



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

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SR. HELEN PREJEAN
ST. JAMES CHURCH
FERNDALE, MI

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Introduction

Bishop Tom Gumbleton



Good Afternoon. It's great to see everybody again and it's a special pleasure and honor for me to introduce our speaker today, Sr. Helen Prejean. She was telling me the last time she was in Detroit was about 13 years ago; but she has been here several times and some of us may remember when the opera opened in Detroit the *Dead Man Walking* opera. But it is a really a special joy that she's with us today, and an honor to introduce her.

Sr. Helen comes from New Orleans where she was born in 1930 in Baton Rouge in Louisiana, and I said 1930; it was 1939, (*lots of laughter*). But anyway, she joined the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1957. She was a high school teacher, and also served as the Religious Education director at St. Francis Cabrini Parish in New Orleans, before she moved into a housing project in the early 1980s.

And at that point, there was a dramatic change that took place in her life. She began to correspond with a prisoner on death row, Patrick Sonnier, and he had been the murderer of two teenagers. But she kept in touch with him on death row and visited and got to know him very well. And when he was put to death in the electric chair, she was one of the witnesses there to watch his execution. In the following months she became a spiritual director for a second prisoner on death row, and continued to meet with him, the same as she did with Mr. Sonnier.

After witnessing these executions, Sr. Helen realized that these rituals would remain unchallenged in our country, unless its secrecy was stripped away. And so, she sat down and wrote a book, which many of us, I'm sure, have read, *Dead Man Walking* where she described being an eyewitness account of the death penalty as it works in the United States. That book ignited a national debate on capital punishment and spawned an academy award winning film, a play, and as I mentioned, an opera.

Over the years, Sr. Helen has made personal approaches to two popes trying to get them to identify the death penalty as something horrible and against Christian teaching. Finally, Pope Francis, in 2018 revised the Catholic Catechism declaring the death penalty is absolutely inadmissible within Catholic teaching, because it is an attack on the inviolability and the dignity of a human person, with no exceptions. But capital punishment is still practiced in 39 states in our country.

Sr. Helen divides her time between campaigning against the death penalty, counseling individual death row prisoners, and working with murder victims families, to help them come to peace in the terrible experience they've had of a child, son, daughter, brother, sister who was murdered. So, a lot of her time is spent in spiritual counseling with families of murdered people. More recently, Sr. Helen published a book, which some of you, I think, have already purchased here today, *River of Fire, My Spiritual Journey*. It was published this year in August; and if you do not have a copy, and haven't read it, I urge you to get one and read it, because it is inspiring, encouraging, and truly challenging as we read the journey of her life. And so, I now am honored to invite Sr. Helen to come forward and speak to us today on *Faith Catching Fire*. And I hope that as each of us leave here we'll experience that fire within our own hearts and spirits. Sr. Helen. (applause)

Faith Catching Fire

Sr. Helen Prejean

Hey! you all, can you hear me? I'm southern. We going to be all right? *Faith Catching Fire*. There are some groups you're with - and I would say that's this group I'm with - all you got to do is blow on the coals a little bit and the fire is there. I'm happy to be in your company; we're here; and we have this precious time together; and I'm just an ordinary person, right? that God swooped in on. All of us can tell the story. I guess the way I would describe grace, which I do here, is that grace wakes us up, 'cuz we could go our whole life and not understand things, or not get it; and so, the fire part of the book, of course, is that witnessing of a human being, being strapped down, and rendered defenseless, and killed in front of my eyes.



And so, the epigraph in the book is from St. Bonaventure: "Ask not for understanding; ask for the fire." And we know from the way of the mystics, we know that rational understanding only takes us so far; and we move into the realm of mystery: "Ask not for understanding; ask for the fire." So then, in the preface - I take you there with me - that transformed my life. "They killed a man with fire one night; they strapped him in a wooden chair, and pumped electricity through his body, until he was dead." His killing was a legal act. No religious leaders protested the killing that night, but I was there. I saw it with my own eyes; and what I saw set my soul on fire, a fire that burns in me still. And now here is an account of how I came to be in the killing chamber that night, and the spiritual currents that drew me there. And that's this book. It's the prequel to *Dead Man Walking*. The last page of this book is the first page of *Dead Man Walking* and this incredible journey.

Tim Robbins, while we were doing the film *Dead Man Walking*, he kept saying, "The nun is in over her head;" (laughter) and the nun was in over her head; and God plunges us into stuff. Didn't know about the criminal justice system. And this whole journey was about awakening to the Gospel, that it was about more than just being charitable to the people around me, and more than just praying to ask God to really help all the suffering people in the world, but to be engaged in it; and that justice was integral. Pope Francis has given us so many great metaphors for being people of the Gospel, and one of my favorites is: "We are supposed to be the field hospital out there where the people are hurtin'." The field hospital! So, if you belong to a field hospital, you're in over your head. We get involved in stuff that we don't know anything about - I mean, that's me. And it's a gift of sharing our stories with each other, when we just say, "I don't know what I was doing, I got involved in this." I talk a lot to university students, to young people, and I talk to them about sneaky Jesus.

