Blog



Sr. Helen Prejean, right, discusses "Dead Man Walking," with actress Susan Sarandon, who won an Academy Award for portraying Prejean in the movie version of Prejean's memoir. They spoke at a Nov. 6 New York book lunch of the illustrated graphic version of the memoir. (Fordham University/Leo Sorel)



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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report's Monday Starter is a feature from GSR staff writers that rounds up news from or about women religious that you may otherwise have missed.*

Monday Starter

First came the book. Then came the film. Then the opera. Then the play.

Now, Sr. Helen Prejean's "Dead Man Walking" has been adapted for a new genre: an illustrated graphic version that its author hopes will reach young readers.

The new version is a way of "getting to the people," Prejean, a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph, said at a Nov. 6 New York book launch of the graphic edition sponsored by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture and held at St. Paul the Apostle Church.

The 304-page book was just published by Random House, in a new format that adapts Prejean's best-selling memoir with graphic illustrations and accompanying text.

Prejean's memoir traces her ministry on Louisiana's death row and her subsequent advocacy against the death penalty. The graphic version updates the narrative with

new information, such as a timeline on death penalty developments since the book was first published in 1993.

Prejean's work is now based at the Ministry Against the Death Penalty, a national advocacy group.

The text adaptation was written by Rose Vines, a writer and editor who has worked with Prejean at the ministry. The illustrations are by award-winning artist Catherine Anyango Grünewald, who teaches illustration at the Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm.

With the new adaption, Prejean's story has had five iterations, including the original memoir and now the graphic version. The 1995 film adaptation of the book starred Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon and won Sarandon an Academy Award.

The 2000 opera, by composer Jake Heggie and librettist Terrance McNally, had its Metropolitan Opera premiere in 2023 and has been called the most performed 21st century opera. A 2002 play adapted from the memoir was written by the American director and actor Tim Robbins, who also directed the film.



Sr. Helen Prejean discusses the new illustrated graphic version of her death-row memoir "Dead Man Walking," Nov. 6 at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Manhattan in a forum presented by the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. (Fordham University/Leo Sorel)

At the book launch, Prejean, Vines and Grünewald were joined by Sarandon in discussing both the new version and the story itself.

Asked by moderator David Gibson about the continued appeal of the story, Prejean suggested that, in part, it deals honestly with her own vulnerabilities as a death penalty chaplain and later an anti-death penalty advocate.

" 'Let's see what happens to this nun — she doesn't know what she's doing,' " Prejean said about a common reaction to the narrative. She added that the story in many ways is about "an awakening of justice."

Grünewald said she believes the memoir has had continued appeal in part because the book has helped in efforts opposing the death penalty. Public opinion polls show growing opposition to the death penalty in the United States.

Another factor: increasing numbers of cases in which it has been proven that some death row were wrongly convicted. "The systems we live by," Grünewald said, "are not infallible."

She added that she loved the idea of an adaption that could reach a new, and possibly younger, audience. "You have the chance [in a project like this] to influence people in a different way." The artist said she read and interpreted the story not through a religious lens, "but a human lens."

Vines said the new version has the chance to introduce a new audience to a work promoting compassion and empathy — not necessarily easy things to promote in today's world, she said.

"It takes some effort to widen your circle of compassion," Vines said.

Sarandon, who was raised Roman Catholic, said she hopes the new version lands in the hands of Pope Leo XIV, calling him a "a woke pope" who is likely to follow Pope Francis' strong opposition to the death penalty.



The Confederation of Conferences of Major Superiors of Africa and Madagascar began publishing a newsletter in early November featured in this screen capture from a Facebook post. The newsletter will feature information as well as reflections for women and men religious in the continent and be available in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. (GSR screenshot)

African religious launch a newsletter

The Confederation of Conferences of Major Superiors of Africa and Madagascar, known as COMSAM, announced via Facebook its first monthly newsletter in early November to help women and men religious keep abreast of goings-on in the continent. It will be available in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

"Help us to spread this tool of visibility, communion amongst the consecrated men and women across the continent," the organization said via Facebook.

The first edition says that "the launch coincides with the Church's Jubilee Year marked by hope, and the month of November, when we celebrate All Saints' Day and remember the faithful."

It also will be shared on Facebook, YouTube and Gmail, with editions also published on Instagram and Twitter, says one of the first items, and will include reflections.

The organization also says it welcomes contributions to the newsletter. Anyone who wants to subscribe can do so by email at comsamnews@gmail.com.

Mercy sister honored with peace award

The organization Christians for Peace in El Salvador, known as CRISPAZ, honored Mercy Sr. Ana María Pineda with a peace award Oct. 15 for what they say is her lifelong dedication to the ministry of the Latino community and her ongoing efforts to preserve the memory and legacy of Catholic martyrs in El Salvador.



Mercy Sr. Ana Maria Pineda, associate professor at Santa Clara University, speaks Sept. 20, 2018, during the Fifth National Encuentro, in Grapevine, Texas. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

Pineda, a theologian, scholar and religious studies professor at California's Santa Clara University, has focused her life's work on Latino ministry and theology, including paving professional and educational paths for Latinas and Latinos to participate in professional ministry roles in the church in the U.S.

She has taken part in all five national gatherings of Latino Catholics in the U.S. called Encuentros, which have taken place every few years since 1972 and where participants discuss topics of importance to Latino Catholics in the country.

CRISPAZ, in a press release, says its peace award recognizes individuals or organizations that embody the preferential option for the poor and promote peace and social justice.

In accepting the award, Pineda asked those present to commit to justice, peace, and reconciliation, "values I know we all share. Our actions today are more urgent than ever. Let us stand with our immigrant sisters and brothers so they can enjoy the fullness of life and dignity, just as many of us have."

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New film on sisters to premiere in December

A film documenting the lives of five orders of women religious will premiere Dec. 1 in Detroit. "The Calling" will feature the Felician Sisters of North America; the Servants of the Immaculate Heart; Sisters of Mercy of the Americas; Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist; and the Chaldean Sisters, Daughter of Mary Immaculate.

The film aims to develop viewers' deeper understanding of women religious and their lives, as they have been leaders in the areas of health care, education, fighting poverty, and the advancement of women, says a promotional press release on the film.

It will premiere in the presence of more than 50 sisters from various congregations Dec. 1 at Detroit's Emagine Theatre and air at PBS Detroit Dec. 9 at 8 p.m.