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Abstract

In the United States, Catholics make up more than 50 million members of the adult population, or about one in five Americans. It is unclear whether their religious affiliation shapes Catholics' views on public policy issues, ranging from the legality of abortion to criminal justice practices. Capital punishment is especially salient, given that Pope Francis announced in 2018—as official Catholic Church teaching—that the death penalty is “inadmissible” under all circumstances. Based on two national surveys, the current project explores Catholics' support for state executions before (2017) and after (2019) the Pope's momentous change in the church's Catechism. At present, little evidence exists that Pope Francis's doctrinal reform has impacted Catholics, a majority of whom—like Americans generally—continue to favor the death penalty for murderers. Data from our additional 2020 MTurk survey show that only 17.0% of Catholic respondents could correctly identify the Church's position on capital punishment. Despite these results, Pope Francis's teachings provide Catholic leaders and activists with a compelling rationale for opposing the death penalty and holding Catholic public officials accountable for espousing offenders' execution. Further, for the next generation of Catholics, instruction in the inadmissibility of capital punishment, as part of the Church's consistent ethic of life, will be integral to their religious training.

Keywords

capital punishment, Catholics, Pope Francis, public opinion, religion

Introduction

Catholics are an important group within the United States, numbering more than 50 million or about one in five adult Americans (Chua-Eoan and Dias, 2013; Masci and Smith, 2018). Masci and Smith (2018) note that the “Catholic Church is larger than any other single religious institution in the United States, with over 17,000 parishes that serve a large and diverse population.” Politically, they are split evenly, with 47% identifying themselves as Democrats and 46% as Republicans (Lipka and Smith, 2019). Catholics also occupy positions of political influence. Of the nine U.S. Supreme Court Justices—the body that decides on the constitutionality of the death penalty—six are practicing Catholics (Chief Justice Roberts and Justices Alito, Barrett, Kavanaugh, Sotomayor, and Thomas), and one (Gorsuch) was raised Catholic but now reportedly is Episcopalian (Escobar, 2018). Former U.S. Attorney General William Barr (2019) and President Joe Biden have been outspoken about how their Catholic faith informs their public policy stances, including about capital punishment.

What Catholic citizens and elected officials believe about the death penalty thus has potential consequences. Notably, for decades, the Catholic Church’s embrace of a consistent life ethic had led to its increasing disapproval of state executions—a position advocated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (Barrett and Garvey, 1998). On 2 August 2018, Pope Francis made the Church’s opposition to capital punishment complete with the momentous announcement that the death penalty was now “inadmissible” in all circumstances (Ladaria, 2018). At issue is whether the Pope’s teaching will affect American Catholics’ views on capital punishment. A collateral concern is how faithful Catholic public officials can advocate for the death penalty when morally precluded from doing so (Barrett and Garvey, 1998).

In this context, we examine Catholics’ support of capital punishment using national-level data from YouGov surveys conducted prior to and after Pope Francis’s revised teaching on the death penalty (fielded in 2017 and 2019). Although the time elapsed since the Catechism’s revision was limited when the second survey was conducted (about 9 months), we assess whether any movement

away from support of capital punishment occurred during this period. We also present results from a 2020 MTurk study that assesses not only Catholics' support for capital punishment but also their knowledge of Pope Francis's new teaching on the inadmissibility of the death penalty. In the concluding section, we explore the policy impact on elected officials of the Church's official position. As a prelude to this analysis, we first review the nature of Pope Francis's doctrinal decision. We then provide a context to understand why American Catholics are not unified on policy issues but sharply divided by political partisanship and ideology. At issue is whether being Catholic plays a significant role in determining capital punishment attitudes or whether Catholics' opinions, like those of Americans more generally, are shaped by other factors.

Pope Francis: Making the death penalty inadmissible

Belief in offender redeemability

On 13 March 2013, 76-year-old Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio from Argentina was named the 266th pope of the Roman Catholic Church. Although a doctrinal conservative (e.g., opposing abortion in all circumstances, married priests, LGBTQ β marriage), he was known for his humility, his preference for simple rather than luxurious residences, and his deep concern for social justice. He chose the papal name of "Francis" after St. Francis of Assisi—the first pope to select this name—to reflect his concern for the poor ("Pope Francis," 2019; "Pope Francis: Life, Quotes & Facts," 2019).

Pope Francis's views on criminals—that their lives matter—provide a foundation for his subsequent change in Church teachings on the death penalty. At the Last Supper, to show His humility and the importance of service to others, Jesus washed the feet of his 12 disciples, teaching that "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15, "What Was the Significance," 2019). Starting in 1955, Pope Pius XII incorporated the washing of the feet into the Mass of the Last Supper, with participants comprised of male clergy ("Foot Washing," 2019). On the first Holy Thursday (also called "Maundy Thursday") of his papacy in 2013, Pope Francis broke with this tradition. In a foot

washing of remarkable symbolic significance, he traveled to a juvenile detention facility where he celebrated Mass during which he washed and kissed the feet of a dozen youthful offenders. In his trips worldwide, the Pope often visits prisons, including the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia during his 2015 stay in the United States (Green, 2015).

These prison visits are important not only for the inmates touched by the Pope's presence but also because they provide a public occasion for Francis to voice his views on offenders and their redemption. Two themes inform his statements. First, he rejects the view that inmates are beyond reform and deserving only of the infliction of pain. The power of God's love knows no limits. "To think that the inner order of a person may be corrected only through punishment," he notes, "this is not God's way, this is mistaken." Continuing, he advises, "The most important thing is what God does with us. He takes us by the hand, and He helps us to go on. And this is called hope!" (NCR Staff, 2014). Pope Francis adds, "It is painful when we see prison systems which are not concerned to care for wounds, to soothe pain, to offer new possibilities" (Yuhas, 2015).

Second, he rejects the view that criminals are the "other"—different from us—because we share the common failing of being sinners. "Listen carefully to this," he urges. "Each of us is capable of doing the same thing that that man or that woman in prison did. All of us have the capacity to sin and to do the same, to make mistakes in life. They are no worse than you and me!" (Green, 2015; see also Wooden, 2015). "We put little trust in rehabilitation," he observes. "But in this way, we forget that we are all sinners and often, without being aware of it, we too are prisoners" ("Pope Urges Rehabilitation," 2016). Indeed, Pope Francis warns of embracing a "culture of adjectives" where the goal is not to "care about people, only about finding a label, an adjective, to disqualify people" (San Mart'in, 2019). He further cautions that "it seems easier to post signs and labels that petrify and stigmatize not only people's past, but also their present and future"—a practice that "spoils everything, because it erects an invisible wall that makes people think that, if we marginalize, separate and isolate others, all our problems will be magically solved" (San Mart'in, 2019).