I mean, sneaky Jesus part one, sneaky Jesus, part two, is my life, because the way *Dead Man Walking* opens, here is, I have awakened enough to go into the St. Thomas housing projects; and that's the last part of the journey, where African American people in New Orleans became my teachers. I'd never heard the term *white privilege*. I didn't know I was a person of privilege. I didn't know growing up, even in the Jim Crow era, when we had Ellen, who worked with us in the house, and Jessie, out in the yard. Didn't even know their last names; and mom and daddy were kind to them. Daddy even helped Ellen and Jessie buy property, get a house, helped Jessie get a job at a refinery in Baton Rouge. But they were sitting on the back of buses. They were living in the servant's quarters in our house.

At Sacred Heart Church, they had to sit way over to the right, and couldn't sit with the white people. Black kids had to receive their Holy Communion separate from white kids. And I had a good Catholic mom and daddy; and it was never questioned. That's what culture does. Culture gives us eyes and ears and explaining to me young Ellen: "Well, honey, it's better that the races stay separate, because, when you get together, people fight." Culture! And so, we don't question it; we're part of it.

And the Gospel, that spark, that light, breaks through to us, mostly through other people. But the awakening that also comes from meditation, and prayer, and listening, listening, listening, and who we associate with, the community we associate with, is what keeps that fire lit in us. We cannot do it alone. So, it's about, and is pure grace that awakened me. Now, you gotta know, I belong to a religious community; and my book's dedicated to the religious community, the Sisters of St. Joseph, that have been with all through my growing up. And the thing that people say the most about me in my growing up years was, "There goes Helen again, with her half baked ideas, feet firmly planted, midair, with her crazy idea, 'Hey, y'all, let's have a boot camp for the young people; let's have a boot camp for Jesus: somebody gave us some property'." They go, "Oh yeah, you got property? You got buildings?" "Oh, we don't have buildings yet." "Is there a well? Is there water? Is there electricity?" "No, we don't have that yet; but what we're gonna do is get on the land, and let the young people build the buildings; do the well; we're gonna get the electricity."



I would be nothing without my community. Well just not grounded ideas, the spirituality that just prayed, and I was really pious. In fact, the first part, when I joined the sisters, I really wanted to be like a little mystic, not a great big mystic, like Teresa of Avila, who is even levitating in the kitchen, but maybe a little bitty mystic you know, where you really touch God.

And I talk about "click" - into my life: click- the sister that sat behind me in the chapel. Here I am, learning the ways of meditation, how to go to that deep part of your soul, your union with God; and what do I hear behind me, *click*, she's clicking her fingernails there in the chapel. She sat right behind me, interfered with my mystical life in every way. (laughter)

And, of course, I'm going to take you through the days of religious life before Vatican II, before the changes came in the Church.

And Vatican II is a bloomin' miracle. And, I mean, here they are gonna vote for this little roly poly guy, who smoked, as a little interim: Pope John XXIII. "Well, he ain't gonna last long anyway; he smokes like a fiend; he's overweight; we'll get him as the interim person, and then, we'll go get our guy in in the next conclave." And here goes roly poly, two months after being elected, saying, "The Holy Spirit said to me, 'It's time to have a gathering, a council in the Church'." And it's the first time there was ever an Ecumenical Council whose purpose was not to condemn somebody's heresy. He said we need to open the windows, needed to open the doors; and, believe me, nobody took that bit in their teeth and ran with the changes of Vatican II more than the nuns, 'cause we had everything to gain. Yeah! women. (applause)

The appendix in the book is the letter to Pope Francis and women in the Catholic Church; and we are never gonna to be whole, and we are never gonna to be healthy, as long as we have only all those little males coming together to make the policies and the decisions without the wisdom and spiritual insight and experience of women. (lots of applause) We wake up slowly. Theodore Roethke: "I wake to sleep and take my waking slow. I learn by going where I have to go." Experience in the Church, we the people; and so, Vatican II. Who's the church? People of the Church. We're a pilgrim Church. You think it's imperfect now, you think the institutional Church is a mess now? It's always been that way, we are always gonna be on the way, always gonna be imperfect. The more we know about Jesus, and the temple cult that ran what they called the liturgies in those days, the high priest, sold out to Rome. It was always when the institution, by its very nature, can get tied into power and wealth.

