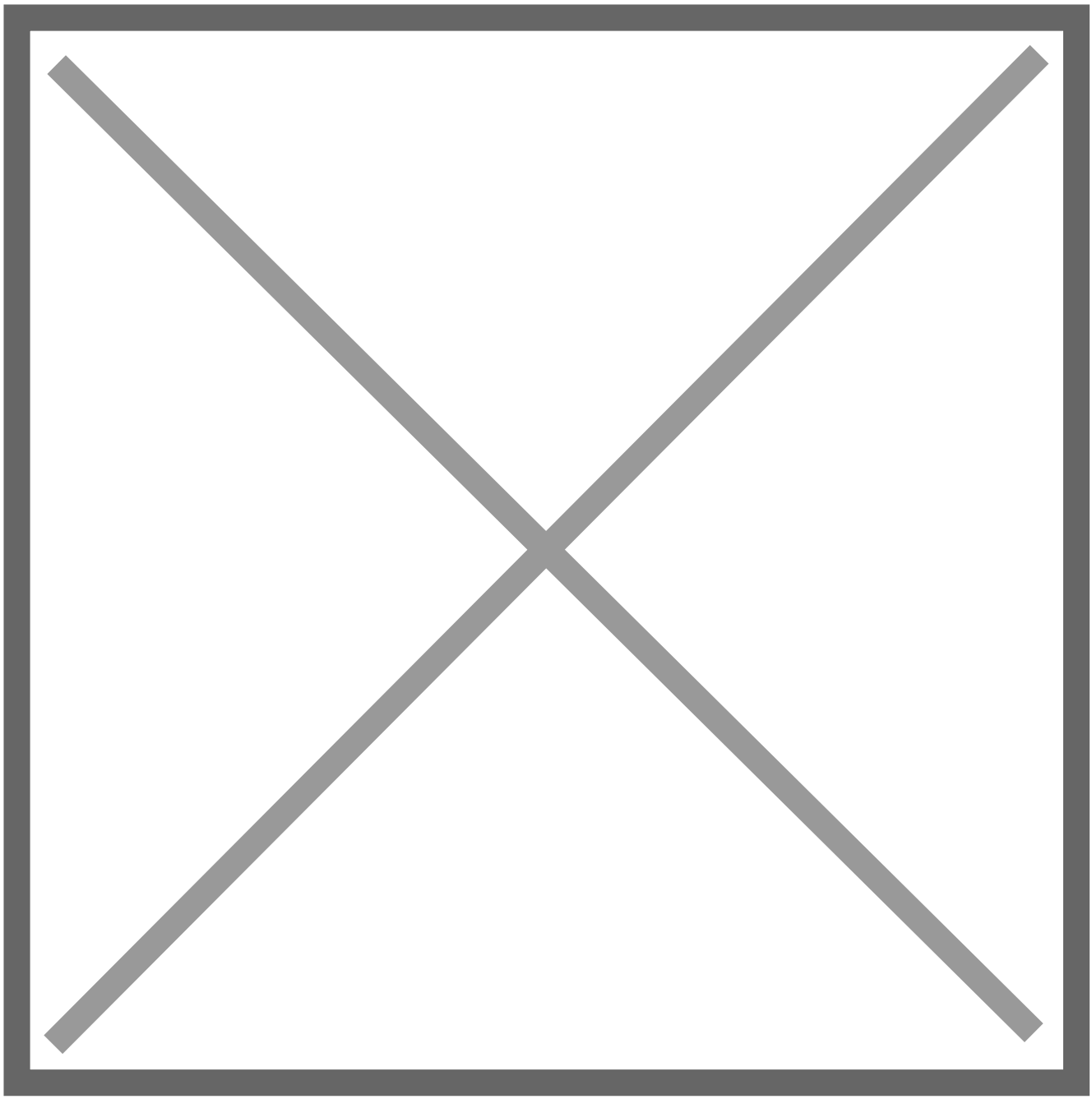
News



Pope Francis greets U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., during a private audience at the Vatican Oct. 9, 2021. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Julie Asher

View Author Profile



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — May 20, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

San Francisco's archbishop declared May 20 that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., is not "to be admitted" to Communion unless and until she publicly repudiates "support for abortion 'rights'" and goes to confession and receives absolution "for her cooperation in this evil."

Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone said he decided to make this declaration "after numerous attempts to speak with her to help her understand the grave evil she is perpetrating, the scandal she is causing and the danger to her own soul she is risking" as a Catholic who supports legalized abortion.

Pelosi represents California's 12th Congressional District, which is entirely within San Francisco. A call to Pelosi's Washington office from Catholic News Service to request a comment was not returned immediately.

"Please know that I find no pleasure whatsoever in fulfilling my pastoral duty here," Cordileone said. "Speaker Pelosi remains our sister in Christ. Her advocacy for the care of the poor and vulnerable elicits my admiration. I assure you that my action here is purely pastoral, not political. I have been very clear in my words and actions about this."

The archbishop opened his 1,300-word letter by saying that Pope Francis "has been one of the world's most vocal advocates of human dignity in every stage and condition of life."

"He decries what he evocatively calls the 'throwaway culture,'" Cordileone said. "This is why Pope Francis, as much as any pope in living memory, has repeatedly and vividly affirmed the church's clear and constant teaching that abortion is a grave moral evil."

Last October, Pelosi met privately with Francis at the Vatican while she was in Rome to speak at a meeting of legislators from around the world in preparation for the U.N. climate summit.

The Vatican released photos of the meeting but provided no details of the encounter. A photo of the pope and Pelosi from that visit is on the homepage of her congressional website.

Pelosi said in a statement at the time that it was "a spiritual, personal and official honor" to have an audience with the pope.

"His Holiness' leadership is a source of joy and hope for Catholics and for all people, challenging each of us to be good stewards of God's creation, to act on climate, to embrace the refugee, the immigrant and the poor and to recognize the dignity and divinity in everyone," her statement said.

Jesuit Fr. Bruce Morrill, a noted sacramental theologian, told NCR that Cordileone is taking a different stance on the Communion issue for Pelosi than Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory has taken with President Joe Biden, a Catholic who also supports legalized abortion. Gregory has not sought to deny Biden communion.

"You could ask the question: Why the need to make it so public?" said Morrill, the Edward A. Malloy Professor of Catholic Studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. "It is the choice of a bishop about how they handle this, and he's made this choice and decided to do it very publicly."

Advertisement

In September, Cordileone asked Catholics in the archdiocese to pray for Pelosi on abortion. What prompted the call for prayer was her leadership on the Women's Health Protection Act, or H.R. 3755, passed by the House in a 218-211 vote Sept. 24.

The measure establishes the legal right to abortion in all 50 states under federal law. The bill was pushed forward over fears by abortion supporters the Supreme Court will overturn *Roe v. Wade* in its decision on a Mississippi ban on abortion after 15 weeks. The measure failed to advance to a full vote in the Senate May 11.

Pelosi considers abortion health care and, as recently as May 13 in remarks on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, she warned the Supreme Court to keep its "hands off women's reproductive health care." She also said if *Roe* is overturned, Republicans have a "dangerous and extreme agenda" that could see "an all-out assault" on more rights.

Aboard the papal flight from Slovakia Sept. 15, Francis said he did not want to comment directly on the issue of denying Communion in the United States "because I do not know the details; I am speaking of the principle" of the matter.

However, he said that while there is no question that "abortion is homicide," bishops must take a pastoral approach rather than wade into the political sphere.

"If we look at the history of the church, we can see that every time the bishops did not act like shepherds when dealing with a problem, they aligned themselves with political life, on political problems," he said.

He also said he never denied Communion to anyone, but he was "never aware of anyone in front of me under those conditions that you mentioned."

Recalling his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope said that "Communion is not a prize for the perfect," but rather "a gift, the presence of Jesus in his church and in the community. That is the theology."

However, Francis also said he understood why the church takes a hard stance because accepting abortion "is a bit as if daily murder was accepted."

Morrill said that while Francis has spoken emphatically against abortion, the pope has also not sought to take part in the so-called "culture wars."

"One can ask whether this kind of high-profile singling out of one of the most powerful politicians in the culture is doing just that — wading deeper into the culture wars," said the theologian.

[NCR staff reporter Katie Collins Scott contributed to this story.]