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Following Chaput into the political fray

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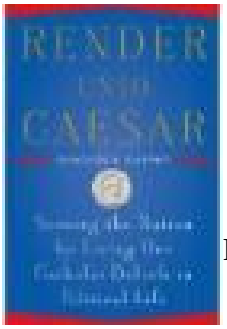

RENDER UNTO CAESAR: SERVING THE NATION BY LIVING OUR CATHOLIC BELIEFS IN POLITICAL LIFE, by Archbishop Charles Chaput
Doubleday, August 2008, 272 pages, $21.95

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver refuses to be quiet -- especially when it comes to Catholic politicians and abortion.

The outspoken Capuchin has repeatedly told elected officials who support abortion rights they shouldn?t take Communion. And he?s quick to correct Catholics who compromise on the issue.

Chaput?s new book, *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life* , is a call-to-arms for fellow Christians to follow him into the political fray.

Religion News Service caught up with Chaput to talk politics and theology, as the Democrats were holding their national convention in his backyard. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Religion News Service: Democrats are meeting in your hometown. Does that make you want to run for the Rockies?

Chaput: (Laughs) No, this will be an interesting week. But I have no desire to run. I welcome the Democrats with enthusiasm and pray they make good decisions in their choice of platform and candidates.

The Democrats already modified their platform on abortion. Do you like the changes?

In some ways I think it?s worse than before. They took out the part saying that abortion should be ?safe, legal and rare,? and they added a modifier saying they ?unequivocally? support it. That concerns me.

People probably don?t know that you worked for the presidential campaigns of Robert Kennedy and Jimmy Carter. So are you a secret liberal?

I don?t know what that word means anymore. I certainly believe we have a common responsibility for each other. That would probably put me in the camp of those who think government should be more involved. If that makes me a liberal, I?m a liberal.

Some Catholics accused you of partisanship in 2004, when you publicly and frequently criticized Democratic nominee Sen. John Kerry. Do you ever worry about crossing the line?

Partisanship is foolish for the church. If you are too much in line with any party, the party takes you for granted. But I wrote my book (*Render Unto Caesar*) to tell Catholics not to be frightened of that possibility. Wanting to protect human life is not a partisan issue.

People say the Catholics bishops? 2007 guide to ?faithful citizenship? was aimed, in part, to quell the partisanship that erupted in 2004. Do you think that?s true?

It?s a much clearer presentation of abortion being the foundational issue of our time. Catholics are not single issue voters. But it?s important to remember that the Civil War was fought over one issue.

You write in your new book that it would be ?cowardly? not to criticize politicians who support embryonic stem cell research. Why have you not said anything about Sen. John McCain?

It?s important that Sen. McCain makes his position very clear. If he publicly embraces embryonic stem cell research ...

But he has, many times. His position is well-known. In an article criticizing ?Catholics for Obama? you took the trouble to find Obama?s positive rating from Planned Parenthood of Illinois. Why don?t you know this about McCain?

If a group came out ?Catholics for McCain,? I would criticize anyone who takes such a position (for embryonic stem cell research). You write an article and send it to me and I?ll comment on it.

In a conflict between Catholic doctrine and the Constitution, which should a Catholic politician obey?

I don?t see how this is possible. Our church has been in peaceful coexistence with our Constitution since the beginning. But a Catholic is always obliged to follow God?s law rather than human law.

You write that Catholics who vote for pro-abortion rights politicians will have to explain themselves to aborted fetuses in the afterlife. Will they also have to explain themselves to war dead and victims of torture?

Absolutely. They?re going to be waiting there for our response. It will be a moment of great embarrassment.

That aside, why should non-Catholics agree with church teaching on abortion?

This is not a Catholic position, it?s a human rights issue that our faith encourages us to support. To identify this as a Catholic issue is a trap. It was the law of the land for decades. It was the way human beings thought human beings should be treated. That?s the kind of question that irritates me.

You criticize Catholics who favor Obama, whom they disagree with on abortion but support for other reasons, saying such compromises have been made for 30 years and ?and we still have about a million abortions a year.? But haven?t anti-abortion Republican presidents been sitting in the White House for 20 of the last 28 years?

I?m not a Republican nor promoting a Republican cause. It?s issues that count. If we haven?t made progress, let?s keep trying. To give up is a foolish thing to do.

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