News



Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., arrives ahead of Vice President Kamala Harris delivering a concession speech for the 2024 presidential election, Nov. 6 on the campus of Howard University in Washington. (AP photo/Stephanie Scarbrough)



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Washington — December 10, 2024
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Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi criticized Pope Francis' recently renewed pact with China, telling the National Catholic Reporter in an interview that the Vatican has disregarded the Gospel by permitting the Communist government to meddle with the Roman Catholic Church in China.

The agreement with China gives the Communist government input over the appointment of Catholic bishops in China, a deal that critics say endangers Catholics loyal to Rome who have worshiped in secret for seven decades. "I'm not too happy about that, and I don't know what they have achieved," Pelosi said in an interview. "Do you know of any success?"

"We have, for decades, seen the suffering of Catholics in China," Pelosi said. "I have a completely different view" from Pope Francis' approach. "Why should the Chinese government be having a say in the appointment of bishops? I've talked to some folks here and they're, 'Well, we have to keep up with the times.' What?! I don't get that."

The comments were part of a wide-ranging interview with NCR in her Capitol Hill office on Dec. 6. Seated in a high-back armchair while snacking on a bowl of California-grown pistachios, Pelosi discussed a variety of issues, including:

- Enthusiastic support of House members challenging ranking Democrats for committee leadership;
- The Democratic Party's loss of the Catholic vote in the presidential election;
- Acerbic clashes with the U.S. Catholic bishops, including the archbishop of San Francisco who issued a ban in the San Francisco Archdiocese to prevent her from receiving Communion;
- Intimate perspective on her Catholic faith.



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

Backing the younger challengers

During the 31-minute interview, Pelosi leapt into the changing power dynamics in Congress. The former speaker, who is close to House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., said she supports the younger renegades who are challenging the traditional seniority of committee leadership in the House of Representatives.

"I'm supporting the newer members who are running for office," Pelosi said. "This is with all the respect in the world for the chairmen who had been there and the contribution that they had made over time. But now others have come forward, and I respect the fact that they're ready to take charge of their committees, and I support that."

By backing the challenge to House seniority, Pelosi's position is a reversal of her previous approach in which she defended and vocally supported committee heads.

Jeffries in recent weeks has added to the intrigue by refraining from holding back the challengers. Many on Capitol Hill take that silence to be a tacit endorsement of nudging out the old guard.



Outgoing U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., a Catholic, wields the gavel inside the House Chamber on the first day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol in Washington on Jan. 3, 2023. (CNS/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

Pelosi's remarks highlighted a growing movement within the Democratic Party to embrace generational change, particularly in light of the spotlight on age and leadership following President Joe Biden's earlier decision to drop out of the White House race in July.

She supported Biden's controversial decision to pardon his son, Hunter, framing the act as a demonstration of mercy. "The Supreme Court is giving immunity to the president. He [Biden] is giving mercy to his son. I'm all for that," Pelosi said.

Pelosi declined to join Catholic and secular advocates calling for President Biden to commute the federal death sentences of 40 inmates despite her long-standing opposition to the death penalty. "I would have to look at each case one by one," she said.

