

DIOCESAN NEWS

Nun wants church to condemn death penalty

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, is glad the Catholic Church — and in particular, Pope John Paul II — has become more forceful in speaking out against the death penalty. Still, she would like to see the church condemn its use altogether.

"You have to establish that nobody is permitted to kill," she said in an interview with the *Catholic Courier* following a speech she gave Jan. 15 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, 125 E. Main St.

A member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, the 57-year-old Louisiana nun's experiences counseling death row prisoners and the families of their victims were made famous by the 1994 film "Dead Man Walking." The movie was based on Sister's Prejean's 1993 book of the same name, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

The movie earned Susan Sarandon, who played Sister Prejean, an Oscar. It has also done much to publicize the woman religious and her crusade against the death penalty, Sister Prejean said. She added that the film was effective because, rather than posing as an anti-death-penalty propaganda piece, it portrayed the killer in the movie, played by Sean Penn, as the kind of remorseless convict many people believe should be executed.

"What do we do with this scumbag guy who killed this innocent person and isn't even remorseful?" she said the film asked.

In fact, one high-school student wrote an essay on the movie that buttressed her belief that the movie presented a balanced picture, she recalled.

"He wrote, 'Before I saw "Dead Man Walking," I was pro-death penalty," she remembered. "After I saw "Dead Man Walking," I'm even more pro-death-penal-



Sister Helen Prejean, C.J.S., and Jim Moreno from the N.Y. Capital Defender's Office answer questions following a talk by Sister Prejean at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse chapel, Rochester, Jan. 15.

Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

ty. He got what he deserved!"

Sister Prejean made several appearances in the Rochester area last week, including her speech before representatives of the community's civic, legal and political institutions at the Hyatt. She also spoke later that day at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse, 4095 East Ave. Her appearances were sponsored by the Common Ground Consistent Life Awareness Fund, a not-for-profit secular organization.

In her interview at the Hyatt, Sister Prejean commended the 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church for calling on civil authorities to refrain from using the death penalty by stating: "If bloodless means are sufficient to defend human lives against an aggressor and to protect public order and the safety of person, public authority should limit itself to such means ..."

However, in her speech Sister Prejean said she wrote the pope in hopes that he might consider ending the church's stance that, in certain grave instances, the state may use the death penalty. In practice, the death penalty is generally applied to poor minority defendants who often receive shabby legal defenses at their trials, she said. Besides the fact that a number of innocent people have been executed, she stressed that it is virtually impossible for society to guarantee that the death penalty can be applied equitably.

"I think it has to be off-limits for us," she said, adding that she does support life sentences without any chance of parole for people convicted of murder in the first degree.

During her interview, Sister Prejean responded to an article that appeared last

year in *Our Sunday Visitor* charging she did not fully support the church's consistent life ethic, which opposes abortion, the death penalty, war, euthanasia and poverty. The article implied that Sister Prejean was pro-choice on the abortion issue.

"I'm not for abortion," Sister Prejean said, adding that she had only said she could understand why some poor women feel pressured financially to obtain abortions.

"If we want to talk practically about having abortions not happen, we have to give support to these women," she said.

She also said that with the pending approval of drugs like RU-486 that would enable women to abort at home, legal censure of abortion is becoming an ineffective strategy to end it.

In her speech at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse, Sister Prejean said the more people know that the death penalty overwhelmingly targets poor and minority defendants, the less they support it. She called on church members to lobby against the death penalty, but added that churches should also reach out to victims' families who must grapple with the pain of losing a loved one to a killer.

Sister Prejean said she and other religious leaders are organizing a Nov. 14-16 meeting in Washington, D.C., to launch a national campaign by U.S. religious communities against the death penalty. Christians, in particular, should have an interest in ending the death penalty, she said, because capital punishment embraces the kind of despair about a person's redemption that Jesus rejected.

"You know what makes the death penalty possible is a lack of identification (with the executed)," she said. "The Body of Christ means that no matter what anyone has done, we're all connected to each other."

