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Archbishop criticizes Obama, Catholic allies

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DENVER -- Denver Roman Catholic Archbishop Charles Chaput labeled Barack Obama the "most committed" abortion-rights candidate from a major party in 35 years while accusing a Catholic Obama ally and other Democratic-friendly Catholic groups of doing a "disservice to the church."

Chaput, one of the nation's most politically outspoken Catholic prelates, delivered the remarks Friday night at a dinner of a Catholic women's group.

His comments were among the sharpest in a debate over abortion and Catholic political responsibility in a campaign in which Catholics represent a key swing vote.

While Chaput has won praise from traditionalist Catholics for stressing opposition to abortion as a foundational voting issue, voices on the Catholic left have sought to apply church teachings to war, poverty, the environment and other issues.

Although the Catholic left is not new, several advocacy groups have either formed or ramped up activities since 2004. Partly, their efforts are a response to attention given to the pro-abortion rights stance of Democrat John Kerry, a Catholic who was criticized by a few bishops who suggested he should be denied or refrain from Communion.

Chaput, without getting into much detail, called Obama the "most committed" abortion-rights major-party presidential candidate since the landmark Roe v. Wade decision on abortion in 1973.

"To suggest _ as some Catholics do _ that Senator Obama is this year's 'real' pro-life candidate requires a peculiar kind of self-hypnosis, or moral confusion, or worse," Chaput said according to his prepared remarks, titled "Little Murders."

Mark Linton, the Obama campaign's Catholic outreach coordinator, said in a statement Saturday that Obama is "proud to have the support of so many committed Catholics who are hungry for real change after eight years of failed policies. He has offered Americans real solutions even on tough issues like abortion, where we can come together to teach our kids responsibility and

self-respect, to prevent unintended pregnancies, and offer strong support to women."

The Obama campaign has been promoting an unusual-suspect sort of endorsement from Douglas Kmiec, a Catholic law professor and former legal counsel in the Reagan administration.

Kmiec wrote a book making a Catholic case for Obama. He argues the Obama campaign is premised on Catholic social teaching like care for working families and the poor and foreign policy premised on peace over war. Democratic efforts to tackle social and economic factors that contribute to abortion hold more promise, Kmiec said, than Republican efforts to criminalize it.

While applauding Kmiec's past record, Chaput said: "I think his activism for Senator Barack Obama, and the work of Democratic-friendly groups like Catholics United and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, have done a disservice to the church, confused the natural priorities of Catholic social teaching, undermined the progress pro-lifers have made, and provided an excuse for some Catholics to abandon the abortion issue instead of fighting within their parties and at the ballot box to protect the unborn."

Pro-Obama Catholics "seek to contextualize, demote and then counterbalance the evil of abortion with other important but less foundational social issues," said Chaput, who wrote a book this year, "Render Unto Caesar," about Catholics and politics.

Chaput emphasized he was speaking as a private citizen and not as a representative of the Denver archdiocese. The IRS prohibits clergy, in their role as clergy, from supporting or opposing candidates. Chaput already has said that Obama running mate Joe Biden, a Catholic, should not present himself for Communion because of his abortion rights position.

Chris Korzen, executive director of Washington-based Catholics United, which has argued in direct mail and TV ads that taking the "pro-life" position means more than opposing abortion rights, criticized Chaput's statements.

"We are concerned that Archbishop Chaput's comments _ even those made in his personal capacity _ will have a chilling effect on this dialogue," Korzen said in a statement. "It is also profoundly unfortunate that Archbishop Chaput has chosen to make personal attacks on lay Catholics acting in good faith to promote Catholic values in the public square."

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