When Random house published *River of Fire*, they had published two of Pope Francis's books; and the first instinct, they said was, "Well, sister we will help. We will send the book to all the U.S. Catholic Bishops; we send them Pope Francis' book. And this good friend of mine, Robert Ellsberg, Orbis Press - his daddy is Daniel Ellsberg - talk about a whistle blower with the Pentagon Papers; and Robert, when he was 14, he xeroxed the Pentagon Papers, when his daddy is coming in, with all this secret McNamara report that just showed how the leaders of the United States were lying about our being in Vietnam. So, here's Robert, 14, and here's his little sister, Mary, who liked to work the scissors. So, he's xeroxing the Pentagon Papers; and Mary saying, "I wanna do something," So, they gave her the scissors and said, "Here Mary, your job is to just whenever you see these words at the top of the page, cut it off. And what were the words? "Top Secret."

So, there's Mary, the two of them, with their daddy may very well go to prison - I mean, the risk of his standing up as he did. And Robert tells me when he hears they are going to send *River of Fire* to all the U.S. bishops, he said, "Hell no, I wouldn't do that if I were you. More of the U.S. Bishops are for Trump than are for Francis." (audience upset) Now, does this shock you?

But we have to look and try to understand how things happen. And actually, compassion is born out of understanding. I got launched into this whole death penalty thing, where everybody and their cat was for the death penalty, when I emerged out of that killing chamber in 1984. What makes people support things like that? And compassion takes us into why would a warden be involved with



this? Why would guards be involved in strapping people down and killing them? Why, when *Dead Man Walking* came out in '93, did 80% of the American public support the death penalty? And I'm gonna tell ya: it's this thing of compassion. It's when people are removed from something. There's a great expression from Latin American Cardinal Ernesto in Nicaragua, "What the eye does not see, the

heart cannot feel." And I'm brought into the death chamber and I see it; and it sets me on fire. It is our witnessing; it is our being there; and when we look at social movements and how the Spirit moves in us to change things, it's always going to be people on the ground who get in there and witness.

So, how did slavery change? The institutional Church supported slavery. Every time I drive to the Louisiana State Penitentiary to see the man on death row that I am accompanying now, I pass the ruins of red bricks of a church where the white plantation owners would go to church, Christians here hear proclaimed from the pulpit one line from St. Paul that approved slavery, that kept it in place in Christian teaching for years: "Slaves be obedient to your owners." So, what was the message of the Gospel coming to the plantation owners and the white churches? "Well, be nice to your slaves; but, basically, they are your property." And boy, we have consciousness rising up. Here's the spirit: truth springs from the earth. Truth springs from experience. Truth springs from the people growing up, awakening, stamped from the beginning by Kinde, about slavery, and the legacy of slavery in this country.

And then also the 1619 project of the New York Times; real estate is coming out of that; banking is coming out of that; social grouping is coming out of that: the legacy that we treated people as property; and it was preached that way in the churches; and we never questioned it, because we weren't awake as a people.

And in many, many ways right now, and as troubling as these times are, we also see the rise of citizen activism in a way we have not seen in a long time. Truth springs up from the ground. Truth just sprang up from the ground in Louisiana, when John Bell Edwards, the only Democratic governor in the South - he's the only one I know who, when he talked about Trump, said: "Well God bless his heart." Well, I mean, that is a southern expression y'all can say, tongue in check, "God bless his heart." I mean, but is it what he said that saved Louisiana. African American people who got out to vote, once again saved our state; African American people, who know the truth about what's goin' on. And by the fact that he was re-elected, and Trump came to our state three times, and it would have been a terrible thing - terrible thing - if the man that Trump put up would have been elected. 700,000 people would have lost their health care if the Trump person had been elected in Louisiana. Citizen activism. God wakes us up and we act. (applause)

Never alone, we don't last long if we act alone. And all those experiences of Resurrection, Pentecost recorded is when the people gathered together in a room, the apostles are together. Get a hold of Sandra Schneider's book on the Resurrection and I am gonna to tell you, can you imagine the guilt I accompanied people in prison, like a man whose been in 42 years now in a Louisiana State Penitentiary? He killed three people, he killed a woman he was angry at, and her two children., tied their hands behind their backs, 9 years old, 12 years old, and threw them in one of the bayous, and drowned them - killed three people. He's never probably going to get out of prison. How does a human being sustain that kind of guilt day after day, and not just devolve into, "I am nothing but a disposable human waste, I did that deed." How do you not collapse inwardly when you do something so terrible?

