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Pelosi counters Catholic bishops' criticisms on abortion

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A spokesman for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has struck back against criticism from prominent Catholic prelates who accused the California congresswoman of misrepresenting church teachings about abortion.

"While Catholic teaching is clear that life begins at conception, many Catholics do not ascribe to that view," said Pelosi spokesman Brendan Daly.

Pelosi, the nation's highest-ranking Catholic elected official, said on "Meet the Press" Sunday (Aug. 24) that the question of when life begins is "an issue of controversy" within the church. Her comments drew rebukes from the archbishops of Denver, Washington and New York.

In a statement released Tuesday (Aug. 26), Cardinal Justin F. Rigali of Philadelphia and Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., both high-ranking officials in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Pelosi's argument was inaccurate.

"The church's moral teaching never justified or permitted abortion at any stage of development," Rigali and Lori said.

Pelosi, who supports abortion rights, cited the work of St. Augustine, who wrote that life begins three months after conception. Church leaders say medieval teachings were "uninformed and inadequate" in light of modern science, and that the question of when life begins was firmly answered in the middle of the 19th century.

Daly reiterated Pelosi's position, again citing St. Augustine, while stressing the need for Congress and the church to work together to reduce the number of abortions.

"The speaker is the mother of five children and seven grandchildren and fully appreciates the sanctity of family. She was raised in a devout Catholic family who often disagreed with her pro-choice views," Daly said.

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