

Could Catholics tip the balance for death penalty repeal?

Rene Ciria-Cruz | New America Media | Oct. 20, 2012
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In a race that polls show could go either way, proponents of the initiative to repeal the death penalty in November are praying that the Catholic Church might make a difference.

While nowhere near as robust as the effort that the Church put into the Proposition 8 campaign against same-sex marriage in 2008, the California Catholic Conference has given Catholics the blessing to join the battle to replace executions with life without the possibility of parole. The official voice of the state's Catholic bishops on public policy issues endorsed California Proposition 34, the End the Death Penalty Initiative, last September.

Ned Dolejsi, the group's executive director, also recently teamed up with Amanda Cox, mother of a murder victim, former Los Angeles district attorney Gil Garcetti and SAFE California campaign manager Natasha Minsker, who is also an ACLU attorney, to meet with the Sacramento Bee editorial board to state their case for Prop. 34. The Bee recently endorsed the proposition.

"We're encouraging our pastors to distribute materials for Prop. 34 in English and Spanish, we've produced bulletins, public service announcements, sample homilies radio interviews, and videos, says Dolejsi.

Yet, institutionally, church support seems barely above the level of an official position. On Oct. 9, Auxiliary Bishop William J. Justice held a press conference announcing the release of a letter by the new San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone, urging church members to vote for Prop. 34. Beyond that, parishes must decide their own scale and scope of pro-Prop. 34 actions, explains George Wesolek, public policy director at the San Francisco diocese.

But there are as yet no reports, for example, of concerted Sunday sermons that proved so potent against same-sex marriage in 2008. Neither has there been a huge cash infusion from the Church into the Prop. 34 campaign, unlike the \$1.4 million for the anti-gay marriage Yes on 8 campaign in 2008, reportedly channeled through the Knights of Columbus, an unofficial political auxiliary.

Grassroots Initiatives

This time, Catholic donations against the death penalty have come mainly from individuals and organizations like Sisters of St. Joseph and the Los Angeles Catholic Worker.

On their own, some individual parishes and lay organizations are actually working with people they may disagree with on social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, and with groups like the Catholic Mobilizing Network that have long been active in opposing the death penalty nationwide.

"There's support all around from the Church," says Miriam Gerace, SAFE California communications director. Sister Helen Prejean, whose opposition to death penalty was dramatized in the movie "Dead Man Walking," has

been touring the state for Prop. 34. Bishop Cirilo Flores in San Diego wrote an op-ed, she says.

The Oakland diocese held a forum on Sept. 25 called "Our Journey to 'Yes' on Prop. 34" at Christ the King Church in Pleasant Hill, with Jeanne Woodford, former San Quentin Warden, Darryl Stallworth, former Alameda County deputy district attorney and Ron Ahnen, family member of a murder victim.

At the Queen of Apostles Parish in San Jose, Bishop Patrick J. McGrath spoke to participants in a workshop organized by the parish, telling them of his "absolute support for Proposition 34 as we the Church's call to a more humane society." Father Mike Carson, Reginald Reese, former associate warden at San Quentin State Prison and California People of Faith Against the Death Penalty member Mary Kay Rafferty whose son, a police officer, was murdered by drug users, helped lead the discussions.

Moral Basis

While concurring that the death penalty has had a damaging impact on public resources and the justice system, Church bishops emphasize the moral basis of their opposition.

"As teachers of the Catholic faith, we consistently proclaim the intrinsic worth and God-given dignity of all human life, whether innocent or guilty," declared the bishops' statement. "The death penalty will not give us justice worthy of a good society," the Conference declared.

While the effect on the voting preferences of California's 11 million Catholics is unclear, the bishops' support is a vote of confidence for [Prop. 34](#) [1]. Campaign organizers hope their endorsement will be one more factor that can swing the vote in their favor.

Could Make a Difference

Polls show voters overall are closely divided on Prop. 34. But poll numbers are conflicting on Latino voters, a potent segment of the state's electorate. A multilingual [Field Poll](#) [2] in September has them opposing the proposition 52 percent to 32 percent; but an LA Times/USC Dorsife bilingual poll in the same period showed them supporting it 45 percent to 40 percent when they are read the actual ballot language.

Prop. 34 proponents are keenly aware of the Latino electorate's increased capacity to determine election outcomes—the Field poll shows a distinct Democratic advantage as a result of the expanding Latino vote in the state. Prop. 34 campaigners are, therefore, putting special emphasis on winning over Latinos.

"We have many bilingual spokespeople, materials and activities—online ads, phone banking, texting programs and more," says Miriam Gerace, SAFE California's communication director.

Support from Catholic clergy could give their efforts added lift. More than half of California's Catholics are Latinos—seven million in all. Church officials, in fact, have credited Latino churchgoers with reinvigorating parishes.

Position Has Evolved

The Catholic Church's position on capital punishment has evolved over the centuries. As a result, there is considerable confusion among Catholics about its permissibility in their faith. For many years the universal Catholic catechism or rule book recognized the state's right to punish criminals, "[does] not exclud[e], in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty" to defend society.

But in 1995, Pope John Paul II declared that today, due to "the steady improvement in the organization of the penal system, such cases are very rare, if not practically nonexistent."

Pope Benedict XVI has reiterated that near total opposition to capital punishment and called on church members to continue through political and legislative actions "the substantive progress made in conforming penal law both to the human dignity of prisoners and the effective maintenance of public order."

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Links:

[1] <http://voterguide.sos.ca.gov/propositions/34/>

[2] <http://www.pe.com/local-news/local-news-headlines/20120925-field-poll-narrow-percentage-favors-blocking-death-penalty-abolition.ece>