And because we read the Gospels with the hindsight of knowing the resurrection, and we say, "Yeh! the apostles are going through a tough time after Jesus was executed." A tough time? They had all run away. They had all betrayed him. He was taken out and he was killed; and they have that to live with the rest of their lives. And that story that emanated about Peter that is probably symbolic of a number of, "Well I don't know the man." They betrayed him; and they have to live with that the rest of their life. And here Sandra Schneider takes us - I mean, this is meditating on the scriptures; this is getting into the words; this is taking the words in.



What would it be like to know that we have betrayed our best friend, the one who had taught us so much? And stories from families, a mother died who had been estranged. “I never got a chance to make peace with my father or mother before she died, and I live with this, what could I have done?” Or someone in the family commits suicide: “I didn't know he was in such pain.” That guilt we live

under, that we never love enough; but imagine the guilt. And she takes that Resurrection story of Sunday night and just simply says that, “He was in their midst.” Later, as the Gospels were written, it got to be more and more physical: “He's coming through wooden doors.” They make it more physical; it's the thing of making something come alive for our meditation. But simply said: “He was in their midst.”

And what was his first word? “Peace.” What does the word peace mean? Peace means: be at peace: “I know you betrayed me; I know you were confused; I know you were scared; I know you; I know, peace.” And then he says, and here's her great contribution here, you know what had always been translated for us: “Those that you forgive will be forgiven; and those whose sins you retain, will be retained.” Well, the first part of the message was: “Those you forgive will be forgiven,” because we know we can't be community for longer than a weekend, or we can't be in a marriage for longer than a weekend, or be a family for longer than a weekend, if we don't forgive each other, because we are always messing up with each other. We will constantly need forgiveness, just like the immune system in the body constantly clears out the cells to keep us healthy. Forgiveness is just a dynamic that always.... But it was the second part which was interpreted by the institutional Church, especially after Trent, of trying to find the places in the Scriptures to uphold all the sacraments, “And whose sins you retain shall be retained.”

Now, what kind of earthly power of the instruments of God is gonna say, “Well, maybe God is ready to forgive you now, but we're gonna retain those sins a little while, 'cause I'm not gonna give you forgiveness.” What a contradiction what the whole message of God is.

And she said that Greek word, "Whose sins you retain," it wasn't retainin' the sin; and it really translates, "And those you hold fast shall be held fast," and harkens back to Jesus saying, "No one snatches my sheep out of my hands." We hold each other fast. Is that not what we do here. Is that not why we are all here? We're holding each other fast, and sharing our faith, and living in as much authenticity as we can, about what we know about the Gospel of Jesus, and being that in the world, letting it ripple through us into the world today.

So, this book, seven years in the making, I mostly write in the summers 'cause I stay on the road. And the most I can say is that God has used me. I mean, what are the changes of a nun in over her head. The gift of being in over your head, when you write a book is, you can take your reader with you, 'cause clearly you're not coming out on page one like who, "Oh! here's the expert who is gonna tell us about everything." She ain't an expert on anything; in over your head, so you are learning, so your reader can come with you.

And just to tell you a little bit about the shaping of the film *Dead Man Walking*, I learned from Tim Robbins, the difference between art and propaganda. So, here you have Tim Robbins, he's against the death penalty with every DNA molecule in his body; he's going to do a film. Most people thought he's going to do an anti-death penalty film. How do you shape a film to be an anti-death penalty film? Well, you show the crime early on; and then all the energy of the film is in the person who did it, who at first is not remorseful; but then, you see that person being transformed, seeing them ask forgiveness for what they did, and acknowledging it, and before they are executed; and you don't bring back the crime again before the eyes of the people. And a film student from DePaul University asked him, "Mr. Robbins, what do you mean, when you say it takes boldness and courage to be a film maker? What you are referring in an instance where you had to be bold?" And Tim said, "Yeh, I can tell you exactly; and it was when we were editing *Dead Man Walking*."

So, here's the character of Mathew Poncelet; and he won't admit what he did. He participated in the rape and killing of innocent people; and he won't admit what he did; and he won't admit, and finally, he has that moment of conversion; and he's weeping; and then, before he is executed; and while they were editing it, everybody on the editing group but Tim said, "Stop the film there with his execution, 'cause you have the audience. And he said, "I don't want to have the audience." And he juxtaposed the execution of Matthew Poncelet with the murder, shows him committing the murder. There's the murder, fresh in the minds of the people. And the theatre managers told Tim Robbins they had never shown a film in their theatre where, at the end of it, everybody just stayed seated till the screen went blank, and they filed out in silence, because they were thinking. And that is what art does. That's what meditation does.

And you notice, at the very end of the film, is praying; my going to a chapel to pray with the victim's family, Earl Delacroes. The name even means cross. He is stretched out, wanting that revenge, and trying to follow the whole thing of forgiveness, and letting his heart stay intact; and we pray together; and that's the end of the film - praying together. You've got to go to the deeper place. And so, it's an amazing film, but it took courage. And so, one thing I learned.