Pope Francis and the death penalty

Importantly, Pope Francis's views on offenders and their treatment—inspired by Jesus's teachings and his own long-standing concern for social justice—inform his position on capital punishment. Throughout his papacy, he has expressed his opposition to the death penalty. Notably, the execution of offenders has been an ongoing source of concern for the Catholic Church, so much so that its position on capital punishment is included in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*—a 904-page document stating official Catholic teachings that the faithful are expected to follow. The death penalty is considered under Article 5, The Fifth Commandment, where other life-ending acts are discussed (e.g., legitimate defense against an aggressor, intentional homicide, abortion, euthanasia). The ambivalence of the Church's position can be seen in the Catechism's traditional statement that the "Church does not exclude recourse to the death penalty, if this is the only possible way of effectively defending human lives against the unjust aggressor." However, "the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity 'are very rare, if not practically non-existent'" (San Martín, 2018; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997: 56, number 2667). The quote starting with "are very rare..." is a statement made by Pope (and now Saint) John Paul II.

The failure to prohibit capital punishment fully created an opening for many Catholic jurists, prosecutors, legislators, and citizens to embrace the death penalty, often enthusiastically (see, e.g., Scalia, 2002). Now this situation has changed. As noted, on 2 August 2018, the Vatican announced that Pope Francis had declared capital punishment to be "inadmissible" in all circumstances. In a letter to the Bishops made public, Cardinal Luis F. Ladaria (2018) explained the rationale for the "new revision of number 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the death penalty." At the core of Pope Francis's teaching is that the dignity of human life, which is not lost even when a person commits a murder, should not be violated. Pope Francis did not speak *ex cathedra*, which would have made his teaching infallible. "Does this mean that the *Catechism* can be disregarded?" According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2019), the answer is clear: "No. The *Catechism* is part of the Church's ordinary teaching authority." Accordingly, it

is now the official position of the Catholic Church that the death penalty should be abolished. The text of section 2267 is as follows:

Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,” and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide. (quoted in O’Connell, 2018)

On 3 October 2020, Pope Francis traveled to the town of Assisi in the Umbria region of Italy. With unmistakable symbolism, he signed his third papal encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (“All Brothers”) before the tomb of Saint Francis (Reis, 2020). In this 45,000-word document, Pope Francis (2020: 1) calls for a renewed sense of “fraternity and social friendship” in the face of the challenges of the global pandemic. Importantly, he explicitly reaffirms his 2018 teaching on capital punishment. “There can be no stepping back from this position,” Pope Francis (2020: 66) states. “Today we see clearly that ‘the death penalty is inadmissible’ and the Church is firmly committed to calling for its abolition worldwide.” As Martin (2020) notes, the Pope “placed the full weight of his teaching authority behind

this statement . . . A papal encyclical is one of the highest documents in terms of its authority, removing any lingering doubt about the church's belief."

Catholics and public policy opinions

Why Pope Francis's teaching might matter

Why might Pope Francis's teaching have impacted Catholics' support for the death penalty? Two factors are potentially consequential. First, although limited and the effects at times complex, evidence exists that religious leaders—from parish priests to bishops and the Pope—can affect their flocks' policy opinions (Bjarnason and Welch, 2004; Mulligan, 2006; Smith, 2005; Wald, 1992; Welch and Leege, 1991). In one study, Mulligan (2006) found that those who "esteemed" Pope John Paul II were more likely to adhere to Church teachings, opposing both the death penalty and abortion.

Second, as part of the "consistent ethic of life" (Bernardin, 1983), the Catholic Church has long opposed capital punishment, permitting it (as noted above) only when it was the only possible way of protecting human lives against an unjust aggressor. Many Catholics, including numerous elected and government officials, used this exception as an unfettered license to endorse executing offenders (see, e.g., Scalia, 2002; cf. Barrett and Garvey, 1998). Pope Francis has closed this loophole. Like abortion, there are no exceptions. Favoring the death penalty now means knowingly disobeying established Church teaching—a potentially difficult choice for those who have preached obedience to papal authority on other political issues (e.g., abortion, divorce, same-sex marriage).

Why Pope Francis's teaching might not matter

Still, three reasons exist as to why the Pope's teachings may not affect American Catholics' death penalty support. First, denomination is not a strong predictor of capital punishment preferences in most studies with fully specified models. A stronger influence is whether people see God as loving and compassionate (leading to lower death penalty support) or as a harsh authoritative father distributing hellfire (leading to higher support) (see, e.g., Froese and

Bader, 2008; Unnever et al., 2005, 2010; Unnever and Cullen, 2006). This empirical finding has significant implications for why faith matters and when the Pope's teaching would matter.

Thus, a key intervening variable between religion and punitiveness is "empathetic identification"—or the extent to which people can appreciate the struggles offenders face and are willing to give them a second chance (Unnever and Cullen, 2009). Callousness makes it easier to inflict pain on others. As noted, Pope Francis exudes empathetic identification with the wayward, seeing them as having dignity and as worth saving. Undoubtedly, many Catholics share this sentiment—embracing a loving, forgiving vision of Jesus—and thus oppose capital punishment. To change opinions, however, Pope Francis's teaching must not only coerce compliance through hierarchical authority but also induce a change of heart that transforms how death penalty supporters see murderers. In the short run, it seems unlikely that his teachings have the capacity to foster empathetic identification among those who likely care about and identify with the victims rather than the perpetrators of lethal violence.

In national opinion polls on the death penalty, Catholics hold attitudes close to the overall sample mean. Thus, in a 2018 survey by Pew Research Center, 53% of Catholics favored and 42% opposed the death penalty for persons convicted of murder; the total sample figures were 54% and 39%, respectively (Oliphant, 2018). Multivariate studies often find no effects for being a Catholic (Kort-Butler and Ray, 2019; Unnever et al., 2010; cf. Froese and Bader, 2008). The point is that in contradiction to the Church's teaching of the consistent ethic of life and similar to fellow citizens, a majority of Catholics hold death penalty opinions favoring executing offenders. Their views appear to be shaped more by being an American than by being a Catholic (Barlow, 2018). If so, Pope Francis's message may fall on deaf ears.

