

**THE DEATH PENALTY: A VIOLATION OF
HUMAN DIGNITY?**
2022 Annual Symposium
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**INTERVIEW OF SISTER HELEN PREJEAN BY
SYMPOSIUM EDITOR ANDRES LOPEZ**

SISTER HELEN PREJEAN*

Lopez: Today is February 17th, 2022, and we have Sister Helen Prejean with us via Zoom. I would like to start with the prayer to attorneys, and it's the Lawyer's Prayer from St. Thomas More:

Lord grant that, I may be able in argument, to [be] articulate, in analysis strict and study, candid with clients, honest with adversaries, stand beside me in court, for that today I shall not, in order to win a point, lose my soul. Amen.

* Sister Helen Prejean has been a member of the Roman Catholic religious order of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille (now part of the Congregation of St. Joseph) since 1957. She is known around the world for her tireless work against the death penalty. She has been instrumental in sparking national dialogue on capital punishment and in shaping the Catholic Church's vigorous opposition to all executions. Her first book, *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* (1994), later adapted into a feature-length film and an opera, described her journey as a spiritual adviser to two men, Pat Sonnier and Robert Willie; she had accompanied both of them to the death chamber. Her second book, *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions* (2005), recounted her further ministry to persons condemned to death and addressed the flaws of capital punishment, particularly as it affects the innocent. Her memoir, *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey*, was published in 2019. For details, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sister-Helen-Prejean>.

Sister Helen: Great – “not to lose your soul,” a wonderful prayer. Thank you, I’m glad to be here because I’ve had a lot of interactions with some Supreme Court Justices in the whole interfacing of law and our Catholic faith. I want to just start by giving three anecdotes.

One is when Justice Antonin Scalia, a Catholic on the Supreme Court, made the statement that when he steps into the court to make decisions, as a Supreme Court Justice, he leaves his faith at the door. In my book, *The Death of Innocence*, I take him up on that because faith is what gives us values. The whole thing of being Christ in the world, imitating his compassion, imitating his mercy, imitating his sense of justice for the poor - how can you leave your faith at the door when you go in to interpret cruel punishments and even death, due process of law, everything?

Second is also recently. Within the last two years, Attorney General William Barr gave a talk at the law school of Notre Dame. He came to them presenting the case that Christianity and the religion of the land is being besieged and threatened and attacked. We have to protect our faith and protect it from those who are attacking it.

Third is when then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions addressed the separation of children from their parents at the border between Mexico and the United States. He justified that separation by saying that, in Romans Chapter 13, St. Paul states that if you disobey civil authority, you are disobeying the authority of God. It’s the law of the land and these people are coming across the border illegally, so therefore we are justified in separating them from their children. Essentially, you break our law and you are going against God. Look at that conflation that is happening there, that if we have something as law this is the will of God. I kept meeting this argument in these 30 years of conversing with people about the death penalty and bringing faith values to bear. In my dialogue with Pope John Paul the Second about the dignity of human life, the heart of my dialogue with him was about why we can never entrust governments to execute people.

Lopez: Yes Sister, such a beautiful analysis. Again, as to the Scalia approach, we should not be leaving our faith at the doorstep, we have to utilize it to be able to make good policy, to be able to make good law. We use our faith as our foundation because that is where we come

from, that is where we derive our values from, and if our values are so skewed that we have to leave our faith at the door, is it really good law? Is it really good law that benefits humanity, that benefits our society, that entrusts that God-given human dignity to all of us? Sister, on that note, let's talk about human dignity, and how the catechism and the new revision of 2267 has shifted the Church from this idea that it was okay on most serious occasions to impose the death penalty, and now, because we understand that we are all made in the image and likeness of God, and, under Genesis, we have that innate human dignity. Can you guide us through your work and everything you have done for the new revision?

Sister Helen: In moral values, we are always evolving and growing with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the church. For a long time, we just simply accepted slavery and didn't resist it nor worked to change it. We just simply accepted what St. Paul had said, that slaves be obedient to your masters. When you get into law, as that good prayer from Thomas More says, you got to dig into stuff. Exactly who's going to be hurt by this? Who's going to be helping to do it with integrity? So, you don't change something in a Catholic Catechism without consciousness, and conscience growing and evolving in the people over a whole number of years. Would you believe if I told you that the dialogue that preceded that change in the Catholic Catechism on the death penalty, in August 2018, took 1,500 years.

