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California's historic opportunity to end the death penalty

John Dear | Oct. 2, 2012 On the Road to Peace

It was exciting to be in Los Angeles over the weekend to join friends in Pax Christi L.A. for their annual assembly day, this year with the theme, "Blessed are the Peacemakers." It was also exciting to feel the momentum building for Nov. 6, when Californians have to opportunity to vote Yes on Proposition 34 and end the death penalty.

California is on the verge of a historic moment, and I hope and pray every Californian will join the campaign to abolish the death penalty once and for all.

All summer long, churches throughout the state have been mobilizing to get out the vote and get rid of the death penalty. This week, Sr. Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking [1]*, arrives for an eight-day statewide speaking tour. She told me how excited she is, too, because the churches are at the front of the movement, and there's a palpable sense of hope in the air. Friends at Death Penalty Focus of California [2] are working overtime to end the death penalty.

Proposition 34 will replace California's death penalty with life in prison without the possibility of parole. It will require inmates to work and pay restitution to the victims' compensation fund and will allocate $100 million in the next three years to solve more murders and rapes in California and protect our families.

As Death Penalty Focus of California explains, California needs to use its limited state resources instead on real human needs; among them, "to investigate and solve the crimes of murder and rape to help keep our families safe -- instead of spending more money on our broken death penalty system." Forty-six percent of murders and 56 percent of rapes go unsolved every year in California, the group says.

Also, California still risks the possibility of executing an innocent person. Nationally, 139 people have been freed from death row in the last few decades after they were found to be innocent. The death penalty always holds the possibility of killing an innocent person, and that's simply a risk that can never be taken again.

But California, like other states, can't afford the death penalty. Since California voted to reinstate the death penalty in 1978, they have spent $4 billion dollars to execute 13 people, Death Penalty Focus states. Each execution costs about $308 million -- about 20 times the cost of a trial for life in prison without parole.

If Prop 34 is passed by California voters Nov. 6, it will save California $1 billion in the next five years, advocates of the proposition say. This expensive policy of state-sanctioned murder has to be voted down because that money is desperately needed instead for schools, jobs, health care and real human needs.

The good news is that the tide is turning. Twenty years ago, the vast majority of Californians supported the death penalty. But last week's poll showed 54 percent of Californians favor life in prison without parole to the death penalty.

Just as Illinois [3], New Mexico, New Jersey and Connecticut [4] have recently ended the death penalty and

saved their states an enormous amount of money, so should Californians.

There are many other arguments for abolishing the death penalty in California and throughout the nation: It's racist. It does not provide a deterrent against violent crime. It is often applied at random. Almost 140 nations around the world have abolished the death penalty; we're one of the last nations to practice state-sanctioned murder.

Bad lawyers are consistently part of the problem. More money should be spent instead on the murder victims' families and their needs. And life without parole is a sensible option. (See www.deathpenalty.org [2] for more details.)

But I would like to point out that every major religion condemns the death penalty. It is morally and spiritually bankrupt. In particular, no Christian can support the death penalty because Jesus adamantly forbid killing, taught us to forgive, love and show compassion, and even intervened, on one occasion, to save the life of a woman about to be executed by stoning, saying, "Let the one without sin be the first to cast a stone." Because of his nonviolent resistance against the empire, Jesus himself suffered capital punishment for the capital crime of inciting revolution. He was executed. He was a victim of the death penalty. He did not side with the executioners, but literally with the executed. No one can claim to be a follower of this person and support the death penalty.

"I am against the death penalty as a Christian and priest because I oppose the execution of Jesus and all of God's children -- we are all created in God's image and likeness," writes my friend Fr. Chris Ponnet, an L.A. pastor and board member of Death Penalty Focus. "I am opposed to the death penalty because as a chaplain, I journey with the victims of crime and the accused and sometimes the guilty, and killing them does not take away the pain but only increases the pain. I oppose the death penalty because as a pastor, I have seen how the victim's families are not free from their appropriate pain and anger when the government kills in our names. I am opposed to the death penalty because we sometimes kill innocent people and its steals funding for our schools, for children. I oppose the death penalty because as one who respects all life and lives according to the Consistent Life Ethic, it is a wrong to kill. Killing to stop killing does not heal; it only carries on the cycle of violence."

Being in California these last few days and speaking with friends about this historic moment reminded me of my work there 20 years ago, when I lived in Berkeley and Oakland to end the death penalty. Twice, I arranged for Mother Teresa to speak with the governor of California in an appeal for clemency for someone about to be executed on San Quentin's death row.

In 1990 and 1992, Mother Teresa told governors George Deukmejian and Pete Wilson: "Do what Jesus would do." She was opposed to California's killing of death row inmates and invoked Jesus as her rationale. Killing people who kill people is not the way to show that killing people is wrong -- that was the message. But more: Aspire to the nonviolence of Jesus. That is our holy ideal.

Several times on the phone, Mother Teresa asked me to call upon the people of California and the whole country to end the death penalty. She told me several times that she was praying for the miracle of the end of the death penalty. I bet she's still praying for that miracle. Now it might actually happen.

I hope and pray that every Californian will take a stand Nov. 6 and "do what Jesus would do" --stop the killing, vote Yes on Prop 34 and abolish the death penalty. Let's pray California makes history Nov. 6 and points the way for the rest of the country to throw the death penalty in the dustbin where it belongs.

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On Oct. 6, John Dear will speak on "Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Nonviolence" in Belleville, Ill., near St. Louis. On Oct. 28, he will give a talk about *Lazarus, Come Forth!* at Maryknoll in Ossining, N.Y. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [5]. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [6], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [7]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [8] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings [9]*; *Put Down Your Sword [10]* and *A Persistent Peace [11]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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[2] http://www.deathpenalty.org/
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