

San Francisco archbishop wants talk with Pelosi on Catholic teaching

SAN FRANCISCO – Calling recent nationally broadcast comments by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi “in serious conflict with the teachings of the Catholic Church,” Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco invited the Catholic lawmaker “into a conversation with me” about church teaching on abortion, the beginning of human life and the formation of conscience.

Archbishop Niederauer said in a Sept. 5 statement that he regretted addressing the issue so publicly, because 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 statement, which was carried in the Sept. 5 issue of Catholic San Francisco, archdiocesan newspaper, was Archbishop Niederauer’s first public comment on the matter since Pelosi’s Aug. 24 remarks drew national criticism.

The house speaker said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” that day that church leaders for centuries had not been able to agree on when life begins.

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, criticized Pelosi the next day, 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.

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.”

“Very often they moved on to a question that caused much discussion during the 2004 campaign: Is it necessary to deny holy Communion to some Catholics in public life because of their public support for abortion on demand?” he added.

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

“The practice of the church is to accept the conscientious self-appraisal of each person” when he or she approaches for Communion, Archbishop Niederauer 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.”

In the “Meet the Press” interview, Pelosi said specific considerations must be undertaken during each trimester of a child’s development before an abortion can be performed.

“This isn’t about abortion on demand. It’s about careful, careful consideration of all factors ... that a woman has to make with her doctor and her God,” she said, adding that her goal is to make abortion safe and rare while reducing the number of abortions nationwide.

Though critical of Pelosi’s statements and stands on abortion and other life issues, the archbishop 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.”

The archbishop told Catholic San Francisco he had written to Pelosi personally about his statement and had a copy of it delivered to her office Sept. 4.

Bishops from Denver to St. Paul and Minneapolis, Chicago and Fargo, N.D., asserted that Catholics have a responsibility to study church teachings on human life and when life begins, which is at the moment of conception.

“The teaching of the church was clear in a Roman Empire that permitted abortion,” said Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “This same teaching has been constantly reiterated in every place and time up to Vatican II, which condemned abortion as a ‘heinous crime.’

“This is true today and will be so tomorrow,” Cardinal George continued in a statement issued Sept. 2. “Any other comments, by politicians, professors, pundits or the occasional priest, are erroneous and cannot be proposed in good faith.”

In his statement, Archbishop Niederauer said Pelosi has consistently mischaracterized church doctrine on abortion.

“For 20 centuries, not for 50 years (as stated by Pelosi), the Catholic Church has taught that abortion is grievously sinful,” he said. “Individual theologians may from time to time have speculated about the beginning of human life, but the church has consistently taught that abortion is wrong. The answer to the question, ‘When does life begin?’ should not have an impact, we are told, on the woman’s right to choose. Nevertheless, the woman’s right to choose certainly has an impact on nascent human life.”

The archbishop said he had an obligation as her pastor “to teach forthrightly and to shepherd caringly, and that is my intent. Let us pray together that the Holy Spirit will guide us all toward a more profound understanding and appreciation for human life, and toward a resolution of these differences in truth and charity and peace.”

Pelosi has defended her position, saying, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, “This isn’t really an abortion issue” but rather consideration of “a procedure that any parent would want her daughter to have access to if she needed it.”