



THOUGHTS ON 'ROMAN CATHOLICS FOR OBAMA'
+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

May 19, 2008

Forty years ago this month Bobby Kennedy was still alive and running for the Democratic Party's 1968 presidential nomination. I was a seminarian in Washington, D.C. I was also an active volunteer on Kennedy's campaign. I can still remember helping with secretarial work in the same room where Edward Kennedy and Pierre Salinger labored away on RFK strategy. It was my first involvement in elective politics, and after the Vietnam Tet Offensive in February and Martin Luther King Jr.'s murder on April 4, Kennedy's cause seemed urgent. Then on June 5, Kennedy was gunned down himself.

After RFK died, the meaning of the 1968 election seemed to evaporate. I lost interest in politics. I didn't get involved again until the rise of Jimmy Carter. Carter fascinated me because he seemed like an untypical politician. He was plain spoken, honest, a serious Christian and a Washington outsider. So I supported him during his 1976 campaign when I was a young priest working in Pennsylvania. After his election as president, I came to Denver as pastor of Holy Cross Parish in Thornton in 1977. I eventually got involved with the 1980 Colorado campaign for Carter's re-election on the invitation of a parishioner and Democratic Party activist -- Polly Baca, who was and remains a good friend.

Carter had one serious strike against him. The U.S. Supreme Court had legalized abortion on demand in its 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, and Carter the candidate waffled about restricting it. At the time, I knew Carter was wrong in his views about *Roe v. Wade* and soft toward permissive abortion. But even as a priest, I justified working for him because he wasn't aggressively "pro-choice." True, he held a bad position on a vital issue, but I believed he was right on so many more of the "Catholic" issues than his opponent seemed to be. The moral calculus looked easy. I thought we could remedy the abortion problem after Carter was safely returned to office.

Carter lost his bid for re-election, but even with an avowedly pro-life Ronald Reagan as president, the belligerence, dishonesty and inflexibility of the "pro-choice" lobby has stymied almost every effort to protect unborn human life since.

In the years after the Carter loss I began to notice that very few of the people, including Catholics, who claimed to be "personally opposed" to abortion really did anything about it. Nor did they intend to. For most, their personal opposition was little more than pious hand wringing and a convenient excuse -- exactly as it is today. In fact, I can't name *any* "pro-choice" Catholic politician who has been active, in a sustained public way, in trying to discourage abortion and to protect unborn human life -- not one. Some talk about it, and some may mean well, but there's very little action. In the United States in 2008, abortion is an acceptable form of homicide. And it will remain that way until Catholics force their political parties and elected officials to act differently.

Why do I mention this now? Earlier this spring a group called "Roman Catholics for Obama '08" quoted my own published words in the following way:

"So can a Catholic in good conscience vote for a pro-choice candidate? The answer is: I can't, and I won't. But I do know some serious Catholics -- people whom I admire -- who may. I think their reasoning is mistaken, but at least they sincerely struggle with the abortion issue, and it causes them real pain. And most important: They don't keep quiet about it; they don't give up; they keep lobbying their party and their representatives to change their pro-abortion views and protect the unborn. Catholics can vote for pro-choice candidates if they vote for them despite -- not because of -- their pro-choice views."

What's interesting about this quotation - which is accurate but incomplete - is the wording that was left out. The very next sentences in the article of mine they selected, which Roman Catholics for Obama neglected to quote, run as follows:

"But [Catholics who support 'pro-choice' candidates] also need a compelling proportionate reason to justify it. What is a 'proportionate' reason when it comes to the abortion issue? It's the kind of reason we will be able to explain, with a clean heart, to the victims of abortion when we meet them face to face in the next life - which we most certainly will. If we're confident that these victims will accept our motives as something more than an alibi, then we can proceed."

On their website, Roman Catholics for Obama stress that:

"After faithful thought and prayer, we have arrived at the conclusion that Senator Obama is the candidate whose views are most compatible with the Catholic outlook, and we will vote for him because of that -- and because of his other outstanding qualities -- despite our disagreements with him in specific areas."

I'm familiar with this reasoning. It sounds a lot like me 30 years ago. And 30 years later we still have about a million abortions a year. Maybe Roman Catholics for Obama will do a better job at influencing their candidate. It could happen. And I sincerely hope it does, since Planned Parenthood of the Chicago area, as recently as February 2008, noted that Senator Barack Obama "has a 100 percent pro-choice voting record both in the U.S. Senate and the Illinois Senate."

Changing the views of "pro-choice" candidates takes a lot more than verbal gymnastics, good alibis and pious talk about "personal opposition" to killing unborn children. I'm sure Roman Catholics for Obama know that, and I wish them good luck. They'll need it.