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Maryland House OKs death penalty repeal; governor pledges to sign bill

by Maria Wiering by Catholic News Service

Annapolis, Md. — The Maryland House of Delegates passed legislation Friday to repeal the state's death penalty, an act the Maryland Catholic Conference called "a historic moment."

The conference advocates for public policy measures on behalf of the state's Catholic bishops, who are longtime supporters of repealing the death penalty.

The House passed the bill with a vote of 82 to 56. The Senate passed the bill in February. The bill now goes to Gov. Martin O'Malley, who has promised to sign it into law. His signature will come after the end of the legislative session, which is April 8.

"I applaud the Maryland General Assembly for choosing to meet evil not with evil, but with a justice worthy of our best nature as human beings," said Baltimore Archbishop William Lori in a statement.

Mary Ellen Russell, the conference's executive director, said in a statement that her organization is "grateful to the many members of the General Assembly who considered this issue with great deliberation over the last two weeks, and who followed their conscience in supporting repeal and the value of all human life."

The Maryland Catholic Conference is a partner organization of Maryland Citizens Against State Executions, which has led advocacy efforts against capital punishment in Maryland. Maryland is the 18th state to repeal the death penalty, and the first state below the Mason-Dixon Line to do so.

During floor discussion before the vote, Delegate William Frank told lawmakers he had been a longtime supporter of the death penalty but changed his mind because of the influence of the Catholic church.

A Baltimore County Republican and a Catholic, Frank was a member of the Maryland Commission on Capital Punishment, which recommended death penalty repeal in 2009 to the Legislature. He stood with the minority vote.

Also on the commission was Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop Denis Madden, a repeal advocate who Frank said influenced his decision to change his mind.

His newfound position on the death penalty is part of his pro-life view, he said.

"The most important and compelling issue for me is to view the issue from a consistently pro-life perspective," he said. "Those five men on death row, the worst of the worst, are, believe it or not, created in the image and likeness of God."

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Madden praised Frank's about-face and said he was pleased with the vote outcome. The state's bishops have worked for repeal for 25 years, he said.

"It's very much needed, and I think it will lift the state," he said of the passed legislation. "I would hope that more states would undertake this."

After the vote, O'Malley was joined at a news conference by Benjamin Jealous, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Jane Henderson, executive director of Maryland Citizens Against State Executions. They applauded the Catholic church for its role in death penalty repeal.

Lori testified before the House and Senate in support of the measure in February.

"As people of faith who live in a civilized nation, we recognize that those who have done great harm to others deserve punishment," Lori said in his statement following the vote to repeal the death penalty. "However, we must also recognize that every life has value and that we cannot overcome crime by executing criminals, nor can we restore the lives of the innocent by ending the lives of those convicted of their murders.

"In this week," Lori continued, "when Catholics celebrate the election of our new Holy Father, Pope Francis, so too do we pray that this vote is a step forward in creating a culture that respects the dignity of all human life, in solidarity with the teachings of our Catholic faith and our new Holy Father."

[Maria Wiering is on the staff of *The Catholic Review*, newspaper of the Baltimore archdiocese.]

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