

With a Human Being Who's About to be Killed

By Sister Helen Prejean

I want to talk to you about the international movement to abolish the death penalty and the recent dramatic change within the Catholic church in that regard. It took me a long time to understand the connection between the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and justice. More than just being kind to individuals, it means to undo the system that kills and hurts people. Justice is a much harder thing to undertake than charity.

The discussion had come up in my community that we were not directly involved with poor people and justice. At first I really resisted that, but eventually I began to make my way into the neighborhoods where the poor people are. I began to realize how scared we are of poor people. Our society, our culture, builds up all these fearful images. When I did research for *Dead Man Walking*, I found that no matter how many peaceful things go on between people in Philadelphia today, the evening news will ferret out whatever violent acts happen, and show people those before they go to bed. It gives people an enhanced sense of danger, fearfulness of each other, "Don't go into that neighborhood, don't mix with those people." The more people get their knowledge of each other through television, the more trouble we're in.

There is something about being in the presence of people, real people, who are suffering from injustice or racism that ignites our souls with a passion; we can't walk away from it. That's what happened to me the minute I went into the first homeless shelter. Some people ask me, "Where do you get your energy?" It's not like you *will* energy! Energy comes to us because we get involved in something bigger than ourselves; our hearts have been moved by people's suffering, and we can't remain neutral. We say, "I don't know what I'm going to do, but I've got to do something. I've got to get involved in some way."

So I am in this climate in the St. Thomas Housing Projects. It was so simple and so casual when you think of it. "Hey Sister Helen, you want to be a pen pal to somebody on death row?" I just said, "Sure, yeah. Give me their name." I thought that all I was going to do was write a few letters, yeah. But then the person wrote back! I wasn't expecting all of this. The next thing I know I am accompanying this human being, Patrick Sonnier, walking with him, my hand on his shoulder. Unbelievable to me that this was happening.

In 1982, we hadn't executed anybody since the '60s. I never dreamed they were going to kill him in the end. I was telling him, "Patrick, when they do this thing, look at me. Look at my face." He had tried to protect me. We had known each other for two and a half years. "Look, Sister," he said, "you've been great and you've been with me. Just pray God holds up my legs, but you can't be there at the end. It could psychologically scar you." The love of him to me, trying to protect me, and then me knowing there was no way on God's earth that man was going to be killed and not have a loving face to look at. It's not like it was virtue, it's not like it was courage, it was just simply what you or anyone would do when you're with a human being who's about to be killed.

That was a transforming point in my life. You cannot be there behind a Plexiglas screen and see the scripted death of a human being, see him being led into the room, strapped into a chair, a mask put over his face, and being killed in front of your eyes--you cannot be there and be in the presence of that kind of blinding light, and walk out and say, "I'm not going to do this any more." Something ignited in my own soul, and I guess the basic thing was that I realized that I was a witness. I had seen the death penalty close up. I got conscripted.

I remember saying to myself, when I came out of that execution chamber, "If the American people could see this, they wouldn't choose this. They don't know what's going on." This was a practice of torture, this was wrong, it's against our whole moral tradition.

An important part of spirituality is that it helps us dive deep to that point of unity where we are no longer us and them, with the victims on one side and the people receiving the death penalty on the other.

The death penalty is not about redressing wrongs, restoring life. For politicians, it's a symbol of how tough they're going to be on crime, that they're doing something substantive. When I came out of that execution chamber, I began to learn about the death penalty. Are we talking about an anti-crime measure when there are about 17,000 capital cases in this country and 1.5% of them are going to be chosen for death, and even fewer than that are going to be executed?

Look at New York. The death penalty was a key part of George Pataki's campaign. Four years later: 488 homicide cases, possible capital cases; out of those, 38 are chosen for the death penalty. Out of those, five people have death sentences, and that's \$68 million later. Then, in his State of the Union address last year, George Pataki claimed that the murder rate was going down in New York because you've got the death penalty. Of course. The murder rate has gone down in Boston, it's gone down in your area, it's going down in states that don't have the death penalty. The violence rate has been going down.

The only way to change things is to change consciousness by having people dialogue. I've been very heartened to see the film's tremendous impact. I spoke at the University of North Carolina. They showed the film twice earlier in the week, and all the freshmen have been assigned the book for summer reading. When I get onto the campus, the soil is tilled! Seventeen hundred freshmen and the faculty have read the book. There's a buzz on the campus about the death penalty. It's like you go in, you take them through it, you point to the alternative and you say, "We don't have to do this anymore." At the end of the talk they stand up and applaud!

Did you hear that when Clinton went to Oslo there was a public demonstration on the streets, led mostly by young people, calling the United States to account for the death penalty, for trying to police the world?

The Council of Europe has as one of its requirements for joining that a country can't have the death penalty. Boris Yeltsin, this past year, commuted all the sentences of people on

death row in Russia. In 1900, only four countries in the world had abolition. Now they're estimating that 100 to 105 have, and there is a fierce struggle going on right now in the UN because they're going to introduce the resolution for a worldwide moratorium on the death penalty, and the United States is going ballistic behind the scenes, twisting arms. They don't want that to get to the floor. They're trying to kill it by amendments. In Geneva at the UN Commission on Human Rights, the majority of countries, including Russia and Eastern Europe, were saying, "Moratorium, moratorium." The United States voted with China, Iran, and Iraq.