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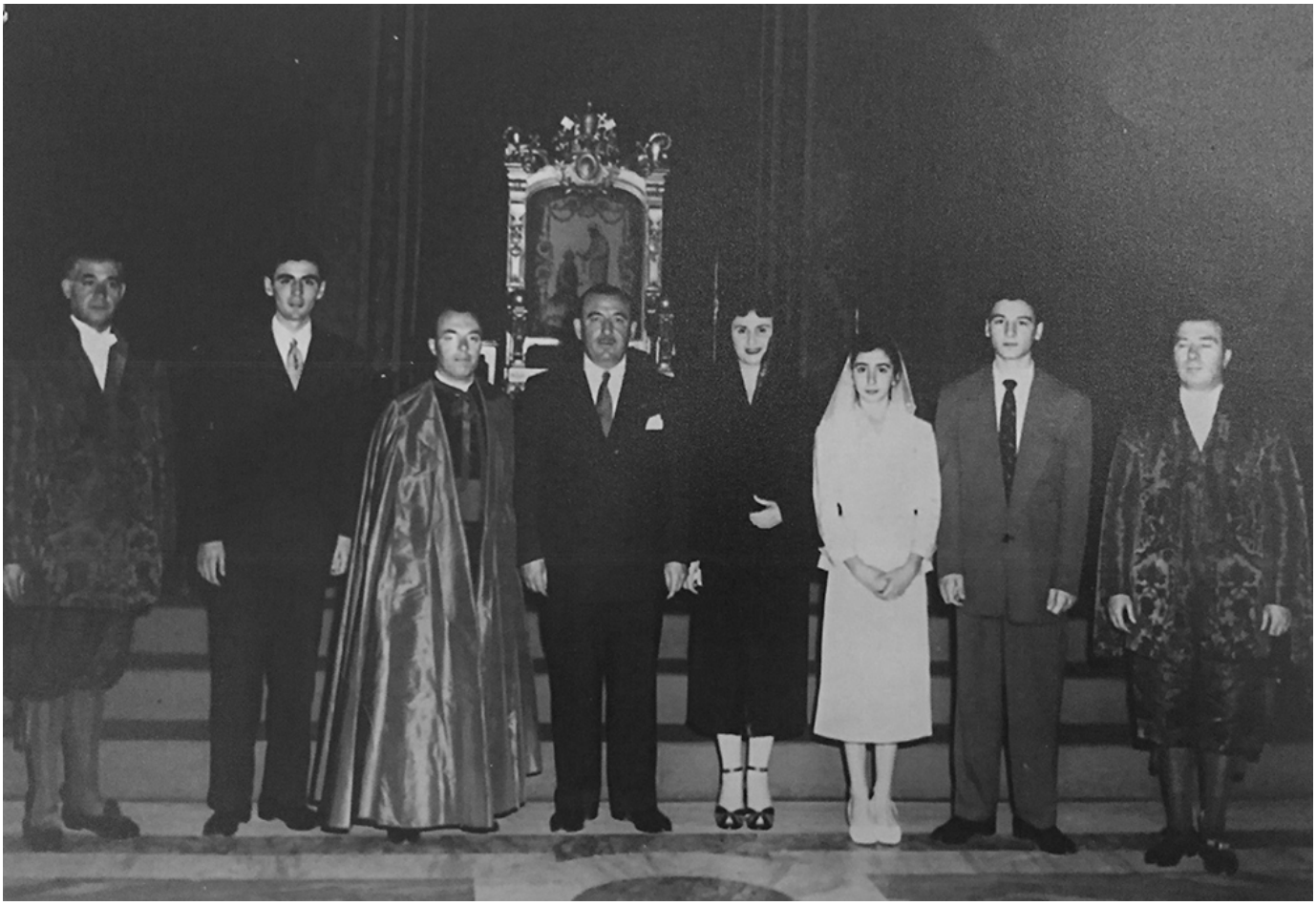
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Losing the Catholic vote

In the wake of recent electoral losses, she acknowledged the Democratic Party's challenges in retaining Catholic voters, urging deeper analysis to understand the causes. "I saw the National Catholic Reporter saying that Catholics walked away from that," Pelosi noted, but added, "The plural of anecdote is not data."

While conceding the drop in Catholic support, she said low voter turnout might have been at play. "A lot of people didn't vote," she said. "That subtracted from our number, and that may be why we have fewer Catholics voting that way."

Pelosi framed the Democratic loss of Catholic votes within the social justice teachings of Catholicism, describing the Catholic skepticism of Democrats as "a complete departure from what we were raised to believe was our social contract in terms of being Catholic and our responsibilities to other people."



