

# Sister Helen Prejean calls on Md. to end death penalty

**By George P. Matysek Jr.**

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Standing beneath a large crucifix in the sanctuary of St. Pius X in Rodgers Forge, Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J., stretched out her arms and intently fixed her gaze on the hundreds of people who filled the pews Sept. 20.

Holding her arms in the vulnerable position for several moments, the Sister of St. Joseph of Medaille said the cross has become a symbol of the suffering caused by murderers and capital punishment in America.

“On the one arm of the cross are the murderer and the murderer’s family,” said Sister Helen, an internationally acclaimed death penalty abolitionist whose book inspired the movie “Dead Man Walking.”

“On the other arm of the cross are the victim and the victim’s family,” she said.

Sister Helen has first-hand experience “entering into the mystery” of the cross, she said. The former middle school teacher was the spiritual advisor to Patrick Sonnier in Louisiana. She accompanied the convicted murderer to his execution by electrocution and later accompanied five more men to their deaths.

Sister Helen also founded “Survive,” a group that provides counseling and support for grieving families of murder victims.

The time has come to help bring healing by abolishing the death penalty in America, Sister Helen said. Marylanders can take the lead by making their state one of the first in the country to do away with capital punishment since it was reinstated by the Supreme Court in 1976, she said.

Last year, an effort to repeal the death penalty in Maryland and replace it with a sentence of life without parole failed to reach the Senate floor by just one vote. A

similar measure, which has the backing of Maryland's Catholic bishops, is expected to be introduced in the upcoming General Assembly.

Calling the death penalty nothing more than "legalized vengeance," Sister Helen said the gift of being a Catholic is embracing the "seamless garment of life" – respecting the dignity of life from conception until natural death.

"We don't cause life, so is it our job to take it away?" Sister Helen asked. "Is it our right to trust a human, fallible system of capital punishment to take it away?"

Sister Helen said she believed two of the men she accompanied to their deaths were innocent. Since 1973, more than 120 men and women have been freed from death row after evidence demonstrated their innocence, according to Maryland Citizens Against State Executions.

Chris Conover, a former parishioner of St. Pius X who received his first holy Communion there, stood in his hometown parish and explained how he spent 18 years in prison for a double murder he didn't commit. He was freed on the basis of DNA evidence.

Mr. Conover, who now lives in North Carolina, challenged those who support the death penalty to ask themselves if they are willing to let some innocent people die in a flawed system.

"Could you go to the family and tell them he had to die for the greater good?" he asked. "Can you say a number of innocent persons who could be killed?"

Kirk Bloodsworth, an Eastern Shore native who was the first death row inmate to be released as a result of DNA testing, told the audience that he and Mr. Conover are living reminders that innocent people will inevitably get swept up in the capital punishment net.

"If it can happen to an honorably discharged Marine like me, with no criminal record, it can happen to you," said Mr. Bloodsworth.

In an interview with *The Catholic Review*, Sister Helen said attitudes are shifting in the Catholic community about the death penalty. Recent polls showed that only 41 percent of young Catholics below age 30 support the death penalty, she said.

Sister Helen raised questions about how the death penalty is applied in Maryland, noting that all the people Maryland has executed and the five people on death row now killed white people.

“Eighty percent of the homicide victims of the people in Maryland are people of color,” said Sister Helen, who had breakfast with several Maryland lawmakers during her visit. “So why is it the death penalty is given only for those who kill white people? People are waking up to racism.”

Sister Helen said ending the death penalty isn’t about letting murderers off or making society unsafe. Quoting Pope John Paul II, she pointed out that prisons in modern society can safely keep convicted murderers off the streets.

“Even those who have committed terrible crimes have a dignity that must not be taken from them,” she said.

In addition to speaking at St. Pius, Sister Helen also gave a presentation at St. John the Evangelist in Frederick on Sept. 21. Her talks were co-sponsored by the Maryland Catholic Conference.