

The Mirror

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COMMENTARY

Racial unrest can erupt in any community

By Rev. Tom Ehrich
Maryville, TN

This charming county seat south of Knoxville seems an unlikely venue for racial unrest, "white power" slogans, and uproar over the Confederate flag.

But then so does the city where I live, Durham, NC, a diverse university town with a long tradition of liberalism, now embroiled in racial conflict, cross burnings, and angry threats at public meetings. So, until it happens, do many communities where racial unrest among whites, blacks, and Hispanics suddenly erupts into brawls, protests, shootings, and cross burnings.

Newcomers wonder what seething hostilities they have wandered into. Old-timers wonder why racial tension won't go away. Meanwhile, white supremacists roam from conflict to conflict painting slogans and seeking recruits, and targets of anger say to all who will listen, "This isn't ancient history. This is today."

Maryville's racial unrest is somewhat ironic. Founded in 1785 by a Revolutionary War veteran and named after the territorial governor's wife, Maryville prospered as a college town (Maryville College, founded in 1819 by Presbyterians) and county seat.

As in other communities in the Great Smoky Mountains spanning Tennessee and North Carolina, Blount County's fiercely independent farmers had little interest in the Civil War. They refused to secede and join the Confederacy. Maryville was overrun by both sides and ended the war in ruins. Sympathetic Quakers helped them to rebuild.

Despite shunning the Confederate cause, Maryville named its high school teams the "Red Rebels," and when its powerhouse football squads ran onto the field, they were greeted by a sea of Confederate flags. This summer, in a bid to ease racial

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With 'Faces of our Faith' series, Sr. Helen Prejean returns to Springfield

By Melissa Gray
Springfield

"When I walked out of the execution chamber on the night of April 5, 1984, I didn't know that my life had changed. In the deep of the night, a guard drove me in a van to the gates of the prison, and I could see clusters of amber lights from camps scattered across the vast 18,000-acre prison. I thought, 'The people of Louisiana are sleeping, but if they could be brought close to what happened here tonight, they would realize that we must find an alternative to government killings.' I didn't realize it then, but a mission was being born inside me that would shape the rest of my life. I had been an eyewitness to state killing, and what I had seen had set me on fire. Most people would never see what I had seen on this night unless I took them there. My resolve to share my experience was bolstered by trust in the basic goodness and decency of the American people. My mission began. I talked to whoever would listen."

—Excerpt from *The Death of Innocents—An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions* by Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ.

Twenty-one years after the execution of Patrick Sonnier, Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ, is still on-fire against the injustices of the death penalty. Internationally known for her tireless work against the death penalty, the notoriety brought about in large part by her first book, *Dead Man Walking—An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*, Sr. Prejean is back out on the speaking circuit with her timeless message and new book, *The Death of Innocents—An Eyewitness Account of*



'FACES OF OUR FAITH' SERIES—Author and internationally-known advocate against the death penalty, Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ, helped launch the "Faces of our Faith" series with a recent visit to Springfield Catholic High School. Sponsored by Springfield Catholic Schools Development Board, "Faces of our Faith" is a series of free public events from which it's hoped participants garner a call to prayer, contemplation, and action. (Photo by M. Gray)

Wrongful Executions.

Sr. Prejean recently returned to Springfield to launch "Faces of our Faith," a new education and outreach effort exploring the role of faith in action. The series is sponsored by the Springfield Catholic Schools Development Board and its free public

events will cover a wide-range of topics that hopes to lead the faithful to prayer, contemplation, and perhaps even action.

'Action' could be Sr. Prejean's middle name. Tirelessly seeking to ignite public discourse on the death

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penalty, she gives on average 140 lectures a year. Her newest book, *The Death of Innocents*, takes the discussion even further as it tells the story of two men whom Sr. Prejean accompanied to their deaths, and whom she believes to have been innocent. The book directly challenges Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, a Catholic and a proponent of the death penalty, and the Supreme Court and appeals courts that, Sr. Prejean asserts, deny constitutional rights and rubber-stamp death sentences. She closes the book by telling the stories of jurors, prosecutors, judges, wardens, and politicians who, she says, get tainted and corrupted by the death penalty.

In keeping with the evening's theme, "Faces of our Faith," Sr. Prejean presented to attendees three faces: that of Patrick Sonnier, who she first met behind a mesh screen

when she visited him on death row; the face of Lloyd LeBlanc, whose son, David, was killed by Sonnier and his brother; and last but not least, the face of Pope John Paul II.

Why these three faces? Sonnier was put to death and spurred Sr. Prejean into action; LeBlanc, who in the grieving process for his own son, sought forgiveness for Sonnier and his family; and, finally, the face of Pope John Paul II, because he helped change the face of the death penalty. Through his many visits around the world, Pope John Paul II spoke out on behalf of the "inviolable dignity" of human persons made "in God's image" and against the "culture of death" with its penchant for violence.

"This really is a journey of faith and you know, the Gospel of Jesus is never easy, the real Gospel of Jesus is never easy, it stretches us," Sr. Prejean said during her "Face of Our Faith" session. "I am going to

use tonight the image of the cross. Jesus on the cross would have one arm around the victim's family and the other arm around the perpetrator—not to condone the murder, not to condone the crime—but to say he, too, or she, too, is a son or daughter of God."