Gandhi said that oppressors stop oppressing usually not for high, lofty, moral reasons but because it gets too costly. We can see it with the United States and the UN.

Moral disequilibrium is the presage to change. The United States, like any country, wants to have pride, and we stand before the world as a symbol of democracy and some of the best values on this earth. For Clinton to be brokering peace in the Middle East and have students shouting, as he gets out of the car, "What about the death penalty, Mr. Clinton?" -to be accosted by your peers and your allies, that's costly. I'm not saying it's going to change overnight, but when the United States stands up before the world to call for human rights, they know they've got a vulnerable flank. That is part of the movement toward peace.

One of the reasons we have 82 innocent people who've come off of death row is not because of the courts' justice. It's because individual citizens got interested in their cases, and brought them to light. Anthony Porter was about to be executed by Illinois. He got a stay of execution because two journalism students from Northwestern were assigned by their professor to look into the case. They went into town and started talking to people. In two weeks they'd unraveled the whole bloomin' thing! The people were saying, "Oh, we know who the real murderer is." The key eyewitness recants and blump, blump, blump, the whole thing comes apart, and they've got to let Anthony Porter go as the twelfth person that Illinois freed.

A member of the Italian Parliament by the name of Luciano Nari sees a little clip in the paper. "Hey, here's this man Joseph O'Dell in Virginia. He's asking for a DNA test and they won't let him have it." He calls Washington, and hooks up with a certain Laurie Errs. The Italian Parliament sends a delegation to visit Joseph O'Dell. They ask to see the governor of Virginia. He doesn't want to see this bunch of Italians. They go back and start spreading the word about Joseph O'Dell. If you go to Italy today and say, "Joseph O'Dell," they know him, like Princess Di! They started doing public demonstrations in St. Peter's Square, in front of the Pope's window.

I'm minding my own business. I never heard of Joseph O'Dell, and I get a phone call from Laurie Errs asking me to speak at a press conference about Joseph's case. So I go to Richmond and now I'm involved with Joseph O'Dell. The next thing you know the Mayor of Palermo, who will forever live in a bullet-proof car with guards around him because he took on the Mafia, hears about Joseph O'Dell. He comes over and they let him into the

prison. He tells Joseph, "If they kill you, we will make you an honorary citizen of Palermo and we will bury you there."

Now sacks of mail are beginning to come to Joseph O'Dell from the Italian people. The governor gets 10,000 faxes and phone calls. It took four people just to field the calls from the Italians. He blew them all off, including the Pope and Mother Teresa. "Hey, hey, what do I care about the Italians? We're doing justice here in Virginia." In the end they killed Joseph O'Dell. There's a slab on his grave in Palermo that says, "Joseph O'Dell, killed by the merciless and unjust justice system in Virginia."

I wrote a letter to the Pope telling him about an experience that Joseph had had in August when he came close to death. He had watched three people go to the shower right outside that cell, put on the white jumpsuit and go into the execution chamber. One of them was his good friend. He was next, and at the last minute they said, "You've got a stay of execution, go back to your cell." He was crying, saying, "They almost killed me. They killed my friend." I wrote, "Your Holiness, when we talk about the dignity of the human person, how are we going to take the torture out of the death penalty? If you're torturing somebody, how can you say we're upholding their dignity?"

I told him that because his encyclical said that the death penalty should be rare or non-existent, but in cases of absolute necessity the state could do it, the Catholic District Attorney in New Orleans, Harry Connick Sr., seized on this, saying "We can't get enough death penalties in Louisiana; it's always an absolute necessity." I said, "Your words are being quoted for death and we've got to take those words out. All human beings have the right to life, guilty people, too. Most of the pro-life people I meet are pro innocent life, but they're sure not pro guilty life. Is there a difference? Did Jesus come only to the innocent, or is there a way that we can stand in the dignity of all human life, even those among us who have done terrible crimes?"

The letter was delivered to him on January 22nd. One week later, the Vatican announced, "There's going to be a change in the Catechism." They cut out the part that said, "For grievous or heinous crimes the state can execute," which is what every legislator and every George Pataki and everybody who's for the death penalty says. And so we have a coming together of religion (in its good and truest and deepest sense) and human rights. This is what's going to bring us into the next millennium. It sets our agenda for the next millennium and is the source of life for the next millennium, and everybody sitting in this room today is part of that. There's part of it in every effort we make for life and the dignity of life, every effort we make for restorative justice instead of for punitive justice, every effort we make to connect people together as neighbors. The only way we can kill each other is when we're disconnected, and we're allowed to say, "Oh, they're not human the way we're human, and it's okay to kill them."

I think the death penalty simply epitomizes the three deepest wounds we have in our society. One is the racism that riddles it. Mostly it's when white people get killed that the death penalty is even sought. Racism is in this thing inside and out. Our penchant for choosing the poor to pay the ultimate price and to suffer the harshest punishments, to

make them the scapegoats--that's another wound. The third is our penchant for trying to solve our social problems with military solutions. The death penalty is one more military solution: target an enemy, dehumanize the enemy, and kill the enemy. The book of Deuteronomy says, "Look, I set before you death and life. Choose life."

Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the US*, has accompanied five men to execution, works with murder victims' families, and founded a group in New Orleans called Survive. This is an abridged version of her keynote address to the AFSC Annual Public Gathering, November 6, 1999, in Philadelphia.

<http://www.afsc.org/pwork/0400/042k06.htm>