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This is a screen grab from an Oct. 19 online panel about the death penalty sponsored by Renew International and the Archdiocese of Washington. Clockwise from the bottom: Sr. Helen Prejean, a Sister of St. Joseph of Medaille and longtime advocate against the death penalty; Jeannine Marino, the Washington Archdiocese's secretary for pastoral ministry and social concerns; Mary O'Meara, sign language interpreter; Genevieve Mougey, moderator and director of the archdiocesan Office of Social Concerns; and Dominican Sr. Terry Rickard, president and executive director of Renew International. (Catholic News Service)



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Social Concerns; and Dominican Sr. Terry Rickard, president and executive director of Renew International. (Catholic News Service)

During an online panel about the death penalty Oct. 19, panelists stressed how capital punishment goes against church teaching and urged the nearly 500 participants to promote this discussion at their own parishes by tapping into available resources.

"We're here to help you; if you want to do more with your parish, reach out to us," said Dominican Sr. Terry Rickard, president and executive director of Renew International, a group that helps parishes strengthen parishioners' leadership roles.

Renew International and the Archdiocese of Washington sponsored the panel, which featured Sr. Helen Prejean, a Sister of St. Joseph of Medaille and longtime advocate against the death penalty, and Jeannine Marino, secretary for pastoral ministry and social concerns for the Washington Archdiocese.

Marino was filling in for Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory, who could not attend at the last minute because of a dental emergency.

"Our parishes are the heart of where we experience Catholic faith," Marino said, adding that parishes could tap into resources from Catholic Mobilizing Network, which offers a Respect Life Month toolkit with anti-death-penalty information, advocacy ideas and prayers.

Catholic Mobilizing Network, together with Renew International, also offers the publication "Dignity and the Death Penalty: Evolution of Catholic Teaching," a resource that can be divided up into material for small-group sessions.

"Whenever you gather with your parish, trust the spirit," said Prejean, who said her own passion against the death penalty happened "because the Gospel woke me up."

She said when she initially started writing to someone on death row, she thought it was something she could certainly take on "as an English major." Two years later, she accompanied this inmate to and prayed with him at his execution.

That experience changed her, she said, adding: "There has been a fire in me ever since."

The Louisiana sister said she knows most Americans will never see the death penalty up close, and she said she sees her role as someone who can share what she has seen and also emphasize the human dignity of the men and women on death row.

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Marino said she was 21 and volunteering in prison ministry when she first heard Prejean speak about the consistent life ethic. In her own work in the church, Marino has seen this firsthand, noting that the church has "always celebrated and upheld life and dignity of all persons."

"We haven't always given correct witness to this, but that is our teaching," she said, noting that Catholics have spoken out against abortion, domestic violence, gun violence and the death penalty.

Prejean emphasized in the panel discussion that "pro-life sounds like pro-innocent-life," but it needs to encompass all life, even lives of those guilty of crimes.

She also noted the church has evolved in its teaching on this from "tolerating the death penalty to calling it inadmissible."

"We're a living church; we're always changing on something," she added.

She said St. John Paul II "set the volleyball over the net, and Pope Francis knocked it over," referring to the late pope's message in St. Louis in 1999, when he called the death penalty "cruel and unusual," and to Pope Francis' revision to the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 2018 to say that the death penalty was "inadmissible" because it was an affront to human dignity.

Promotional material about "Dignity and the Death Penalty," which was published earlier this year, said the parish resource comes at a "pivotal moment in the death penalty abolition movement": Executions and death-sentencing rates are declining, and public opposition to capital punishment is at a record high.

It also said Catholics involved in this issue around the country "could have a huge impact on the movement to end state-sponsored executions."

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