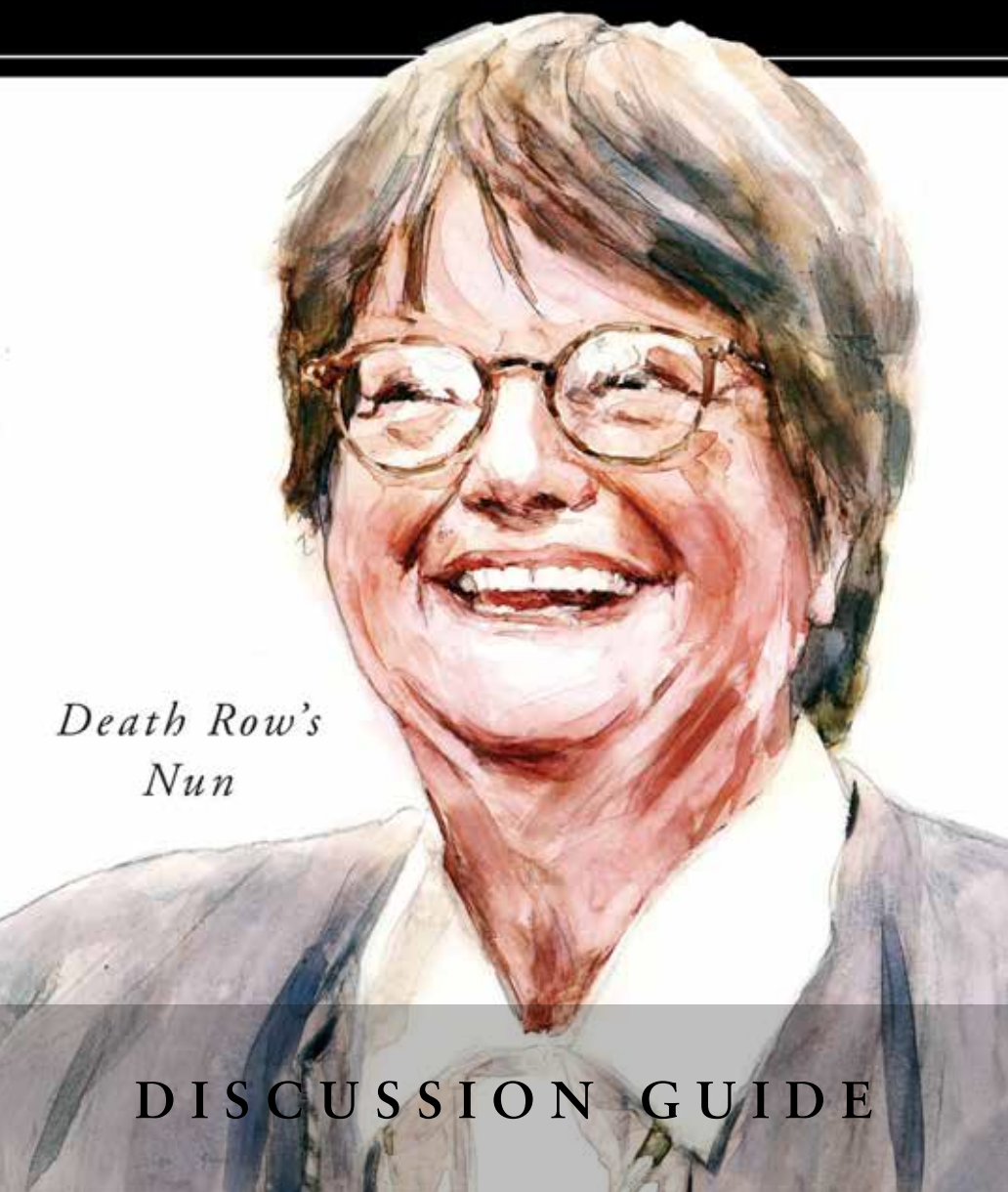


JOYCE DURIGA

HELEN PREJEAN

*Death Row's
Nun*

A watercolor-style portrait of Helen Prejean, a woman with short, layered brown hair, wearing round glasses and a dark suit jacket over a white collared shirt. She is smiling broadly, showing her teeth. The background is plain white.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

About the Book

No person has worked more effectively toward the abolition of the death penalty in the United States than Helen Prejean, CSJ. Her best-selling book *Dead Man Walking*, and the hit Hollywood film adaptation in which she was played by Susan Sarandon, was a catalyst for drawing national attention to the issue. In the years since then, her continuing and often controversial work with death-row inmates has kept the issue near the forefront of national debate. She has confronted lawyers and judges, politicians and the media, to expose the indignity and injustice of the death penalty and inhumane prison conditions.

In *Helen Prejean: Death Row's Nun*, Joyce Duriga explores Sister Helen's life growing up in upper-middle-class Louisiana, and her growing awareness of the injustice of the death penalty, its disproportionate targeting of the poor and minorities, and her introduction to death-row inmates Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie. Through this book, readers will witness her life's work with victims and their families, and see how she came to understand her role in prison ministry, not only as an activist but as a champion fighting for hope and restorative justice for those facing the death penalty.

