

An Invitation from Sister Helen Prejean

Dear Educator,

Since 1976, 1,534 people have been executed by the United States of America—by gas, electrocution, firing squad, and lethal injection. Numerous lawsuits to make these killings public have been denied court hearings, preventing all but a few of us to bear witness to this process conducted in our name. This secrecy is not accidental.

The U.N. Declaration of Human Rights asserts that every human being has an inalienable right to life and that no person should be subjected to cruel or degrading punishment or torture. Yet the U.S. Supreme Court refuses to acknowledge the death penalty as cruel and unusual punishment.

State killings are in stark opposition to the call for compassion and restorative justice found in all mainstream religious traditions. We have got to stop calling for an eye for an eye. I have found staunch allies for abolition of the death penalty among folks who profess no religious beliefs but who hold fiercely to the inalienable human rights of every person. Believers, on the other hand, tend to favor the practice. A recent Pew Research Center poll found that 60% of religiously affiliated people support the death penalty. Given how executions are largely hidden from public view, these results should not surprise us.

I have been inside the killing chambers, where I witnessed six executions. I have visited with men and women who sit for decades on death row, awaiting the day of their execution. I have seen how flawed, racist, and cruel the government killing of citizens actually is.

I wrote *Dead Man Walking* to bring people into execution chambers, close to the reality of torture. And over the next two years, I am keen to awaken young Americans, to activate them to join me in forever ending the death penalty in our nation. I've designed a dynamic, interactive way to engage with students on this urgent moral issue, which I've already piloted in eighty colleges over the past year. You and your students are invited to join me in this interactive, live exploration: *Dead Man Walking and Human Rights*.

The death penalty is an issue that begs for passionate engagement from our nation's young people. I've designed this module to bring students into the experience of both perpetrators and victims' families, to help students explore their opinions about human rights through independent journaling, and I'm inviting them to engage directly with me through Zoom sessions.

Of all the inalienable human rights, none is more fundamental than the right to life. Are you ready to join me in my mission to abolish the death penalty? Contact my team at hprejean@sisterhelen.org or give us a call at 504-948-6557.

From the heart,



Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ

An Overview of the *Dead Man Walking* and Human Rights Module



Preliminary Questionnaire



30-minute Zoom with Sister Helen

Learn about the life events that prompted Sister Helen to write *Dead Man Walking*



Classroom Discussion on the death penalty, including:

The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights

United States Supreme Court decisions

The Catholic Church's teachings on the death penalty



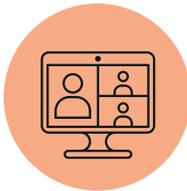
Independent Reading and Reflection on *Dead Man Walking*

Students read chapters 1-4 and complete independent journal prompts



Optional viewing of the film *Dead Man Walking*

1995, available on Netflix



Concluding One-hour Zoom with Sister Helen

40minute Q & A followed by a 20-minute conversation with activists in your state



Closing Questionnaire



Recommended timeframe: 1-4 weeks

Human Rights and the Death Penalty



The United Nations

Read the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with attention to Articles 3 and 5:

- ▶ Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.
- ▶ Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

In 1957, only six countries in the world prohibited use of the death penalty. Of the 193 member states in the U.N. today, 170 have abolished the death penalty outright or do not actively practice it. As a pro-death penalty nation, the U.S. continues to invest in supreme power over life and death.

Questions for Discussion:

- ▶ What stood out to you in reading the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights?
- ▶ What do you know about the United States relationship with the United Nations? Why do you think the U.S. has refused to abolish the death penalty along with the majority of member states?



The United States Supreme Court

In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court, in order to avoid the arbitrary and capricious application of death sentences, issued the decision ***Furman v Georgia***, which declared the death penalty unconstitutional.

In 1976, the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty with the decision ***Gregg v Georgia***, empowering states to define what was acceptable. In this case, the Supreme Court set two significant guidelines: only those who commit the “worst” murders should face the death penalty, and prosecutors were granted discretion to pursue the death penalty or not.

