

# **Catholic Bishops Launch Major Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty**

## **Groundbreaking Poll Demonstrates Dramatic Rise in Catholic Opposition to Use of the Death Penalty**

WASHINGTON (March 21, 2005)—The U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops today launched a Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop of Washington, declared, “We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. We cannot defend life by taking life.” Speaking at the National Press Club on behalf of the U.S. bishops’ conference, Cardinal McCarrick said, “The Catholic campaign will work to change the debate and decisions on the use of the death penalty: building a constituency for life, not death; calling on our lawmakers to lead, not follow; to defend life, not take it away. . . . This cause is not new. Our bishops’ conference has opposed the death penalty for 25 years. But this campaign is new. It brings greater urgency and unity, increased energy and advocacy, and a renewed call to our people and to our leaders to end the use of the death penalty in our nation.”

At the press conference, noted pollster John Zogby reported on an unprecedented survey of Catholic attitudes on the death penalty: “We found that support for the use of the death penalty among American Catholics has plunged in the past few years. The intensity of support has declined as well. In past surveys, Catholic support for the death penalty was as high as 68%. In our November survey, we found that less than half of the Catholic adults in our poll (48%) now support the use of the death penalty, while 47% oppose it. The percentage of Catholics who are intensely supportive of the death penalty has been halved, from a high of 40% to 20% in this survey.” Zogby also reported that:

- The more often Catholics attend mass, the less likely they are to support the use of the death penalty.
- The younger Catholics are, the less likely they are to support the death penalty.
- A third of Catholics who once supported the use of the death penalty now oppose it.

Among the major reasons Catholics gave for opposing the use of the death penalty was “respect for life.” Two of three (63%) Catholics are deeply concerned about what the use of the death penalty “does to us as a people and a country,” according to the surveys. (The charts used in the presentation are attached to this press release.)

Cardinal McCarrick emphasized the church’s commitment to victims of violence and their families as a central part of the campaign. Bud Welch, whose daughter Julie Marie

was killed in the Oklahoma City bombing, made an impassioned plea: “My conviction is simple: More violence is not what Julie would have wanted. More violence will not bring Julie back. More violence only makes our society more violent. The Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty is another way for the church to say no to more violence and no to our culture of death.”

Cardinal McCarrick said the campaign is about “justice. . . . The death penalty in our land is deeply flawed.” Demonstrating this reality, Kirk Bloodsworth told his story of coming into the Catholic faith on death row: “I spent eight years, 11 months and 19 days behind bars before DNA testing proved my innocence. Since 1973, more than 100 people have been exonerated from death row after being cleared of their charges. . . . Every bit of my story exemplifies the problems in the death penalty system. The same systemic flaws that led to my wrongful conviction . . . plague the cases of innocent people in prison and on death row.” Cardinal McCarrick said, “the use of the death penalty cannot really be mended, it must be ended.”

The Catholic Campaign, according to the Cardinal will “educate — in our parishes and schools, universities and seminaries. We need to share Catholic teaching with courage and clarity, reaching out to those who teach our children, write our textbooks, form our priests, and preach in our pulpits. This is a work of formation and persuasion, not simply proclamation. . . . The Catholic campaign will act — with continued advocacy in the Congress and state legislatures, in our legal briefs and before the courts. . . . This is just a beginning.”

The Catholic campaign has a new website <http://www.ccedp.org>, which includes a basic brochure, clear explanation of the Church’s teaching, and resources for education and action. It includes the many statements of bishops around the country (e.g., powerful statements just in the past week by Archbishop Chaput of Denver and Bishop Wuerl of Pittsburgh ). It will include lesson plans for Catholic schools and religious education, action alerts, and tools for advocacy.

Cardinal McCarrick pointed out this campaign brings the church together. Gail Quinn, executive director of the Secretariat for Pro Life Activities, welcomed the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. Ms. Quinn said, “This cause unites our pro life and social justice convictions in defense of human life and dignity. We are called to respect human life in all stages, and in all circumstances. I hope that Catholics will increasingly speak to their belief that the use of the death penalty in this nation must cease. We pledge to be an integral part of carrying out this campaign”

Cardinal McCarrick, once a supporter of the death penalty, concluded his statement by saying, “I’m not a young man. But as a pastor, teacher, and citizen, I hope I will see the day when the nation I love no longer relies on violence to confront violence. I pray I will see the day when we have given up the illusion that we can teach that killing is wrong by killing.”

For additional information go to <http://www.ccedp.org>.