

Review of "Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life"

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Chaput, Charles J., O.F.M. Cap., *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life*. New York: Doubleday, 2008. 258 pp.

This timely book by the Archbishop of Denver is of crucial importance for all American Catholics, who should all be struggling to combat the “culture of death” and develop the “culture of life.” One of his major reasons for writing the book was that he was becoming increasingly tired “of the church and her people being told to be quiet on public issues that urgently concern us” (p. 3). He wrote it to challenge “all of us who call ourselves Catholic...to recover what it really means to be ‘Catholic.’...[and] to find again the courage to be Catholic Christians first—not in opposition to our country, but to serve its best interests” (p. 7). Although speaking as an American Catholic to American Catholics, he hopes “many other people of good heart will see the importance of these issues and find value in these pages” (pp. 6-7).

Chaput reminds us that the Declaration of Independence has a broad religious resonance, referring several times to a Creator or Supreme Being. Moreover, and more importantly, that document is shaped by natural law principles rooted in Christian medieval thought that in turn was nourished by the Hebrew tradition, Greek thought and Roman jurisprudence (pp.83-86, 94-96 and elsewhere). Chaput shows that its principles have historically formed the core of the “truths” the American people held that made them a people and not a motely crowd. Similarly, he shows that the first Amendment to our Constitution, while forbidding the establishment of religion, far from hindering citizens from bringing their religious convictions into the public market place guaranteed their right to the public exercise of their faith, including their right to participate fully as religious people in the public market place. Their faith was not a “private” matter with no bearing on public life (pp. 86-87).

Religious bigotry, particularly against Catholics, has been and still is a problem, as has been atheistic opposition to all belief in God. But Chaput does a marvelous job in describing contemporary phobia of God in the U.S. He notes that it comes in two forms: hard and soft. The hard variety pushed by people like Richard Dawkins is, he thinks, more honest and not as serious a threat to the exercise of one’s religion in the public market place. The soft variety is subtler and more dangerous. Its song is that a pluralistic society like ours must avoid sectarian warfare by keeping religion out of the national public conversation. The soft variety simply contemns religion and fosters what C.S. Lewis described in *The Abolition of Man* as a civilization of “men without chests,” people who have plenty of comforts but no greatness of soul. This, it seems to me is what he thinks is our real enemy today in “serving our nation by living our Catholic [or other deeply felt religious beliefs] in political life.” [On



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all this see pp. 23-30, 33.)

Briefs

Chaput offers a marvelous overview of the true achievement of Vatican Council II, particularly in its final documents, *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom), *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), and *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). He masterfully corrects grave misunderstandings of these documents and sets forth their major teachings accurately. He also gives his readers a marvelous vision of what precisely living as a faithful Catholic entails, reminding Catholics, clerical and lay, that they are called to holiness, to be saints, to love with a healing, redemptive love, to sanctify their work and to change the world, including the political world in which they live, for the better. The lay faithful, in particular, are called to live their faith in the day to day secular world in which they work and play—and exercise their political responsibilities.[For this see chapter 6].

In chapter 7 Chaput reports with sadness that in contemporary American far too many Catholics, instead of transforming the secular culture in which they live have capitulated to it and its values, placing them above the truths central to the Catholic faith. He points out that unfortunately John F. Kennedy, allegedly our first “Catholic” president, in fact made it clear that for him his Catholic faith was a purely private matter with no relevance to public life. And that, unfortunately, seems to be true of far too many Catholics in public office today. Chaput likewise notes that traditionally, particularly since the time of FDR’s new deal, Catholics have as a whole found their home in the Democratic party, but that its commitment to the so-call “pro-choice” position has forced more and more Catholics to leave the party. He notes that neither major party’s platforms and policies are fully compatible with politically relevant truths of the faith. He likewise notes that laypeople, who have unfortunately been badly instructed in the faith over the past forty years, are not alone in failing to live their Catholic faith fully—bishops have their shortcomings, weaknesses, and failings to atone for.

