

[News](#)



Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone are seen in this composite photo. (CNS composite/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein and St. Louis Review/Lisa Johnston)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

[View Author Profile](#)

cbarone@ncronline.org

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

Washington — December 12, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi has quietly turned to Rome to resolve her two-year-old dispute with the San Francisco archbishop over her receiving Holy Communion.

Pelosi for the first time has revealed that Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone's order that she be banned from receiving Communion now is pending a final resolution at the Vatican. She did not say and it is unclear when she sought Vatican intervention.

"My understanding, as long as Rome has the case, it hasn't been resolved," Pelosi said in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter.

The fight stems from a May 2022 public letter from Cordileone banning then-Speaker Pelosi [from receiving holy Communion](#) within his archdiocese because of her work on abortion rights.

The [extraordinary action](#), rarely used against a political leader, did not stop Pelosi from receiving the Eucharist. "I received Communion anyway," Pelosi said in an interview with the National Catholic Reporter on Dec. 6. "That's his problem, not mine."

On Tuesday evening, Dec. 10, Cordileone responded to the first report of Pelosi's Dec. 6 interview in NCR by issuing a 410-word statement inviting her to discuss the matter with him, an invitation he has previously extended publicly.



San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone prays during solemn vespers and a Holy Hour at Mission Dolores Basilica, May 18 in San Francisco. The event launched the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage's western route. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

"This kind of dialogue can dispel misperceptions and melt away hostilities, and build new bonds of friendship," Cordileone said. "I therefore earnestly repeat once again my plea to Speaker Pelosi to allow this kind of dialogue to happen."

A spokesman said that Pelosi had no comment on Cordileone's Dec. 10 statement.

In the [interview with NCR](#) to discuss her recent memoir, *The Art of Power*, Pelosi said she has not raised the Communion issue directly with Pope Francis — though [she met with him in June 2022](#).

Cordileone notified Pelosi in a [public letter](#) that stated: "You are not to present yourself for Holy Communion and, should you do so, you are not to be admitted to Holy Communion, until such time as you publicly repudiate your advocacy for the legitimacy of abortion and confess and receive absolution of this grave sin in the sacrament of Penance."

Cordileone [invoked an obscure provision](#) of canon law unfamiliar to many everyday Catholics. [Canon 915](#) states: "Those who have been excommunicated or interdicted after the imposition or declaration of the penalty and others obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to Holy Communion."

The former House speaker did not provide precise details on her request for a review and she did not respond to a request to speak with her canon lawyer. Her spokesmen declined to comment on a personal matter.

[Related: NCR interview: Nancy Pelosi criticizes Pope Francis over China pact](#)

Fr. John P. Beal, a professor of canon law at the Catholic University of America, said that a person banned from receiving Communion can ask for a review or a kind of appeal under canon law — called a "recourse" — by citing procedural issues like lack of due process, or substantive issues like insufficient justification under Canon 915 itself.

Such "recourses" can only be filed by the person affected, not third parties, and would typically involve a canon lawyer sending the request for a review to a dicastery, the equivalent of a department at the Vatican, that could make a formal ruling.

With a canon lawyer, a challenger must first seek review from the issuing bishop, and then make recourse to the Holy See, in this case the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Beal said.

Pelosi also questioned how such exclusionary practices might impact the church's ability to grow and engage especially with younger believers. "I don't know how they think they're going to grow the church and do that."

She said that despite the ban in San Francisco, she has still received Communion in the U.S. She also received Communion in a Mass presided by Pope Francis in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in June 2022.

"I've never been denied. I've been to Catholic churches all over the country, and I've never been denied," she said.



Pope Francis greets then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., accompanied by her husband, Paul, before Mass on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 29, 2022. (CNS/Vatican Media via Reuters)

A flash point in the culture wars

The Communion ban has been a notable flash point in the culture wars that have raged in both American politics and the U.S. Catholic Church.

The Eucharist, central to Catholicism, is believed to become the sacramental body and blood of Christ through the act of transubstantiation during each and every Mass celebrated by Catholic priests, setting it apart from many Protestant views that see it as just symbolic.

Cordileone did not respond to requests to comment for this story. In his pastoral letter, the archbishop justified his action by saying the church had "always upheld the dignity of human life in every stage" and that this belief has "consequences for Catholics in how they live their lives, especially those entrusted with promoting and protecting the public good of society."

'I've never been denied. I've been to Catholic churches all over the country, and I've never been denied.'

—Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi, on receiving Communion

[Tweet this](#)

But Fr. Mark Massa, a Jesuit historian at Boston College, called the archbishop's act bad for religion — noting instances when the San Francisco archbishop also [criticized](#) President Joe Biden for not respecting his Catholic faith.

"What Cordileone has done is performative," Massa said. "He wants to make a point. It has nothing to do with the spiritual welfare of the souls of the president or Nancy Pelosi. I think he's doing a performative thing to make a stance in the culture wars."

Because Pelosi vowed to codify *Roe v. Wade* into federal law, Cordileone launched initiatives like the "[Rose and Rosary for Nancy](#)" campaign in 2021, urging Catholics to pray for her "conversion of heart."

