Event:  Senator Barack Obama’s campaign for the president . . .

Sister Helen Prejean speaks at the 2008 Democratic National Convention
18 min.

- Yellow highlights refer to comments applicable to the unborn and abortion.

“I speak today as a woman of faith, a woman in the Christian tradition to address our sacred responsibility.  Sacred responsibility is a language of the soul, a language of faith and it goes deeper than all politics.  This invitation to become a nation of peace is addressed to all of us.

“My deepest lessons about our sacred responsibility to our nation I have learned in the government killing chambers, on death row, in execution chambers, the darkest most hidden corner of American life.  As spiritual advisor, I have accompanied six human beings to their death and I don’t know what the six men experienced physically when they were killed; but I do know that they experienced great mental anguish preparing for death, anticipating death, and dying in their minds a thousand times before they died.

“Inherent in the practice of the death penalty is the practice of mental torture.

“I’ve also been privileged to accompany the victims’ families in their search for healing.  The real heroes in my book ‘Dead Man Walking’ are the LeBlancs whose only son was murdered.  And Lloyd Leblanc was the first to teach me what forgiveness really means.  He said, ‘I’m not going to allow hatred and bitterness take over my life because then I’d be dead, too.’  [find source]

“If we understand what we’re doing in our own killing chambers we will more readily understand what happened in Abu Ghraib and what’s happening in Guantanamo and why we’re at war in Iraq and Afghanistan.  And how it has happened that even our Attorney General and lawyer have employed shocking legalisms to bypass the Geneva conventions to legitimize torture of suspected terrorists!

“What has happened to us?!  Practice of the death penalty on our own soil has, I believe, developed a mind set, an attitude, that makes it easier for us to kill those we designate as enemies, or suspected enemies, and to torture them.

“The death penalty -- far from being a peripheral moral issue concerned about how we should punish a few terrible criminals -- reveals the very soul of America!  It lays bare our deepest wounds of our nation:  our racism, our assault on poor people, and our ready instinct to use violence to solve social problems!

“Racism overwhelmingly – did you know we’ve been at the death penalty for 32 years?  We’ve killed over a thousand people in our killing chambers since 1976 in this country.  Overwhelmingly the punishment of death is meted out to those who kill White people.  It’s the death of White people that causes outrage in this country.  32 years of experience shows who really gets the punishment for whose death.  Rarely is the death penalty sought for people of color; and 50% of all homicides in this country are against people of color.  But it’s rare when you see the death penalty pursued for [the murder of] a person of color.
“Disproportionately it singles out poor people to pay the ultimate punishment for their crime.

“Our country’s almost DNA gene instinct is to kill the enemy as the only way to be secure. Here’s a pattern: target the enemy, dehumanize the enemy, kill the enemy; and if needed torture the enemy since he’s not human we are anyway.

“So we don’t hear the cries in the torture chambers; nor may I say that on the highest level of our own courts are the cries heard of those in the execution chambers, not only those being killed but the mothers…like those in Texas there are 3 witnessing chambers: one is for the state’s witnesses; one if for the victims to get their so-called closure or healing by watching another person being killed; and the third witnessing chamber is where the mother stands to watch her child be killed by the state.

“We’re not worthy of the death penalty as a people. We are not worthy of this! I invite dialogue with both political parties, both presidential candidates around the death penalty. No matter how restricted we try to make our criteria, our little designer death penalty I call it. That it should only be applied the crime should be so heinous that the full outcry of the community ought to be expressed. The problem with the criterion is that outrage of the community is very uneven. It’s very weighted around the murder of citizens that have status and it’s almost nonchalant about the murder of other people. 90% of the murders in N.O. are against people of color, and very seldom is the death penalty ever pursued for those who kill people of color.

“We need to take death off the table as a punishment! Off the table! And then when we go talk to China or other countries about human rights we can hold our head up high because WE don’t torture our citizens!

“I’ve got to tell you what I’ve learned. When you start talking about the death penalty, there’s a deep religious underpinning. Who is God for us? It is God who demands an eye-for-an-eye. It is God who is pleased with sacrifice.