So, you have to go back and you have to look at the history of the traditional teaching of the Church on the death penalty and how it emerged in history. Things always emerge in historical context. They never come out of the blue, as if God dropped in from a cloud and told us to go. It's always in history, which means you have to mix it up with each other, you have to read the signs of the times and what's going on. So you go back to St. Augustine in the fifth century and what was happening - the Huns and the Goths and Visigoths were banging down the gates of Rome, there was chaos in the land, and so St. Augustine was the first to depart, at least in the words—and then in the actions—from the Gospel of Jesus, the nonviolent Gospel of Jesus, when he said the wicked can be coerced with the sword. You can use violence. But notice context, it was about defending society.

Later, Thomas Aquinas in the 12th century likens the killing of violent offenders by the state to cutting off a gangrenous arm for the health of the whole body. It's always about defending the safety and health of the whole body. It was never this thing, which has been the mentality when the modern death penalty was put back in the United States, there are some crimes by their nature so heinous that only death is justified as a punishment. These people by the nature of their crime, we call them, the "worst of the worst." By the nature of the crime they have done they show the character of who they are. Basically, you're saying they're unredeemable. Basically, you're saying we can't put them in prison because they're so violent by their nature they'll kill guards or other inmates, we have to kill them. That's the mentality when the Supreme Court in 1976 put the death penalty back into operation. It's only going to be, they said, for the worst of the worst. But then the essential fault line that was put into it, we are going to leave it up to the discretion of prosecutors. If prosecutors do not seek death, nobody's going to die. You're going to leave it up to individual human beings who are political, human, frail, ignorant, biased. All the human qualities that go into human beings. And so we began in our question for the death penalty supposedly only for the worst of the worst. And as we've seen repeatedly, we do not know what we mean by worst of the worst because every taking of irreplaceable human life is of its very nature the worst of the worst.

So what happens is, we move on to another century here, another century there, and societies begin to build prisons; so we begin to have a way in society to protect ourselves from these very dangerous people. So, we have an alternative to the state killing, that grows and that progresses. Enter the United States debate starting in 1976 when the Supreme Court restored the death penalty.

You have a whole number of statements by the Catholic Bishops growing in understanding, as they went along, as we were all growing in understanding. And then you have the people of God involved in these moral issues, you got people like me, dropping down a laundry chute unto death row, totally unprepared for what I'm doing. And people are coming out and they're witnessing. We have more and more deacons and lay people in the church going into prisons saying these people are not irredeemable; these are human beings. They're

worth more than the one thing they've ever done. You have all this bubbling up in society, you have all this bubbling up in the Church. So, when the statements were coming out by the Bishops, they always left this line in there, and I knew as long as they left in this line, we were not going to be able to have a root solution to the problem of the death penalty. They always left in the line the state has the right to take life, always.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 of the UN, states in Article 3—and this is where we get to that inviolable dignity of human beings—that every human being simply by being a person has an inviolable right to life. In other words, you can't give over the power to state governments to decide the inviolable dignity of human life. But we kept having these statements, that the state has a right to take life. Enter onto the scene Pope John Paul the Second, who in 1995 had written an encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*. So, we'll open a book and I go right to the death penalty section, what's he going to say? Is he going to get to the foundation that you can never give the state the right to take life, or they are always going to do it against poor people? I read, read, read, and read, God was beautiful, and I told him this when I had this dialogue. There was discussion about the inviolable dignity of all life. And then, I come to the words where it says the death penalty should be rare if not non-existent. He pushed it right to the edge, and then he made the statement and my heart dropped, he said but in cases of absolute necessity, the state can execute. Your Holiness, your words were quoted for death. Shortly after that, his Catholic encyclical came out. Our Catholic DA in New Orleans, Harry Connick Senior, holds up your encyclical saying every death penalty we get, in New Orleans, is of absolute necessity. We can't get enough death penalty. What he didn't say is it couldn't get all black people off the jury. But he quoted the Pope's Encyclical and I could put that right in the Pope's lap. I said your Holiness, when I'm walking with a man to execution—and I was talking about Pat Sonnier—he was the first. He's shackled hand and foot. He's rendered completely defenseless. Surrounded by six guards. And he's going to be strapped into a wooden chair, onto a gurney and deliberately killed. Where is the dignity in the killing of this human being? We have a way to keep Society safe. Can you help our Church realize, and come to the understanding,

that we can never give the right to the state to take life? I have talked to a lot of Catholics who say they're pro-life but the longer they talked to me, they realized they are pro innocent life, but not pro guilty life. People cross this line, they do this terrible crime, we don't have to talk about their dignity. They didn't respect the dignity of their victim, we are going to do to them what they did to their victim. Can you help our church come to the realization that even those guilty of terrible crimes have dignity?

