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St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean speaks in front of a banner that reads, "End the death penalty."

St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean served as Texas death-row inmate Ivan Cantu's spiritual adviser during his execution on Feb. 28. She is seen in Anaheim, Calif., in this 2016 file photo. (OSV News/CNS file/The Tidings/J.D. Long-Garcia)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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In February my Congregation of St. Joseph leadership asked all of us to pray with our Sr. Helen Prejean, who was accompanying a death row inmate, Ivan Cantu.

As Cantu's execution date drew near, we joined nearly 152,000 others in petitioning Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to stay his execution so that extensive evidence that might exonerate him could be heard in the courts.

Abbott refused, and Ivan went to God on Feb. 28.

Helen was with him, whispering prayers and encouragement until the moment he died.

Both Helen and Ivan have been much in my thoughts since then.

During Holy Week, I can't help but reflect that Helen's accompaniment mirrors that of the many courageous women who stayed with another man executed for a capital crime more than 2,000 years ago. We revere his death on Good Friday (Matthew 27:55-56).

For the past 42 years Sr. Helen Prejean has accompanied seven men killed in Texas and Louisiana by our country's broken judicial system. It is very likely that three of them — possibly including Ivan Cantu — were falsely accused and innocent. Since 1973, 185 people have been exonerated from death row. Most wrongful convictions were not accidental.

I wanted to ask Helen about her experience. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

***Schenk*: Tell me about Ivan Cantu.**

Prejean: I first met Ivan in the early '90s when I visited death row in Texas. Then life went on. When I returned home after the 2000 debut of the "Dead Man Walking" opera, a letter was waiting for me.

Ivan Cantu

Ivan Cantu, a Texas death-row inmate, was executed Feb. 28. He is pictured in an undated prison photo. (OSV News/Texas Department of Criminal Justice)

It was from Ivan. "Will you be with me when I'm executed?" he asked. "Would you hold my hand and pray with me and make sure I have a rosary around my neck from the Vatican?"

I can't possibly accept every invitation. But there it was, "Will you be with me?" So a big thing happened. I have to say yes. But I know the system now and I know he probably is innocent. What went with that yes was that we were going to have to do everything we could to resist his death.

Now, the interesting thing about Ivan is that he has more executive agency in his little finger than most CEOs have. Because he believed nothing's impossible with God. And he's like, "Let's get this story out because I'm innocent. They framed me and we've got to get the truth out, not just for my life, but because this criminal justice system is so broken."

And then private investigator Matt Duff gets intrigued by Ivan's case and investigated the stuff Ivan's lawyer never did. And this is the brokenness of the system. I mean it's so much like Jesus. When it was exposed that the state's key witnesses had lied, three jurors stepped forth, including the foreperson of the jury, and asked for a new trial.

What was it like to be with Ivan during his execution?

Everything about it is surreal. I can go and visit him at 3 p.m., but at 4:15, I must leave because the family will be talking to him on the phone. And then they call the governor. So it was 6:15 by the time I walked back to the execution chamber. And they already have Ivan in a cruciform position. It was like Dali's crucifixion painting, head down from above. So I walk in and I'm right at his head. And I said, "Ivan, how are you doing?" He goes, "Well, I'm anxious." I go, "Yeah, you're anxious. Of course you're anxious. You know Jesus was anxious. This is the big moment."

I knew my job was to just keep pumping those words into his ear. I had told him earlier about this image I had, that you're in a tunnel and the light is fading and you're going to get to a black place with no light. Then one of two things will happen: You will land on your feet in a place that seems familiar, or you'll learn to fly. And he told me, "I'm going to fly." He had deep faith in Jesus.

The warden gave the signal (to give the injection). And very shortly Ivan took like three breaths. And then his mouth flew open. All I could think was "He has breathed forth his spirit." It is over. I mean, Jesus was in that room, Chris. And with me. Yeah. I knew my role. I mean, my role was to help him as best I could. It's just keep saying those words into his ear to help carry him over. It is a very energetic thing. It's not passive. It's like he needs these words. I was holding his hand.

His last words were to the family of the victims. "I want you to know that I never killed James and Amy. And if I did, if I knew who did, you would've been the first to know any information I would've had." He protested with integrity. He spoke the truth to the end.

And what happens is that I get galvanized because I'm praying with him and promising him that his death will be redemptive. We will get his story out to help save the lives of people and end the death penalty.



A death chamber table is seen at the state penitentiary in Huntsville, Texas, in this file photo from 2010. (OSV News photo/Reuters/Texas Department of Criminal Justice handout/Genevieve Robbins)

Do you have a different pastoral approach with someone you believe is guilty?

Well, it's always to accompany them and for them to know their dignity. If they're denying what they did, just to help them to tell the truth. The truth will set you free. It's wrong what the state is doing. And we are going to resist it in every way we can. But you want to die truthfully, which means dealing with what you did. And then they ask forgiveness of the victim's family. They always do. They reach that point, this deed is done, and you can't undo it. And how do you deal with that? And that's really the forgiveness of Jesus, that we are more than that terrible act.

And people change. One time a guard told me "the man we are killing tonight is a different man from that young brash animal who came in here cursing everybody. He's changed." Because that's the message of redemption. That we can change. And

that's the arrogance of the state to declare that we are going to send this person into eternity because they're finished, and they can never change.

How do you deal with what must be a painful aftermath? Do you ever get PTSD?

Well, you've got the paschal mystery that's present. So there's a galvanizing effect and a missioning effect that happens in me with these deaths. And that happened when I came out of the execution chamber when Pat Sonnier (the first person Prejean accompanied) was killed in the electric chair. It was the middle of the night. First thing I did was vomit. I had never watched a protocol, cold and legal and step-by-step, to kill a person.

And that's when the mission was born. It was like, "I can't walk away from this. I've been a witness." And when you're a witness to something, something happens inside of you because you see the suffering. You see the torture of it. You see the defenselessness; you see the cold legal protocol. And so what will I do? Will I just go back to my life and never touch this again?

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I ask myself, "Why am I not devastated?" First, I know I had done every single thing I knew to do to prevent the death and to speak out with the prophetic voice. And to educate the people. People are so removed from the death penalty. They're never close when it's done. That's part of the mission too.

Then the late Millard Farmer, who was the lawyer that we got to try to save Sonnier's life, told me, "Sister Helen, we have two other people in Louisiana." And I looked in his eyes when he said that, and I thought, "He's not saving himself from the fire. He's going back in because they don't have anybody. They need you." But these lawyers, they are the real heroes And I said, "I'll do it, Millard, but I'll only take one at a time." Right now I've been accompanying Manuel Ortiz for 20 years.

What can ordinary people do to abolish the death penalty?

A big part is to catch on fire with the issue itself. You do that through reading. By meeting with people. And then to encourage everybody to start reaching out to prisoners. "I was in prison, and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25:36) is a real

mandate.

But to start taking that mandate literally, see, it's a fire thing. You catch fire. Once you're on fire and you're working with other people, you are alive.

What an irony. That I would come so alive from work on death row. I call that a little paradox.