

Catholic bishops renew drive vs. death penalty: Opposition to executions growing among parishioners

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The U.S. Catholic bishops have launched a nationwide campaign against the death penalty, citing new evidence that support for capital punishment is slipping among parishioners.

The campaign, announced during Holy Week when Christians recall Jesus' state-ordered execution, comes in the wake of two recent Supreme Court decisions that outlawed executions for juveniles and the mentally retarded. "I pray I will see the day when we have given up the illusion that we can teach that killing is wrong by killing people," said Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C.

Although the church has long opposed capital punishment, the new drive is a sign that Catholic leaders think they have gained the moral upper hand and that public opinion is fluid enough to render the death penalty obsolete, if not extinct.

A new Zogby poll of 1,785 Catholics commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops found that support for capital punishment has slipped from a high of 68 percent in 2001 to 48 percent. The poll found that minds can be changed—nearly one-third (29 percent) of Catholics who oppose the death penalty said they had once supported it but have since had a change of heart.

Opposition to executions was strongest among 18-28-year-olds, people who attended Catholic schools, and worshipers who attend weekly mass. The poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8 percentage points.

Pollster John Zogby said the results mirror a larger "seismic shift" in public opinion about the death penalty, fueled by the cases of death row inmates who were freed through advanced DNA testing and by overall unease with the soundness of the legal system.

Church teaching on the death penalty does not carry the same ironclad prohibitions as teachings on abortion, birth control or even homosexuality. Although the church allows capital punishment in limited cases, McCarrick said it is "very, very difficult" to justify its use. "In principle, the state does have that right, but it's the use of that right" that the church objects to, McCarrick said.

McCarrick, the church's unofficial liaison to lawmakers in Washington, said the church would seek to persuade politicians, including President Bush, that the death penalty is no longer warranted. He and other church officials noted the confusion generated in last year's presidential election when some bishops chided Senator John Kerry for his support of abortion rights but did not apply equal criticism to Bush's support of the death penalty. —
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