Questions for Discussion:

- ▶ Is it possible to develop criteria that can determine whether a murder is not “ordinary” and deemed to be the “worst”? Why or why not?
- ▶ Do you believe that prosecutors should have discretion as to whether or not to seek the death penalty? Should they still be allowed to pursue the death penalty even if victims’ families oppose it?
- ▶ Why do you think that former President Trump chose to resume federal executions after a 17-year hiatus? Why has President Biden instead chosen to declare a moratorium on federal executions?

Human Rights and the Death Penalty



The Catholic Church

In 1997, I wrote a letter to Pope John Paul II ([DePaul University Library Archives](#)). I recounted that the men I accompanied to execution said to me as they were about to walk to their deaths, “Please pray that God holds up my legs.” Where, I asked the Pope, is there any dignity in this deliberate killing of a human being, who has been rendered completely defenseless? “Surely, it is not the will of Christ for us to ever sanction and kill in such fashion, even those guilty of terrible crimes.”

After 1500 years of upholding the right of the state to conduct executions, the Catholic Church made a seismic change. In August 2018 Pope Francis amended the Catholic Catechism to state that, no matter how grievous the crime, the state may never take upon itself the right to punish the offender with death.

Questions for Discussion:

- Do you believe human dignity belongs to both the innocent and to the guilty? Why or why not?
- What do you think of when you hear the term “pro-life”? Do you think of people who support the abolition of the death penalty? Why or why not?



Resources on the Death Penalty

- [Death Penalty Information Center](#)
- [Equal Justice Initiative](#)
- [The Innocence Project](#)
- [The Marshall Project](#)
- [Witness to Innocence](#)

An Invitation to Students from Sister Helen Prejean

Dear Student,

As you begin to read my book *Dead Man Walking*, you are entering into a dynamic encounter. Reading text is never a neutral experience. You can't help but respond intellectually and emotionally, wondering to yourself how and why things unfolded the way they did.

Keep these journal prompts at your side as you read chapters 1-4 of *Dead Man Walking*. It's a way I can accompany you as you make your way through my own life experiences. Simply jot down quick phrases, maybe just a word or two, a spontaneous emotion: *I like this!* or *Not true!* and, especially, questions you want to ask me. This will "till the soil" for our Q & A during our final Zoom, where we'll have a no-holds-barred, ask-me-anything conversation.

Ever heard this bit of wisdom: *As always, the wake is wider than the vessel?*

I believe that the wide wake is us, *We the People*. As we deepen our understanding of fundamental human rights and burn with passion to work for change in our society, the *wide wake* of us becomes a mounting wave, building and eventually breaking upon the shore of history. This is the slow but sure way that we create social change in our country.

I, for one, am grateful to be awake on this crucial human rights issue and happy to be a small part of the worldwide movement to abolish its practice forever from the face of the earth. When we meet next on Zoom, I'll be inviting you to join me.

From the heart,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Helen Prejean, CSJ". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ



Journal Prompts

1. What were your feelings as you read about the murders of Loretta Bourque and David LeBlanc? How did you feel about Patrick and Eddie Sonnier after reading about their crimes? What punishment do you believe they should have received?
2. What do you think would help victims' families heal? Can witnessing the execution of their loved one's murderer help them find closure? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe that governments have the authority to execute their citizens? Why or why not? Are there any exceptions to your opinion?
4. My personal guides for understanding human rights are the **United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, the **U.N. Commission on Human Rights**, **Human Rights Watch**, and **Amnesty International**. What people or organizations have helped you form your own understanding of human rights in the United States and around the world?
5. When the death penalty was resumed in the U.S. in 1976, its supporters argued that the only way to stop an increase in violent crime was to “fight fire with fire”—those who killed others would be punished by being killed themselves. Has the death penalty proven to be a deterrent to murder? Why or why not?
6. What do you think are the root causes of violent crime in our nation? How do you think we should address these root causes in order to prevent crime?
7. Since 1976, 185 innocent people were sentenced to death but were able to expose the errors in their cases before they were executed. Others were not as fortunate. Is it possible to have a criminal justice system that will not condemn innocent people to death?
8. Why did the Catholic Catechism change to reflect that capital punishment is inadmissible? Do you agree? What were some reactions to this change within the Catholic Church?
9. Do you think it is fair for prosecutors to have full discretion over whether or not to seek the death penalty? Who do you think should be involved in making this decision?
10. Study after study has found that people who kill white people are far more likely to face a death sentence than those who kill black people. 75% of people who were executed were convicted of killing white victims. Do you think that these are indications that the death penalty is racist? Why or why not?