My image of Pope John Paul and then Pope Francis, is like Pope John Paul set up the volleyball right above the net for Pope Francis to come and change the Catechism in a public talk in St. Louis. He, for the first time, put the death penalty in with the other pro-life issues. He said no abortion, no euthanasia, no physician-assisted suicide, and he added no to the death penalty, which is cruel, although our Supreme Court does not acknowledge the cruelty of it, and it is unnecessary. Even those among us who have done terrible crimes have a dignity that must not be taken from them. And then, Pope Francis could tap the volleyball over the net.

The changing of the Catechism took 1,500 years of dialogue, experience in the people and consciousness, and conscience under the guidance of the Holy Spirit changes us. The last thing you do is change it on the books. It is clear that for the first time the Catechism unequivocally states, for even those who have done terrible crimes, we can never give over the right of the government to take their life. Now we just have to teach the people and get those words out of a document and into hearts.

Lopez: That's why we're here, Sister, because this is such an important aspect of not only the law, but also our faith that comes together. And, this teaching that you've been doing for a number of years now, and God bless your soul for it, can be furthered by individuals in the legal field. Which is why our Symposium is here for this. We're trying to educate future attorneys to understand that their faith is no longer something that you have to leave at the door. Their faith can allow them to create good law. Their faith can allow them to participate in the discourse and understanding under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is law.

Sister Helen: Also, their faith can lead them to represent poor clients that don't have people by their side, because that's a big thing of the Catholic faith - not to be driven by money. The lawyer, the legal profession, is one of those professions where you can make a lot of money. So, first of all, where's that heart in terms of who their clients are going to be? And even if you know you have a debt when you leave law school and you have to work for a firm and you have to pay back your debt, always build into your legal house a room for the poor. I'd like to also add that we now have 187 wrongfully convicted people put on death row, and having a lawyer by your side when you go to trial is so important.

Lopez: Of course, in your book *Death of Innocence*, one of the biggest points shared is the fact that these individuals, because they don't have the means to afford it, get poor defense counselors. And sadly, it promulgates the system of death penalty. It promulgates the fact that they don't have attorneys who are willing or able to, but we're here to change that. We're here to showcase that our faith could allow us to feed the poor and assist the poor and do those corporal works of mercy that were called to do.

Sister Helen: And take the side of the poor when they come to court. That's Thomas More. Thomas More taught us the virtue of mercy and charity that goes beyond just legalities. The reason rich people never go to death row is because the DAs, even if they want to see death, they are going to know they're up against a formidable defense, like pretrial motions. They are going to have to fight every inch of the way to get that death sentence and maybe lose in public. So, they're much more prone to sit down to make a deal, but for poor people it can be a slam dunk. It's not the public defenders, they are not bad, they are wonderful people. I give the top priority to talk to public defenders, It's an overworked, underpaid job as it's hard to get resources. DAs have all kinds of resources. Public defenders have very few, so that's why it's such an imbalance because trial is supposed to be the place where an adversarial system comes to bear for the truth. Prosecution presents, defense presents. Prosecutors are supposed to turn over in

discovery everything that comes out in the original police report; anything that points to the possible innocence of the defendant. But all they get is a slap on the wrist when they don't do it. And that's one of the imbalances in it, and it's been driven a lot by politics -- when DAs run for higher office. DAs in Louisiana, when they would run for higher office, they would brag about how many death penalties they got, because they knew that really played with their constituents. So, you see the political currency you get from this so-called being "tough on crime."

Lopez: A lot of those individuals sometimes run as Republicans, sometimes they run on faith-based platforms as well. That's where we have to educate. That our faith is no longer that which was made under Romans 13. That which was made way back when, because given history and context, it's not the death penalty, it's not made to defend it. These individuals who are seeking election, and have Roman Catholic constituents who believe that the death penalty is right under God's will, we have to educate them; it's not. It's no longer about taking an eye for an eye; it's based on human dignity, it's based on this inherent human dignity that is given by God. Therefore, if we are true to our faith and we are truly pro-life, it should be from conception until natural death. Natural death does not follow through with the death penalty.