Second and relatedly, Americans' views on the legality of abortion—a procedure already deemed impermissible in all circumstances—similarly contravene Church teachings and approximate those of the general U.S. adult population. A 2019 Pew Research Center poll reported that 56% of Catholics believed that abortion should be legal in all or most cases; the statistic for the

overall sample was 61% (“U.S. Public Continues to Favor Legal Abortion,” 2019; see also *The State of Abortion and Contraception*, 2018). If the policy preferences of a majority of American Catholics are impervious to long-standing teaching prohibiting abortion in all circumstances, then many of the U.S. faithful might resist Pope Francis’s instructions that are inconsistent with their support of the death penalty. Indeed, Americans are often referred to as “cafeteria Catholics’ who pick and choose which doctrines to support” (Barlow, 2018). Although Catholics tend to say they agree with Pope Francis on most public policy issues, only 38% of Catholics in a 2014 poll did so on abortion; the policy of capital punishment was not reported (Cox and Jones, 2015). And in a 2017 poll on the “sources used by Catholics in making moral decisions,” fewer than one in five respondents chose “read papal statements” either “sometimes (15%) or “often” (3%) (Dillon, 2018).

Third, a difference may exist between changing existing policy opinions and affecting the development of the next generation’s views on the death penalty. Many adult Americans were raised in the “get-tough” era that endorsed mass incarceration and the death penalty (Gottschalk, 2006). Those in elementary school today will grow up in a time of declining punitiveness and waning support for capital punishment (Enns, 2016; Pickett, 2019; see also Chammah, 2021; Garland, 2010). More importantly, they will be taught in childhood and beyond that the death penalty is, in language approved by U.S. Bishops, “inequitable and flawed,” “inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,” and a practice that the Catholic Church will seek “with determination” to abolish “worldwide” (Zimmerman, 2019a). In short, the impact of the Pope’s teachings may prove minimal in the short-term and profound in the long-term.

Catholics in context

Beyond these narrower issues, Catholics’ response to Pope Francis and Church teachings on capital punishment must be placed in a larger social context. As noted, Catholics are divided virtually evenly between those on the Left and those on the Right. To the extent that political allegiance binds Catholics to criminal

justice policy positions, Church members may pay more attention to political elites than to Church elites. If this is so—which we suspect is the case—then Pope Francis’s teaching will serve to confirm the policy “bias” of progressives and be resisted actively by political conservatives (see Durkin, 2020).

Historically, Catholics have varied in political party membership, favoring FDR in the 1940s, moving toward Eisenhower in the 1950s, and then embracing the Democratic Party fully with the candidacy and election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 (Dionne, 2000). Political division among Catholics emerged in the 1950s, with anti-Communist conservatives supporting Joseph McCarthy’s crusade and others (e.g., William F. Buckley) joining with rightward Protestants and Jewish figures to establish the *National Review* (Carey, 2004). The socio-political changes wrought by the 1960s and beyond—social justice movements, Vietnam War protests, sexual liberation, and secularization—fostered, in reaction, the growth of a conservative Catholic coalition. Catholic Phyllis Schlafly successfully led a campaign to derail the passage of the women’s Equal Rights Amendment (Chelini-Pont, 2018). The candidacy of Ronald Reagan proved defining, as he had a close relationship with Pope John Paul II and “became the President of the Catholics” (Chelini-Pont, 2018). Some Catholics made alliances with the Moral Majority and later the Christian Coalition (Carey, 2004; Chelini-Pont, 2018). The issues of abortion and same-sex marriage would cement alliances with the political Right (Baer, 2020).

Garland (2010) has captured how the death penalty became a salient public policy in the rise of American conservatism. “Sparked into action by issues such as abortion, school prayer, flag burning, gun control, women’s liberation, gay rights, and same-sex marriage,” observes Garland (2010: 251), “the ‘religious right’ emerged as a potent force in the 1980s and 1990s, using its influence to promote ‘faith, family, and country’ and push back against what it saw as ‘permissiveness’ and ‘secular progressivism’ in public life.” In this context, capital punishment took on intense symbolic meaning. “Depriving people of the right to impose capital punishment—like depriving them of their guns, or their right to school prayer, or their right to ban abortion—came to be viewed as a kind of elite contempt for common people, for their faith, and for their way of life” (Garland, 2010: 253). More

than this, executing a murderer was crucial to upholding morality in “the most dramatic, profound way” (Garland, 2010: 253).

Political polarization, of course, is not unique to Catholics (Klein, 2020). Still, the migration of a substantial block of Catholics to the Right has had consequences. Conservative Catholics with loyalties to the Republican Party often develop a portfolio of policy preferences that are defined by their partisan allegiance. For many, as Garland (2010) described, this affiliation of religion with Republicanism has long included firm support for the death penalty. Even the Pope’s historical repudiation of capital punishment might not be sufficient to attenuate this core belief—especially if conservative elites seek to delegitimize the Pope’s position and announce to the Catholic faithful that the Pope can be ignored. As Smith (2020, emphasis in original) notes based on Pew Research Center polling data, “When it comes to *specific policy issues*, Catholics are often more aligned with their political party than with the teachings of their church.”

