

The Pastor's Column - September 28th, 2023



Photos by Jim Anness/Fordham University

Sr. Helen in the house...

We are still buzzing from last Friday evening's hugely successful presentation *Sister Helen Prejean on Dead Man Walking: Opera, Activism, and Faith* that we co-sponsored with Fordham University. As I mentioned to Fordham President Tanya Tetlow: "We haven't seen a crowd this big since Easter." Ever more momentous, for maybe the first time ever, we three neighbors on Columbus Avenue, the Metropolitan Opera, Fordham University, and St. Paul the Apostle, joined together for a common effort. But let's be honest, it took an 84-year-old woman religious from Louisiana to make it all happen.



The gathering was an opportunity to discuss the opera *Dead Man Walking*, based on Sr. Helen's bestselling memoir, which premiered this past Tuesday evening at the Met. Also lifted up was the on-going efforts of Sister's ministry to advocate for the abolition of the death penalty. There is good news to report here. According to the New York Times, in 1994, 80% of Americans favored the death penalty. Last year, it was down to 55%. Death sentences and executions have both plummeted from their peaks. Sr. Helen further pointed out how Church teaching has developed in the past 25 years. In fact, Pope Francis revised the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 2018 to call the death penalty "an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person" and deeming it "inadmissible" in all cases. Her tireless ministry and advocacy no doubt encouraged this development of doctrine.



A force of nature isn't the right way to describe Sister Helen. She's more like a beam of warm sunshine that you are naturally drawn to. Sr. Helen comes from that Southern Cajun culture where connections and relationships are what matter the most. We shouldn't have been surprised that she arrived in the nick of time for the talk as she was schmoozing all the way from the Met to St. Paul's, completely missing the pre-event reception in the parish center. For her, taking time to talk to neighbors, strangers, parishioners, even enemies anywhere, anytime is a way of life. Befriending the friendless on death row is in her DNA.



Sr. Helen animated the conversation with mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, who plays her on stage, and composer Jake Heggie. She framed her reflections on human dignity and forgiveness both as core Catholic values and universal human values which invited the other participants to reflect on a deeper level than they might have otherwise. Heggie and DiDonato both commented that one of the marvels of the Opera is exploring Sr. Helen's story, especially from her initial, naïve efforts accompanying those on death row, to her growth in understanding of the pain and suffering of the victims and their families as well as the families of the perpetrator, and ultimately her discovering the humanity in the perpetrator themselves. Sr. Helen was adamant that we must stop the cycle of violence that the death penalty perpetuates and seek a path of reconciliation and forgiveness so both the offended and the offender may find peace.

It was an amazing night and the crowd roared in applause when it concluded. What was truly inspiring to me was that after the event, Sr. Helen remained in the church and talked to everyone who wanted to meet her, speak to her, and have her sign their book. Her smile, her charm, her energy, her sense of humor never wavered. We pray that her vision of a world where the rights and dignity of all persons are cherished and respected may be realized!

God Bless,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Eric". The script is cursive and fluid.

Rev. Fr. Eric Andrews, CSP
Pastor, Church of St. Paul the Apostle (NYC)



PS: I'll be travelling West this weekend to celebrate the 65th birthday of our former pastor Fr. Gil and for Paulist Meetings being held in Los Angeles from Oct. 3-5. I'll be back for First Friday!