

Catholics Start Drive To Stop Death Penalty

by Nina Ogden

On March 21, at the National Press Club, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop of Washington D.C., launched the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty. The Cardinal said, “For us this is not about ideology, but respect for life. We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. We cannot defend life by taking life. In his encyclical ‘The Gospel of Life,’ the Holy Father challenges followers of Christ to be ‘unconditionally pro-life.’ He reminds us that ‘the dignity of life cannot be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil.’ ”

The Cardinal noted that the press conference was scheduled for the beginning of the Christian Holy Week, when “Catholics and all Christians are reminded of how Christ died—as a criminal brutally executed.”

McCarrick said, “The Catholic campaign will challenge the temptation to answer violence with violence. It will confront the notion of ‘an eye for an eye’. The Cardinal noted that the campaign to end the use of the death penalty “brings together our social justice and pro-life efforts.”

A Useful Contrast

It is useful to think back just a few short months ago to the days leading up to the Presidential election of November 2004, when the words “pro-life,” or “same-sex marriage” were the hottest of hot button phrases, and candidate George W. Bush was using the phrase “culture of death” in every campaign speech he could make to the religious right. Clearly Pope John Paul II’s profound concept of a culture of life had become swallowed up in the political spin cycle.

A month before the election, John Carr, Secretary for Social Development for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, presented the Conference’s view on political responsibility in a statement titled, “Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility.” Carr said that since the September 11 attacks, there is a more urgent need for the church to refocus on its mission as proclaimed in the fourth chapter of Luke: to bring glad tidings to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, and restore the sight of the blind. He said he often meets Catholics who talk about rights or responsibilities, but not both. “It begins fundamentally with the right to life, but also includes what makes life truly human,” Carr said. “It’s morally wrong that 44 million Americans don’t have health care coverage. We have the responsibility to secure those rights for ourselves and others.” Carr emphasized. “When so many of our leaders have



Cardinal Theodore McCarrick announced the Roman Catholic Church's campaign to end use of the death penalty at a Washington, D.C. press conference on March 21.

their fingers to the wind, we need to change the wind.”

The most corrosive aspect of that windy campaign came shortly before election day when a highly publicized debate broke out about whether a call by a few bishops who wanted to deny communion to Catholic Democratic Party Presidential candidate John Kerry, and other Catholic politicians who had not voted against abortion, should be followed by all bishops. Cardinal McCarrick, chairman of the Task Force on Catholic Bishops and Catholic Politicians, reported two weeks after the election that “the media or partisan forces tried to pit one bishop against another.” He reported that the common statement of the Bishops’ Conference emphasized that individual bishops and their parishioners “can come to different prudential and pastoral judgments on public policy.” He reported that “the Holy See has been both sympathetic and supportive of our efforts. They publicly expressed the view that our efforts were ‘very much in harmony’ with their principles.” He said, “We will work for human life and dignity, for justice and peace. This is who we are and what we believe.”

With his usual diplomacy, Cardinal McCarrick did not report that those media and partisan forces had unrelentingly targeted him for his work in calming down the overheated situation. Neither did he note that the main bishops they were trying to pit against each other were himself and Cardinal Ratzinger, who spoke for the Vatican in saying that the views of the Holy See and the U. S. Bishops Conference were “very much in harmony.”

Respecting All Human Life

This background was not discussed in the March 21 press conference to end the use of the death penalty. And by no

means is the campaign against the death penalty being launched for any opportunistic reason. In fact, the Bishops’ Conference has opposed the death penalty for twenty-five years, and the Catholic Church changed its official teaching to one of opposition to the death penalty in 1992. Rather, the context in which the campaign to end the use of the death penalty is being launched, is the attempt to bring together a deeper understanding of those rights and responsibilities which John Carr spoke about a month before the election. The fact that it will become almost impossible for such life-and-death questions to be used as a political football by those partisan forces discussed by Cardinal McCarrick in November, is a pleasant by-product of the campaign.

At the March 21 press conference to end the use of the death penalty, a reporter asked Cardinal McCarrick if there was a difference between the Church’s position on abortion and euthanasia, and that of opposition to the death penalty. The Cardinal explained that the difference is, that the

Church’s opposition to abortion and euthanasia is a matter of tradition, but that its new campaign against the death penalty “brings greater urgency and unity to this respect for human life in all stages and in all circumstances.” He emphasized that “This campaign will unite the social justice and pro-life commitments in the Church.” and that the campaign would “bring unity to the Church.”

Pollster John Zogby addressed the press conference, along with Cardinal McCarrick, Kirk Bloodworth, the first wrongfully convicted death row inmate to be released on the basis of DNA evidence, and Bud Welch, father of an Oklahoma City bombing victim. Zogby reported that his polling shows “a seismic shift in attitude among Catholics against the death penalty.” When this news service asked about this seismic shift, in the last question of the press conference, Zogby said, we are living through “cataclysmic changes,” and cited a “huge uptick” of opposition to the death penalty, even among “so-called conservative Catholics.” He said that the major reason Catholics gave for opposing the death penalty was “respect for life.” Many of those opposed to executions were concerned about what the use of the death penalty “does to us as a people and a country.”

Zogby’s “seismic shift” poll was taken in November 2004, in the aftermath of the intense campaign carried out by the LaRouche Youth Movement and many other Democrats, aimed at bringing the United States back to the idea of the Common Good.

The March 21 press conference indicates that this political shift has not only not been reversed, but that the potential for splitting the Catholic Church on the questions of life, has been dramatically reduced.