Methods

Data for this study come from three national-level sources—two YouGov surveys and one Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) survey. With a pool of over 2 million adult U.S. residents, YouGov uses matched opt-in survey methods to collect responses—a methodology that has become widely used in social sciences due to its advantages over convenience samples (Graham et al., 2020) as well as other probability sampling techniques (Vavreck and Rivers, 2008). Using a three-phase sampling strategy, YouGov produces samples designed to reflect national representativeness of a target population (Rivers, 2006). To do so, YouGov first creates a synthetic sampling frame (SSF) from high-quality, large-scale, commercially available probability surveys, such as the American Community Survey (ACS). Second, YouGov panel members are matched to this SSF based on sociodemographic characteristics. Third, following the completion of the survey’s fielding, YouGov adjusts for biases using propensity score weighting, again using socio- demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	2017 YouGov (N = 852)		2019 YouGov (N = 942)		2020 MTurk (N = 983)	
	Percent/M (SD)	Range	Percent/M (SD)	Range	Percent/M (SD)	Range
Dependent variable						
Favor death penalty (%)	55.8	0-1	54.2	0-1	44.0	0-1
Key independent variable						
Catholic/Roman Catholic (%)	22.7	0-1	18.9	0-1	26.4	0-1
Control variables						
Age	48.28 (17.51)	19-93	48.76 (14.38)	19-93	38.39 (11.42)	19-79
Female (%)	50.6	0-1	49.1	0-1	40.4	0-1
White (%)	69.5	0-1	66.6	0-1	67.8	0-1
Education	3.24 (1.53)	1-6	3.43 (1.53)	1-6	4.48 (1.26)	1-7
Full-time employment	31.3	0-1	41.0	0-1	-	-
Married (%)	45.4	0-1	48.4	0-1	45.4	-
Republican (%)	26.3	0-1	29.1	0-1	28.8	0-1
Conservatism	3.15 (.98)	1-5	3.04 (1.27)	1-5	2.69 (1.23)	1-5
Registered voter (%)	75.6	0-1	86.2	0-1	94.2	0-1
Southerner (%)	37.0	0-1	37.7	0-1	36.0	0-1
Racial resentment	-	-	3.08 (1.13)	1-5	2.51 (1.04)	1-5
Dangerous world	-	-	3.55 (.88)	1-5	3.15 (1.05)	1-5
Care/harm moral foundation	-	-	3.71 (.72)	1-5	-	-
Fear of crime	-	-	3.01 (1.06)	1-5	-	-

The first YouGov survey was fielded between 3 and 7 March 2017, which involved the initial matching of 1,161 panelists to an SSF based on the 2010 ACS. These panelists were then matched down to a sample of 1,000 respondents and weighted for national representation using propensity scoring. Based on list-wise deletion due to non-response for key items in this study, the analytic sample of the first YouGov study is 852 respondents. As a note, “not sure” (for political ideology; n = 87) and “don’t know” (for registered voter; n = 78) responses were treated as missing.

The second YouGov survey was fielded between 7 and 10 June 2019, with the initial matching of 1427 panelists to an SSF based on the 2016 ACS. These panelists were matched down to a sample of 1,200 respondents and weighted for national representation using propensity scoring. Employing the same coding decisions as used with the 2017 data, the analytic sample for the 2019 study was 942 respondents.

Finally, MTurk was used to collect data between 28 and 29 March 2020. Following listwise deletion using the same approach conducted on the YouGov samples, the sample was reduced from 1,000 initial respondents to an analytic sample of 983 respondents. See Table 1 for sociodemographic characteristics of these samples.

Dependent variable: Support for the death penalty

The dependent variable of this study is the support, or lack thereof, for the use of the death penalty. As such, across all three samples, the respondents were asked the General Social Survey (GSS) question, “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for people convicted of murder?” The response options included *favor*, *oppose*, and *don’t know* (NORC, 2020). Responses were recoded to create a binary variable with *favor* (=1) and *oppose/don’t know* (=0). This question has been asked for nearly 50 years and has been regularly included in prior research (see, e.g., Cullen et al., 2000; Enns, 2016).

Independent variables

Catholic. Across all three samples, the respondents were asked to identify their religious affiliation using the item “What is your present religion, if any?” The respondents were provided options of “Protestant,” “Roman Catholic,” “Mormon,” “Easter or Greek Orthodox,” “Jewish,” “Muslim,” “Buddhist,” “Hindu,” “Atheist,” “Agnostic,” “Nothing in particular,” or “Something else.” Given the focus on Catholics, this item was recoded as an indicator for Catholic (=1) and all other response options (=0).

Change in Church’s position. Unique to the MTurk sample, the respondents were asked, “Were you made aware that Pope Francis had changed the Church’s position on the death penalty?” with response options of (1) “I do not recall hearing about this change,” (2) “I heard about it but I don’t remember what it was,” and (3) “I heard about the change and am pretty sure I know what Pope Francis’s new position is.” These responses comprised an ordinal measure of knowing about the change in the church’s position on the death penalty.

Know the Pope’s position. Again, unique to the MTurk sample, the respondents were also asked, “Which of the following best represents your understanding of the Catholic Church’s position on the death penalty” with response options of (1) “I am not sure what the Church’s position is,” (2) “The Church believes that each nation should decide whether to use the death penalty,” (3) “The Church only allows the death penalty if it is the only possible way to protect society and human life against a dangerous offender,” and (4) “The Church teaches that because all human life has dignity, the death penalty is inadmissible, meaning that it should be abolished worldwide.” Responses were recoded to indicate the Church’s current position—the death penalty is inadmissible (= 1) as opposed to all other response options (= 0).

Control variables

Across all three samples, the following sociodemographic controls were included in the models: age (measured continuously in years); sex, (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*); race (1 = *White*, 0 = *Non-White*); marital status (1 = *married*, 0 = *other*);

education (measured ordinally: 1 = *less than high school degree* to 7 = *Doctoral degree*); employment (1 = *full-time*, 0 = *other*); political party affiliation (1 = *Republican*, 0 = *other*); conservatism (measured ordinally 1 = *very liberal*, 5 = *very conservative*); registered voter (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*); and Southerner (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*), based on the U.S. Census regions and identified by the respondent's reported zip code.

As a well-known predictor of death penalty preferences, racial resentment was included as a control in the 2019 YouGov and MTurk models. Based on Kinder and Sanders's (1996) scale, racial resentment was measured as a four-item scale: (1) "It is really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as Whites"; (2) "Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors"; (3) "Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve"; and (4) "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class." Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly agree* and were recode coded so that higher values indicated greater resentment (Cronbach's alpha = .865, factor loadings between .825 and .859).

