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Bishops hail repeal of capital punishment in Maryland

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One U.S. Catholic bishop hailed the repeal of the death penalty in Maryland as "a courageous step toward a culture of life."

The comment, by Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, was issued Thursday, the day Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, signed the bill that repeals capital punishment.

In Baltimore, Maryland's largest city, the interior and exterior lights of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary were to be lit at dusk that evening, and remain illuminated overnight, in honor of the repeal.

Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore had testified in support of the legislation to repeal the death penalty at hearings in the Maryland Senate and House of Delegates, the legislature's lower chamber. In 2008, Auxiliary Bishop Denis Madden of Baltimore had served on the Maryland Commission on Capital Punishment, which examined the use of capital punishment in the state.

"We must lift up the dignity of all human life -- even for those convicted of the worst crimes -- and work to transform our culture so that it respects the inherent dignity and value of all people," said Blaire in his statement.

"Americans are beginning to realize that we can do better than the death penalty both to punish crime and keep our society safe," Blaire added. "We welcome the decision by the Maryland legislature and Gov. O'Malley to abolish the use of the death penalty in Maryland. This is a courageous step toward a culture of life."

"This is a very exciting day. We have been waiting for it literally for decades," Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, told the *Catholic Standard*, newspaper of the archdiocese of Washington. "This has been a priority for years. The church has been a leading voice for life in all its stages. And this (repeal) is consistent with our pro-life message."

"This has been a long hard push for us since 1987 when we succeeded in winning legislation prohibiting the execution of juveniles, and two years later banning the execution of persons with mental retardation," said Russell's predecessor, Richard Dowling, who served in that post from 1984 to 2008. "I am very proud of my church being having been in the vanguard all along."

Maryland became the 18th state, and the first south of the Mason-Dixon Line, to abolish the death penalty. The others are Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont, West Virginia and Wisconsin. The District of Columbia also bans capital punishment.

Six states have banished the use of the death penalty in the 21st century. Maryland joins Connecticut, Illinois,

New Jersey, New Mexico and New York with that distinction.

The last state to legalize capital punishment was New York in 1995.

As with New Mexico and Connecticut, the Maryland abolition is not retroactive. Five prisoners with death sentences are in Maryland jails. O'Malley has said he will review them on a case-by-case basis. The state's last execution was in 2005. The bill replaces capital punishment with a sentence of life imprisonment without parole.

Among those on hand for the bill-signing ceremony in Annapolis were Benjamin Jealous, president of the NAACP, and Kirk Bloodsworth, a onetime death-row inmate in Maryland who became the first U.S. prisoner whose death sentence was overturned after DNA evidence exonerated him.

The new law may be the subject of a petition drive to repeal it at the ballot box. If enough valid signatures are gathered, the law will not be put into effect until the referendum takes place, no earlier than the November 2014 election.

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