

A win for death penalty opponents

by [Cathleen Falsani](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue

On Ash Wednesday, Illinois Governor Pat Quinn signed a law abolishing the death penalty in his state, making the Land of Lincoln the 16th state where capital punishment is no longer an option.

"It is impossible to create a perfect system, free of all mistakes," Quinn said after signing the death penalty law, which takes effect July 1. "I think it's the right and just thing to abolish the death penalty and punish those who commit heinous crimes—evil people—with life in prison without parole or any chance of release."

Quinn, who is Catholic, revealed that he turned to his faith—to the Bible and to Catholic leaders and tradition—in contemplating the bill that lawmakers delivered to him in January.

The governor even quoted Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the beloved archbishop of Chicago who died in 1996, saying, "In a complex, sophisticated democracy like ours, means other than the death penalty are available and can be used to protect society."

Religious leaders have been at the forefront of the death penalty abolitionist movement in Illinois and nationwide. But there has been a disconnect between their activism and the opinions of it.

According to a 2010 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 62 percent of Americans support the death penalty in murder cases, with only 30 percent saying they oppose it. That figure is nearly identical to the results of a similar survey in 2007, but lower than that of a 1996 survey, when 78 percent of Americans said they supported capital

punishment for murder and just 18 percent said they were opposed.

Survey

results on the death penalty vary little across religious groups—at least among white Americans. Last year, 74 percent of white evangelicals, 71 percent of white mainline Protestants and 68 percent of white Catholics said they favor capital punishment, according to Pew. But fewer than half of black Protestants (37 percent) and Hispanic Catholics (43 percent) said they approve of the death penalty.

"The

light of God is shining, shining positively on our state," Illinois state senator Kwame Raoul said after Quinn signed the death penalty ban.

Raoul

was not alone in thinking that the Illinois ban is a moral as well as a legal victory for people of good faith. As more states examine whether to eliminate capital punishment, some wonder whether the days of the death penalty are numbered and what, if any, role people of faith might play in reaching such a tipping point.

Racial disparities and too

many wrongful convictions are often cited as compelling reasons to abolish the death penalty. In Illinois, for instance, the state executed 12 prisoners after the death penalty was reinstated in 1977. During that time, Illinois also exonerated 20 death row inmates.

"One

significant moral problem with the state having the authority over capital punishment is that the decision is irrevocable and so often carried out in ways that are racially questionable—studies prove this," said Richard Cizik, a former vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals. "My conscience can't accept this appalling reality.

"If

it's not a matter of serious reflection, it should be!" Cizik continued. "To miss the moral questions at stake is to be hard of heart."

According to Mike Farrell, president of the group Death Penalty Focus, many evangelicals and other religious folks still have tough hearts when it comes to moral questions about the death penalty.

What

Farrell referred to as the "fundamentalist Christian community" remains "wedded to a political position that embraces state killing and insists that its use is right, holy, biblically ordained and necessary—'the Lord's work,' as some would have it," he said.

Yet Farrell—best known for his role as Capt. B. J. Hunnicutt on TV's *M*A*S*H**—said he's seeing a change of opinion among rank-and-file Catholics, a shift he attributes to the "strength of their leadership's advocacy."

He

sees a similar trend emerging among mainstream Protestants but senses "that the shift toward abolition in their community of believers is more reflective of a general awakening on the part of the American public."

Farrell

believes people of faith can have a significant impact in moving toward a nationwide abolition by addressing capital punishment as a pressing moral and spiritual concern and shedding light on the "sins of the [justice] system."

"I believe we are moving ever more rapidly to a point where abolition is inevitable," Farrell said. —RNS