

Sen. Mooney undecided on death penalty ban

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ANNAPOLIS – Sen. Alex X. Mooney knows he’s the man of the hour in the death penalty debate.

In the deadlocked Maryland Senate judiciary committee, the parishioner of St. John the Evangelist in Frederick holds the deciding vote on whether legislation to abolish the death penalty will make it to the Senate floor.

While the committee is expected to vote at the end of this week, Sen. Mooney still doesn’t know what his position will be.

“I really don’t know where I’m going to come down,” said the Frederick County Republican, speaking to The Catholic Review during the March 12 Maryland March for Life.

“I don’t consider it the same issue as abortion,” said Sen. Mooney, an abortion opponent. “On the death penalty, there’s no black and white.”

The bill under consideration would replace the death penalty with prison sentences of life without parole. It has the strong support of Maryland’s Catholic bishops, and Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, testified in support of the measure Feb. 21.

Sen. Mooney acknowledged he has been feeling pressure from both sides of the issue. He’s received “a few nasty e-mails” from supporters and opponents, he said.

“I had one guy stop me in the middle of Mass on Ash Wednesday,” he said. “He grabbed me on the way back from Communion, and I told him I’m just here to pray.”

Sen. Mooney said his Catholic faith will help inform his conscience on the issue – as will his upbringing, his educational background and his political constituencies.

The senator has raised concerns that the death penalty may be needed in cases of prisoners who murder correctional officers. He had considered introducing bill amendments to make some ban exceptions.

“It’s frankly hard to craft a bill that has exceptions,” he said.

The senator said the church’s position has “evolved over time,” and that the death penalty has “never been considered inherently immoral like abortion.” Church leaders have pointed out that Pope John Paul II said the death penalty is no longer needed in modern society that has other means of protecting itself.

“Frankly, my own position has developed, and I don’t have an absolute one right now,” Sen. Mooney said.