our spiritual life. When you watch the government execute a human being, there is nothing pro-life about it. We need a whole educational strategy in parishes. Suburban parishes are often disconnected from the reality of what it means to be poor and to face injustice. I'm a religious educator, and with social justice you have to take people through that journey.

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JG: What have death-row inmates taught you over the years?

HP: Human beings are more than one terrible act. I also see just how cushioned and protected I have been in my life, and I can't say that is just virtue on my part. People on death row make me feel so alive. I know that sounds like a contradiction, but when you want to make every second of your life count it reminds you what is real. You learn the meaning of grace.

JG: You've accompanied people who in many instances have committed heinous crimes. How do you connect with them?

HP: You have to be open to them as a human being. When you meet a person on death row, they are shackled and behind bars. Your eyes meet and you see their face and you begin to talk about ordinary things people talk about. The fact that you are present is meaningful. This is a meeting between two human beings.

The last two prisoners I accompanied to their death were innocent. I wrote about it in my book, *The Death of Innocents* [3].

JG: You're best known for anti-death-penalty advocacy, but you have also been using Twitter [4] lately as a type of social-media ministry, inviting people who are despairing about the state of things to share their stories. You now have more than 70,000 followers. What prompted you to do this?

HP: I actually never thought about putting the name "ministry" to it, but you help me see that it is a type of ministry. Social media can build community and spiritual sustenance. I work as part of a team, and someone who works with me said, "People are really struggling these days, and you could play a helpful role." That's really how it all started. The response was tremendous. I read what people write and I respond. It's personal, my voice talking to them. There is so much coming at us—what's happening in the legal system, what's happening to immigrant families. It feels like things are out of control. Sometimes we have to allow ourselves a place for lamentations, and acknowledge the grief and the pain. Jeremiah knew that. We have to acknowledge we are in a place of terrible suffering.

At the same time, you're seeing this uprising in activism, and that helps us keep our eyes focused. Jesus talked about the wheat and the weeds always coming up together. So many people have a sense of despair about politics and where we are with this administration. But people realize that they have to vote, get involved. When there is a constant barrage of bad news, and all these tweets coming out of the White House, it's easy to be distracted and get thrown off. You have to remember what really matters: immigrant children separated from their parents, abuses of human rights. Keep focused and take action. That's actually part of a spiritual discipline.

What I have found is that even when you talk to people who support the death penalty, they haven't really thought that much about the issue. It's a knee-jerk response. When people hear stories it changes them and it becomes harder to demonize and dehumanize.

JG: Who do you look to for inspiration?

HP: The big names, of course. Martin Luther King, Mandela. But also regular folks like the women who started the feminist movement. I began to awaken to social justice when I lived in the St. Thomas housing project in New Orleans. I saw ordinary people like me working for change, met the Bill Quigleys of the world [a Loyola University law professor and human rights lawyer] and black leaders like Barbara Majors who were teaching white people about institutional racism. In the 1980s, I heard a talk by Doug Magee [5], who spoke with such passion against the death penalty. He took a photograph of everyone on Florida's death row. I came away from that talk just amazed that someone could be so committed to a cause that he handcuffed himself to the gate at the governor's mansion to protest an execution. When you see that kind of moral integrity it makes you ask, "What am I doing?"

JG: Are you more or less hopeful now than when you started your social-justice work?

HP: I'm more hopeful about ending the death penalty, and I see the impact that can happen when you engage with people, give talks, write books, or work with people in the art community. What I have found is that even when you talk to people who support the death penalty, they haven't really thought that much about the issue. It's a knee-jerk response. When people hear stories it changes them and it becomes harder to demonize and dehumanize.

The fact is, it's just a few prosecutors in certain counties who account for a disproportionate number of death penalty convictions. In Oklahoma, it's one prosecutor who's responsible for fifty-four death-penalty cases. You have a cultural phenomenon, especially in the south, where politicians are rewarded for being "tough on crime." Ten states that were part of the Confederacy and practiced slavery are responsible for most executions.

JG: On Twitter you don't shy away from challenging politicians like Governor Ricketts. How do you see Twitter as an advocacy tool?

HP: Twitter is a way of having an ongoing conversation with a lot of people. I have strict moral guidelines. Never use *ad hominem* attacks, never name-call or demean people. Just stay with the issue. What helps is I'm really steeped in the issue of human rights. I know from traveling around the country that people have very superficial views on things. Politicians press the fear button. But it's not always who they are as people. I try and approach people by finding out what sack of rocks they're carrying. Even the district attorneys I deal with who are pro-death penalty are under tremendous pressure.

JG: President Trump views himself as a strong "law-and-order" leader. How do you size him up, and how would you approach a meeting with him?

HP: I don't know that a meeting with Trump would be possible. He doesn't seem to want conversation with people who disagree with him. He is not simply a "law-and-order" person. He doesn't seem to think about policy. He is like a law unto himself, and he assaults people who disagree with him.

JG: Why do you think *Dead Man Walking* struck such a chord?

HP: I'm in Montana now. I had forgotten this, but a man from the Cheyenne tribes told me *Dead Man Walking* was the first book he ever read cover to cover. I'm proud I wrote a readable book. A girl in the eighth grade told me she read it three times. It takes you on a journey, and takes you to both sides of the story, including the victim's family.

JG: Is there a next phase you see in your journey?

HP: When your boat is in a current, you keep moving. I'm in a deep current with all these life and death issues. I'm going to keep going and following that current.

John Gehring is Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, an advocacy group in Washington, and a former associate director for media relations at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He is author of *The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope's Challenge to the American Catholic Church* [10] (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) and a contributing editor to *Commonweal*.