LOVE AND VOCATION

“Freedom to Love”
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In Dead Man Walking, Matthew Poncelet is a death row inmate convicted of raping and killing a teenage girl and her boyfriend. He says he is innocent and enlists the help of Sister Helen Prejean in his attempt to be taken off of death row. Through working with Poncelet, Sister Helen realized that she is against the death penalty. In fact, she is seen protesting one execution and is against the execution of Poncelet. While I will not try to reconcile the death penalty, I will relate the Christian images in the movie and compare them to Martin Luther’s concept of “Christian Liberty.”

I felt that the parents did not take advantage of their Christian liberty and gave into hatred and sin. I wholeheartedly think that Sister Helen did the right thing by ministering to Poncelet in his final days. I believe that she did make a difference in his salvation. We as Christians are called to love the condemned and be humble, not to have a “holier-than-thou” attitude.

Hours before Poncelet is to be executed Sister Helen tells him that he is a son of God. Poncelet says, “I’ve never been called that before. I’ve been called a son of a you-know-what a lot of times, but never a son of God.” Poncelet realized that God loves him, and that he needs God. “Now when a man has learned through the commandments to recognize his helplessness and is distressed…being
truly humbled and reduced to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself nothing whereby he might be justified.” Poncelet sees himself against the standard God has set for him and realizes that he can't do it by himself and that God can and will save him from eternal death. He is thus relieved of the pain and suffering and guilt he had been feeling over the murders he participated in. This is what Christ meant when He said, “And the truth shall make you free.” He was not talking about physical freedom, but the same spiritual freedom that Luther spoke of. Poncelet know longer had to worry about his soul or feel guilty. He no longer had to worry about facing the parents of those murdered children; he had put his trust not in himself but in God.

The first image of Christianity that really struck me was how people acted toward the condemned. “It’s much easier to kill monsters than human beings.” Poncelet’s lawyer said this to prove the point that people don’t care about the executed; after all, the executed had ceased to become human in their mind. This is evident in the words and actions against Poncelet and others on death row. The parents of the murdered girl hated Poncelet with a passion few could replicate. They wanted nothing to do with anyone who had anything to do with Poncelet. Love helps separate sin from the sinner. They were so full of hate that they had forgotten to love. As Poncelet was saying his apologies to the family of the son who had died, the parents of the girl said to each other, “What about us?” It is this type of arrogance that Luther preaches against. “By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor” (Luther 34). The parents flat out refused to do this. Jesus did
not condemn sinners, He communed with them. He did not commune with the self-righteous; He told the self-righteous that a doctor cares not for the well, but for the ill. The parents did not show love for their fellow man, they scorned and mocked him.

Three important people had three very different attitudes towards Poncelet. Sister Helen had an attitude and outlook of love, from the first letter she received from him to the second he died. She was able to do this because she had the love of God in her. The love of God knows no bounds, whether the person be the president or a murderer. The lawyer’s attitude was one more of duty than one of love. He had taken the job for free out of a favor to a friend. He sincerely tried to help Poncelet, he tried within all of his power. His motivation was to see that Poncelet’s rights were not violated and because he had given his word that he would do his best. The parents of the murdered teens had an attitude of extreme hatred. They treated him as if he were the scum of the earth, cursing him until he died, and probably until they died as well. They held no esteem for anyone who would voluntarily associate with him. They too, had their reasons for doing this. He was suspected of killing their children, and would not let God’s forgiveness or God’s love enter their lives.

Tim Robbins’ seems to enjoy comparing characters to Christ, especially Christ on the cross. Robbins’ character in *The Shawshank Redemption* spreads his arms out when his character escapes from prison. Sean Penn’s character has his arms spread out wide when he escapes prison as well; not just the physical prison, but the earthly
prison of judgment and sin. Sister Helen tells Poncelet that he must participate in his own redemption. While communion was not possible for Poncelet, I think that the Robbins was saying that the only way Poncelet could partake in Christ's sacrificial love was by becoming a sacrifice himself.