Speaking to NCR from her office in the Longworth House Office Building with the U.S. Capitol visible through the window behind her, the former speaker dismissed the impact the ban has had on her own faith and confirmed that a case has been opened at the Vatican about the issue. "I'm sad about it because Communion is important to me, but I think it was a political move on his part," she said.

"I don't have my devotion tied to my archbishop," Pelosi said.



Then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., is seen in this June 30, 2021, file photo. (OSV News/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)

She said she has been welcomed to receive the Eucharist in Catholic churches across Washington, D.C., in multiple other churches all over the country, abroad and in San Francisco.

Pelosi said she would not identify priests in San Francisco who defied their archbishop to offer her Communion for fear they would be disciplined.

"Whatever the status of the case is, I think it's important for me not to jeopardize the well-being of priests, because they might be inclined to give me Communion," Pelosi said.

"I can go any place, and people will give me Communion, but that would get that priest probably in trouble with the archbishop if it's in my district," Pelosi said. Still, she made clear that no priest has ever expressed fear or reluctance to offer her the sacrament, and she continues to attend Mass across the country without incident.

In [Cordileone's Dec. 10 response](#) to Pelosi's NCR interview, he said he wants to discuss with Pelosi "if and when it can ever be morally permissible to kill innocent human life, but also in other critical areas where our views on behalf of human life and dignity are aligned, especially threats to religious liberty internationally and the plight of immigrants domestically. This should not be a problem, as Catholics are not afraid of the truth."

Advertisement

'What is going on here?'

Some liturgical specialists have expressed concern about politicizing the Eucharist.

Jesuit Fr. John F. Baldovin, professor of historical and liturgical theology at Boston College, noted that Pope Francis said the Eucharist should not be viewed as "a reward for virtue."

"Receiving Communion is not just receiving something. It's making a commitment to be a Christian," Baldovin said.

Historically, such measures have been employed even against powerful ancient leaders like King Philip IV of France and Emperor Theodosius, by figures such as Pope Boniface VIII and St. Ambrose of Milan. Still today, [Canon 915](#) of the Catholic Church's canon law stipulates that individuals who have been formally excommunicated, placed under interdict, or who persist openly in "manifest grave sin" are prohibited from receiving Communion.

Pelosi is not the only Democratic politician who has been denied Communion by a Catholic bishop in the U.S. In 2018, Bishop Thomas Paprocki of the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois, confirmed that Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin was [barred from receiving the Eucharist](#) in his diocese due to his support for abortion legislation.

"I think most European bishops would shake their heads like, 'What is going on here?' " said Massa, director of Boston College's [Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life](#).



A priest participates in the adoration of the Eucharist at the Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel Sept. 5, 2015, in New York City. (CNS/Reuters/Brendan McDermid)

Baldovin said that abortion has become a "banner issue" for politically conservative Catholics in the U.S., often serving as a marker of identity as much as a matter of faith. This dynamic complicates the Vatican's ability to intervene because such cases are fraught with political and emotional sensitivity, he said.

Baldovin said he doubts the Vatican will get involved in the Pelosi ban because the Holy See does not lightly overrule a bishop.

"There is the idea, which has been accepted by many Catholics actually, that clergy have something like the military power to control who receives God's grace and who does not. This is terrifying from the point of view of religious culture," said Massimo Faggioli, a Villanova University theology and religious studies professor who is a specialist in American politics and the Catholic Church.

A similar approach has been applied to LGBTQ+ Catholics. "It comes down to the fact that someone was presumed to have the power to exclude a certain segment of the Catholic population from God's grace."

'Worth fighting for'

Despite the ban, Pelosi defined her connection to the Catholic Church as deeply rooted in faith and tradition, emphasizing the personal significance the sacrament of Eucharist has for her.

She raised her arms, gazed upward, and said, "The church has been a beautiful experience in terms of, imagine, every day a priest can turn bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. A miracle, a mystery to some. So anytime we can have the opportunity to be present at that is glorious."

When asked about her most cherished Catholic memories, Pelosi pointed to her own first Communion and the baptisms of her grandchildren as particularly meaningful moments. While she enjoys the "joyous" celebration of Christmas, Pelosi said her favorite holiday is Easter. "Christ is risen, and as I said, the gloriousness of Easter is my favorite," she explained.



Then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., smiles after the passage of the health care reform bill in Washington March 21, 2010. The House of Representatives passed the measure late in the evening with a 219-212 vote after more than a year of partisan debate. (CNS/Joshua Roberts)

The [future does not look scary](#) to her, Pelosi said. "When people ask me, 'What gives you hope? Where is hope?' I always say the same thing, 'Hope is sitting where it's always been, right between faith and charity.' People have faith. They believe in the goodness of others, and that gives them hope that somebody will care for them."

In *The Art of Power*, Pelosi wrote that during the most delicate stages of the negotiations and passing of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, Sr. Joyce Weller of the Daughters of Charity shared with then-Speaker Pelosi a prayer.

The nun had seen the prayer on the wall of a hospital in Sierra Leone. It was about the wounds formed throughout life; Pelosi wrote in the final line of her book that she is proud of her own wounds.

"When I die and happily meet my Creator, He will ask me to show Him my wounds. If I tell Him that I have no wounds, my Creator will ask: Was nothing worth fighting for?" the prayer said.