So, the book comes out in '93. What chances does a book have when 80% of the people of the United States thought the death penalty was a good idea. There is a nun, who is a spiritual advisor for somebody on death row writes a book. And I'm gonna tell you right now, I've only had great Jewish editors at Random House; and if I had that Jason Epstein in the shaping of this story, you never would have heard about *Dead Man Walking*. And then, in the very next year, Susan Sarandon wouldn't have read the book, when it came out in paperback, and she would not have pestered Tim Robbins for nine months 'till finally he did the film. And then, on the feast of the Annunciation, 1996, with 1.3 billion people watching, four nominations of *Dead Man Walking*, and it spread around the world.



Dead Man Walking got into the vernacular; and I was in Japan six weeks after the Academy Award, and a taxicab driver said, "*Dead Man Walking*." And that's God, when that stuff happens. You know it's God, right? None of that would have happened if Jason hadn't help me shape this story. So, I sent him the first draft, and anybody writing, you want to bring people fairly over to both sides; and when you make a mistake, you also want to share that, and not try to spin it; and that's what Jason helped me with the most.

So, in the first draft he read it; and he said, "You are so holding up the human rights of this man who did these murders, that you wait far too long before you talk about the crime; and look, nobody is going to read your book. And they are going to say, 'She's a nun. She believes Jesus said to forgive. She's a spiritual advisor. She's not gonna be able to really stand at the heart of the killing of two innocent kids in cold blood and leaving them dead in a sugar cane field, with bullet holes in the backs of their heads; she's not going to be able to face that.'

And if you don't, within the first ten pages, talk about that crime, stand before it, be outraged by it yourself, nobody is going to read your book." That was number one.

And then, the second thing he really helped me with was about the victim's family. I didn't know what to do with the victim's family. I mean, I am just in with this man, I can't believe he's going to be executed, when I'm talking about sneaky Jesus, part one and two, when I got the invitation to write a man on death row, it was 1982; and we hadn't had an execution in Louisiana in 20 years. There had been an unofficial moratorium. I thought I was only going to be writing letters. And, I was an English major, and I thought I could write some nice letters. I had no idea that two and a half years later, he's gonna be executed, and I'm gonna be there at that scene. And that's the way grace works - sneaky Jesus.

"Hey, you want to be on a little committee. We have a little committee goin'. Just gonna ask you to come to a few meetings; and you put your little boat in.: And the next thing you know, you are in white water rapids with this committee, or whatever. We get involved in things, but God's grace comes to us when we need the grace, not ahead of time. And so, I write the letter; and then, I realize from his letters he has no one to visit him. He didn't even ask me to come. But here I am, writing a man and here I am now - the Gospels: how many times had I read in the Gospel of Matthew, "I was hungry; you gave me to eat. I was in prison; and you came to me." I mean, there are the words and I'm writing somebody. So, here is sneaky Jesus, part two, because I was: write Pat Sonnier and said, "Look, I will come see you sometime." I just thought it was gonna be like a little end run. I was going to keep doing my ministry at Hope House at the adult learning center working with the people. Little end run. Go visit the guy sometime. You don't know when you do this end run, this end run is going to be your whole life. You know it turns you upside down. You don't know it, 'cause grace happens, right?

So then, I write to him and say, "I'll come to see you sometime." Return mail. Visit a farm. "You'll come see me." Well, look, you can't just go to the front of the prison and say, "I want to see so and so." You gotta be approved as a visitor in a certain slot. So, he said, "You're a nun and I'm a Catholic; you could be my spiritual advisor." Sure. Fill it out. Send it in. And I did not know that, when he would be killed at midnight, at six o'clock in the evening, everybody would have to leave that death house, the lawyer, family, everybody except the spiritual advisor, who can be with him, and accompany him in those last hours, and be with him when he is killed and say to him, "Grace," underneath me. Saying to him when they do this, "Look at my face; and I will be the face of Christ for you."

Grace comes up under us as we need it; and as we age, and as we accompany one another through death, grace comes up under us, not ahead of time, to be able to do what God calls us to do. If we start anticipating, we come unraveled. My only place of privacy in the death house was the women's room. It's filled with men, with guns all around, for the killing of this one human being. But they had the women's room, and I could go there; and it is recaptured in the scene where you see Susan Sarandon as me going into that bathroom, and just praying, "O God, God please help me." Actually, it was a selfish prayer I said in the bathroom. I mean like, "God please don't let him fall apart." I didn't know what I would do; I was holding up by a thread. What if he just suddenly emotionally fell on his knees, and started crying, and said, "I don't want to die." I mean, I don't know what I would have done. So, it's like we held each other up, and he'd say, "Sr. Helen are you okay?" And I'd say, "Yeh, Pat," and then we'd pray together, we'd be together, holding each other up with feet firmly in midair, because it's all faith then, but taking it step by step by step.

