

**Catholics and Capital Punishment:
Do Pope Francis's Teachings Matter in Policy Preferences?**

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Abstract

In the United States, Catholics make up more than 50 million members of the adult population, or about 1 in 5 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 doctrine—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 murders. Data from our 2020 MTurk survey shows that only 12.7% 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 impermissibility of capital punishment, as part of the Church's consistent ethic of life, will be integral to their religious training.

On March 13, 2013, 76-year-old Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio from Argentina was named the 266th pope of the Roman Catholic Church. His papacy was marked by several “firsts”—the first pontiff who was a Jesuit priest, who was from the Americas, and who was a non-European (since Gregory III from Syria who passed away in 741). Although a doctrinal conservative (e.g., opposing abortion in all circumstances, married priests, LGBTQ+ 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). Conservative critics have written an open letter, now with more than 1,500 signatories, accusing him of the “canonical delict of heresy” because, among other alleged transgressions, of his openness to remarried and LGBTQ+ Catholics and to pluralism in religious belief, among other alleged transgressions (Benevento, 2019; Collins, 2019).

In this context, Pope Francis's views on criminals take on relevance. 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 set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:1-17, *New International Version*; see also “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. Among the inmates were two women and two Muslims (Peralta,

2013). He has celebrated the Holy Thursday Mass in a detention facility four more times, the latest on April 18, 2019, at the Velletri Correctional Facility near Rome, where “the detainees were unable to contain their joy” and interrupted the “solemnity of the opening procession” with “applause and cheers” (Esteves, 2019). 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” (Yuhus, 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 Martín, 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 Martín, 2019).

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 doctrine 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 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’” (quoted in San Martín, 2018; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, p. 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. On August 2, 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 Bishops (2019), the answer is clear: “No. The *Catechism* is part of the Church's ordinary teaching authority.” Accordingly, it is now the official doctrine 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)

In this context, we examine Catholics’ support of capital punishment using national YouGov surveys conducted prior to and after Pope Francis’s revised teaching on the death penalty (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 examine 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. As a prelude to this analysis, we set the context for why the Church's position might or might not have influenced American Catholics' policy opinions.

Catholics and Public Policy Opinions

Catholics are an important group within the United States, numbering more than 50 million or about 1 in 5 Americans (Chua-Eaon & Dias, 2013; Masci & 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."

Catholics are spread across the nation: 26% in the Northeast, 21% in the Midwest, 24% in the South, and 23% in the West (Masci & Smith, 2018). Politically, they are split evenly. When asked which party they identify with or lean toward, 47% answer Democrat and 46% answer Republican (Lipka & Smith, 2019). Note as well that Catholics occupy positions of political influence. Thus, of the nine U.S. Supreme Court Justices, five are practicing Catholics (Justices Roberts, Alito, Thomas, Sotomayor, and Kavanaugh), and one (Gorsuch) was raised Catholic but now reportedly is Episcopalian (Escobar, 2018). The late Justice Scalia also was a committed Catholic (Scalia, 2002). In the current U.S. Congress, Catholics number 141 in the House (32%) and 22 in the Senate (O'Loughlin, 2019). U.S. Attorney General William Barr (2019) is outspoken about how his Catholicism informs his public policy stances.

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 & Welch, 2004; Mulligan, 2006; Smith, 2005; Wald, 1992; Welch & 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). 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).

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 & Bader, 2008; Unnever, Bartkowski, & Cullen, 2010; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate, 2005). In national polls, 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 & Ray, 2019; Unnever et al., 2010; cf. Froese & 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 doctrine 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 & Jones, 2015). And in a 2017 poll on the “sources used by Catholics in making moral decisions,” fewer than 1 in 5 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 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.

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 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, Pickett, & Cullen, 2020) as well as other probability sampling techniques (Vavreck & 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 adjust for biases using propensity score weighting, again using sociodemographic characteristics.

The first YouGov survey was fielded between March 3–7, 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 listwise 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 June 7–10, 2019 with the initial matching of 1,427 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. Using the same approach as the 2017 data, the analytic sample for the 2019 study was 942 respondents.

Finally, MTurk was used to collect data between March 28–29, 2020. This national-level opt-in platform allows “workers” to identify and participate in a variety of tasks for a small incentive—in our case, \$2.30 for completing an online survey. Online opt-in surveys are useful for producing more honest and accurate self-reports (i.e., less social desirability bias, satisficing, speeding, interviewer effects), which is important given the topic of study (Anson, 2018, Chang & Krosnick, 2009, Weinberg, Freese, & McElhattan, 2014). Following listwise deletion using the same approach as 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.