Sr. Prejean outlined her own faith journey for participants. Joining the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille at the age of 18, she spent the first 24 years of her ministry teaching religion to junior high school students and working as the formation director for her community. At the age of 40, she attended a talk by Sr. Marie August Neal that changed her life and eventually directed her toward her current path of advocating for life's less fortunate.

"Suddenly I got it. Poverty is not God's will. It is caused by humans and it must be changed by humans," Sr. Prejean said. "The quest for social justice isn't only what 'political activists' do, it's what Christians do."

When she realized she didn't know poor people, and "had never stood on the side of justice," Sr. Prejean packed up her belongings and moved to the St. Thomas housing projects in New Orleans. Although less than five miles from where she had been living, the housing project seemed a galaxy away in terms of the reality of its inhabitants.

"I was living in New Orleans by the lake, in the suburbs, loving what I was doing," Sr. Prejean said. "When this thing started happening within me, this social justice thing, I knew I needed to go where I was needed, to the projects."

"The poor are all around New Orleans. You just saw it in the Superdome. Who was left behind? How could a city have an evacuation plan that did not include 100,000-plus people who didn't have cars? How could that happen?" Sr. Prejean continued. "It happened in Hurricane Katrina because it has been happening in our inner cities for years. The poverty rate in this coun-

Next in the 'Faces of our Faith' series

"Faces of Faith" continues on Tues., Nov. 8, in Springfield Catholic High School auditorium with special guest Fr. Fred Lucci, OP, chaplain of the All Saints Catholic Newman Center on the campus of Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ. Fr. Lucci is head-lined as a preacher who excites an audience with a message of unbridled joy and the love of Christ.

try is going up. And poverty kills more people than guns kill people."

How can the desire to work with the poor lead to becoming one of the nation's, or for that matter, the world's most vocal opponents of the death penalty? It happened because while living and working among the poor, Sr. Prejean was invited to write to a prisoner on death row. Her letter to Patrick Sonnier led her to take on the role as his spiritual

"Poor people don't have resources to make the law work for them, and people of color are powerless in the face of racist practices that infect the justice system at every turn."

—From *The Death of Innocents*

advisor, and subsequently accompany him to the death chamber on April 5, 1984.

When the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, it laid out reforms intended to eliminate the random application of the punishment. However, nearly 30 years later, the sentence is still random at best. Annually, a mere two percent or less of the 14,000 or so persons who kill are selected to die through capital punishment.

"It is no secret that in this country the impact of the death penalty has always fallen heavily on poor people and minorities, especially in the

South," Sr. Prejean wrote in *The Death of Innocents*. "Poor people don't have resources to make the law work for them, and people of color are powerless in the face of racist practices that infect the justice system at every turn."

Struggling with the outrage at the crimes that generally warrant a death sentence is normal and expected. Most, but not all, prisoners on death row are guilty, and have themselves felt horror about their crimes. In our modern society, life without parole is a viable option, a way to prevent the convicted from harming anyone again, but why is it not more aggressively fought for by US citizens for its prisoners?

"The death penalty is sanctioned killing of the defenseless—shackled and led to their death. How can that be a killing in self-defense? As Catholics we need to ask, do we only uphold the dignity of the innocent?" Sr. Prejean urged the "Faces of our Faith" audience. "There is a dignity in every person, and every person is worth more than the worst thing they have ever done."

Sr. Prejean suggested to attendees that they look to church leaders who are now asking the faithful to take a closer look at the death penalty as a pro-life issue. The US bishops are inviting all Catholics to reflect on the death penalty during 2005.

"Spirituality is always about looking at the surface of things and going deeper," Sr. Prejean said. "It is time for us to grow as a people, to truly live what Jesus taught: mercy and forgiveness. At the heart of every religion, not just Christianity, is that we are brothers and that we are one body."

As a pro-life people, how is the death penalty furthering the love of God? Frankly, and simply, it doesn't.

For more information concerning the Catholic Church's position on the death penalty, log on to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops Web site at www.usccb.org. ©TM

After 44 years of active ministry, Msgr. Bucher to retire

Branson, MO

In response to recommendations from his physicians, Msgr. Philip Bucher will retire for health reasons effective Oct. 18, 2005. Msgr. Bucher is currently pastor of Our Lady of the Lake Parish in Branson, and Our Lady of the Ozarks Parish in Forsyth.

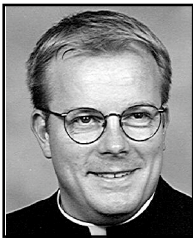
Msgr. Bucher has served the diocese for 44 years in parishes and high schools, as well as in The Catholic Center as director of Religious Education, and for the diocese as consultor and vicar general. Msgr.

Bucher has also devotedly served on many diocesan councils and organizations. His leadership will be missed.

Fr. Rick Jones will succeed Msgr. Bucher as pastor of Our Lady of the Lake Parish, Branson, and Our Lady of the Ozarks Parish, Forsyth, effective Nov. 21, 2005. Fr. Jones has been on leave of absence while completing a master's degree in counseling. Fr. Philip Conlon, retired, who has been assisting Msgr. Bucher in sacramental ministry in the lakes area will offer Fr. Jones assistance as well. ©TM



Msgr. Philip Bucher



Fr. Rick Jones