Sister Helen: Beautiful, Thomas More would be proud. That was a ringing endorsement. But one thing is you mentioned Republicans. We don't want to get into Republicans and Democrats because it's a temptation of all politicians to use the things that get you political currency. So, we want to address the issue without bringing in parties because it could be people in either party. This last presidential election was the first time in the campaign, a presidential candidate stated that he was against the death penalty and that when elected he would end the federal death penalty?

Lopez: Yes it's amazing and beautiful. There are actually three bills in the House and the Senate. Part of our Symposium will be detailing

the Federal Death Penalty Abolition Act of 2021 [HR 97 Federal Death Penalty Abolition Act of 2021], introduced by U.S. Representative Adrian Espallat, and S 582 and HR 262 (Federal Death Penalty Prohibition Act), two identical bills introduced by Senator Richard Durbin and U.S. Representative Ayanna Pressley. Beautiful bills.

Sister Helen: Vatican II taught us as Catholics to read the signs of the times. We look at the events that are happening in history, and in our day, and through the prism of faith we interpret them. Look at what just happened with the federal death penalty: because complete discretion is given up to the Prosecutor or the DA to seek it or not, before Trump, the former president left office, simply because he could and had the discretion, he had thirteen human beings executed. His attorney General William Barr, a Catholic, worked right beside him to get that done. Now these are, you know, good people. That's what I've discovered is in 30 years of dialogue with people, politicians, they're all basically good people. But they get under pressure and one of the just supreme tragedies of one of the people who was killed in those 13 people was Lisa Montgomery. There has never been a woman who had been more abused than Lisa Montgomery. She was traumatized as a result of it. She was so abused as a child, that her parents had a special room in the back of the house to pay bills like the plumbers or electricians. Her parents would just say to pay the bill you can go in the back room, and you can have sex with our daughter. She was so traumatized, she committed a terrible crime, and she's one of the people to die. First, she had a date in December and then it was pushed back into January. When she heard the new day, when her lawyers met with her and said the new date is in January, she kind of looked away and kind of wistfully almost said, "eight days." Eight days meant eight days from my date of execution Joe Biden is going to become the president of the United States, and he will save my life. he will not let me be killed. But, because it's happening under the Trump Administration, I am going to die. This is why you can never entrust the government the right to take life—you have to set in a system of how you're going to do it and you're going to get into all these vagaries and all these things. There had not been a federal execution in seventeen years at the federal level until former President Trump decided that to make

his mark on how strong he was for Law and Order, showing he could have people executed, and so thirteen human beings died.

Lopez: True tragedies.

Sister Helen: However, that's what wakes up the people, because your heart at some point has to be moved with a sense of justice, compassion, and human rights. It coincides with the Gospel of Jesus, which says pray for those who persecute you and forgive your enemies.

Lopez: It's like turning the other cheek and allowing it to be slapped.

Sister Helen: Martin Luther King based his whole campaign on love. We will never return violence for violence. The most explicit, and inspiring, movement we have ever seen for non-violence has been led by African-American people fighting for their rights. We've never heard anybody call us like that. And so, from all these audiences I've talked to all over the place, I receive a Biblical quote that supports the death penalty, "an eye for an eye." And then, if I say to them, remember what Jesus said, "You've heard it said an eye for an eye," etc. Then they say, "But we don't want to bring in Jesus here." Because we get caught in culture. And culture is if you ever read the book of Jesus and John Wayne, we're not talking about this Jesus turning the other cheek Jesus, we're talking about Jesus being John Wayne who gets in there and returns fire with fire, kills bad people, and all that.

Lopez: That is very insightful! I'm so appreciative of your time, of your effort, of your mission.

Sister Helen: I have to do it. I have watched six human beings be killed by execution, and you can't witness that and just stay neutral. So, it's morally imperative for me, because I am a witness that therefore I have to give testimony as to what I have seen. I believe always in the goodness of people, that the American people are not really

vengeful people. They've been sold this whole thing because they've been made to be afraid of these people that are so evil that we can't put them in prison, we have to do this. What do they know about the death penalty? Most people don't reflect deeply on this penalty; their lives are busy about other things -- not getting into why is it only poor people, to see that race plays into that. Overwhelmingly, 8 out of every 10 people have been executed, over 1,500 people. 8 out of every 10 of 2,000 people sitting on death row are there because they killed a white person. That's the starting point, because if you don't value or get outraged at the death of someone you know, whose life you respect, you're not going to do anything.