Likewise, perceptions of a dangerous world are known to influence views of punitiveness (see, e.g., Silver, 2017; Silver and Silver, 2017; Vaughan et al., 2019). Following Stroebe et al. (2017; see also Altemeyer, 1988), a four-item scale (e.g., "There are many dangerous people in our society who will attack someone out of pure meanness, for no reason at all") was included as a control variable in the 2019 YouGov and MTurk models. The items were rated using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*), and the responses were recoded so that higher values indicated a greater agreement that the world is unpredictable and dangerous (alpha = .794, factor loadings between .759 and .828). Note that the alpha and factor loadings presented here and below pertain to the 2019 full analytic sample. Scale characteristics for the 2017 YouGov and 2020 MTurk datasets, as well as for the subsamples within data sets, are comparable.

To control for general orientations of caring for others, we include a measure

of Haidt's (2012) care/harm moral foundation from his work on Moral Foundations Theory. This measure is based on Graham et al.'s (2009) scale, which was only available for the 2019 YouGov models. This four-item averaged measure (e.g., "It can never be right to kill a human being"; "The government must first and foremost protect all people from harm") asked the respondents their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) with responses recoded so that higher values indicate greater concern for mitigating harm (i.e., more caring; alpha = .550, factor loadings between .608 and .700).

Finally, to control for threat salience, fear of crime was used as a control variable in only the 2019 YouGov models. This five-item scale, used in past research (e.g., Ferraro, 1995), asked respondents their level of fear (1 = *very unafraid*, 5 = *very afraid*) about being the victim of theft, burglary, robbery, sexual assault, and murder in the next five years. This mean index was coded so that higher values indicated greater fear of crime (alpha = .911, factor loadings between .802 to .908).

Results

As noted, the current study measures death penalty opinions with the often-used question from the General Social Survey (GSS) (see Cullen et al., 2000). As a point of comparison, the findings reported in the 2018 GSS (the last year for which data are available) were as follows: *favor* = 59.2%; *oppose* = 33.9%; *don't know/no opinion* = 6.9% (NORC, 2020). The YouGov findings for 2017 and 2019 are similar, though slightly lower in the *favor* category (but within 5 percentage points) and higher in the *don't know/no opinion* category (see Table 2).

The key comparison in Table 2 is between the Catholic respondents for 2017 and 2019. In the YouGov data, those favoring the death penalty declined 5 percentage points, from 64.7% to 59.7%. Although suggesting a possible Pope effect, this interpretation would be difficult to sustain. First, the difference between 2017 and 2019 for Catholics is not statistically significant ($X^2 = .731$, $p = .393$). Second, even with the decrease, a clear majority of Catholics supported capital punishment in contradiction to Pope Francis's teaching.

	2017 YouGov (n = 852)	2017 YouGov Catholics (n = 193)	2017 YouGov Non-Catholics (n = 659) ^a	2018 GSS ^b (n = 2348)	2019 YouGov (n = 942)	2019 YouGov Catholics (n = 178)	2019 YouGov Non-Catholics (n = 763) ^c
Favor	55.8% (475)	64.7% (125)	53.1% (350)	59.20% (1390)	54.2% (510)	59.7% (106)	52.9% (404)
Opposed	28.8% (246)	24.4% (47)	30.0% (198)	33.94% (797)	33.0% (311)	29.6% (53)	33.8% (258)
Don't know/ no opinion	15.4% (132)	10.9% (21)	16.8% (111)	6.86% (161)	12.8% (121)	10.7% (19)	13.4% (102)

^a $\chi^2 = 8.75$, $p = .013$, Cramer's $V = .101$.

^bWeighted by using the "WTSSALL" variable and used the VSTRAT" and "VPSU" variables to adjust for geographical clustering of respondents. The following R command was used: `svydesign (id=~VPSU, strata=~VSTRAT, weights=~WTSALL, nest = TRUE)`.

^c $\chi^2 = 2.69$, $p = .261$, Cramer's $V = .053$.

Table 3 presents additional information on the extent to which the respondents were aware the Pope had changed the Church's position on the death penalty. These data are from the 2020 MTurk study. Although more Catholics than non-Catholics reported "hearing about this change," 40.2% of Catholics stated that they did not "recall" doing so, and another 36.7% could not remember what the change was. Less than 1 in 4 could say that they were "pretty sure I know what Pope Francis's new position is." Table 3 also presents information on whether the respondents could correctly identify the Catholic Church's position. Among Catholics, 37.1% admitted to being unsure what this position is. About 1 in 4 selected, incorrectly, that the Church allows each nation to make its own decision, and about 1 in 5 selected the prior Church teaching that executions are permitted if they are the only possible way to protect human life. Notably, only 17.0% could correctly identify that the death penalty is now "inadmissible" and should be abolished worldwide.

Tables 4 and 5 present multivariate analyses of relevance. In Table 4, independent variables that are available in both the 2017 and 2019 YouGov data sets are included. In Table 5, the effects of additional predictors that are known correlates of death penalty attitudes and available only in our 2019 survey are presented. As can be seen, the denominational membership as Catholic is positively and significantly related to support for the death penalty in 2017 (Table 4, Model 1) but not in 2019 (Table 4, Model 4; Table 5, Model 2). At this time, being a

Catholic did not affect policy opinions. Within Catholics as a group, age, conservatism ($p \frac{1}{4} .10$ in 2017), and especially employment are positively associated with favoring capital punishment. Table 5 reports two other significant factors: racial resentment increases, whereas scoring higher in the care/harm moral foundation decreases, death penalty advocacy (see Model 2).

Table 3. Awareness of Church teachings on the death penalty, 2020 MTurk sample.

Item (response options)	Total population % (N = 983)	Catholics % (N = 259)	Non-Catholics % (N = 724)
Were you made aware that Pope Francis had changed the Church's position on the death penalty?			
1. I do not recall hearing about this change	72.3	40.2	83.8
2. I heard about it but I don't remember what it was	19.0	36.7	12.7
3. I heard about the change and am pretty sure I know what Pope Francis's new position is	8.6	23.2	3.5
Which of the following best represents your understanding of the Catholic Church's position on the death penalty?			
1. I am not sure what the Church's position is	69.8	37.1	81.5
2. The Church believes that each nation should decide whether to use the death penalty	9.7	24.3	4.4
3. The Church only allows for the death penalty if it is the only way possible way to protect society and human life against a dangerous offender	7.8	21.6	2.9
4. The Church teaches that because all human life has dignity, the death penalty is inadmissible, meaning that it should be abolished worldwide	12.7	17.0	11.2

Finally, using the MTurk 2020 data that contained these questions, we assessed whether Catholics who stated they knew the Church's position had changed and then accurately identified the Church's position affected their death penalty attitudes. No significant effects were found.