-----*Insert Table 1 About Here*-----

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 as a binary variable with *favor* (= 1) and *oppose/don't know* (=0). This question has been asked for nearly 50 years and is regularly included in prior research (see, e.g., Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 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) as opposed to 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,” used as 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—as = 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’ (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).¹

Likewise, perceptions of a dangerous world are known to influence views of punitiveness (see, e.g., Silver & Silver, 2017; Silver, 2017; Vaughan, Holleran, & Silver, 2019). Following Stroebe, Leander, and Kruglanski (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 was unpredictable and dangerous (alpha = .794, factor loadings between .759 and .828).

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 and colleagues' (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 harm (i.e., more caring; alpha = .550, factor loadings between .608 and .700).²

¹ The alpha and factor loadings presented here and subsequently reference 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 and available upon request.

² Although the alpha and factor loadings are low, these values correspond with previous research using the care/harm scale (see, e.g., Chowdhury, 2019; Smith, Alford, Hibbing, Martin & Hatemi, 2017; Yilmaz & Saribay, 2017).

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 oft-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* = 59.0%; *oppose* = 34.4%; *don't know/no opinion* = 6.6% (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.

-----*Insert Tables 2 and 3 About Here*-----

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 available in both the 2017 and 2019 YouGov data sets are included. In Table 5, the effects of additional predictors 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 ($p = .10$ in 2017), and especially employment are positively associated with favoring capital punishment. Table 5 reports two other significant factors: racial resentment increases, whereas having a care/harm moral foundation decreases death penalty advocacy (see Model 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.

Discussion

For decades, the Catholic Church has been opposed to the use of capital punishment. As Joseph Cardinal Bernardin noted in his now-famous 1983 Gannon Lecture at Fordham University, the Church embraces “a consistent ethic of life,” an umbrella that embraces 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” (p. 3) and because its use does not “cultivate an attitude for respect for human life” (p. 4). Cardinal Bernardin did not counsel insularity within the faith but undertaking “an American–Catholic dialogue” (p. 1) in which Catholics should “shape and share the vision of a consistent ethic of life” (p. 6). In August 2018, Pope Francis doubled down on the Church’s support for life by making the death penalty impermissible in all circumstances.

There is little evidence, however, 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, 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 (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.

There are three reasons why Pope Francis's official doctrine on capital punishment may nonetheless prove consequential. First, our 2020 MTurk data show that two years following the Pope's policy change, only 12.7% 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 doctrine. Notably, the America of today is marked by declining punitiveness, increasing support for offender inclusion, and growing concern about racial justice (Burton et al., 2020; Butler, 2020; Cullen, Lee, Butler, & Thielo, 2020; Enns, 2016; Pickett, 2019). Further instructive is the Gallup Poll of October 14–31, 2019, that probed what is the “better penalty for murder.” For the first time in the history of the survey on this issue (starting in January 11–14, 1985), more Americans favored “life imprisonment, with absolutely no possibility of parole” (60%) over “the death penalty” (36%); 4% answered “no opinion” (“Death Penalty,” 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

impermissibility of capital punishment (see, e.g., Coakley, Gregory, & Dewane, 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.

Second, the United States is an era of slow but steady abolition of the death penalty (see Garland, 2010). Twenty-eight states still authorize capital punishment, but 10 of these jurisdictions have not executed anyone in more than a decade (Gramlich, 2020). Although California houses over 700 inmates on its death row, Governor Gavin Newsom has issued a moratorium on executions in the state (Gramlich, 2020). Further, in 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). Recently, courts in Delaware and Washington have "ruled that the states' capital punishment laws are unconstitutional" ("States and Capital Punishment," 2020). In 2015, the Nebraska unicameral legislature repealed the state's death penalty statute, overriding a veto by Governor Pete Ricketts, a practicing Catholic (Morgan, 2015). The following year, Ricketts allocated \$300,000 of his own money to help fund a ballot initiative to reinstate capital punishment in Nebraska, which subsequently was approved by the voters—an issue we return to shortly (Baptiste, 2018).

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). 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). Ricketts attempted to justify his decision but now had to take Pope Francis into account. "While I respect the pope's perspective," he commented, "capital punishment remains the will of the people and the law of the state of Nebraska" (Baptiste, 2018). His Catholicism, however, remains palpable. Outside St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church in Omaha, where Ricketts worships, dozens gathered to protest the execution, reportedly raising signs reading, "Who Would Jesus Kill?" (Baptiste, 2018).