“And in the Christian tradition, there are those who say God allowed or even willed his own son, Jesus, to be sacrificed and killed on the cross in payment for our sins! And when we kill criminals we have chaplains in death houses! And when we kill criminals for their crimes God accepts their death in payment for their sins so they can go to heaven! What kind of god do we believe in?!

“What kind of father would demand the death of a son? Is this a god? Or is it an ogre, a monster, created by our own violent impulses? We project so this is God who wants vengeance, like we want vengeance. Truly there are contradictory images of God in the Bible. On which one will we model our lives?

“Jesus forgave his executioners and showed us the way to compassion, as do all religious traditions teach us the way of compassion. Jesus showed such compassion that no one can be called enemy, at least for long. No one can be called enemy. He said to a young lawyer, He said ‘Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Not a life for a life; not a death for a death; not an eye-for-an-eye. And when Jesus talked about an eye-for-an-eye, he said you’ve
heard it said an eye-for-an-eye. But I say to you love those who hate you. Do not let your love be overcome by death, pray for those who persecute you.

“And [when] Lloyd LeBlanc and murder victims like him say, ‘I cannot let my love be overcome by hate, or I would be dead, too; I am going to follow the way of love and forgiveness as Jesus said,’ they show us the way.

“When I had an opportunity to dialogue with Pope John Paul II, about my church’s teaching about the death penalty, I asked him, “Does the Church uphold only the dignity of the innocent? What about the guilty? When I’m walking with a man to his death and he’s shackled hands and feet; and he says to me, ‘Sister, please pray that God holds up my legs’ -- where is his dignity? There is no dignity in rendering someone defenseless and putting him to death.

[She does not mention any response from the pope to her question.]

“Now, happily, after 25 years of dialogue in our Catholic Church, our bishops played a key role in it, I wasn’t the only one for sure -- along with all the other religious traditions who’ve really been having a lot of dialogue about the death penalty, too -- now, my church works earnestly to abolish the death penalty. And the development and understanding in our faith goes hand-in-hand in our understanding of human rights.

“There’s been a great development in world in the last 40 years in the development in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights -- every human being has the right to life, and no one should be tortured. All religions teach that life is sacred. And Jesus and all religious teachings show preferential love for the least of these, the vulnerable. And when Pope John Paul made public the changes in Catholic teachings on the death penalty in St. Louis in ’99, for the first time he put abolition of the death penalty in squarely with the other life issues the Catholic Church holds dear: respect for life from life’s beginning until natural death.

“In Catholic circles we call this the ‘consistent ethic of life’ -- all life. And the more vulnerable life is, the more we have to be there for it.

“Spiritual paths always involve change, always involve conversion, and I just have to say being invited here today -- we had no guidelines; we didn’t have anything [like], ‘But you can’t say “this.”’ They let us be free to speak our minds today and I speak out of that freedom. Is it not time for our nation to be converted from our pursuit of violence, to be a nation that embraces dialogue, diplomacy with our enemies?! Are we ready to build a peace academy alongside our military academy?! Wouldn’t it be life-giving if every school child in America would learn nonviolent conflict resolution? And wouldn’t it be exciting if congress would offer to be first to pilot the program?!

Are we ready to begin shifting $800 billion-plus in the defense budget into mass transit, affordable homes, health care for all, massive green technology harnessing solar and wind energy to address global warming?!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! A new industry that can provide jobs for our people?

And are we ready to follow Australia’s example that formally apologized to their aboriginal people, to our Native Americans for the violence we have reaped on them, the
lands we have stolen from them, and herding them onto reservations, and our blatant noncompliance with our own treaties?!!!!!!!! Are we ready to apologize to them?!!!!!!!!!

“Oh, say, what do you see in the dawn’s early light? Bombs bursting in air? Or do you see a newly budding America respectful of human rights, refusing violence, taking care of all of our people no matter how poor – especially the poor – and actively engaged with talking with our adversaries, instead of threatening to drop bombs on them?!!! Thank you.”

[Standing ovation followed by “Yes we can.”]

Transcribed by Nina Rhea on 11/3/11.