Legislature passes measure to set up death penalty study

Richard J. Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, praised the Maryland General Assembly for passing legislation to establish a commission that will study the death penalty in Maryland.

The Catholic conference is the legislative lobbying arm of Maryland's Catholic bishops.

The House of Delegates passed its version of the bill March 21 on an 89-48 vote, and the Senate passed its version a day later on a 32-15 vote.

The two versions are expected to be reconciled soon, and Gov. Martin J. O'Malley is likely to sign the measure into law, Mr. Dowling said.

The commission will be made up of people on both sides of the issue, and it is expected to include representatives from the state's religious community. "We're hopeful this commission will help remove the residual doubts about whether our justice system can be best served by repeal of the death penalty," said Mr. Dowling.

The commission is expected to hold regional hearings, and Mr. Dowling said he is "confident people and interests throughout the state will have their say."

"If the polls are any indication, the people will make clear their preference for life sentences without the possibility of parole," he said.

While the Catholic conference had high hopes that a bill to repeal the death penalty would have been approved this year, the legislation was one vote short in the Senate judicial proceedings committee. Sen. Lisa Gladden of Baltimore, the bill's sponsor, asked the committee's chair not to bring the repeal bill up for a vote after it was clear that the measure would come up short, Mr. Dowling said.

Mr. Dowling is hopeful the commission will recommend repeal.

"If it does, that will provide the momentum needed to move repeal legislation

through," he said.

After the commission is formed, it is expected to issue a report by year's end, Dowling said.

The commission is modeled after a New Jersey commission that recommended abolishing the death penalty in that state.