And this I want to bring you into. The conversation with my Church. The dialogue always has been, first and foremost, nine out of every ten times, it's been with the people in parishes, in churches, has been with the people. Where do you go? You go to the people. Where do I go? Not to governors, first of all; much less to the President; but to the people of the United States.

And when I came out of that killing chamber, that night after midnight, and I just witnessed this of the rendering of a person defenseless, and taking him, and killing him. Came out in a prison vehicle - they bring you to the gate - our sisters were there waiting for me. They put a coat around me; and these lawyers, who had worked so hard to save his life, were there. Then, the first thing I did was throw up; I vomited. I'd never witnessed the intentional killing of a person rendered defenseless. And my journey then began; my mission was really born that night.

It's very clear to me that I remember thinking about you. I began thinking about the American people are good people. The only reason they are supporting this is they are not anywhere close. As Bishop Gumbleton brought out in the introduction, they don't know. They're never gonna see this. They're gonna get news; and they're gonna see there was a terrible killing of two teenage kids. Justice was done; he was executed; end of reflection. But to be there, to go there, and my job then was to go to them, to bring them the story. I didn't know what I was gonna do. I didn't know I was gonna write a book, I did what everybody does in Louisiana first; you talk to each other. We are a talking group in Louisiana. We have crawfish talks for three hours. If you don't know how to talk and tell stories, you ain't gonna be invited to the crawfish bar.

We're oral tradition in a lot of ways. And so, I just began to talk to people and then gradually it emerged about writing and then writing a book.

So now then, the dialogue goes on, and Elie Wiesel, in writing his book, *Night of the Holocaust*, says, "Those of us who are brought in, and witness something ahead of the rest of the community, have a moral imperative to go to the people, and to be a witness. "I wanna tell you what I have seen." So, we bump along, bump along; and you stay in the dialogue long enough, eventually you're gonna bump into a pope or two. I mean, I bumped into bishops along the way - bishops were the toughest. In fact, when I started out in Louisiana, we had Bishop Phillip Hannan, who had been in the military as paratrooper- chaplain, who was all for the death penalty, and blocked every chance of any bishop getting in there to the legislature, or even in the pulpits, to summon the people.

There was a terrible statistic in the 1980s that said that: "The more people went to church, the more they believed in the death penalty." And it's a crass misunderstanding of the execution of Jesus. I mean, I don't think that's passed us. In Wyoming, six, seven months ago, they were close to repeal; you come down to the final votes. A woman, who was a Senator, said, "I'm not voting to repeal the death penalty. If Jesus hadn't been executed by the Romans, we wouldn't be saved from our sins." Look at how unthought-of it is; straight out of St. Anselm in the 10th century. You know, the atonement thing of God will only be satisfied with the sacrifice, a death for a death. What kind of a God is that?

But, biblical literacy is almost nil in this country; so, it's really easy to have proof texting that goes on by politicians like Jeff Sessions just did, about separation of children from their parents at the border, quoting Romans 13, as Justice Scales used to love to do about the death penalty, saying, "These people, coming to the border, are breaking the law. And we quote St. Paul's words, 'When you obey civil authority and the law, you are obeying God. You break the law; you are disobeying God'. They are disobeying the law, coming here illegally; and they bring their children." So there, it's on them that we separate their children from them; and equating the law of the United States with the law of God. And because people are biblically illiterate and don't know.

Do you know, 13% of Americans identify Joan of Arc as Noah's wife? (laughter) I'm not pulling your leg. What do they know? They see Arc and Ark. "Oh yeh! duh! she's gotta be his wife." Right? Look, we got our work cut out for us. So, here I am, thrown into all this 1980s; and here we got Bishop Hannan - God bless him - anytime we got a real person, who is gonna be executed, they call him and say, "Archbishop, we really need you to send a letter to the pardon board."

And he would,... like he didn't want real people to be executed; but he wanted the death penalty and hold it up.

So, I stay in dialogue; and here's my one little bit of wisdom, which you already know: when we love our family, when we love our Church, when we love our nation, we stay at the table, and we stay in the dialogue. We don't retreat over to our little silo. We stay in the dialogue, in any way that we can, which means we keep learning; and we learn how to listen; and we learn how to be able to stand. Where are they coming from; where is the fear underneath this? And I understand better how we got into the death penalty in the United States. Crime had been rising. It's gonna really benefit politicians, who by running on tough on crime, they're gonna be able to get elected. So, they got an incentive, and the people are made to be afraid. You put all those together, and you got whence people are afraid. They are afraid, then, anything can happen, if they don't see the outcome. So, the dialogue with my Church.

