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Sr. Helen Prejean, a Sister of St. Joseph of Medaille, who has worked in prison ministry and against the death penalty for decades, is pictured in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Jan. 21, 2016. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Daniel P. Horan

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August 21, 2019

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St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean is known the world over for her commitment to social justice, particularly for her ministry to and advocacy on behalf of those incarcerated and sentenced to die. Her ministry has garnered attention and has helped to shape public sentiment about the injustice of the death penalty, especially among Catholics. But how did she become filled with that prophetic fire and righteous passion for which she is known today?

Her new memoir, *River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey*, chronicles the path from pre-conciliar nun to modern-day voice of conscience. This book (her third) ends where her first, *Dead Man Walking*, begins. It is the story behind the story — how the devout schoolteacher and aspiring mystic grew into her vocation, which took her behind bars and into the world of America's inhumane pseudo-justice system in order to bring the compassionate face of Christ to those least sympathetic in our society.

Reading the book, I was reminded of the famous passage in the Letter of James, which tells us starkly that: "faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17). I believe this is the constant refrain of Sister Helen's story.

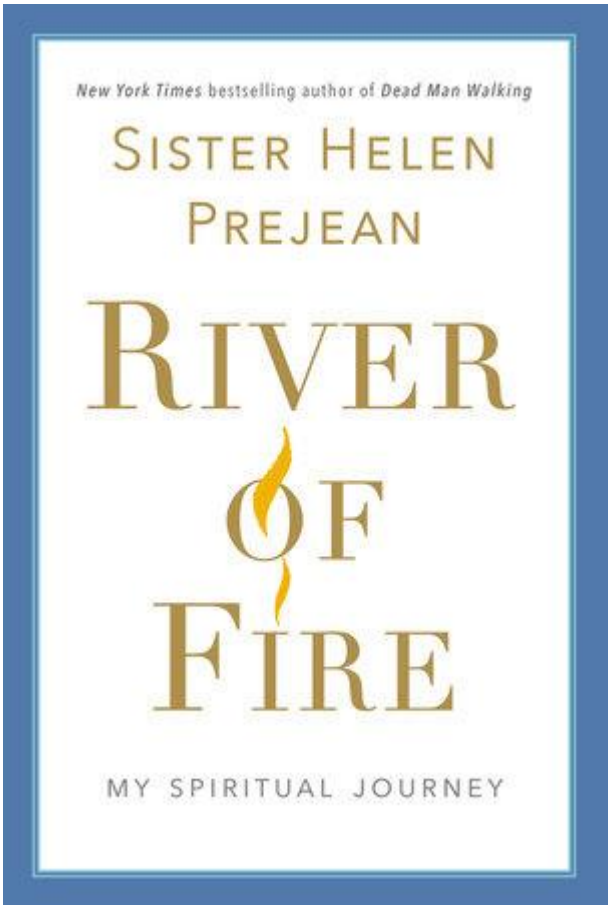
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A good Catholic young woman of the 1950s, she entered religious life with a sincere, if understandably simplistic, vision of what it meant to say yes to God: Prayer. Lots and lots of prayer. As she states throughout, there is nothing wrong with prayer (it's absolutely essential). But it is not enough to pray and call oneself a good follower of Christ.

The specter of the Letter of James haunts this book. Through Sister Helen's narration and recollections of a life led by the Spirit to places she never dreamed of going, we are likewise challenged to love God in our neighbors and be open to the journey of faith that puts faith into action, prayer into practice.

Sister Helen's experience is deeply instructive. Those who admire her — and even those who revile her — for her social justice work may be quick to overlook the spiritual foundation that undergirds the difficult ministry she has performed for the last 40 years. Such oversight is understandable because accompanying prisoners on death row, testifying in court and before legislators, speaking in public venues, and being portrayed in an Oscar-winning role gets more attention. The years of religious formation, hours in chapel, time for meditation and reflection, reading, and study of theology go unacknowledged; these things are neither flashy nor easily seen.

But those who understand the point of the Letter of James can recognize that in caring for the most despised and forgotten of society, Sister Helen has embodied the verse which proclaims: "Demonstrate your faith to me without works and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works." She has been demonstrating her faith for decades.



