



THE  
**TABLET** .co.uk

## **‘I’m a witness, pure and simple’**

### ***The Tablet* Interview Sister Helen Prejean**

Sister Helen Prejean was a little-known American nun when *Dead Man Walking*, her book on the guilty of death row, became a best-seller. She talks to Mian Ridge about her new campaign: to save the innocent

Sister Helen Prejean has watched the killings of five men on death row since she first stepped into an execution chamber in 1984. On that occasion she stood beside Patrick Sonnier, a convicted murderer, as he was electrocuted; the experience formed the basis of her book, *Dead Man Walking*, and the subsequent film, in which she was played by Susan Sarandon. As with Sonnier, Sister Helen’s presence at the following executions came after she had “walked with” each man on death row, given him counselling and spiritual direction, prayed with him in his final days, sat with him in the hours and minutes before his execution and – every time – told him to look at her face as he was killed.

***Each time, she says, she was “set on fire”*** by the experience and fuelled for the mission that she took on the night Sonnier was executed: to see the death penalty in America abolished. Her new book, which was five-and-a-half years in the writing, is part of that mission. Like *Dead Man Walking*, it is an eyewitness account of executions on death row, but with one big difference. While Sonnier was a convicted murderer who confessed to his crime, *The Death of Innocents, An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions*, chronicles the fate of two men of whose innocence Sister Helen was – and remains – convinced.

I meet Sister Helen in Atlanta, Georgia, where she is in the middle of a non-stop book tour. I ask her if highlighting the execution of the innocent is designed to persuade more Americans to oppose the death penalty.

“I never start from the point of view of what is going to convince people,” Sister Helen answers. “It just doesn’t happen that way.” She was born and still lives in New Orleans, Louisiana, and she continues, in her warm southern drawl: “I’m a witness, pure and simple. Most people are never going to get anywhere near this terrible thing so I’m saying, ‘let me tell you what I’ve seen, what I’ve learned’. And through these two executions I’ve learned that in this broken justice system, which has always been unfair, we are executing people who are innocent.”

*The Death of Innocents* plunges straight into the horror of life on death row with the story of Dobie Gillis Williams, an indigent black man from Louisiana with an IQ of 65.

Accused of killing a white woman, Dobie, as Sister Helen calls him throughout the book, was convicted by an all-white jury, on DNA evidence that was challenged by experts; among the many irregularities of the case was the fact that the dead woman's husband, who was in the house at the time of the murder, was never questioned as a suspect. Dobie was represented by an inept defense counsel who was later disbarred.

Sister Helen builds an equally persuasive case for the innocence of Joseph O'Dell, whose conviction for rape and murder rested on the testimony of a "jailhouse snitch" who later admitted that he had lied. When it became clear to him that his lawyer was incompetent, O'Dell decided to represent himself – the failure of the system to provide adequate legal representation for the accused in capital cases is raised repeatedly in the book – but he lost despite the strength of his case. O'Dell subsequently struggled for justice on death row for 12 years. Sister Helen describes the last days of these two men, whom she clearly admired and loved, in heartrending detail. Through these particular stories and with countless other examples, Sister Helen argues that the death penalty in America is applied in a systematically unjust manner that exposes the country's deepest social wounds, particularly poverty and racism. Over 80 per cent of executions in the past 25 years have been carried out in the former slave states: black men are far more likely to be sentenced to death than white, while a white person's death is more likely to be avenged by the death sentence.

***Sister Helen lists appalling procedural injustices***, from suppressed exculpatory evidence, falsified police reports, and "coached" eyewitnesses, to the district attorneys' practice of omitting to tell juries about the option of a life sentence without parole, because they know that jurors tend to choose life over death if they know the offender will be locked away. The statistics bear out the systematic nature of the problem. Since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976, for every eight people executed, one wrongfully convicted person has been freed; over this period state and federal courts have freed 117 wrongly convicted people from death row.

As a young nun, who had grown up in a middle-class family, Sister Helen used to pray to God to right wrongs in the world. Later, she says, she realized "that God had entrusted these tasks to me". She first taught in a school in a middle class area, but later moved into a housing project in a poor area. It was here that she became horrified by the number of poor black men in prison, and started to write letters to Sonnier. While Sister Helen has devoted much of her adult life since then to the campaign to abolish the death penalty – her order, the Sisters of Medaille, have freed her to spend her time giving lectures and campaigning – she is not consumed by the cause, and frequently addresses the issue in a wider context. "There is a penchant in America", she says at one point, "which we can especially see in this current president, for trying to solve social problems by using violence and coercion."

Sister Helen is funny and sharp. She laughs and smiles a lot. She looks younger than her 65 years and, despite her near-celebrity status and extraordinary life, she retains the air, dressed in plain clothes with a big wooden cross around her neck, of a warm,

down-to-earth nun. It is only later she tells me the cross is the one she held up for Dobie to look at as he was lethally injected.

***She can also be searingly critical***, accusing the Catholic Supreme Court Justice, Antonio Scalia, of “icy sophistry” in his reconciliation of his Catholicism with his support for capital punishment. She doesn’t spare any charity, either, for President George W. Bush, and what she calls his “Christianity-lite”. *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II said the death penalty should be “rare, if not non-existent”, but that in cases of “absolute necessity” governments were justified in killing their citizens.

Sister Helen found that this exception was used as a loophole by some in the Church. She mentions in particular Harry Connick Sr, the former district attorney in New Orleans and a practicing Catholic, who often said publicly that there were too few death sentences. He was backed up by Archbishop Patrick Hanlon of New Orleans who once drafted a letter assuring Catholic jurors that they could vote for a death sentence “in good conscience”. It was atheists and members of Amnesty International who stood alongside her, she says, while she felt that she was squaring up to her own Church.

So, in 1997, at the height of efforts to save the life of O’Dell, Sister Helen wrote a letter to John Paul II, urging him to speak out against the death penalty; *The Tablet* was the first publication to print excerpts from the letter. “I wrote to him and I said, ‘Your Holiness, your words are going to be used to justify killing someone’ ”.

The letter continued: “Rarely is the death penalty questioned from pulpits in Mass, and ‘pro-life’, as it turns out, most often means pro-innocent life, not guilty life. I pray for the day when Catholic opposition to government executions will be unequivocal.”

Significantly, Sister Helen believes, when the pope visited St Louis in 1999, he appealed “for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary”. On his previous four visits to America he had spoken of pro-life issues – abortion and euthanasia – but not of the death penalty.

Sister Helen believes this appeal made an enormous difference to the way America’s Catholic bishops have spoken publicly about the death penalty.

“The bishops are much clearer, more forthright in their statements now, but what is really needed is some strong teaching, some real moral energy, *from the pulpit*,” she says.

She believes Catholic opinion could make all the difference to the debate. “There are 65 million Catholics in this country and 29 per cent of people of Congress – it’s the biggest block of faith in Congress,” she says. “Man! We got to go after the Catholics.”

She has hope that public opinion in America is beginning to turn against the death penalty, and points to the declining number of executions in the nation as a whole. In

1996 a poll showed that 78 per cent of Americans supported the death penalty. A 2004 Gallup poll found that this figure had dropped to 64 per cent – the lowest in 20 years.

“The discourse is so different now from when I wrote *Dead Man Walking*,” she says.

“It seems to have a way of evening itself out,” she says. “You work out a balance. All through the book tour Manuel has stayed at the hub of the wheel. But the other stuff I have to do – I just have to do something with the anger, the fury, the fire, of having walked with human beings to their deaths.”

***The Death of Innocents* is published by Random House.**