About the Author

Joyce Duriga has served as editor of *Chicago Catholic*, the official newspaper for the Archdiocese of Chicago, since 2007. She also oversees content for www.catholicnewworld.com and the newspaper's social media efforts. Prior to coming to Chicago, she was the associate editor of *Our Sunday Visitor*, a national Catholic newsweekly. Her work appears regularly in local, regional, and national publications.

Discussion Guide

Chapter One

1. Duriga refers to the Scripture verse that Sr. Helen read to Patrick Sonnier as he approached his execution—Isaiah 41:10—but doesn't quote the verse in full. Check the verse in your Bible, and spend some time reflecting on it, especially in the context in which Sr. Helen used it. Why do you suppose Sr. Helen chose this verse? Do you think it was a fitting one?
2. What verse would you have chosen, if you were in Sr. Helen's shoes at that moment?
3. What details about Sr. Helen's experience of Patrick Sonnier's execution are most striking to you?

Chapter Two

1. How does Sr. Helen's ministry reflect the original mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph?
2. What is your reaction to Duriga's account of how Sr. Helen was "awakened to the Gospel of justice"?
3. "In a democracy," Sr. Helen learned from Sr. Maria Augusta Neal, "there's no apolitical stance to take. If you're not doing anything, then that means you're supporting the status quo and that is a very political stance to take." Your thoughts?
4. There are several references in this chapter to the privilege that characterized Sr. Helen's childhood and her life prior to her move to the Saint Thomas Housing Project. In what ways was her upbringing and early adulthood privileged?
5. What is most interesting or surprising to you about Sr. Helen's childhood? About her early life as a religious sister?

Chapter Three

1. “That’s what it’s like to follow grace. . . . You take a step,” Sr. Helen said. How have you experienced grace in this way in your own life?
2. Have you ever felt “in over your head” while in the midst of a situation that later seemed to be exactly what you were supposed to be doing?
3. Sr. Helen’s argument about the government not being worthy of the trust we give it to decide who should be killed by the death penalty is an interesting one, since it is usually “conservatives” who express distrust for government power and bureaucracy, while support for the death penalty is generally a “conservative” stance. Can we trust state governments to equitably mete out capital punishment? Why or why not?
4. Being the face of Christ to a man facing execution—this theme is repeated at several places in this book. What does Sr. Helen mean by it? In what way is it so in her story? In what way have you experienced being the face of Christ for someone who needed to know Christ’s presence, or in what way has someone been that face at such a time for you?
5. What do you think of a nun becoming a friend to a man who has committed an unspeakably evil act?

Chapter Four

1. Reflect on Sr. Helen's often-repeated conviction: "People are more than the worst thing they have done in their life." Should this impact our approach to the death penalty? Why or why not? How? How might it apply to other circumstances in life?
2. Have you read the book *Dead Man Walking*? Seen the movie? Seen the play production or the opera? What is it about Sr. Helen's book that has led to its being adapted into so many other formats and genres?
3. Duriga recounts an amusing comment by Sr. Helen about the importance of "getting the nuns right" in the movie. If you've seen the movie, do you think it "gets nuns right"?
4. What is your reaction to critic Roger Ebert's interesting comments, in his review of the movie, on "movies about 'religion' "?
5. What is your reaction to Sr. Helen's interactions with Lloyd LeBlanc? How is Mr. LeBlanc, as Sr. Helen says, "the hero of *Dead Man Walking*"?

Chapter Five

1. What does Sr. Helen's book *The Death of Innocents* add to the conversation about capital punishment that *Dead Man Walking* did not? How does this book (or at least Duriga's explanation of it) impact your understanding of the issue?
2. What do you make of (now Saint) Mother Teresa's intervention in the case of Joseph O'Dell?
3. What does Sr. Helen mean by calling the gurney on which O'Dell was executed "Joe O'Dell's modern, high-tech crucifix"? What do you think of that image?
4. What do you make of the Supreme Court ruling that executing people with mental disabilities violates the Eighth Amendment? What of the fact that if it had been made four years earlier, Dobie Williams would not have been executed?
5. Should Dobie Gillis Williams have been executed? Should Joseph Roger O'Dell have been?

Chapter Six

1. Have you read the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*? (Called “a blockbuster” by one prominent cardinal at the time of its publication, it is available on the Vatican’s website and well worth a read.)
2. Duriga’s review of the church’s stance on the death penalty includes teachings by Pope St. John Paul II, the U.S. bishops, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis. Were you aware of this extensive body of teaching? How does it impact your understanding of the Catholic position on the death penalty? And your understanding of capital punishment itself?
3. What is the significance of the fact that in his speech to the United States Congress, Pope Francis chose to include capital punishment among the issues he addressed?
4. Are you familiar with the further development of Catholic teaching on capital punishment that has taken place in the time since *Helen Prejean: Death Row’s Nun* was published? In 2018, Pope Francis approved a revision of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* declaring that capital punishment is inadmissible in all circumstances. How can we recognize in this development an organic growth in the church’s understanding of this moral question?
5. How does the death penalty violate—as Justices Breyer and Ginsberg suggested—the Eighth Amendment?

Chapter Seven

1. This short chapter offered in brief form several weighty arguments against the death penalty. What are they? Which seem most compelling to you? Or which are most unpersuasive?
2. Why is race such a significant factor in the way the death penalty is meted out?