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Pelosi Changes Tune on Bishops' Involvement in Politics

by Elisabeth Meinecke ([more by this author](#))

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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi recently called on the Catholic Church to speak out from the pulpit to promote immigration reform, reversing herself on whether the church should take political stands.

Nearly six years ago, Pelosi signed a letter—along with 47 other congressional members—to Cardinal Theodore McCarrick which said “allowing a bishop to take actions that lead to involvement in partisan politics would be detrimental to the Church.” The letter, dated May 10, 2004, was protesting bishops denying communion to legislators because of votes on certain issues as they relate to Catholic Church teaching.

“Both the Holy Father and members of the U.S. hierarchy have condemned the death penalty, as well as the war in Iraq,” the letter states. “Will an individual bishop decide to deny communion to a legislator—Republican or Democrat—who has voted in favor of the death penalty? Will another bishop decide to communion to a legislator who authorized the war in Iraq? Such conduct would foster division within the Church as well as division between the hierarchy and the laity. And allowing a bishop to take actions that lead to involvement in partisan politics would be detrimental to the Church.”

It's a different tone from the one Pelosi took on May 6 this year.



“The cardinals, the archbishops, the bishops come to me and say we want you to pass immigration reform. And I said, ‘But I want you to speak about it from the pulpit,’” Pelosi said. “I want you to instruct your—whatever the communication is, the people, some oppose immigration reform are sitting in those pews, and you have to tell them that this is a manifestation of our living the gospels.”

Pelosi voted against the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ position on healthcare back in March, when they urged the House not to pass the Senate-crafted healthcare version because it was pro-abortion and failed to allow legal immigrants access to Medicaid for five years (they were also upset that the bill would “prohibit undocumented immigrants from buying insurance for their families in the exchanges using their own money”).

Kevin Appleby, a spokesperson for the USCCB, said the organization works with who they can on each individual issue.

“Basically, she’s picking and choosing,” said Appleby. “If we took names every time that a legislator disagreed with us and said we’re not going to work with them anymore, we wouldn’t be very effective.”

Erik Stanley, senior legal counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, heads the organization’s Pulpit Initiative, which works to allow pastors and priests to speak “freely and truthfully” from the pulpit without danger of losing tax-exempt status.

Stanley says he agrees that a politician should be able to encourage pastors to speak on particular issues, but the politicians need to make sure they're consistent.

"Politicians usually send mixed messages to pastors about what they can and can't do," Stanley said. "When it's convenient, they tell pastors that you should speak out in favor of a particular proposal or politician, but then when the pastor does, the IRS comes knocking on the door."

Stanley says currently the law allows a pastor to support or oppose legislation from the pulpit, but it does not allow them to do so with candidates.

Cartoon courtesy of Brett Noel

Miss Meinecke was a member of Hillsdale College's Dow Journalism Program, sports editor and beat reporter for the campus newspaper, and also contributed to Life Times, the newsletter for Southern Indiana Right to Life. She interned at Comcast SportsNet in Washington, D.C. through the National Journalism Center before joining Human Events in August 2008. E-mail her at emeinecke@eaglepub.com. You can also request to follow her on [Twitter](#).

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