

Steven P. Millies, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of political science at the University of South Carolina in Aiken. This article, from DenverPost.com, is written with great respect for Archbishop Chaput's role as a moral leader and Professor Kmiec's role as a constitutional scholar. If I had to choose a final article for you to read before the election, this would be the one.

Archbishop Chaput's comments on Barack Obama

By Steven Millies

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I have met Archbishop Charles Chaput and, because I have experienced his warmth and generosity myself, I admire him. However, I disagree with Archbishop Chaput when he calls Barack Obama the "most committed abortion rights candidate in 35 years," and when he says that prominent Catholics like Douglas Kmiec who support Obama do the Church a disservice, suffering from a delusion of "moral self-hypnosis."

There is an important difference between Archbishop Chaput and Professor Kmiec: one is a bishop and the other is a constitutional scholar. The difference is not insignificant. For Catholics like Kmiec and me, Archbishop Chaput is a teacher of the faith who speaks with the moral authority of the Gospel. That extraordinary competence reaches far into the lives of Catholic citizens to help us form our consciences, but it is not unlimited. It does not give Archbishop Chaput or any other bishop a privileged understanding of the U.S. Constitution or the nuances of public policy.

Kmiec, a former Reagan Administration official and a law professor, has those competencies. He knows that political opposition to abortion cannot be binary in the way that moral opposition is. Kmiec's moral opposition to abortion is the same as Archbishop Chaput's: it is an either/or question, and both of these men answer that question the same way. But political and policy opposition to abortion can take many forms.

Does it mean seeking the reversal of Roe v. Wade? Does it mean seeking an amendment to the Constitution? Does it mean supporting a network of social programs that can relieve the economic anxiety of having children? All of these—and other things—are meaningful ways to oppose abortion, and all express a Catholic point of view.

We may debate legitimately which would be the most effective opposition, but we know that no one candidate stands for all of them. This suggests that it is possible to vote in many ways and still hold moral opposition to abortion, as it suggests there is a distinction between our moral decisions and ways that we act on them.

Archbishop Chaput also has admonished a host of Catholic elected officials for making a distinction between their private convictions and their public responsibilities. The Archbishop has said that Catholics like Senator Biden and Speaker Pelosi are being disingenuous when they say that their moral opposition to abortion is not something they can render unto Caesar. What someone like Professor Kmiec understands is that public officials take an oath to uphold a constitution whose meaning is not theirs to reinterpret or change. Roe, which abortion opponents like John Ashcroft and John Roberts both described as "settled law," is no more fit for public officials to ignore than Lemon v. Kurtzman, which established ground rules for the church/state relationship, the Brown decision, or any other.

Until the Supreme Court says else, our public officials swear to uphold a Constitution that protects abortion rights. Therefore, to be a Catholic public official is a high-wire act of conscience whether we discuss abortion or an innumerable range of other issues.

When Catholics do the business of the people, they agree to defend the preferences of non-Catholic citizens and a Constitution with no debt to the Gospel or the teachings of the Church. Catholic politicians, as much as we Catholic citizens when we vote, must be pragmatic enough to recognize the good we can do, and hope for the chance to seek other goods in other ways or at other times. The alternative is not to participate in public life.

Recently, Archbishop Chaput quoted another bishop who said that this nation is "drenched in blood" because of abortion. Of course that is true.

We also are "drenched in blood" for countless other reasons. No nation ever has not been "drenched in blood." It is in the nature of nations, it is a fact of our human condition, and our faithful citizenship cannot change it.

That is no license to abandon our consciences, but it ought to be a useful guard on our expectations for what politics can achieve.

Any hope to live in a nation not implicated in death and suffering aims too high above what we should expect from the principalities and powers of this City of Man.

It says much about the goodness of Archbishop Chaput, the spiritual leader who thirsts for justice, that he holds such hopes.

Still, that the Archbishop seems shocked by the moral failures of his country underscores how, to be as shrewd as serpents when they engage the political arena, Catholics must keep firm watch on their hopes and listen to the voices of good men and women who understand political life, and who seek to practice their faith as much as public life will permit.

Pro-life voters (Catholic, and otherwise) should celebrate Sen. Obama's startling admission that the pro-choice movement has been wrong to avoid the moral dimension of abortion.

It is a sign the moral victory has been won, and that much might be achieved in an Obama Administration (far more than has been in the Bush Administration).

Neither Archbishop Chaput nor any other voice in the pro-life movement should keep silent or step to the sidelines.

Yet, just as the Archbishop enjoys deference on the moral question of abortion, it is time to recognize that the abortion debate is held in the realm of Caesar where pro-life Catholics like Professor Kmiec who support Sen. Obama bring an understanding to this debate that is needful and also deserves deference.

Sadly, it is the nature of nations to be "drenched in blood." Hopefully, this election will leave us drenched in civility.