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. Pro-choice Catholic politicians have long experienced this attempt at public shaming. As recently as October 2019, because of his views

on abortion, a priest at a South Carolina church denied Holy Communion to former Vice President Joe Biden (Cummings, 2019). Might this exclusion await Catholic public officials trumpeting capital punishment?

One more example merits notice: The 2019 decision by Attorney General William Barr to reinstate the federal death penalty, which has not been used since 2003 (Office of Public Affairs, 2019). The offenders scheduled for execution were carefully chosen. As the Department of Justice noted, the “five death-row inmates” were “convicted of murdering, and in some cases torturing and raping, the most vulnerable in our society—children and the elderly” (Office of Public Affairs, 2019). Notably, the response by Catholics was immediate, including from his defenders who claimed that “executing child murderers does not make Bill Barr any less pro-life” (Hirschauer, 2020). The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, however, felt otherwise, condemning the policy (Zimmerman, 2019b; see also Clarke, 2019; Coakley et al., 2019). As Chicago Cardinal Blasé 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).

Third and more broadly, 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, 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 delegitimates as incorrect condemnation scripts (see also Burton et al., 2020; Cullen et al., 2019).

Ultimately, the full effect of Pope Francis's change to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to make the death penalty impermissible in all instances remains to be seen. It may take years for American Catholics to be taught official Church doctrine 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.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	2017 YouGov (N = 852)		2019 YouGov (N = 942)		2020 MTurk (N = 983)	
	Percent/ Mean (SD)	Range	Percent/ Mean (SD)	Range	Percent/ Mean (SD)	Range
<i>Dependent Variable</i>						
Favor Death Penalty (%)	55.8	0-1	54.2	0-1	44.0	0-1
<i>Key Independent Variable</i>						
Catholic/Roman Catholic	22.7	0-1	18.9	0-1	26.4	0-1
<i>Control Variables</i>						
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	--	--

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

Table 2. Death Penalty Favorability by Catholic Affiliation 2017 to 2019

	2017 YouGov (n = 852)	2017 YouGov Catholics (n = 193)	2017 YouGov Non-Catholics (n = 659) ¹	2018 GSS [^] (n = 2,348)	2019 YouGov (n = 942)	2019 YouGov Catholics (n = 178)	2019 YouGov Non-Catholics (n = 763) ²
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)

1 – $X^2 = 8.75$, $p = .013$, Cramer's V = .101

2 – $X^2 = 2.69$, $p = .261$, Cramer's V = .053

[^] Weighted 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)`.

Table 3. Key Independent Variable Distributions - MTurk

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	8.6	23.2	3.5
4. Pope Francis's new position is			
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

Table 4. Logistic Regression Models for Favoring the Death Penalty – 2017 to 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)		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	OR	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	OR	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	OR	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	OR
<i>Key Independent Variable</i>												
Catholic	.501	.183	1.650**	--	--	--	.301	.189	1.351	--	--	--
<i>Control Variables</i>												
Age	.003	.005	1.003	.033	.012	1.033**	.013	.005	1.013**	.028	.012	1.028*
Female	-.207	.150	.813	-.914	.370	.401*	-.086	.150	.917	-.180	.348	.836
White	.577	.167	1.780**	1.201	.433	3.324**	.263	.160	1.300	-1.166	.403	.312**
Education	-.062	.053	.939	-.148	.140	.862	-.131	.054	.877*	-.107	.125	.899
Employment	.361	.172	1.435*	1.268	.438	3.555**	.457	.171	1.579**	1.126	.442	3.082*
Married	.251	.159	1.285	-.104	.390	.901	.313	.155	1.367*	-.369	.384	.692
Republican	-.021	.197	.979	.248	.467	1.282	.502	.195	1.652*	.932	.445	2.540*
Conservatism	.629	.092	1.875***	.337	.194	1.401	.567	.071	1.763***	.513	.170	1.670**
Registered Voter	-.022	.190	.908	-1.582	.530	.206**	-.145	.219	.865	-.157	.480	.855
Southerner	-.209	.156	.811	-.410	.384	.664	.226	.152	1.254	.529	.382	1.698
Constant	-2.181	.384	.112	-.967	.840	.380	-2.343	.359	.096	-1.948	.757	.143
Cox & Snell Pseudo R Squared		.123			.222			.192			.192	

Note: * 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)		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	OR	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	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 & Snell Pseudo R Squared		.285			.275	

Note: * p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001