Pelosi and bishops spar over church's teaching on abortion: Speaker of the House cites Augustine

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A spokesperson for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has struck back against criticism from prominent Catholic prelates who accused the California representative 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 spokesperson Brendan Daly.

Pelosi, the nation’s highest-ranking Catholic elected official, said on NBC’s *Meet the Press* that the question of when life begins has been “an issue of controversy” throughout the history of the church.

Pelosi’s comments came in defense of her party’s presidential nominee, Barack Obama. The Illinois senator told megachurch pastor Rick Warren in an August 16 civil forum at his Saddleback Church in California that the theological or medical question of when life begins is “above my pay grade.”

The House speaker’s August 24 comments drew rebukes from several Catholic archbishops. Cardinal Justin F. Rigali of Philadelphia and Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Connecticut—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 in an August 26 statement.

Pelosi, who supports abortion rights, cited the work of St. Augustine (354-430), 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, Pelosi’s spokesperson, reiterated Pelosi’s position 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.

The two prelates acknowledged that theologians during the Middle Ages disagreed about when the soul enters a human body and that canon law once prescribed different penalties for “very early and later abortions.” But, Rigali and Lori said, “the church’s moral teaching never justified or permitted abortion at any stage of development.”

Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., said the church’s catechism is unequivocal on abortion, and it’s important to “make this correction for the record.”

“We respect the right of elected officials such as Speaker Pelosi to address matters of public policy that are before them, but the interpretation of Catholic faith has rightfully been entrusted to Catholic bishops,” Wuerl said in a statement.

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver said that Pelosi has “many professional skills. Regrettably, knowledge of Catholic history and teaching does not seem to be one of them.” *–Religion News Service*