

# Faith leaders bring personal testimony to Texas dialogue on death penalty

HOUSTON - Religious leaders, including Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, brought personal testimony and the beliefs common to their faiths to a recent dialogue on the death penalty.

Cardinal DiNardo said the care and support brought to families and communities victimized by murders is “an essential element and dimension of our religious convictions.”

“The humanizing attitude we can bring to the manner of punishing crime and criminals requires now more thinking and action in our culture, particularly in this faith, toward the elimination of punishment by execution,” he said.

The cardinal recalled leading a pro-life march in 2008, where 500 participants prayed at various sites through Huntsville. The mile-long walk ended with a vigil at the state penitentiary in Huntsville, which houses the state’s execution chamber, and a meeting with prison authorities.

“It was a most sobering occasion,” Cardinal DiNardo said. “The authorities were kind and clear in the explanation of what happens in the final days and hours of the prisoner who is to be executed. But in going into the death chamber and the surrounding rooms, there was an unmistakable aura and feeling of coldness, stark efficiency of everything that is opposed to the dignity of the human person, even a guilty one. I found the occasion instructive and alarming.”

Citing “*Evangelium Vitae*” (“The Gospel of Life”), Pope John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical indicating a preference for a “nonlethal means of punishment as more in keeping with the common good and dignity of the human person,” the cardinal emphasized the need for catechesis on the death penalty with parishioners and seminarians.

Cardinal DiNardo, who is chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Pro-Life Activities, also said that “sharing in the grief of those who lost a dear one by violence is a significant aspect of our humanity and of our Christian faith.”

More than 500 people of various denominations attended the Jan. 18 symposium at the Hobby Center. The event preceded a Houston Grand Opera performance of “*Dead Man Walking*,” the opera based on a book recounting Sister Helen Prejean’s experiences with two men on death row.

Sister Helen, a Sister of St. Joseph of Medaille, said she hoped the evening would “help ignite discourse in this community” regarding the issue of capital punishment. Noting that 16 states have abolished the death penalty, she said Texas’ reputation of ardently supporting capital punishment draws an inaccurate picture of the state from her perspective as a well-traveled public speaker of 20 years.

“The people in Texas are not any different than people in other parts of the United States,” she said. “I find some of the same things. Most people haven’t reflected deeply on the death penalty. You hear about terrible crimes and you think that is what the death penalty is for. It is not one of the moral issues that hits home personally the way other moral issues do. I believe in the goodness of the American people.”

Sister Helen said those who consider themselves pro-life do not always extend their beliefs to include death-row inmates.

“Pro-life-stance people are for the dignity of unborn children. ... But murderers?”

she said. “They stepped across the line, they killed a person. And doesn’t justice demand that we do (to) them what they did to the one they killed? Even those who have done a terrible crime have a dignity that must not be taken from them. Statements, church teachings are one thing. Those of us who try to follow the way with Jesus ... we have to go through our own journey.”

Joining Cardinal DiNardo in exploring the issue were representatives of the local Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Jewish and Lutheran congregations and the group Pastors in Action.

Sponsors of the dialogue included Catholic Mobilizing Network to End the Use of the Death Penalty; Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston; the Dominican Sisters of Houston; the archdiocesan Office of Justice and Peace; and the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word.