Lopez: Again it's at the prosecutor's will, the prosecutor's decision, and being able to understand that this is not what society needs, it is not what people really want and what people really need, that will help shift that movement. This will help shift and will help change how the prosecutors choose to prosecute and choose to send people to death row because ultimately it's a choice. Ultimately, it's a choice that the prosecutors have to make. If we can understand that these individuals are not truly evil—because no one is truly evil, everybody is redeemable, everyone no matter what has human dignity.

Sister Helen: Even in court, if a prosecutor wants to show how bad somebody is they can never point at that person. You cannot assign evil to the person, to the acts, but not to the person.

Lopez: Sister, you are an amazing woman. Thank you for your faith and seeing that. I had the pleasure of being at the United Nations a couple years ago during Pope Francis's introduction of the UNGA 70 and that feeling, I've carried it for a couple of years now. Being able to converse with you over this topic, I could see that faith. I could see that faith that drives you, with that Holiness, that amazing responsibility, that heavy responsibility, that you bear, and you bear it well, and you bear it because you have been a witness to it.

Sister Helen: Yes, but you know the other thing—and you and I both have to look at this—it’s our privilege. See, when we have been privileged, especially just by being white, we never have detectives follow us in a store. So much about race is a legacy of slavery in this country. In the way we look upon the value of life, you see it showing up in the death penalty. Most of us who are privileged go into law school to fit in. But, as Pope Francis says in the gospel of encounter, “you have to go to the margins.” If lawyers take poor clients, they are going to be with people at the margins. That’s not always an easy thing to do. These lawyers don’t always have clients say “oh you’re a wonderful lawyer,” they try to fire them, and they get mad at them. Go to the margins, and that’s what happened to me. I had never been at the margins. I was out in the suburbs. I was doing good stuff teaching kids religious-education in a parish. But I lived in the city which had an inner city which is over 50% poor, struggling, black people, and I’d never met them. So, it was that waking up to the fact that the Gospel of Jesus was about more than just being charitable to people around but getting in there. And what Pope Francis calls that he said believing Christians need to be like the Field Hospital, out close to where the wounded are. That’s the call to holiness to all of us, not just nuns and Priests. Vatican II made it clear, everyone by virtue of baptism is called to live in the fullness of Christ’s life in our lives. So, it’s up to us. Waking up to justice is a great grace to have. I prayed for that grace, and I wrote about it in *River of Fire* about finally waking up. I was in my blooming 40s when I woke up, that the gospel was integral and that’s what led me to go and live among African-American people in the St. Thomas housing project, then they became my teachers. That’s when I really began to learn. It was like another country in a lot of ways. I began to look at it from the perspective of what they were experiencing and, reading the Gospel of Jesus, and seeing it, your heart becomes on fire when you wake up to something that’s really got purpose in your life and that you know you want to put the energies of your life into.

Lopez: The Church reading a couple days ago was “Harden not your hearts, if you first hear His word, Harden not your hearts.” [Hebrews 3:15]. You’re preaching it, Sister. It’s beautiful!

Sister Helen: So are you, Andres. You got to stop giving me all this praise.

Lopez: I can't help it.

Sister Helen: We'll be doing it together.

Lopez: I'm happy to. Happy to be one of these future young attorneys who will continue following your footsteps. Who will continue on this trajectory, on this path to ensure that the individuals who are being prosecuted, they have those attorneys, the defense attorneys, and are able to see the human dignity that they have and are able to not dehumanize their poor clients, but to allow them to have good legal counsel. I am privileged to be able to take on this mission, Sister. To have such an amazing group, like yourself and individuals like yourself, who have promulgated it and will continue to popularize it as we continue to change society for the better.

Sister Helen: And for you to keep that spark alive, Andres. You are going to need to be in a community of faith because it is not easy and you have so much against you. First of all, how many ordinary Catholics that live out in the suburbs, go to church, really believe when they see a young black man being brought in an orange jumpsuit into court take as a given, that he is innocent until proven guilty? There are so many ways we get signals in our society, because often we don't have interaction with people very different from us. That's what we really need to change. I often think if we could have breakfast across the nation every Tuesday morning, people that live in mostly all-white parishes, the Catholic Church, connecting with people, black Catholics, and just having breakfast together and talking about your faith in your life, could help to change things. But it's mostly us, as white, resourced, privileged people, that need to be doing the conversion because so our hearts can be changed, and so we don't have that automatic response: black people are to be afraid of, they're uneducated, this, that and all that.