Journal Prompts

11. What inequities exist within the U.S. criminal punishment system? What connections exist between the history of slavery and mass incarceration? Between lynching and capital punishment? Do you believe that this system can be fixed? Why or why not?
12. Thurgood Marshall, the first African American Supreme Court justice, once said that a black person and a white person have very different interpretations of the words “equal protection under the law.” What is your own interpretation of these words and how does it relate to your own racial identity?
13. The U.N. Convention Against Torture defines torture as “an extreme mental or physical assault against someone who has been rendered defenseless.” How do you personally define torture? How do you define cruelty? What stories, readings, or studies have shaped these definitions? Do you think that spending 20 years on death row is a form of torture? Why or why not?
14. My own faith inspires and urges me to not seek “an eye for an eye” retribution. Do you believe that the death penalty is death-for-a-death retribution? Do you feel there are some murders that are such an affront to humanity and decency that justice demands that the perpetrator pay with their life? Why or why not?
15. Who are the ultimate guardians and interpreters of the United States Constitution? What do you think the role of “We the People” should be in determining the future of the death penalty?
16. Former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, who was a Catholic and also upheld death sentences, stated that when he entered the court to interpret the U.S. Constitution and the death penalty, he “left his faith convictions outside the door.” Do you believe it is possible to leave moral convictions at the door? Why or why not?
17. What are some examples from U.S. history where something was “the law,” yet profoundly morally wrong? How do you think the death penalty will be viewed 50 years from now?
18. In a democracy, is the source of government authority the people who elect leaders to office or divine ordination by God? What is the difference between a theocracy and a democracy?
19. What are your own moral or spiritual convictions about human rights and human dignity? Have these beliefs prompted you to get involved with other citizens to work for social change? Why or why not?
20. In my dialogue with Pope John Paul II about the death penalty, I described Pat Sonnier’s request as I walked with him to the electric chair. His arms and legs shackled, and surrounded by six guards, he whispered: “Please pray that God holds up my legs as I walk.” I asked the Pope, “Where is there dignity in killing a person who has been rendered completely defenseless?” Do you believe that it is important to preserve dignity within the criminal justice system? Why or why not?

Resources for Continued Learning & Discussion

- Explore the **Sister Helen Prejean and *Dead Man Walking* Teaching Kit** from the Special Collections and Archives at the DePaul University Library
- Watch the one-hour documentary ***Sister***
- **Sign up for *Death Penalty Discourse***, Sister Helen's monthly newsletter
- Watch **Sister Helen in conversation with Amy Goodman** on *Democracy Now!*
- Listen to **Sister Helen in conversation with Terry Gross** on NPR's *Fresh Air*
- Read **Sister Helen's article in the *Washington Post***: "Trump is rushing to execute inmates. We must raise our voices in protest."
- Watch or listen to **Sister Helen Prejean in conversation with Bryan Stevenson** at the New York Public Library
- **Write to a person in prison**

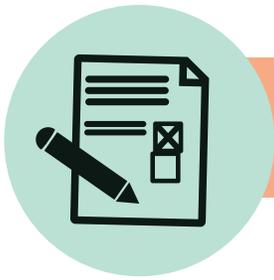


About Sister Helen Prejean

Sister Helen Prejean is known around the world for her tireless work against the death penalty. She has been instrumental in sparking national dialogue on capital punishment and in shaping the Catholic Church's vigorous opposition to all executions.

Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States ignited a national debate on capital punishment when it was published in 1993. It inspired an Academy Award winning movie, a play, and an opera. Sister Helen also embarked on a speaking tour that continues to this day.

Today Sister Helen divides her time between educating the public, campaigning against the death penalty, counseling individual death row prisoners, and working with murder victims' family members. Sister Helen's second book *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions* was published in 2004 and her third book *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey* was published in 2019.



Preliminary Questionnaire

1. I have an opinion about the death penalty

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. I consider myself to be

Pro death penalty Against the death penalty Not sure

3. I know how to get involved in organizing in my state

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Please explain your answers:

sisterhelen.org



Closing Questionnaire

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Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

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