

## Pelosi, Niederauer meeting to spur debate, resolution or both?

Michael Humphrey | Sep. 9, 2008



When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi meets with San Francisco Archbishop

George Niederauer to discuss Catholic teaching on abortion, at least two paths could emerge. The strongly pro-choice Catholic politician might vigorously debate Augustine and church history with her archbishop. Or the two will try to put their heads together to create a public resolution that is acceptable for everyone. Or maybe they will do both.

But two Catholic scholars who know about butting heads with the church agree on this: The controversy that brought this meeting about could have been avoided.

"I think it's a mistake for politicians to talk theology," said Jesuit Father Thomas J. Reese, senior research fellow at Woodstock Theological Center. "Let's just say, it's above their pay grade."

Pelosi not only dabbled in theology, she did it on national television just as her Democratic party was headed into its convention.

During an Aug. 24 "Meet the Press" interview, Tom Brokaw asked Pelosi, "Senator Obama saying the question of when life begins is above his pay grade? If he were to come to you and say, 'Help me out here, Madame Speaker. When does life begin?' what would you tell him?"

Pelosi replied, "I would say that as an ardent, practicing Catholic, this is an issue that I have studied for a long time. And what I know is, over the centuries, the doctors of the church have not been able to make that definition. And, Senator, St. Augustine said at three months. We don't know. The point is, is that it shouldn't have an impact on the woman's right to choose."

When Brokaw pointed out the church's stance, Pelosi added, "I understand. And this is like maybe 50 years or something like that. So again, over the history of the church, this is an issue of controversy."

Pelosi also talked at length about the political realities of abortion and, Reese said, if she had stayed on that

track, she might well have avoided controversy. That's something Reese knows something about. His tenure as editor of *America* magazine was cut short by pressure from the Vatican to remove him.

Pelosi need not have engaged in parsing of church history and doctrine, he said.

"The question of when life begins is a theological question," Reese said, "It's a philosophical question. It's not a political question. [Discussing theology] invited the bishops to pounce on her. They are going to make clear to everybody that they are the teachers of the faith."

And bishops did start teaching.

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia and Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairmen of the U.S. bishops' pro-life and doctrine committees, released a statement the next day. It read: "The teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law."

Other bishops weighed in. Just as Democrats convened in his city, Archbishop of Denver Charles J. Chaput released a statement: "Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is a gifted public servant of strong convictions and many professional skills. Regrettably, knowledge of Catholic history and teaching does not seem to be one of them."



Niederauer stepped in last week, inviting Pelosi to discussion on the matter and stating that he

would not deny Pelosi Communion for her statements. He said, "It is my obligation to teach forthrightly and to shepherd caringly, and that is my intent."

To be fair, David J. O'Brien, professor emeritus of Catholic studies at Holy Cross College, said Pelosi is not necessarily off the mark in her statements.

"There is some validity to the idea that the church's stance was somewhat different at the beginning of the last century," O'Brien said. "But I would also say it's her role to speak to the political realities of today rather than church history. She might not have framed it quite right, but she has a right to speak to the issue from her perspective."

And from that perspective, all Catholics have a right and perhaps obligation to push for dialogue on the realities of the abortion debate.

"I personally feel we should not be so passive in dealing with hierarchy and dealing with this question," said O'Brien, an outspoken critic of church paternalism. "They should be challenged as to the political uses of this issue."

That's where the conversation between Pelosi and Niederauer should lead, O'Brien said.

"I wouldn't argue over the teaching of the church," he said, "but I would argue about the experience of the church. What do Catholics in everyday life say about their experience with this issue?"

Reese agrees. Pelosi has a right to speak out on abortion, but from her expertise.

"She should focus on pragmatic political realities and programs," Reese said. "I think what [Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe] Biden said on 'Meet the Press' was more appropriate. Democrats can say,

‘Republicans talk about abortion, but they do nothing.’ And they can say, ‘Are we going to fight for the next 50 years over criminalizing abortion and do nothing to reduce abortions over that period?’

Reese pointed to the Catholics United-sponsored study released last week that states overturning *Roe v. Wade* would do little to reduce the number of abortions in America.

‘If that’s the real world, then the question is who has the right programs to reduce the number of abortions,’ Reese said. ‘And Pelosi can make the argument that the Democrats have it. Healthcare for children, health care for pregnant mothers, support with daycare, resources for women who are pregnant.’

O’Brien and Reese didn’t necessarily agree on what Niederauer’s response to Pelosi meant. Reese said it was an act of necessity, while O’Brien saw something hopeful in it.

‘It shows some willingness to have dialogue,’ O’Brien said. ‘There’s been movement to make the bishops’ role primarily one of teacher, his job is to proclaim. This shows a willingness to listen, I hope. Bishops should be having a conversation with their church.’

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