

# Dead Man Walking (1995)

*After meeting Sr. Prejean recently I decided to go back into the archives and post this review of one of my favorite films.*

Rated R. Running time: 2 hr 2 min.

Our content rating (1-10): Violence 8; Language 5;  
Sex-5/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (0-5): 5

*Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."*

*John 8:31*

*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us...*

*...For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.*

*Romans 5:6-8; 8:14*

Tim Robbins, best known as an actor, wins his laurels as screenwriter and director in this powerful, theological drama based on Sister Helen Prejean's book about her experience as spiritual director for a condemned rapist-killer. I especially appreciated Mr. Robbin's refusal to water-down the author's deep faith and piety – unlike those who spoiled the beautiful *City of Joy* when they transferred it to the screen.

Susan Sarandon is outstanding as the gutsy nun working in the

inner city when she is asked to correspond with a prisoner condemned to die. She soon becomes far more involved than she had expected, forced to evaluate her faith and love in the face of criticism of her involvement, from her own family, the people whom she is serving in the city, and, above all, the families of the murdered young couple. It is the father of the slain boy who makes her aware of how arrogant she seems to those on the other side of the debate. She is flexible enough to go visit the victims, as well, as the man who caused all the pain.

Sean Penn is Ms. Sarandon's equal in conveying the essence of the condemned killer Matthew Poncelet, a proud man presenting a hard shell to the outside world that had given him so little. Little by little he begins to give his trust to this woman, fighting with her at times over his racist views, trying to hide his vulnerability, refusing to be considered a victim yet denying his guilt.

This is a film of radical grace, as seen in the scene in which Sr. Helen visits the parents of Hope, the young woman raped and killed by Poncelet and his partner. They ask incredulously, "How can you come here – and sit with that scum?" She replies that she is just trying to follow the example of Jesus, but, though they are Catholic also, they cannot comprehend this, responding finally in anger with "You can't be the friend of that murderer and of this family, too!" (Would this be the view of many in your church or group?)

But Sr. Helen is not into what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace! When Poncelet assures her "me and God are squared away," she, knowing better, quotes from John 8:32, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." She insists that he must own up to his part that he played in the two deaths, whether or not he pulled the trigger. He tries to wriggle out of guilt by blaming his friend and others, but Sr. Helen will not let him off, continuing to insist on his assuming responsibility for his actions.

During their interchanges, Sr. Helen presents new aspects of Jesus Poncelet had never thought of, such as Jesus being a rebel. This is a good scene for youth leaders to discuss with their youth – and especially the tender scene when she calls him “a son of God.” “No one ever called me that,” the surprised man responds. And at the end, the condemned man says to her, “I thought I’d have to die to find love. Thank you for loving me.” An incredibly, rich, rewarding film of guilt and grace.

*Since writing the above in the March 1996 issue of Visual Parables, I have also included a discussion guide in FILMS & FAITH and a meditation on grace based on the film in my WJK book PRAYING THE MOVIES, both available at Visual Parables’ Walton, KY office.*