

HELEN PREJEAN

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# Helen Prejean

*Death Row's Nun*

Joyce Duriga



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

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Cover design by Red+Company. Cover illustration by Philip Bannister.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2017935290

ISBN 978-0-8146-4663-2    978-0-8146-4687-8 (ebook)

Society proceeds sovereignly to eliminate the evil ones from her midst as if she were virtue itself. Like an honorable man killing his wayward son and remarking: “Really, I didn’t know what to do with him.” . . . To assert in any case, that a man must be absolutely cut off from society because he is absolutely evil amounts to saying that society is absolutely good, and no one in his right mind will believe this today.

—Albert Camus, *Reflections on the Guillotine*



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# Foreword

If the United States one day leaves the company of nations that still practice capital punishment, that may owe much to the efforts of one American nun, Sister Helen Prejean. Her classic work, *Dead Man Walking*, belongs in the company of such landmarks as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: books that transformed consciousness and altered history.

The present biography tells the fascinating story that led up to Sr. Helen's book, and of her ongoing campaign, through tireless speaking and writing, to abolish the death penalty. Among the surprising stories is the account of her meetings with Pope John Paul II, and her influence in steering Catholic teaching toward an explicit rejection of capital punishment—a position explicitly embraced by Pope Francis and by the US Catholic bishops.

So identified is Sr. Helen with her cause that it is surprising to remember the substantial portion of her life spent in a more traditional form of religious life. From her Cajun roots in Baton Rouge, to her decision at the age of eighteen to enter the Sisters of St. Joseph, there was no foretelling her later role as one of the prophetic witnesses of our time. The most intriguing part of this story, in fact, is the gradual journey by which she came to understand the social implications of the Gospel.

In her early career, largely spent teaching in her order's schools, she had accepted the idea that the primary aim of Catholic life was to prepare believers for heaven—not to be concerned with worldly issues like poverty and injustice. But from the time she joined other sisters in moving into a housing project among poor African Americans, she began to read the Bible and to see the world around her through different eyes.

As Sr. Helen's story demonstrates, the Christian life entails a continuous call to conversion—a matter of responding to that voice that comes to us, through circumstances or the needs of our neighbors or our moment in history. It is a voice that calls us deeper into the heart of our vocation. In Sr. Helen's case, that voice came through a request to write to a prisoner on death row. That invitation, in turn, opened a door on a relationship that would change her life forever.

In the average life, such transformative opportunities may occur more often than we know. How often do we pass them by? Perhaps it may be in reading the story of this remarkable woman that we will confront the invitation to take our own first steps on the risky journey of faith.

—Robert Ellsberg

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Moment That Changed Her Life

Sister Helen Prejean is living on adrenaline and nerves. Last night sleep wouldn't come. At 3:00 a.m. she gives up. By 6:30 a.m. she's on her way from New Orleans to the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola and the "death house," the name for the part of the prison where inmates on death row are executed.

Waiting for her there is Elmo Patrick Sonnier—a thirty-four-year-old, white Cajun man scheduled to be executed by the electric chair in two days on April 5, 1984, at midnight. Sonnier and his brother Eddie abducted a teenage, white couple out for a night on lovers' lane in the fall of 1977. They raped the girl and then shot them both in the head after forcing them to lie face down on the ground. The state sentenced Pat to death by the electric chair. His brother Eddie received two life sentences.

Going through the prison on the way to see Pat, Sr. Helen passes out from hunger—she didn't eat that morning—and from a bronchial infection that's brewing in her lungs. She

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ends up on a table in the prison hospital and learns this is where they will bring Pat after the execution to run an EKG. He may be the next person lying on that table, she thinks.

When prison officials return her to the death house, she learns no one told Pat what happened to her, and he worried that he would have to go through the execution alone. After a short prayer service with a priest chaplain where Pat receives Communion, Sr. Helen and he talk through a mesh screen and share stories to pass the time—some about their attempts with the governor for a stay of execution and some about small topics like birds and hunting. Sister Helen tries to wrap her mind around the fact that in a mere thirty hours or so, Pat could be dead. It's not like he has a terminal illness, just a scheduled execution. Pat admits he is afraid, but tells Sister they won't "break" him.

That night Sr. Helen stays at her mother's house, which is closer to Angola than her home in New Orleans. Family and friends join her. She takes a sleeping pill to help her rest. The next day, April 4, when she arrives at Angola it is a beautiful day—the sun is shining and the sky is blue. Sister Helen first stops to see Pat's brother Eddie Sonnier, who is also serving his sentences in Angola. News reports that morning feature stories about Eddie writing to the governor saying he committed the murders, not Pat, and that they planned to execute the wrong person.

Next Sr. Helen heads over to see Pat. At 3:15 p.m. a friend visits. No word yet from the governor or the courts on a stay of execution. Just after 5:00 p.m. the electrician arrives to make sure the chair is ready. At 6:00 p.m. it's time for Pat's final meal: a steak done medium well, potato salad, green beans, hot rolls with butter, a green salad, a Coke, and apple pie.

Soon they hear from the warden that the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals turned down Pat's petition for a stay of execution. Now they wait for the governor. In the meantime, prison staff trickle in readying things for the execution. At 8:40 p.m. word comes from the attorneys that the governor also turned Pat down. As the guards shackle his hands and feet, Pat collapses to one knee, looks at her and says, "Sr. Helen, I'm going to die."

He makes out his will, leaving her all of his possessions and writes to his brother asking him to take care of himself and telling him that he loves him. Prison staff shave Pat's head and his eyebrows so they won't catch on fire during the execution. They also cut off his left pant leg and shave that leg.

At 11:30 p.m. the guards arrive to take Pat. They put a diaper on him, which angers him. Sister Helen is allowed to walk with Pat to the death chamber. He asks the warden if she can hold his arm. He agrees. It's the first time she's touched him. As they walk she recites the words of Isaiah 41:10, "Do not be afraid . . ."

The oak execution chair, nicknamed Gruesome Gertie, awaits Pat in the death chamber, which has the green walls and a clock ticking on the wall. Witnesses sit on the other side of the room behind glass. The fathers of the victims are there along with the press, Pat's attorneys, and the doctor who will verify his death. Sister Helen notices an exhaust fan running. It will remove the smell of burning flesh from the death chamber.

The warden asks Pat if he has any last words. He does. Pat asks for forgiveness from Lloyd LeBlanc, the father of David LeBlanc, one of the murdered teens. He says his brother committed the murders, but he is sorry all the same. No words for Godfrey Bourque, the father of Loretta Bourque. Pat

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knows Bourque has been speaking in the press about how much he has been looking forward to Pat's execution so he offers him no apology. Pat turns to Sr. Helen and tells her he loves her. "I love you too," she says.

Prison staff place a metal cap on Pat's head. It has an electrode attached to the top, which is connected to a wire that comes from a box behind the chair. Next they fasten an electrode to his leg, the one they shaved earlier. Then they strap his head to the chair with a piece of leather around his chin. Lastly they cover his face with a grayish-green cloth.

The warden nods to the executioner who flips a switch that pushes nineteen hundred volts of electricity through Pat, then five hundred, and then nineteen hundred again. A few minutes later the prison doctor pronounces Pat dead at 12:15 a.m., April 5, 1984.

On the way home from the prison, Sr. Helen's friends must stop the car so she can vomit. This early morning experience ends the two-year journey Sr. Helen made with Pat Sonnier. It also changes the course of her life and puts her on the road she calls a vocation from God as "death row's nun."