Table 4. Logistic regression models for favoring the death penalty, 2017 and 2019.

	Model 1 2017 YouGov (N = 852)		Model 2 2017 YouGov Catholics (N = 193)		Model 3 2019 YouGov (N = 942)		Model 4 2019 YouGov Catholics (N = 178)		
	b	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	
<i>Key independent variable</i>									
Catholic	.501	.183	1.650 ^{***}	-	-	.301	1.351	-	-
<i>Control variables</i>									
Age	.003	.005	1.003	.033	1.033 ^{***}	.013	1.013 ^{***}	.028	1.028 ^{**}
Female	-.207	.150	.813	-.914	.401 ^{**}	-.086	.150	-.180	.348
White	.577	.167	1.780 ^{***}	1.201	3.324 ^{***}	.263	.160	-.1.166	.403
Education	-.062	.053	.939	-.148	.140	.862	.054	-.1.107	.125
Employment	.361	.172	1.435 ^{**}	1.268	3.555 ^{***}	.457	.171	1.126	.442
Married	.251	.159	1.285	-.104	.390	.901	.155	-.369	.384
Republican	-.021	.197	.979	.248	.467	1.282	.195	.932	.445
Conservatism	.629	.092	1.875 ^{***}	.337	.194	1.401	.071	.513	.170
Registered voter	-.022	.190	.908	-.1.582	.530	.206 ^{***}	.219	-.1.157	.480
Southerner	-.209	.156	.811	-.410	.384	.664	.152	.529	.382
Constant	-2.181	.384	.112	-.967	.840	.380	.096	-.1.948	.757
Cox and Snell Pseudo R ²		.123		.222		.192		.192	

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 5. Logistic regression models for favoring the death penalty with additional control variables.

	Model 1 2019 YouGov (N = 942)			Model 2 2019 YouGov Catholics (N = 178)		
	b	SE	OR	b	SE	OR
<i>Key independent variable</i>						
Catholic	.150	.198	1.161	–	–	–
<i>Control variables</i>						
Age	.012	.005	1.012*	.041	.013	1.042**
Female	.003	.167	1.003	.023	.387	1.023
White	.326	.174	1.386	–1.096	.438	.334*
Education	–.026	.060	.975	.037	.143	1.038
Employment	.544	.191	1.723**	1.409	.490	4.090**
Married	.316	.175	1.372	–.566	.440	.568
Republican	.240	.210	1.271	.898	.485	2.456
Conservatism	.302	.080	1.353***	.408	.180	1.504*
Registered voter	.068	.230	1.071	.153	.518	1.166
Southerner	.168	.164	1.183	.517	.411	1.677
Income	–.030	.028	.971	–.059	.071	.943
Racial resentment	.621	.094	1.860***	.497	.243	1.644*
Dangerous world	.345	.108	1.411**	.504	.305	1.656
Care/harm moral foundation	–.561	.129	.570**	–.824	.345	.439*
Fear of crime	.205	.083	1.228*	.373	.204	1.452
Constant	–3.492	.669	.030	–4.261	1.625	.014
Cox and Snell Pseudo R ²		.285			.275	

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Discussion

For decades, the Catholic Church has been opposed to the use of capital punishment. As Joseph Cardinal Bernardin (1983: 1) noted in his now-famous Gannon Lecture at Fordham University, the Church embraces “a consistent ethic of life,” an umbrella that encompasses the “sacredness of human life” and capital punishment. He deemed the death penalty unacceptable in all but exceptional circumstances because “the taking of even one human life is a momentous event” and because its use does not “cultivate an attitude for respect for human life” (1983: 3, 4). Cardinal Bernardin (1983: 1, 6) did not counsel insularity within the faith but undertaking “an American–Catholic dialogue” in which Catholics should “shape and share the vision of a consistent ethic of life.” In August 2018, Pope

Francis doubled down on the Church's support for life by making the death penalty inadmissible in all circumstances. In October 2020, his papal encyclical *Fratelli tutti* reiterated this position: "There can be no stepping back from this position" (Pope Francis, 2020: 66). There are four ways in which Pope Francis's official teaching on capital punishment can prove consequential: Its impact on individual Catholics if taught more vigorously, making Catholic elected officials supportive of the death penalty vulnerable to public moral criticism, energizing the anti-death penalty movement among Catholics, and creating a context in which the redeemability of offenders is taken more seriously.

Impact on individual Catholics

At present, there is little evidence that American Catholics have been influenced by Church teachings on capital punishment—any more than they have been by teachings on the policy of making abortion illegal in all or most cases (see "U.S. Public Continues to Favor Legal Abortion," 2019). In our YouGov surveys before (2017) and after (2019) Pope Francis's momentous change in the Church's position, a majority of Catholics in the United States continued to favor the death penalty. Approximately the same level of support also was found in our 2020 MTurk study, where 53.3% of Catholics endorsed the execution of convicted murderers. These findings must be placed in a context. In a 1994 Gallup Poll, support for the death penalty reached its all-time high of 80% ("Death Penalty," 2019). In the mid-1990s, polls from a variety of sources reported support consistently above 70% (Cullen et al., 2000). Thereafter, the number of Americans favoring capital punishment has steadily declined (Enns, 2016; Pickett, 2019) to where it stands around 55%. Catholics' support for the death penalty seems to have tracked this national trend so that today their attitudes hover close to the nation as a whole—as shown by our data and other national polls (e.g., Oliphant, 2018). These findings suggest that Catholics have been assimilated into the United States to such an extent that their policy view on capital punishment is best seen as an American attitude rather than a Catholic attitude.

Part of this American attitude, however, is the existence of a partisan divide

on death penalty support. With one exception (Table 4, Model 2, where $p < .10$), either conservatism or Republican is positively and significantly related to favoring capital punishment. At issue is whether, in the time ahead, this partisan divide among Catholics can be diminished.

