

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by **PROFESSOR WILLIAM SCHABAS**, National University of Ireland, Galway on 29th June, 2002 on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **HELEN PREJEAN**

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

Dead Man Walking! The expression comes from the death rows of American prisons as men condemned to be executed are taken from their cells to the modern-day scaffold. Sister Helen Prejean first learned of it some twenty years ago, when she took up an invitation to become a pen-pal with a death-row inmate. For years since that time she has ministered to the condemned, in time becoming America's best known advocate of the abolition of capital punishment

Sister Helen Prejean was born in Baton Rouge in 1939, and she has lived and worked in Louisiana all of her life. She joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille in 1957. Sister Helen received a BA in English from St. Mary's Dominican College in New Orleans in 1962, and an MA in religious education from St. Paul's University in Ottawa in 1973.

Her religious commitment began with the ethereal and the spiritual, but later took a dramatic re-orientation towards social and political activism. In 1981 her religious community took what they called "a stand on the side of the poor" as part of a reform movement in the Catholic Church. She went to work at the St. Thomas Housing Project with deprived inner-city residents, and soon she was counselling death row inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

When she decided to write a book about her experiences, Sister Helen was inspired by Huck Finn in Mark Twain's great novel, "not fixing up any particular plan, but just trusting to Providence to put the right words in my mouth when the time come: for I'd noticed that Providence always did put the right words in my mouth, if I left it alone." Many of you have read the words that Providence put in her mouth in her best-selling book, *Dead Man Walking: An Eye Witness Account*, first published in 1993, or seen the Oscar-winning film by Tim Robbins, starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Some may even know the renowned contemporary opera *Dead Man Walking*, by American composer Jake Heggie, first presented at the San Francisco Opera in October 2000.

Sister Helen's encounters with Louisiana's death row soon focussed her phenomenal energies and charismatic persona onto the more general issue of capital punishment, especially the form it takes within the United States. The United States stands alone among developed countries in its attachment to the death penalty. Only the United States and Iran continue to execute persons for crimes committed while under eighteen, something prohibited by international law.

One year ago, the Irish electorate passed a referendum making capital punishment contrary to our constitution. This unprecedented event was overshadowed at the time by other political issues, and was never celebrated as it should have been. Ireland is the only country in the world to have put the issue to the public in this way. I am sure that Helen Prejean will be thrilled if we share this moment of personal honour and distinction with a celebration of Ireland's rejection of capital punishment.

Ireland never forgot its sixteen dead heroes, "loitering there to stir the boiling pot", in the words of Yeats. As in many countries, the death penalty was a cruel memory of an oppressive past. In the United States, capital punishment is the legacy — and the enduring, unforgettable symbol — of slavery and its post-emancipation echoes in the Jim Crow laws. The Louisiana penitentiary where Helen Prejean began her famous work is called Angola. The place was given its name by slaves who were brought there from Africa. The name remained when it later became the killing fields of a justice system infected with racism.

The second half of the twentieth century has seen the steady erosion of the death penalty. In 1945, most countries in the world, including Ireland, still used capital punishment. But by the year 2002, according to figures from the United Nations, two-thirds of the world's states have put the supreme penalty behind them as a form of cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.

An honorary degree is usually the occasion to take stock of a life's work, of fulfilment and completion. But Helen Prejean's work is unfinished, and she is still young and energetic. While we honour her achievement, we don't want to delay the return to her important work. More than any other personality, she symbolises the gentler, kinder America that we all love and appreciate. We wish you Godspeed, Sister Helen.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totaeque Academiae