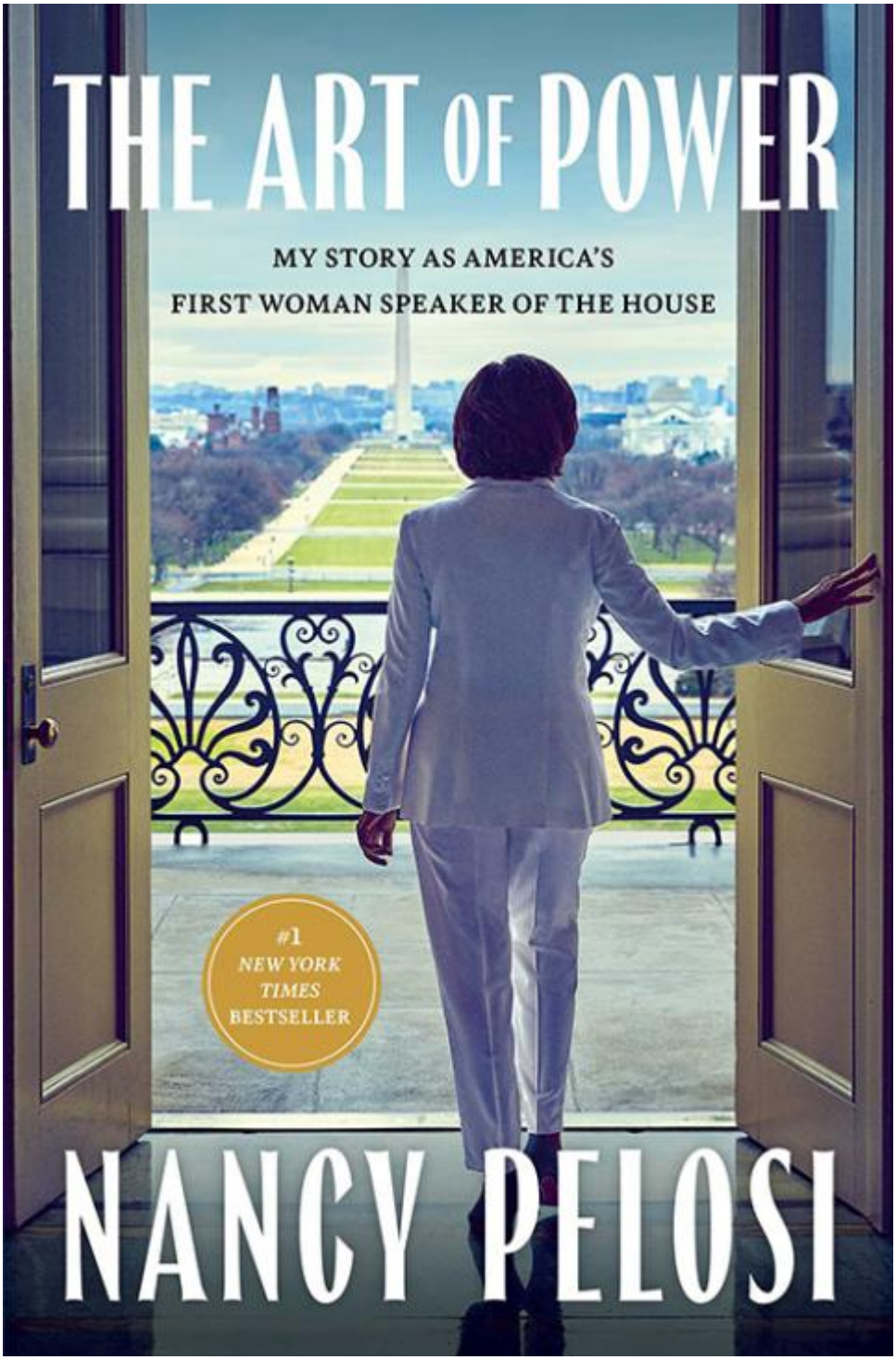
Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (in white dress) with her family during a visit at the Vatican in 1954. (Courtesy of Office of Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi)

Then, she paused, closed her eyes and quoted the Gospel of Matthew. " 'When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was homeless, you sheltered me. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me. When I was in prison, you visited me' — except right now," she said.

"It's really a sad thing," Pelosi added.

The Vatican's press office did not respond to a request for comment.

Battling the bishops, embracing the nuns



Book cover of *The Art of Power* (Simon & Schuster)

In her recent memoir, *The Art of Power: My Story as America's First Woman Speaker of the House*, Pelosi revisited clashes with Catholic bishops, particularly during the negotiation months of the Affordable Care Act, or ACA, accusing them of distorting the truth about abortion provisions in the bill.

Pelosi recalled a "painful" March 2010 phone call with Cardinal Francis George of Chicago (who died in 2015), the president of the U.S. bishops' conference at the time. George cut her short saying that "I'm only willing to talk if you're not calling about killing unborn babies."

Pelosi wrote in her book that there were no provisions in the ACA that made new federal policies on abortion, but the U.S. bishops' conference later noted that there were over a thousand ACA health plans eligible for federal premium subsidies that cover elective abortions.

Pelosi said in the interview that the bishops were motivated by the Supreme Court's abortion-rights precedent, *Roe* v. *Wade*. "I think that the bishops had another agenda," Pelosi said. "I think they wanted to bring down *Roe* v. *Wade* altogether, and they didn't care if they brought down the Affordable Care Act to do that."