Despite these constraints, Pope Francis's official teaching on capital punishment may nonetheless prove consequential. Our 2020 MTurk data show that two years following the Pope's policy change, only 17.0% of Catholics could correctly identify the Church's new position on the death penalty. That bad news also contains good news: The potential exists for the American Catholic Church to educate its faithful on this policy issue. Unlike abortion, where the Church's teachings are likely clear to virtually everyone—Catholic and non-Catholic—most Catholics favoring the death penalty have apparently not been directly confronted that their death penalty belief violates Church teaching. Notably, the America of today is marked by declining punitiveness, increasing support for offender inclusion, and growing concern about racial justice (Butler, 2020; Enns, 2016; Lee, 2020; Pickett, 2019).

These findings suggest that for many Americans—including Catholics—support for capital punishment might be held weakly rather than firmly and thus could be open to change if challenged by respected authorities on a moral level. U.S. Bishops have spoken out on the inadmissibility of capital punishment (see, e.g., Coakley et al., 2019; Zimmerman, 2019b), but their pronouncement might not reach the average Catholic. Rather, altering opinions to align with Church teachings might require a systematic effort by parish priests to preach directly, if not repeatedly, on Pope Francis's doctrinal revision banning the use of capital punishment. Catholic activists might lobby Catholic bishops to implement a Church-wide educational outreach on the consistent ethic of life, including why the faithful must oppose capital punishment. As noted, from now on, each new generation of Catholics will receive religious instruction across their life course on why the death penalty is inconsistent with the Church's belief in the sanctity of life. So, over the longer term and unless competing societal events spike punitiveness, this message might fall on receptive rather than deaf ears.

Impact on Catholic public officials

Second, the United States is in an era of slow but steady abolition of the death penalty (see Garland, 2010). The historical period that gave the United States Ronald Reagan, the religious Right and conservative Catholicism, mass incarceration, and a thirst for capital punishment has ended (Petersilia and Cullen, 2015). In the aftermath of George Floyd's killing that pricked the American conscience, the possibility of criminal justice systemic reform seems within reach. Although 28 states still authorize capital punishment, 10 of these jurisdictions have not executed anyone in more than a decade (Gramlich, 2019). California houses over 700 inmates on its death row, but Governor Gavin Newsom has issued a moratorium on executions in the state (Gramlich, 2019). Further, in a little over a decade, six states have abolished the death penalty, bringing the number banning the practice to 22 and the District of Columbia ("States and Capital Punishment," 2020). Despite carrying out more executions than any other state, Virginia now is poised to abolish capital punishment; if so, it would be the first southern state to take this step (Vozzella and Schneider, 2021).

These developments are important both in showing how the prevailing social context is conducive to death penalty abolition and why Pope Francis's doctrinal change might prove consequential. In 2014, Texas Governor Greg Abbott defended his support of capital punishment by claiming: "Catholic doctrine is not against the death penalty, and so there is no conflict there" (Burke, 2018). Nebraska Governor Ricketts had similarly asserted that the "Catholic Church does not preclude the use of the death penalty" when "guilt is determined and the crime is heinous" (Burke, 2018). But Pope Francis shut this door—so much so that "you'd have to be flatworm-thin to wriggle through as a pro-capital punishment Catholic" (Barlow, 2018). Shortly after the Pope's teaching was issued, Ricketts approved of the execution of 60-year-old Carey Dean Moore after 38 years on death row. The state's three Catholic bishops opposed this action, noting: "Simply put, the death penalty is no longer needed or morally justified in Nebraska" (Burke, 2018). Outside the Catholic church in Omaha where Ricketts worships,

dozens gathered to protest the execution, reportedly raising signs reading, “Who Would Jesus Kill?” (Baptiste, 2018).¹

The point is not that the Pope’s doctrinal teaching can force pro-death penalty Catholic politicians to change their minds, but rather that it gives opponents a moral weapon to use in their campaign against capital punishment. For Catholic public officials who tout their faith and then violate the consistent life ethic, they open themselves up to charges of being unfaithful and hypocritical. They are put on the defensive.

The reaction to then-Attorney General William Barr’s decision to reinstate the federal death penalty, which has not been used since 2003 (Office of Public Affairs, 2019), merits attention. As Elie (2020) notes, after Pope Francis’s teaching on the inadmissibility of the death penalty, “Catholic conservatives derided the move as an act of progressive overreach. Barr has translated their defiance into Justice Department policy.” In 2020, Barr pursued an “aggressive execution schedule” (Mack, 2020: 11B), eventually sending 13 federal prisoners to their death (Roche, 2021). This figure exceeds the number of state executions for the year—seven, which is the lowest in 37 years (Giuliani-Hoffman, 2020).

Notably, the response by Catholics to Barr’s embrace of capital punishment was immediate, including from his defenders who felt the need to pronounce that “executing child murderers does not make Bill Barr any less pro-life” (Hirschauer, 2020). One commentator termed these executions “Trump’s final cruelty” (Kim, 2020). Most notably, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops condemned the policy (Zimmerman, 2019b; see also Clarke, 2019; Coakley et al., 2019). As Chicago Cardinal Blas’e J. Cupich tweeted, a reinstatement of the death penalty is “gravely injurious to the common good, as it effaces the God-given dignity of all human beings, even those who have committed terrible crimes” (Zimmerman, 2019b).

Again, when prominent Catholic officials facilitate state executions, the inconsistency of their conduct with Church teaching actively promoted by Pope Francis will be palpable. Especially when otherwise wearing the breastplate of religious righteousness as part of their public persona, they are now vulnerable to

accusations of hypocrisy, if not immorality. A case in point is Amy Coney Barrett's ascendancy to the U.S. Supreme Court, leading the court to have six Catholic justices, five of whom are conservatives (the exception is Justice Sotomayor). Whereas Justice Anton Scalia (2002) refused to accept that Church teaching's discouraged capital punishment, Barrett does not. With Barrett and Garvey (1998), she defined her position in a now-celebrated 1998 law review article on "Catholic Judges in Capital Cases." Barrett and Garvey (1998: 303) noted that the Catholic Church's "campaign against capital punishment puts Catholic judges in a bind." As jurists under oath to their office, they are obligated to enforce the law permitting the death penalty, but as faithful Catholics, they are obligated "to adhere to their church's teachings on moral matters" (1998: 303).