Lopez: It's true, we are called to evangelize.

Sister Helen: And be evangelized. To be changed. See, when I lived amongst black people, I was just thinking, I grew up in this great family. My dad had been poor, and he actually had grown up, his father worked on a plantation. My mom had been poor, her dad worked on a plantation. Of course, they were the white overseers now; they were not the black workers. But dad had to drop out of school to help support his ten other brothers and sisters, so he didn't finish high school. He went to work, then came and moved to Baton Rouge, went to school, ends up going to law school and becomes a lawyer. But he had to overcome the prejudice against Catholics because in Washington, DC in the 1920s Catholics couldn't go to a regular law school, that's why Catholic University started the Knights of Columbus School of Law, so Catholics could go to law school and now that's been incorporated into Catholic University. I noticed, because I gave a talk to the law school at Catholic University, as I'm in the Dean's office, this Columbus thing on the wall and I said what is this connection to Columbus, and that's the first time I heard the story. They had to start a law school for Catholics called the Columbus School of Law because they couldn't get into any other law school. There was prejudice against Catholics in this country and my dad, when he got his law degree, he went back to Louisiana, he'd see people for five dollars. He had a lot of poor clients that would come. A lady gave him a chicken as payment. Mom would say "now I have cook that chicken." I mean because they were poor, but his heart was there, and he was a Catholic and he lived in his faith, but because he was white, he had a lot of struggles but at least he didn't have to deal with this thing. One little story about this: when I talked to the Manhattan Bar Association in New York, I asked to see their library. I wanted to go and I wanted to sit in their library. The reason I did this was because when Thurgood Marshall, our first black Supreme Court Justice, wrote his arguments that led to *Brown v. Board of Education*, he couldn't get into a regular library. They wouldn't let a black man in. But the Manhattan Bar Association let them use their library, and he sat at one of those tables and used

their books and that's where he wrote the successful argument of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Lopez: That is so cool. I did not know that.

Sister Helen: Yes, really. Let's see now. We're looking to get an African-American Supreme Court Justice.

Lopez: Indeed we are, and hopefully moving forward, it's a good push.

Sister Helen: Yes, because then you have a diversity of thinking and backgrounds. One time Thurgood Marshall said if a black man reads "equal justice under law" and someone who is white and has had privilege and went to an elite school reads "equal justice under law," they will interpret that phrase pretty differently because of their life experiences. So, you want to have a mixture on the court of different life experiences. It is very interesting the way people interpret the Constitution. Everybody is looking at the same words. Like what does "cruel" mean. Then you have someone like Scalia and others who would say, oh we're going to go with an originalist approach. We can think about what did the framers mean. What can we glean from the plain text? What did the people understand? Well, at the time the Constitution was written, they were still hanging people for witchcraft, you know, or for sodomy. What do you mean to get into the original mindset of the framers? Evolving standards of decency that mark a maturing society is what we have to go for. But if you use that originalist approach you just put that little framework on it and you don't have to deal with what's going on in society where the changes are taking place.

Lopez: At which point it's not history in context.

Sister Helen: You have got that right. For example, it took the court how many years to realize that you couldn't execute children? That you couldn't execute people that were below eighteen?

Lopez: Only recently it has been changed.

Sister Helen: In *Roper v. Simmons*. Science helped changed that, because they can show from brain scans that your brain, judgment, maturity, is not fully developed until you are in your 20s. When you had the mentality of Justice Scalia, he said they know right from wrong, don't tell me they are kids. And what he used as his criteria was going back to the dictionary of the 18th century and reading under "idiot." The definition of an idiot is somebody that can't make change like out of a dollar or doesn't know the name of their parents. Then he said and he would fixate on this, look at this crime and don't tell me they don't know right from wrong. And so he was against changing it. The way you interpret law has a lot to do with your soul.

Lopez: Which is why, once again, we cannot leave our faith at the door.

Sister Helen: Amen, Brother!

Lopez: Amen! Amen indeed, Sister. You are incredible, and your books are just as fascinating. We definitely want to be able to continue the discussion. Thank you on behalf of all of us that are here now and that will be here at the symposium, for sharing your deep insights with us, Sister Helen Prejean.