Nuns take charge of Sonnier funeral

Elmo Patrick Sonnier, who was executed Wednesday for the murder of two New Iberia teenagers, deserves a dignified burial, according to Baton Rouge nuns who arranged his funeral.

The nuns, who oppose the death penalty and tried to save Sonnier from the electric chair, said Thursday that Bishop Stanley Ott will conduct the requiem services for the dead convict.

The nuns stepped in to arrange the funeral after Sonnier’s parents did not claim his body for financial reasons, according to Sister Helen Prejean, who was Sonnier’s spiritual adviser.

“They were very poor. We asked to claim the body. There was no rejection on the part of his family at all,” she said.

Sister Kathleen Bahlinger, who is handling the arrangements for the funeral, said she doesn’t expect Sonnier’s parents to be at Rabenhorst Funeral Home here for the services, but she does expect some family members to come.

“It’s just too difficult for his mother to handle. I don’t believe they will be there. We would be very happy if his mother could come, but we don’t know that she’s able to,” Sister Bahlinger said.

Sonnier was a Catholic, and Ott is expected to conduct the religious services on Friday, she said. Sonnier is scheduled to be buried in Roselawn Memorial Park here after the services.

“It was his (Sonnier’s) wish and the family’s wish that Bishop Ott would perform the ceremony. We are very happy that the head of the diocese agreed to do the ceremony,” Sister Bahlinger said.

“We want this to be a religious ceremony,” she added, referring to publicity about the funeral.

“We want to maintain a certain dignity about the ceremony. It’s intended for those who mourn his death and rejoice in his union with God in that which we all seek,” Sister Bahlinger said.

Larry Moore, director of Rabenhorst Funeral Home, said Sister Prejean and the Sisters of St. Joseph (the religious community to which she belongs) felt that it was their responsibility to see that Sonnier had a Christian burial.

The funeral home provided the nunswith a casket, Moore said.

Sonnier grew up in St. Martinville and was working as a truck driver in New Iberia when he was arrested for and convicted of killing two teenagers in a lover’s lane orgy of rape and murder.
Death penalty protesters in front of the Capitol here Tuesday night

Taylor

(Continued from 1A)

incompetent. At Angola Tuesday night, Warden Ross Maggio said Taylor was acting "rather calmly considering the circumstance he finds himself in."

Maggio said the Robert Wayne Williams execution last December and the Taylor death coming so quickly on its heels "created some anxiety among individuals on Death Row."

Maggio said Taylor, who was moved to the death house about 11 a.m. Tuesday morning, spent five hours that afternoon visiting with eight members of his immediate family. He said that Taylor spent the evening hours consulting with a prison chaplain and a spiritual adviser. Taylor did not request a last meal.

Taylor's attorney met with Treen's executive counsel Ray Lamonica late Tuesday afternoon to present reasons why a request for relief should be granted. Treen met with Taylor's attorneys shortly after arriving back in town from the National Governors Association Conference in Washington, D.C.

"We were aware of the potential situation and he has reviewed it," Lamonica said. Lamonica said Trean took part of the record in the Taylor case with him on the out-of-state trip.

Taylor, of Prichard, Ala., was convicted of murdering David Vogler in Kenner on the night of Feb. 8, 1980, and stealing a car. Taylor accused Jefferson Parish prosecutors of falsifying the print by taking it from the car he was driving rather than the one in which Vogler's body was found. Beer key evidence in the trial was a palm print on the lid of the trunk in which Vogler's body was found. Prosecutors used that print to link Taylor to the murder, although Taylor claimed never to have been in Kenner.

Vogler had one other date with death, which was stayed last year. Maggio as well as death penalty opponents expressed surprise at Taylor's quick progression to the electric chair. Many of the 26 other Death Row inmates have had multiple dates with death that have been called off through rounds of court appeals. For instance, Williams, who died in December, had had six stays of execution.

With his wife Karen, Jerry Williams — brother of recently-executed Robert Wayne Williams — joins death penalty protest group

The Religious Leaders Against the Death Penalty, a statewide ecumenical group, expressed "moral outrage" at the impending execution, claiming racial prejudice was involved.

"The impending execution of a second black man in our state makes a mockery of our religious belief in the equality of all God's children and reminds us that, while we claim that justice is blind, we know, in fact, that it is not yet color blind," said Rabbi Myra Soifer, chairman of the group.

In his final appeal to the Supreme Court, Taylor's attorney asked the justices to stop the execution to give him a chance to track down and interview people who might have convinced jurors to impose a less severe penalty.

The justices denied the stay of execution in a three-line statement. Only Justices William Brennan and John Paul Stevens said they would have granted the stay. Justice Thurgood Marshall, a death penalty opponent, did not participate in the case because he was hospitalized with bronchitis.