(Penguin Random House)

Her book invites readers deeper into that faith that is on display in her works. And, like the best spiritual memoirs, it challenges each of us to examine how we do or do not put our faith into action and pursue a life of Christian discipleship in our particular contexts. In this way, Sister Helen not only reflects the truth of James but also the wisdom of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation on holiness, *Gaudete et Exsultate*. I would suggest that one way to read *River of Fire* is as a companion volume to the pope's reflections on holiness. It offers a clear, concrete and compelling illustration of what striving for holiness looks like in the modern world.

The particularity of Sister Helen's story is actually one of the features that make it so universally relevant. While this book chronicles her own journey — what she describes throughout as a "river" on whose current she rides — it also presents us with a wellspring of wisdom for all Christians. Here are just a few of the many themes that bubble up from this source and offer refreshment for Christians thirsting for spiritual renewal.

Christian discipleship demands ongoing conversion. As she has often said in public presentations, Sister Helen was not immediately convinced of the validity of nuns getting involved in "social justice" efforts after Vatican II. In fact, she describes how she was resistant to it. It seemed as though religious sisters were neglecting what she viewed as their primary vocation — prayer in the convent. She had been a Sister of St. Joseph for decades before God's grace could strike her and inspire her through the words of other sisters to grow in her understanding of vocation and ministry.

Sister Helen's journey, like all of ours, is a journey of gradual changes, unexpected encounters, and uncomfortable beginnings. There is no singular point of decision in the Christian life. Rather, there is a constant need for ongoing conversion, growth, and change guided by the Holy Spirit. Oftentimes, we are completely oblivious to how the Spirit is at work in real time, but we can train ourselves to be more attentive to the Spirit's promptings.

Our humanness is not the enemy, but the condition of discipleship. Some of the most moving parts of the book are Sister Helen's reflections on deep personal relationships, including a close friendship with another sister in her community and a complicated friendship with a diocesan priest. Drawing on journal entries and her own remembrances, Sister Helen reflects on the importance of what it means to be someone capable of loving and able to receive love. Human relationships and the

emotions that come with them are, at times, messy and confusing. Yet, risking the messiness and confusion is part of what it means to be authentically human.

It's not just the individuals we are closest to — family, friends, community members — who bring out the messiness and complications of our humanity. The institutions we belong to and the contexts in which we find ourselves also bear witness to the complexity of life. One of the striking observations that come through is how so many people (especially *religious people*) try to run from their inescapable humanness. Sister Helen was initially formed in a kind of community life that adopted a mindset of *fuga mundi* ("fleeing the world") common in pre-conciliar religious congregations. The idea was that true holiness is found in those moments, places and ideas that focus on the spirit and not the body, the divine and not the world; anything not religious ought to be abandoned. Such strict thinking, while understandably appealing at times, nevertheless rejects the very locus of God's deepest encounter with us in the Incarnation, which announces that our humanness in all its messiness is precisely the place we encounter the divine.

Sister Helen quotes Irenaeus of Lyons at one point, rightly stating that: "the glory of God is the human person fully alive." God does not desire restricted, isolated, self-protected individuals but women and men alive in all their messiness.

Christian discipleship requires a life of prayer. It is a cliché among pastoral ministers to say: "You cannot give what you do not have." But it's also true. As Sister Helen's faith journey makes plain, you cannot fulfill your call as a follower of Christ to announce the reign of God by word and deed without prayer. This is perhaps the most important takeaway for me — this reminder that we must be people of prayer if we are to work for justice in our world. At a time when we are constantly reminded of the local and global injustices around us, many people are energized to do something. As Christians, we should — we *must* — do something, but if it's not grounded in a practice of prayer, we will likely fall prey to our own wills and not that of God. Sister Helen reminds us of this, not just by her words, but also by her actions.

In addition to her tireless social justice work and advocacy, I am grateful for her personal witness to ongoing conversion, openness about her own humanness, and commitment to a life of prayer. I'm especially thankful for the wisdom that flows through the *River of Fire* and Sister Helen's invitation that we join her for the ride.

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