In the final two chapters of his book Chaput gets into the nitty gritty of the crucial political/moral question facing us: abortion, along with the responsibilities of Catholic legislators. The issue of abortion is front and center in the penultimate chapter. Chaput recognizes that the moral difference among social issues is crucial. But, he goes on to say, “some acts are so evil that tolerating them itself becomes a poison that weakens the whole of society.....In our day, sanctity-of-life issues are foundational—not because of anyone’s ‘religious’ views about abortion...but because the act of dehumanizing and killing the unborn child attacks human dignity in a uniquely grave way. Deliberately killing the innocent is always, inexcusably wrong” (p. 207; emphasis in original). He stresses that bishops must give clear Catholic teaching. He thinks that they have done so in their 1998 statement *Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*. While recognizing that Catholic public officials are obliged to promote respect for human persons at all stages and work to resist the violence of war, the scandal of capital punishment, and to combat poverty, etc., they emphasize that “‘being right’ on such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks n innocent human life [emphasis in



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the original].” They then go on to declare: “If we understand the human person as ‘the temple of the Holy Spirit’—the living house of God—then these latter issues [war, poverty etc.] fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the houses’s foundation [pp. 210-211; emphasis in original].” This is most clear and has obvious implications for political life.

The final chapter takes up the issues of refusing to allow Catholic legislators who support abortion to receive Communion and of voting for specific candidates. Regarding the first Chaput first makes it clear that no one has a “right” to receive the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist and he reminds readers of St. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.” He also writes that “if we ignore or deny what the church teaches, or refuse to follow what she teaches, we are not ‘in communion’ with the Catholic faith....If we receive communion anyway, we engage in a lie” (p. 224). Denying anyone Communion is a grave matter and “should be reserved for serious cases of public scandal where it can actually make a difference” (p. 225). He declares: “Catholic officials who act against Catholic teaching in their political service on a foundational matter like abortion should not present themselves for Communion” (p. 225). What if they do? After citing a 2004 statement by the U.S. Bishops that leaves the issue up to the prudent judgment of individual bishops, Chaput then raises and answers some questions. The first is “What would I do if a Catholic public official...publically acting against Catholic teaching on a grave moral issue like abortion...presented himself for Communion?” He then makes a distinction. If the official is not from his diocese and he received no contrary guidance from the individual’s own bishop he would assume his honesty and goodwill and not refuse him Communion and would so instruct his priests. But if the person were of his diocese he would first instruct and admonish the official in private and if that failed to persuade him not to present himself for Communion he would then, should he so present himself, publicly ask him not to take Communion and explain why. If he persisted in presenting himself Chaput would then refuse him Communion “because of his deliberate disregard for the rights of other Catholics and the unity of the church” (pp. 227-228).

He then asks whether a Catholic in good conscience could vote for a “pro-choice” candidate. His answer: “I couldn’t. Supporting a ‘right’ to choose abortion simply masks and evades what abortion really is: the deliberate killing of innocent life” (p. 229). But he knows some Catholics who judge differently. These persons, troubled by war and other serious problems and struggling with abortion, which they do not accept as a closed issue, “keep fighting for a more humane party platform—one that would vow to protect the unborn child” (p. 229). He respects their judgment of conscience and will not judge them. They think that there is a “proportionate reason” to allow abortion, a reason, Chaput says, that we could, “with an honest heart, expect the unborn victim of abortion to accept when we meet them and have to explain our actions” (p. 230). Chaput’s final question is the problem facing Catholics when both major candidates are both “pro-choice.” Here he thinks there is no “right” answer. Committed Catholics could either vote for the major candidate



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more closely fitting the moral ideal, for an acceptable third party candidate, or refrain from voting (pp. 250-251).

As one can see, this is a most significant book. Some of Archbishop Chaput's positions will undoubtedly be challenged, particularly regarding reception of Communion by well known Catholic legislators who year in, year out, vigorously support pro-abortion legislation, even so far as opposing efforts to stop partial-birth abortion, and misrepresenting Catholic teaching in their public statements. But Chaput himself, I believe, teaches that they ought to be denied Communion, for he explicitly declares: "Catholics who actively and prominently work to advance permissive abortion or any serious violation of human dignity, persons who deliberately treat the church, her people, and her sacraments as political theater to attack Catholic convictions and faith, should never present themselves for Communion and should never be surprised at being denied if they do so" (pp. 228-229).

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