

Misinterpreting history



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Throughout history many have challenged the Church's teaching regarding the immorality of certain issues. One recent challenge and misinterpretation of the Church's teaching came from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

In an Aug. 24 appearance on "Meet the Press," Speaker Pelosi suggested there were differences in the way the Catholic Church has understood its teaching on abortion throughout the centuries. She even quoted St. Augustine as having justified abortion in the first three months of pregnancy. Pelosi described herself as an "ardent, practicing Catholic" who had "studied the issue of when human life begins for a long time."

The responses by the Catholic Church to Speaker Pelosi's statements have been direct and strong. Several U.S. bishops have corrected her perception that there is no clear teaching of the Church on abortion. Some commentators even have mentioned it is more scandalous that Speaker Pelosi has spoken of herself as a lifelong, practicing Catholic who receives the Eucharist frequently than the fact that she favors allowing some abortions to take place.

Speaker Pelosi holds the opinion, now almost 40 years old, that abortion should be legislated as a basic woman's right, and she dared to go beyond the political sphere to defend her position by bringing in religion. In doing so she incurred the obligation to represent correctly the religious views she was presenting. Without a doubt, this is where she failed miserably!

As in every argument, there is always a kernel of truth. There is a history connected to every Church teaching, and that history has been affected by the overall knowledge that was available to the people discussing the issue at the time. The Church is not exempt from the limitations imposed by time. Speaker Pelosi's main argument was that, due to lack of knowledge in the biology of procreation and human biology, there was a tendency in the past not to consider the presence of human life until there was the "appearance" of a human life.

For many in the ancient world – saints, philosophers and theologians included – one could not be a human person until one "looked" like a human person. Of course, that did not happen from the beginning if what you meant by a human person was someone who looked somehow like the baby we are accustomed to see after birth. In that case, early embryonic life would not have the human "form" we would expect.

We must remember that early biological science could not fully perceive what was happening at the moment of conception. The primitive perception was that the male provided the seed, which contained the complete person, and the female provided the fertile ground in which the seed could germinate. This is far from the truth. In actuality, as modern biology attests, both the male and the female contribute equally to the beginning of a new life. Conception is the only logical moment for that human life to begin.

It would be difficult to say anything else but that human life begins at conception. If not, trying to specify and defend any other time and would lead to a deficient argument.

The early Church may not have accurately perceived the biology, but it clearly perceived the moral principle behind the fact that once there is human "form," there is a human person present, and such a person has the full dignity of a son or daughter of God. St. Augustine's argument on delayed hominization – the belief that the conception becomes human at some point during the pregnancy – was simply due to a limited biology and never intended to justify an abortion. His argument considered only the theological question of the presence of a soul.

Speaker Pelosi's argument, besides showing her ignorance on the topic, betrays

a lack of honesty on the part of those who want to justify the immoral killing of an innocent human being through the application of a teaching that had nothing to do with abortion to begin with. The teaching attempted to use very limited biology to explain a spiritual reality.

The clear teaching of the Church is that at the moment that there is human life, there is a human soul, since the soul, by definition, is the principle of life. It is at that moment that there is a human person, since if it is not a person, what else could it be? With our present knowledge of biology, St. Au-

gustine would have had no problem in expanding our human biography to include the first nine months of life in the womb.

To me, it seems Speaker Pelosi feels it is more important to defend her political position, even when misrepresenting Church teaching, than it is to expand her horizons and acknowledge the self-evident truth that her own Church strongly proclaims – that human life begins at conception.

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Readers respond

Put faith in action

New Orleans

Thank you for your article in the July 26 Clarion Herald ("Sister Jane Remson: Nutrition is a basic human right"). I've received many, many phone calls about it. I hope those that read the article will be motivated to put their faith into action. We have the recent encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI,

"Deus Caritas Est," to guide us.

I must say Loyola University was well represented in this issue of the Clarion: Bread for the World, the Farmers Market and Loyola football.

In 2002 Loyola University was represented by Bread for the World and the Farmers Market at the World Summit for Sustainable Development

in Johannesburg, South Africa. There we met former Loyola professor Father Roland Lesseps, S.J. Father Roland is presently stationed at the Kasisi Agricultural Training Center in Lusaka, Zambia.

On a personal note, my dad was a member of Loyola's football team.

SISTER JANE REMSON,
O.Carm.