Notably, a bright spotlight shined on Justice Barrett in her very first capital punishment case on the court. In his news story in *The Washington Post*, Barnes (2020) quotes her law review article and its central theme that faithful Catholic judges "are morally precluded from enforcing the death penalty." Barnes discloses that in her first case, Barrett did not oppose the majority's decision to allow the execution of Orlando Hall to go forward. The issue is not the appropriateness of the decision but the fact that the moral context has been transformed. When Catholic policy elites render death-penalty decisions, their conduct will be scrutinized in light of Pope Francis's doctrinal change making this sanction inadmissible. In this way, the public conversation over capital punishment continues and is publicized.

Finally, the second Catholic after John F. Kennedy to be elected U.S. president, Joe Biden is publicly devout in his faith, wearing a rosary (a gift from son Hunter) around his wrist (O'Loughlin, 2020). Days after his election, he notably spoke with Pope Francis, expressing "his desire to work together on the basis of a shared belief in the dignity and equality of all humankind" (Chalfant, 2020). Although once a death-penalty supporter, Biden now expresses his opposition to capital punishment and "has pledged to help eliminate it at the federal level"—a dramatic reversal of policy from the Trump-Barr administration (Kim, 2020; see also Biden, 2020). Biden's likely affirmation of Pope Francis's abolitionist stance could change not only federal policy but also public opinion, both among Catholics and non-

Catholics. As Green and colleagues (2020) note, there is a “vast literature highlighting the importance of partisan and elite cues for anchoring political attitudes and behaviors.”

Impact on Catholic reform groups

Similar to the Protestants’ Social Gospel movement that linked salvation to good works, Catholics have advanced “Catholic Social Teaching” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011: 6). Social teaching involves the lesson that every human being has dignity and that a “basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring,” especially the poor. Although often a source of conflict within the Church, Catholics have long engaged in social reform efforts, such as the Catholic Worker Movement of the 1930s involving Dorothy Day (Coles, 1987) and the peace movement during the 1960s (Carey, 2004). Opposition to capital punishment is long-standing and a Catholic social teaching. Sister Helen Prejean’s (1993) *Dead Man Walking* catapulted her into the forefront of the anti-death penalty debate, especially after her book was made into a movie starring Sean Penn. Today, Catholics Against Capital Punishment is a “national, Catholic organization committed to ending the death penalty and promoting restorative justice” (Catholic Mobilizing Network, 2020). Their Mercy in Action Project provides a website that has been used to send thousands of letters asking governors to halt scheduled executions. Note that in 2005, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) initiated their “Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty.” These organized efforts to oppose capital punishment have been energized and given fresh legitimacy by Pope Francis’s teachings. Their effects on Catholics and on non-Catholics warrant further study.

Impact on offender redeemability

On a broader level, Pope Francis’s view on capital punishment extends to all offenders—even those who have committed heinous harms—the status of deserving human dignity and the offer of spiritual and social redemption. As noted previously, his death penalty position reflects a more global understanding that

God's pathway to inner change is not punishment but love and support. He thus stands as a powerful voice, heard in the United States and internationally, that rejects the view of offenders as "the other" who cannot be saved and advocates for an image of the redeemable wayward soul meriting rehabilitation. Put in Maruna's (2001) terms, Pope Francis legitimates a collective belief in redemption scripts and delegitimizes as incorrect condemnation scripts.

Conceptions of offenders matter. Scholars have noted that mass incarceration was fueled and justified by depictions of law-breakers as "the other" and as an "unchanging legal threat" (Garland, 2001; Simon, 2014). By contrast, Pope Francis's emphasis on the dignity and redeemability of justice-involved individuals mitigates retributivist sentiments and promotes a more humane criminal justice. He models empathetic identification with offenders, from washing their feet to asking that their lives be spared. This message may find an increasingly receptive audience in a United States that is turning away from mass incarceration (Lee, 2020), especially with a younger generation (ages 18–29) of whom 60% voted for Joe Biden for president. Further, building on the work of Maruna and King (2009), there is now a growing empirical literature demonstrating that belief in redeemability—the idea that offenders can change for the better—is negatively related to punitiveness and a robust predictor of support for a range of inclusive policies, such as reducing collateral consequences, expunging criminal records, and reentry and rehabilitation programs (see, e.g., Burton, Burton, Cullen, et al., 2020; Burton, Cullen, Burton, et al., 2020; Burton, Cullen, Pickett, et al., 2020; Butler, 2020).

Ultimately, the full effect of Pope Francis's change to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to make the death penalty inadmissible in all instances remains to be seen. It may take years for American Catholics to be taught the official Church position on the death penalty, although this process might be cut short if Catholics urged their bishops to take steps to educate the faithful on the death penalty and why opposition to this policy is integral to the consistent ethic of life (Bernardin, 1983). More immediately, the Pope's teachings give Catholics a strong rationale to use when campaigning against capital punishment, and they

mandate that Church leaders speak out against efforts to expand the use of this lethal sanction. The impact of Pope Francis's teachings thus should be revisited in future research on individual opinions of Catholics toward the death penalty and on their role in motivating social reforms by Catholic groups aimed at the abolition of capital punishment.

Note

1. In technical terms, Pope Francis's pronouncement on the death penalty makes no claim of infallibility and does not rise to the level of Church "dogma" or "doctrine." Rather, it is best considered a "social teaching" that offers "a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of a modern society." The Church opposes practices that "threaten" the "sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person," whether that is abortion or the death penalty (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011). Noting that capital punishment has a Biblical justification and has been permitted by the Church until this moment, some conservatives argue that the Pope's mandate is not binding on Catholics (see, e.g., Feser, 2020). Still, the Pope's authoritative communication of the Church's revised stance makes Catholics' non-compliance morally problematic. His 2018 "Letter to the Bishops" was explicitly intended "to better reflect the development on the doctrine" and resulted in a change to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Ladaria, 2018). By a vote of 194 to 8 (with 3 abstentions), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops then voted to revise the *U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults* so as to align with the "universal" catechism (Zimmerman, 2019a). These actions enshrine the Pope's statements as "official Catholic teaching" and make it difficult for politicians and others to dismiss the new teaching as merely "the Pope's opinion" (Burke, 2018). Most salient, Pope Francis's use in 2020 of the encyclical "Fratelli tutti" to reaffirm his teaching on the inadmissibility of the death penalty is consequential. As Martin (2020) notes, "A papal encyclical is one of the highest of all documents in terms of its authority, removing any lingering doubt about the church's belief."

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