So, the second book I wrote, *Death of Innocence*, is about innocent people I was with, who were executed. And here's the big learning thing. I had no idea how the courts worked. I thought, if they made mistakes at your trial and if the truth didn't come out, you had the appeals. So, if you got good lawyers, you went in for the appeals, you could say, "Look! this so-called jail house snitch lied; and that put the nail in the coffin for me." Or, "Look! the DNA evidence that I could never get a hold of, now I can get the DNA test to show that I am really innocent." And, that you could just bring it to an appeals court, and then it could be heard, and that way no wrongfully convicted person would ever have ever be convicted, because you had the appeals.

I didn't know how the appeals worked. I didn't know it was like those treddles that come up behind you when you leave a parking lot, or something and things called procedural bars. These are legalisms. These are: "If you have a certain amount of time to get your evidence in; otherwise, we will not hear your case." And when we are dealing with all poor people in this process, who sometimes have terrible defense. I didn't know if you didn't present, if your lawyer didn't raise a formal objection, when this all white jury is seated, and you are a black man, and your lawyer didn't raise a formal objection, it doesn't get in the transcript; then no appeals court will look at it. It is over for you 'cause they didn't raise a formal objection. And you try to say, "But my lawyer was totally inadequate;" too late. We've had people executed because, when they finally got a good lawyer, they filed it one day late; and they killed him anyway. *Death of Innocence*, I get into the whole thing of the Appeal Court.

But the second story is about a man by the name of Joseph O'Dell. How do I get involved in these cases? You get summoned. You just get summoned, right? So, I get a phone call - lawyers. She was part of the Centurion Project, coming out of Princeton, that she volunteered, that maybe she would write to some people who were innocent; and they were one of the first in the country to take on an innocent project for people in prison wrongly. And you see the mountain you have to climb. "Hey! I'm innocent. I'm imprisoned and I'm innocent." I mean, it's just so unbelievable, that in America, it could happen. But a man, by the name of Joseph O'Dell of Virginia, lawyers wanting to do something with their life. Volunteers with the Centurion Project get hooked up with this man, Joseph O'Dell. Begins to write to him, and he is saying to her, "I am innocent. I did not kill and rape this woman, Helen Shart. I did not do that!"

She knows nothing; but she gets the transcripts, and she starts digging into it. And this is a thing, and it's a gift of Vatican II, it's a gift of "Look at the signs of the times," which means, "When I was just mainly praying for the world, I wasn't using my intelligence very much. I wasn't digging into the news. I wasn't doing an analysis of social policies. I was just prayin'." But she starts digging into this case of this man, Joseph O'Dell, who said, "Look what happened to me and I'm innocent." She gets involved and Italy - I don't know what it is about the Italians, but they are really great about human rights. So, members of the Italian Parliament hear about this man, Joseph O'Dell - you have got to believe this - and before it was over, the governor of Virginia had gotten 10,000 faxes from the people of Italy: "Do not kill Joseph O'Dell."

He couldn't wait to kill Joseph O'Dell to get all these Italians off his back; and they are sending delegations from the Parliament, and through this activity within Italy, Pope John Paul II hears about Joseph O'Dell. I got a phone call from Laurie one day. She said, "Hey Sugar, guess what? The Italian Parliament has invited me to go over to talk about Joseph's case, 'cause they want to get even more involved; and I hear I might be able to meet with the pope; and maybe you could come with me, because like nuns and popes are tight right? (laughter) I said, "Some nuns and some popes are tight - but my good friend Chris was dying of breast cancer - and I said, "I can't go;" and she said, "Well look! Write a letter." and look at the miracle in this.

I write a letter. It was January 1, 1997. I write the letter. I put it in Laurie's hands. Meanwhile, the word had kind of spread in the press that there was going to be this *Dead Man Walking* nun - that's how I'm known now - had written a letter to the Pope. So, the press had gotten wind of it. So, by the time Laurie gets in the Vatican with the Secretary of State to the Pope, he said, "I understand you have a letter." She hands him the letter.

The letter then goes into the lap of Pope John Paul. When? Right as the pope was looking at the definitive Latin addition of the Catechism of 1995- the definitive edition - and suddenly, I hear on the news: there's been a delay in the catechism; and I heard the delay was happening around the death penalty. I went. "Wow!" You just got to wait to see what happens, right?

But it got to John Paul II; and here was the essential thing in that letter. When you look at the teaching of the Church, it has always been about the defending of human life, that the state has the right to take life to defend society 'cause they didn't have prisons, they didn't have a way to incapacitate violent people - Thomas Aquinas in the 12th century. It's like having a rabid dog that you put down; or a gangrenous arm that you amputate from the body to save the health of the whole body. It was never about, there are some crimes, by their very nature, and some murderers, in their very nature, are so evil that we must eradicate them or terminate them. It was never that! It was always about defending society.