St. Mary's Hospital joins Park Ridge in new health system

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester and Park Ridge Health System in Greece have signed an agreement, effective Jan. 14, that combines the two institutions into the St. Mary's-Park Ridge Health System.

The new system brings together St. Mary's, a not-for-profit 218-bed hospital affiliated with the Daughters of Charity National Health System-East, Inc., and Park Ridge, a not-for-profit 621-bed community-based network. The new system will provide services at more than 60 sites in the counties of Monroe, Orleans and Ontario.

Timothy McCormick, president and chief executive officer of Park Ridge, will serve as the new system's president and CEO, according to a press statement released by both institutions. He was out of town and unavailable for an interview, however, when contacted by the *Catholic Courier*.

In an interview last summer, McCormick stated that Park Ridge has agreed to comply with the Catholic ethical guidelines under which St. Mary's op-

erates. That would include guidelines on the treatment of dying patients and the provision of obstetrical and gynecological services, he said.

St. Mary's president and CEO, Stewart Putnam, will serve as vice president and chief operating officer of the new system, he said in a telephone interview with the *Courier*.

Putnam predicted consolidating services would lead to some layoffs in every department of both institutions over the next two years, but he gave no specific figures. He added that the new system will allow both institutions to shore up their futures in an era of declining inpatient admissions.

"The thing that allows us to come together ... is our ability to deal with the oversupply of hospital beds," he said.

The new system will be operated by a holding company overseen by a 20-member board chaired by Sister Marie Burns, DC, chair of St. Mary's board. The new board consists of 10 representatives from each institution, Putnam said.

The Daughters of Charity National Health System-East, Inc., has pledged to invest \$40 million into the new system for service reconfiguration, capital improvements and debt reduction.

The agreement calls for:

- Consolidation and relocation of St. Mary's inpatient medical/surgical and obstetrical services to Park Ridge.

- Relocation of the Park Ridge's inpatient psychiatric beds to St. Mary's. Park Ridge currently has 25 such beds, and St. Mary's has 20, but Putnam said the final combined number of beds may be less than 45.

- Consolidation of both institutions' rehabilitation services and relocation of Park Ridge's 15 acute beds to St. Mary's, which has 33.

- Relocation of Park Hope Nursing Home from its current location on Mount Hope Avenue in Rochester to St. Mary's. The Park Ridge home has 120 beds, Putnam said, adding that St. Mary's will renovate existing hospital space to house the nursing facility.

- Expansion of ambulatory care services at St. Mary's, which will also retain its emergency department and urgent care services.

- Combining of both institutions' clinical laboratories and occupational health programs.

In the statement, McCormick said both institutions will form work groups of staff and physicians to develop plans and procedures for the new system.

"This is an excellent opportunity for us to take a fresh look at the way we are delivering care to achieve the highest levels of cost-efficiency, quality and customer service," McCormick said in the statement.

Putnam said that officials from the new system plan to meet with about 30 area physicians on Feb. 11 to discuss improving care for inner-city patients under the new system.

The agreement is the culmination of discussions that began early in 1996. Officials from both health facilities signed a non-binding memorandum of understanding last August, noting both institutions' desires to discuss consolidating services and facilities.

Memorial service set for Fr. Orestes Coccia, was McQuaid teacher

A memorial Mass for Father Orestes Paul Coccia, SJ, has been scheduled for 11 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 25, at Holy Family Church, 415 Ames St., Rochester.

The former McQuaid Jesuit High School teacher died Nov. 17, 1996, at Campion Hall, the Jesuit residence at the University of Scranton.

Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580) Vol. 108
No. 15 January 23, 1997

Published weekly except the first Thursday in January.

Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$20.00; Canada and foreign \$20.00 plus postage. Offices: 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624, 716/328-4340. Periodicals postage paid at Rochester, N.Y.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, P.O. Box 24379, Rochester, N.Y. 14624.

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