Roe was overturned in 2022.



Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi walks to her California representative's office on Capitol Hill, Dec. 6. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

In contrast to the bishops' opposition to the health care law, more than 50,000 Catholic nuns signed a petition supporting the ACA, Pelosi noted. "The nuns were very important — not just for the votes, but for the substance," she said.

"Many of the nuns had been engaged in health care, delivering it, the administration of it in the Catholic hospitals and the rest, so they knew the subject," Pelosi said.

"The bishops have largely not been involved in health care, as far as I know."

One bishop who drew Pelosi's ire in particular in the interview was Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, a noted conservative who laughed heartily at Trump's jokes attacking Democrats at the Al Smith dinner in New York in October. "The cardinal of New York thought he was funny at that dinner. Isn't that appalling?"

'Upon this rock I will build my church'

One matter where Pelosi is in sync with conservatives is the Catholic Church's China policy. Pelosi appeared incensed over the Vatican's China agreement, the precise details of which have never been made public. First announced in 2018 and twice renewed, most recently in October, the deal marked a significant milestone in a relationship long strained by internal tensions between China's state-supervised Catholic church and an underground church loyal to the Vatican.

Pope Francis has appointed about 10 bishops under the deal since it was first made in 2018. Pelosi echoed conservative anti-Communist Catholics and religious freedom advocates who have blasted the arrangement by quoting a passage of the Gospel of Matthew that is a cornerstone of the Roman Catholic Church. "Let me say it this way, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.' Every bishop has sprung from that rock. And now, the Chinese government?" Pelosi said.

Pelosi's criticism of the pontiff over China stands out given that he has taken a gentler approach on culture war issues, such as opening up a dialogue in the church with LGBTQ+ Catholics, and is a favorite of the progressives who generally back the former speaker.



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

At the same time, her criticism is unsurprising given her personal faith and longstanding criticism of China's human rights record. Pelosi, who angered China in 2022 with a trip to Taiwan as one of her last acts as speaker, noted that Republicans and Democrats both joined her objection over Sino-Holy See relations. Pelosi said she was so troubled with the Vatican's agreement that she took her complaints to the papal nuncio, the Vatican's ambassador in the United States.

"We showed him what our concerns were, what had been said and written by Democrats and Republicans, House and Senate," Pelosi said. "This brings a lot of us together, because over time, even bishops were being killed. I mean, this is like martyrs."

Pelosi contrasted Pope Francis with Hong Kong's retired cardinal. "With all the respect in the world for His Holiness, Pope Francis, my point of view is closer to the

cardinal of Hong Kong, Joseph Zen," she said.

Zen has led the opposition to the Vatican deal with China and told Reuters it thrust "the flock into the mouths of the wolves. It's an incredible betrayal." Two years after the Vatican deal was announced, Pelosi presented Zen with the Wei Jingsheng Chinese Democracy Champion Prize, saying he "inspires all who work to protect those fighting for their beliefs."

> 'My Catholic faith is, Christ is my savior. It has nothing to do with the bishops.'
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> —Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi
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'An angel on my shoulder'

Pelosi's embrace of Zen, a noted conservative, stands in contrast to her relationship with another conservative, the archbishop in Pelosi's home of San Francisco, Salvatore Cordileone, who has quarrelled with the congresswoman. In a letter in 2022, Cordileone said he would no longer allow her to receive the sacrament of Communion in his archdiocese because of her activity on abortion rights. Pelosi told NCR that the sacramental ban didn't shake her devotion.

"I received Communion anyway. That's his problem, not mine," she said.

"My Catholic faith is, Christ is my savior. It has nothing to do with the bishops."



Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her husband Paul greet Pope John Paul II during his visit to San Francisco, in September 1987. (Courtesy of Office of Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi)

The San Francisco Democrat also discussed the emotional toll the incident took on her family and her reliance on faith.

"My faith is always with me. I always feel there's an angel on my shoulder," she said.

At the heart of her spirituality today, she said, is the belief in the "divine spark within every individual" — a conviction she said she shares with the late John Lewis, with whom she had a close bond.

"That spark of divinity is what I respect in every person, especially if they respect it in themselves."

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec. 20, 2024-Jan. 16, 2025** print issue under the headline: NCR interview: Nancy Pelosi.