And so, when I write to him, and, you know, you don't talk to a pope any different than I am talking to you - you don't have like this pope language, like you do in a letter, whatever. And I just said, "Your Holiness, when I am walkin' with a man to execution; and when his feet are shackled, his hands shackled, surrounded by six guards, I am gonna walk with him, like across the length of here to the back (back of this church), and they are gonna strap him down, and render him completely defenseless, and kill him. Does the Catholic Church only uphold the dignity of innocent life?" I meet so many Catholics who say they are pro-life, but they are for the executions. Is dignity only for the innocent? What about the guilty? And it's that defenselessness; because always, the rationale was to defend society.

But we have prisons; we have a way to protect society, as most of the nations of the world, ever since the U. N. Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, began to circle the world. Nation after nation has put down the death penalty; out of 195, the vast majority now. We are one of the few that has held onto it, probably because of the political power that is still in it; it but it is fading. And we are winning; and the wave is hitting the shore; and you gotta know about your state of Michigan: you were the first democratic body in the world to abolish the death penalty; and never let it be entered onto your books during all these waves in the United States. Michigan is a very special place. (applause)

So anyway, the pope gets the letter; there's a little delay about the death penalty thing; and then, two years later, he's in St. Louis, 1999; and it was the first time we heard the death penalty put with the other pro-life issues.

And it was: no to abortion, no to euthanasia, no to physician assisted suicide, and he said, “No to the death penalty, because, even those among us who have done a terrible crime, have a dignity that must not be taken from them.” And it's that utter defenselessness.

So, in the Geneva Conventions, prisoners of war, “You cannot take a prisoner of war, tie their hands behind their back, put them against the wall, and shoot them.” It's the defenselessness. And the pope got it. He got it 'cause he had a good heart. He got it because he belongs to a body of people that are infused with the Spirit and the Church. I wasn't the only one, like someone, like Catherine of Sienna, who got to the Pope and got him to come back to Rome from Avignon, or something like that. I am part of the body; and the bubbles were coming up in the pot everywhere; and then, finally, it got to him. And that's the way things change.

So, with all the bishops' letters coming out about the death penalty in the 70s, the 80s, always they had in there: to hold on to the right of the state to take life. That was always in there. And the significance of Pope Francis, on August 2, 2018, saying for the first time ever, “Under no conditions can we ever have the state have the authority to decide that human beings can die.” We cannot give them that; we have principles of opposition that Amnesty International has had for years. So, we have people in human rights that have been ahead of us; but we are all community together, we learn from one another, and together we rise. We rise morally to come to understand things. But to just change that document, the catechism, that's words in a document. It's to bring it into the hearts and the minds of the people, to be able to catch on fire, and to be able to get into the prisons, and to be able to act. That's what faith is all about. It's about acting. It's about being ignited, and then acting.

You know, in my own life, when I was just trying to figure out what to do. I could do this, there are so many issues, I felt paralyzed. The minute I put my hand on a rope and began to pull, that's when the life flows through us. And so, the more we look at the vast array of problems, and the more we know, we can just sit, and isolated, and on the internet; we can just feel more and more paralyzed about how bad everything is, how hopeless everything is, and the good thing about doing a book is, the conversations when people gather in a room together, like we are doing here. It's the gathering together in a room, where we are with each other and delving into things. And so the questions - all kinds of questions - of how do you meditate? How do you hear purpose in your life? How do you keep sustained in your life? Just people asking each other these questions, and the kind of conversations that are coming out of the book.

I was a slow learner in many ways. I just stayed with the Sisters of St. Joseph in Kansas City, where they started a community for women right out of prison, and I said, “You know, I was 45 before I understood the Gospel of Jesus was about getting involved with justice, and not just charity.” And one of the women, straight out of prison, said, “You were a slow learner, weren't you?” (laughter) I went, “Yeh, I was, but God can work with slow learners.” And it doesn't matter when we wake up; it's that when we wake up, we put our hand to a rope; and we let God's energy flow through us; and we begin to act. Hope is never in the abstract and thinking about stuff. Hope comes from being connected, community, and then acting.

So, I'm really glad to be with you today, so we haven conversation together. The rest of it is just goin' to be you, questions and comments and sharin' wisdom together with each other. And before it's directed up here to me, a chance for a break for you to be able to share with each other. And I'll be happy to sign these books. It's a precious thing to share life and give it over to community. We'll let the Holy Spirit stir the pot; and then, we'll come back and answer your questions. (applause)

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Bev Parker

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Photos by

Fr. Don Walker