

CATHOLIC DISCUSSION GUIDE



Dead Man Walking: Graphic Edition by Sr. Helen Prejean, CSJ

About this Guide

Through a series of thoughtful reflection questions, this discussion guide serves as an accompaniment to *Dead Man Walking: Graphic Edition*, offering readers a way to explore the Catholic call to uphold the sanctity of life and to examine the inadequacies of the U.S. criminal legal system.

About *Dead Man Walking: Graphic Edition*

Since its landmark 1993 release, Sr. Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking* has been adapted as an Academy Award-winning film, an opera, a stage play, and now a graphic novel. *Dead Man Walking* tells the true story of Sr. Helen Prejean, whose work ministering to Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie as they were scheduled to be executed animated her to become the Catholic Church's most outspoken advocate for death penalty abolition. This new Graphic Edition engages readers of all ages to examine what true justice and mercy look like, and the need to abolish the death penalty in the United States.

Before You Read

This book may elicit intense emotions because it handles challenging topics including murder, sexual assault, racial injustice, and methods of execution. Additionally, the book depicts nudity associated with crimes as well as images of violence.

Discussion on the Story:

- 1 How did Sr. Helen's upbringing and experience as a sister prepare her for her ministry? In what ways did those realities make her ministry with Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie challenging?
- 2 How does Sr. Helen approach her ministry with Patrick and Robert? What are some similarities and differences between her approaches?
- 3 Spend some time looking at the panels that show the execution of Patrick Sonnier (pg. 160-161). **Where are your eyes drawn to the most?** Which panel do you try to avoid? Spend a few moments journaling about why. Pay attention to your feelings and reactions to the images.
- 4 Reread Patrick (pg. 159) and Robert's (pg. 253) last words. What do you think about them? Should either of them have said something different? If so, what?

"The Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that **'the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,'** and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide."

(Catechism of the Catholic Church #2267, updated in 2018)

Discussion on the Story:

- 5 The ant and owl characters appear throughout the story, adding insights and commentary. **What do you believe is their role in telling this story?** Why do you think the book uses an ant and an owl, as opposed to any other animals?
- 6 Near both the beginning of the book (pg. 23) and the end (pg. 280) there are images of the characters on staircases that do not lead anywhere. What do those images suggest in each case? Do you find them accurate? Why or why not?
- 7 The book uses color in a variety of ways. What colors stand out to you the most in the book and why? What purpose does color play in the story; how does it create, emphasize or focus your attention?

Discussion on Your Catholic Faith:

- 1 Before reading *Dead Man Walking*, what did you think about the death penalty? Has your sense of it changed? If so, how?
- 2 Many people in the book justify their participation in the system of capital punishment by saying that it is merely part of their job or that they are just following the law. What do you think of these arguments? **Knowing what the Church teaches about the death penalty, what would you say to these characters?**
- 3 After Sr. Helen prays with Lloyd LeBlanc and learns how he forgave Patrick Sonnier, there is the line: *"Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won."* Reflect on a time in your life where it was difficult to forgive someone. What eventually led you to you forgive that person?
- 4 It took learning about social justice from a fellow sister and living in the St. Thomas housing projects to compel Sr. Helen to put her faith into action to work to abolish the death penalty. What about your Catholic faith compels you to advocate for an end to the death penalty?

Discussion on Capital Punishment:

- 1 The book presents several criticisms of the death penalty: the disproportionate impact on people of color and poor people, the suffering of long imprisonment and the pain of execution, the failure to provide healing to families, the procedural barriers in the legal system that prevent errors from being fixed. Which argument do you think is the most convincing and why?
- 2 Some proponents of capital punishment argue that it brings closure to victims' families. **Do you think closure is always possible? What might victim family members need to experience a sense of wholeness?**
- 3 The book also describes other execution methods, including the electric chair (pg. 39–49), the gas chamber (pg. 243), and hanging (pg. 271–273), along with stories of people executed in those ways. Which of these did you find most moving? How did these stories affect your beliefs about the death penalty?

