

House Speaker Pelosi agrees to meet archbishop; Sen. Biden remarks also draw criticism

SAN FRANCISCO - Responding to an invitation to meet with him to discuss church teaching on abortion and other topics, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she would “welcome the opportunity” to meet with Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco “to go beyond our earlier most cordial exchange about immigration and needs of the poor to church teaching on other significant matters.”

In a letter delivered to Archbishop Niederauer Sept. 5, House Speaker Pelosi offered to “meet at your earliest convenience” to discuss a statement by the archbishop that said her remarks were “in serious conflict with the teachings of the Catholic Church” on abortion, the beginning of human life and the formation of conscience.

But the furor that arose after House Speaker Pelosi said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” Aug. 24 that church leaders for centuries had not been able to agree on when life begins received further fuel Sept. 7 when Sen. Joseph Biden, the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, responded to a similar question on “Meet the Press.”

Sen. Biden, who like House Speaker Pelosi is a Catholic, said he accepted Catholic teaching that life begins at conception but did not believe that he could impose his beliefs in the public policy arena.

“I’m prepared as a matter of faith to accept that life begins at the moment of conception,” he said. “But that is my judgment. For me to impose that judgment on everyone else who is equally and maybe even more devout than I am seems to me is inappropriate in a pluralistic society.”

Sen. Biden’s remarks drew an almost immediate response from Archbishop Charles J. Chaput and Auxiliary Bishop James D. Conley of Denver, who said in a Sept. 8 “notice to the Catholic community in northern Colorado” that the Delaware senator “used a morally exhausted argument that American Catholics have been hearing for

40 years: i.e., that Catholics can't 'impose' their religiously based views on the rest of the country."

But, they said, "all law involves the imposition of some people's convictions on everyone else. That is the nature of the law.

"American Catholics have allowed themselves to be bullied into accepting the destruction of more than a million developing unborn children a year," the notice added. "Other people have imposed their 'pro-choice' beliefs on American society without any remorse for decades."

Archbishop Niederauer said in his Sept. 5 statement that he regretted addressing the issue so publicly, because House Speaker Pelosi - a Democrat who represents the San Francisco area - has been a dedicated public servant who has promoted some legislation that is in line with the social teachings of the Catholic Church.

"But the widespread consternation among Catholics made it unavoidable," he added.

The archbishop said reaction to his statement had been "mostly positive."

"People have said they feel it said what needed to be said," he added.

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia and Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairmen of the U.S. bishops' pro-life and doctrine committees, respectively, had criticized House Speaker Pelosi Aug. 25, saying she "misrepresented the history and nature of the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church on abortion."

Since the first century, the church "has affirmed the moral evil of every abortion," the two chairmen said.

The two chairmen also issued a lengthy critique of Sen. Biden's comments Sept. 9, saying that "the obligation to protect unborn human life rests on the answer to two questions, neither of which is private or specifically religious."

The first question is when human life begins, they said, adding it is a matter of "objective fact," taught in embryology textbooks, that life begins at conception. The second, "a moral question, with legal and political consequences," is which human

beings “should be seen as having fundamental human rights, such as a right not to be killed,” they added.

“We have no business dividing humanity into those who are valuable enough to warrant protection and those who are not,” Cardinal Rigali and Bishop Lori said. “Such views pose a serious threat to the dignity and rights of other poor and vulnerable members of the human family who need and deserve our respect and protection.”

Archbishop Niederauer said many Catholics “have written me letters and sent me e-mails in which they expressed their dismay and concern about the speaker’s remarks.”

Church leaders should be cautious when making judgments about who is worthy of receiving Holy Communion, he said.

Bishop Michael J. Sheridan of Colorado Springs, Colo., took a stronger position in a statement issued Aug. 26.

“Those Catholics who take a public stance in opposition to this most fundamental moral teaching of the church place themselves outside full communion with the church,” he wrote in his statement, “and they should not present themselves for the reception of Holy Communion.”

Though critical of House Speaker Pelosi’s statements and stands on abortion and other life issues, Archbishop Niederauer described the member of St. Vincent de Paul Parish in San Francisco as “a gifted, dedicated and accomplished public servant” who “has stated often her love for her faith and for the Catholic Church.”

In her response, which House Speaker Pelosi released to the media, she thanked the archbishop for his “gracious remarks regarding my love for the Catholic Church and my Catholic faith.”