

DIOCESAN NEWS

Nun continues crusade against death penalty

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, had just finished telling a University of Rochester theology class about the oppression death-row inmates experience. A student challenged her, asking how she could describe the inmates as "oppressed" in light of their criminal convictions.

Even with the popularity of her book, *Dead Man Walking*, and movie by the same name, Sister Prejean later acknowledged that she still catches flak when she speaks out against the death penalty.

"People do stand up, and do challenge," Sister Prejean said Oct. 25.

But the 61-year-old Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet is well equipped with responses. Among the reasons she cites for opposing capital punishment: the unjust convictions of some death-row inmates, especially among minorities; the mental torture inmates face in not knowing when they'll be put to death; the suffering inflicted on prisoners' loved ones; and the negated possibility that a prisoner may have a spiritual conversion.

"The journey of liberation is to not use violence as a means of solving problems," Sister Prejean stated. Yet, she said, the death penalty is a symbol of "legitimized



vengeance in this society" where movie audiences will "cheer when a head is blown off."

The New Orleans resident recently gave three public lectures in the Rochester Diocese: at Ithaca College Oct. 23, at Cornell University Oct. 24, and at the University of Rochester Oct. 25. During her Oct. 25 talk, Sister Prejean had strong words for Gov. George Pataki's reintroduction of the death penalty in New York state in 1995. She said this legislative act has drained major tax dollars, but has yet to be proven as an effective deterrent to crime.

"Five years later, he (Pataki) has spent \$80 million and he has five trophies on death row," Sister Prejean said. (No executions have taken place in New York since the death penalty was restored.)

Sister Prejean also noted that the state of Texas, under the governance of Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, has more incidents of capital punishment than practically all other U.S. states combined. Throughout his campaign, Bush has maintained that the death

penalty deters crime. His chief opponent in the presidential race, Democrat Vice-President Al Gore, also supports capital punishment.

Sister Prejean addressed approximately 500 people during her evening lecture at the University of Rochester. Today's public consciousness regarding the death penalty, she said, is much greater than when she began protest marches in the mid-1980s. Then she had few supporters, she recalled, and "half the people going by in their car gave us the finger and yelled 'Fry the SOB's.'"

Sister Prejean has witnessed the deaths of five Louisiana State Prison inmates to whom she served as spiritual adviser. She detailed her ministry in the 1993 book, *Dead Man Walking*, which stayed on *The New York Times* best-seller list for 31 weeks and later was developed into a movie released in late 1995 by PolyGram Films. It earned four Academy Award nominations including a Best Actress Oscar for Susan Sarandon, who portrayed Sister Prejean.

"The movie was successful against all odds," Sister Prejean said. "The (major) Hollywood studios didn't believe people would want to reflect (on the death penalty). We showed those film makers that you could do a film like that."

Sister Prejean has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998, 1999 and 2000. She lectures most of the year while

also continuing her ministry to death-row inmates — as well as the families of crime victims — in New Orleans. In addition, she leads a national campaign, "Moratorium 2000," which seeks to end the death penalty by collecting signatures that are forwarded to legislators.

Though she has become close friends with Sarandon and her boyfriend, "Dead Man Walking" director Tim Robbins, Sister Prejean said that she prefers to "stay with the ordinary people" rather than hobnob with the Hollywood elite.

Sister Prejean's common touch was evident as she mingled with U of R students at dinner before her Oct. 25 talk. She talked for several minutes with a student group from Amnesty International, which cosponsored her appearance with the U of R's Newman Catholic Community.

"She sounds like she's very in touch with human-rights issues. Even though she's known for the death penalty, she seems to have a keen awareness of those other issues," said Sarah Clock, 20, a U of R junior who belongs to Amnesty International.

Newman Community member Romeo Galang, 19, said talking with Sister Prejean spurred his desire to reflect more deeply on the death penalty.

"Hearing about it in classes and the media is not enough. This is a human life you're talking about, and you can't bring it back," said Romeo, a sophomore.

St. Charles, Greece, notes 75th

GREECE — A yearlong 75th anniversary celebration by St. Charles Borromeo Parish will reach its pinnacle on Saturday, Nov. 4, when Bishop Matthew H. Clark presides at the 5 p.m. Mass. The liturgy will fall on the feast day of the parish's patron saint.

Bishop Clark is also the scheduled homilist that day. Concelebrants will be Father Ed Palumbos, St. Charles' pastor; Father Mickey McGrath, priest intern; and Father Elmer Heindl, priest in residence.

A public reception in the parish hall will follow the Mass. Sister Barbara Baker, MSHH, pastoral associate, noted that many former priests and staff have been invited to the Nov. 4 festivities.

Also during the weekend, artifacts from both of St. Charles' church cornerstones, laid in 1926 and 1966, will be on display at the parish. Sister Baker added that parishioners will add new artifacts to the cornerstones before they're put back in place.

In addition to the Nov. 4 activities, the parish has staged a jubilee-related event each month throughout the calendar year. Among those events were a gala dinner in February; a parish Lenten project; a parish picnic in August; and a St. Charles School history project in October. And, the Sunday liturgies of Dec. 30-31 will have a special focus on the anniversary year as well.

St. Charles parishioner Sharon O'Brien, coordinator of the 75th anniversary events committee, said she's taken special pride in the jubilee due to her longstanding affiliation with the parish.

"I've been here nearly 50 years, and there are a lot of other families in similar situations," O'Brien said. "It's always been

home to me, no matter where I've lived in Greece."

St. Charles Parish, located at 3003 Dewey Ave., served 72 families upon its inception in 1925. The parish was named in honor of St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), the patron saint of learning and the arts. Charles Borromeo became bishop of Milan, Italy, in his 20s and played a crucial role in the reformation of the Catholic Church. He was canonized in 1610.

A combined church and school for the new St. Charles Parish opened in 1926, and a convent soon followed. A 1938 fire badly damaged the school, but it was rebuilt and expanded in 1940. Another expansion was completed in 1950.

Discussions for a new church, to accommodate the growing population in Greece, went on for many years. The possibility became reality when a new structure opened for Easter Sunday liturgies in 1967. The old church then became part of the school. It currently houses a gymnasium and offices.

Other facilities on the St. Charles campus are the Heindl House, a former youth center that now houses a pre-K program; and the Borromeo Prayer Center, which opened in 1991 and is considered one of the most comprehensive prayer centers in the Rochester Diocese. Borromeo Prayer Center was directed by Father Francis Blighton, parochial vicar of St. Charles, until his death on Jan. 11.

Today the parish comprises approximately 2,500 families, according to Father Palumbos, who has served as St. Charles' pastor since 1992.

— Mike Latona



John Powell/Photo intern

Charitable creatures

Tom Racko of Fairport (left) and Roger Scalzo of Irondequoit dance the "YMCA" during a Halloween party sponsored by Odyssey, the diocesan young adult network, and the *Catholic Courier* Oct. 27 at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Webster. The party raised more than \$425 for the *Catholic Courier*/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal, which provides emergency aid year-round.

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