

# She keeps the faith for death penalty opponents

The Boston Globe

By Ethan Gilsdorf, Globe Correspondent | January 12, 2005

Sister Helen Prejean swore. On a Sunday afternoon no less.

The celebrated death penalty opponent was in the middle of a tirade against Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, whose pro-capital punishment arguments she finds repugnant, and who also happens to be a duck-hunting buddy of her brother Louie.

"He's horrible," Prejean said of Scalia via telephone from her hotel room in New York City. "Religion is so badly used and manipulated in this country. People selectively quote the Bible to justify their beliefs."

It was then that she let the cuss fly: "I mean, Jesum!"

Jesum?

If that's as close as the author of "Dead Man Walking" gets to truly swearing, she can be forgiven. After all, she is a nun.

Still, her outspoken words and actions tend to contradict the cloistered and demure image of the sisterhood.

"People say, 'You're a nun, why aren't you teaching children, working with old people?' " said Prejean (pronounced "pray-John"). "They're comfortable with that kind of work. But the minute you work for social change, people call you 'political.' Yet if you just adopt the status quo, that is also a highly political position to take."

Prejean says she isn't trying to refurbish the images of nuns. "I just do what I do."

What she does is this: crisscross the country, delivering on average 140 passionate lectures a year that take on not only Justice Scalia but what Prejean sees as fundamental injustices in the US legal system now painstakingly detailed in her new book, "The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions."

Prejean's worldwide reading tour brings her to Borders in Framingham tonight at 7:30 and to Cambridge's Brattle Theatre tomorrow night at 6.

"A book releases energy," Prejean said in her Southern-tinged accent that bespeaks of a lifetime spent in Louisiana. "So I'm riding that wave right now."

The 65-year-old Roman Catholic said she recently spoke at Texas' Sam Houston State University, whose campus is about 3 miles from the death chamber that accounts for one-third of all US executions. "This is in their backyard," Prejean said by way of suggesting she was not preaching to the converted. "Yet as I talked to [the students], I could see in their faces they were moved. They stood up at the end and applauded, but I knew they weren't standing up for me but because they'd been awakened to something."

Prejean's own awakening was slower to come. She joined the New Orleans-based Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille in 1957 and for 25 years lived a fairly sequestered religious life. In 1981 she began counseling death row inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary, which led her to write the 1993 Pulitzer Prize-nominated "Dead Man Walking," a humanizing portrait of a death row killer.

Two years later, when actor-director Tim Robbins adapted the book into a film starring Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon, Prejean emerged as an "activist nun." Using her newfound celebrity, she hit the lecture circuit, and went on to found the Moratorium Campaign (a group working to end capital punishment) and Survive (which counsels murder victims' families). The recipient of numerous honorary degrees, Prejean has even been the subject of Nobel Peace Prize buzz.

"She, more than anyone in America, has placed the issue of the morality of the death penalty on the public agenda," said David R. Dow, founder of the Texas Innocence Network and author of the forthcoming "Executed on a Technicality: Lethal Injustice on America's Death Row." "She is warm, committed, smart, and funny -- which is a pretty good combination of values for taking on an unpopular cause."

A former death penalty supporter, Dow now opposes capital punishment for the same reasons Prejean outlines in "The Death of Innocents" -- that race, poverty, and incompetence play too large a role in a flawed system that sometimes sends the wrongly convicted to death row.

"My daddy was a lawyer," said Prejean. "I used to think we had the best criminal justice system in the world. Now I'm not naive."

Her position outside the legal system has its advantages. "A person of the cloth, Sister Helen can assert an unambiguous moral claim more powerfully than a lawyer could ever hope to," said Scott Turow, the legal thriller author and lawyer. His last book, "Ultimate Punishment: A Lawyer's Reflections on Dealing with the Death Penalty," recounts his service on the Illinois commission that influenced Illinois Governor George Ryan's 2003 decision to commute the sentences of 167 death row inmates.

Prejean's new book focuses on the cases of two men -- Dobie Gillis Williams, a man with an IQ of 65 whose legal defense Prejean argues was woefully inept, and Joseph Roger O'Dell, whose suppressed DNA evidence may have exonerated him. Prejean accompanied both men, who she contends were innocent, to their deaths.

"I see myself as the witness," Prejean said. "I'm the storyteller, and my fidelity to [their stories] is the Energizer bunny that keeps me going. The fact that I'm a religious nun, I have a voice, people listen to me. The reader, in a way, will become their first fair jury."

Her books and talks, she hopes, will improve what she sees as America's failure to reflect on tough moral issues such as capital punishment, the war in Iraq, or torture at Abu Ghraib.

"It's all about discourse; it's all about reflection," she said. "The spiritual life is about getting under the surfaces, into the pulse, the life, the love force, the God's force that's under all of us -- like in poetry, to find the meaning of things."

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