

LONG ISLAND

Cuomo wants to take death penalty law off books in New York

"Today, in solidarity with Pope Francis and in honor of my father, I will be advancing legislation to remove the death penalty - and its ugly stain in our history - from State law once and for all," Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said Thursday.

By Janelle Griffith August 2, 2018 10:15 PM

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo says he will introduce legislation to remove the death penalty from New York State law.

"In his final years, my father continued to advocate for eliminating the law from the books, calling it a 'stain on our conscience,' " Cuomo said in a statement Thursday. "Today, in solidarity with Pope Francis and in honor of my father, I will be advancing legislation to remove the death penalty — and its ugly stain in our history — from State law once and for all."

The Vatican announced on Thursday that the church would work "with determination" to abolish capital punishment.

His father, Mario Cuomo, vetoed legislation reinstating the death penalty 12 times in 12 years, the governor said.

"He did this because he believed the death penalty was wrong and he had the courage to stand firm in his beliefs — so much so that he was willing to lose his office rather than capitulate."

New York has had a moratorium on capital punishment since June 2004 when the state's highest court ruled that the death penalty violated the state constitution.

The Diocese of Rockville Centre did not return a request for comment.

Pope Francis has condemned capital punishment for many years and indicated last October — on the 25th anniversary of the publication of St. John Paul II's Catechism — that he was looking into a change.

Robert Blecker, who supports the death penalty, said that under Pope Francis' logic, life without parole also was an "illegitimate sentence" because it didn't give a person a second chance.

"Once the killer reliably no longer poses a future threat, we would have an obligation to recognize his dignity and release him regardless of how heinous his past crime," said Blecker, who teaches criminal law and constitutional history at New York Law School.

Other Long Islanders agreed with the pope.

Aida Leisenring, a Garden City criminal defense attorney, said she couldn't believe this position had not been taken earlier.

"You can't work in the criminal justice system and turn a blind eye to the fact that innocent people get convicted," said Leisenring, 41, of Long Island City. "And with a death sentence, it's irreversible."

Leisenring co-created "The Last Defense," a seven-episode docuseries airing on ABC about individuals who have been sentenced to death for crimes they say they did not commit.

She understands why some people support the death penalty, Leisenring said, but “we haven’t figured out a way to guarantee that innocent people aren’t executed and for that reason we should not have it.”

Sandra Thomas of Wheatley Heights called Pope Francis’ philosophy and thinking “very Christ-like.”

“He’s absolutely right,” said Thomas, a retired school social worker. “If you’re pro-life. You’re pro-life.”

Thomas became a Roman Catholic at age 17 and said she had followed the faith for more than 50 years.

“Catholic teaching says there shouldn’t be any death penalty,” said Thomas, who is a member of Our Lady of the Miraculous Meadow Roman Catholic Church in Wyandanch. “I don’t think any other pope has said it as profoundly and as consistently as Pope Francis.”