

RESISTING THROWAWAY CULTURE

How a Consistent Life Ethic
Can Unite a Fractured People

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How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People
Charles C. Camosy

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How a Consistent Life Ethic
Can Unite a Fractured People

CHARLES C. CAMOSY


New City Press
Hyde Park, New York

Camosy diagnoses America's current ills better than anyone and offers the most compelling and hopeful way forward of anybody I've read. Unlike a lot of pro-life activists, he doesn't shy away from the most difficult moral issues of our time. Indeed, he embraces them, even as he dismantles modern America's "throwaway culture." I don't always agree with Charlie on everything, but if you're looking for a coherent argument and compassionate worldview—delivered by someone with the credentials to reach a sophisticated and cynical world—this is the only book of its kind.

Matt Lewis

Senior Columnist at the Daily Beast
CNN Political Commentator

Responding to a climate of political tribalism and cultural fracturing, Dr. Camosy's new book provides a unifying framework for creating a culture of encounter in which mercy, responsibility, and dignity lift up vulnerable populations for special protection and welcome. This framework, a growing edge of the Consistent Life Ethic, challenges us to take a stand against a "throwaway culture" in which vulnerable people are reduced to a product in the marketplace instead of recognized for their inherent and irreducible value. If we allow ourselves to be challenged and moved by Camosy's arguments, we can create a culture of encounter capable of resisting what Pope Francis calls a "globalization of indifference."

Kristin M. Collier, MD FACP

Assistant Professor of Internal Medicine
Director of the Program on Health, Spirituality and Religion
University of Michigan Medical School

This book is a must read, deep dive for anyone with questions about the sanctity and dignity of human life in contemporary society. Conservatives and liberals alike will cheer and loathe various chapters with equal fervor, once again making Professor Camosy

impossible to pigeonhole as a partisan of any stripe. Agree or disagree, this work is an important contribution to the national conversation about a consistent life ethic.

Kelly M. Rosati

CEO of KMR Consulting

Former VP of Advocacy for Children at Focus on the Family

Camosy is a principled, smart, faithful, and courageous defender of human life and human dignity. A lot of us talk about the “consistent life ethic,” but he articulates, demonstrates, and practices it. If you want to understand how the “throwaway culture” challenges both parties, left and right, and every one of us, read this book.

John Carr

Director, Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life

Georgetown University

I'm grateful to Charles Camosy for doing the hard work of trying to hash out what Catholic social teaching looks like in practice in the world as it is today. You don't have to agree with every word in this book to be inspired to do the same. This book is an exercise in moral civic responsibility and an act of love.

Kathryn Jean Lopez

Senior Fellow, National Review Institute

Editor-at-Large, *National Review*

Camosy has written a unique, deeply thoughtful book that merits the consideration of anyone who wishes to understand a Catholic approach to the intrinsic value and dignity of every human life. Though I may not agree with all of his conclusions, his arguments are well worth engaging.

Alexandra DeSanctis

Staff Writer, *National Review*

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*for my children—Jenie, Jonathan, Gina, and Thaddeus—
who are teaching me how to live out a culture of encounter
and hospitality*

Preface

The origins of this book go back to the beginnings of my formation as a Roman Catholic Christian. I've identified as an anti-abortion pro-lifer since I was a fifth grader at St. John the Baptist grade school in Paris, Wisconsin—when I first learned what abortion is. But especially for someone who grew up in a purple Midwestern state, and had family all along the political spectrum, some version of the Consistent Life Ethic has always seemed like common sense. I abhorred abortion on the basis of values that had direct implications for other issues, including social support of women in difficult situations.

I started this book project seven years ago, during a 2012 sabbatical at the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life at Christ Church, Oxford. This occurred well before the phrase “throwaway culture” was even a thing—and also well before two other books I've published in the meantime. I had trouble finding the right angle; also the right energy, the right press, the right moment in my life, and the right audience. First it was a book for the classroom. Then it was a crossover book. Then it was an academic book. Then it was a crossover book again.

The pro-life ethic of Pope Francis excited me soon after his election and I shifted quickly to make him the “hero” of the project. I must admit to losing a bit of that excitement over time, especially given his self-admitted failures with regard to important aspects of the sex abuse crises, though his vision is still central to the project. Despite the

roadblocks, stalls, and twists and turns, a phone call with Jessica Keating, director of the Office of Human Dignity and Life Initiatives in the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame, convinced me that the time was right for this book and pushed me toward the finish line. I'm so indebted to her, and her boss John Cavadini, for their support of my work. On multiple levels.

Taylor Ott, my theology graduate assistant at Fordham for the 2018-2019 academic year, has been incredibly helpful with research, notes, and the appended charts. Past Fordham theology assistants—including Meg Stapleton Smith, Malik Muhammed, and Pierre Bourgeois—have also been extremely helpful as this project developed. Many colleagues in Catholic moral theology gave me wonderful feedback at earlier stages of this project, especially Patrick Clark, Jana Bennett, Julie Rubio, and Jennifer Beste. I'm particularly grateful for those who looked over what would become the final manuscript and gave me critical feedback: Chris Crawford, Christopher White, Kelly Rosati, Elise Italiano, Alexandra DeSanctis, Kristin Collier, Rachel Metzger, Kim Daniels, and Kate Bryan.

And I'm of course very grateful for the team at New City Press, especially for working to meet stricter-than-usual deadlines in getting this book published. I couldn't be prouder to have worked with them—not least because the Focolare's spirituality of unity is at the very heart of this project. If there is anything that can heal our most profound fractures, that can mitigate our current suffering of Jesus Forsaken, it is the Consistent Life Ethic.

A Political Culture on the Brink

Political culture in the United States, at least as we've come to know it over the previous two generations, is collapsing. Congress, now more polarized than at any time since Civil War reconstruction, has an approval rating of 19 per cent.¹ (Notably, the electorate prefers cockroaches to Congress.²) Donald Trump was elected to the presidency in 2016 with an electoral college victory, but lost the popular vote by more than three million, and came in with the lowest approval rating in modern history.³ Significantly, relatively few voters for Clinton or Trump were voting for a good candidate they supported; instead, they were voting against a terrible one they loathed.⁴ For some time now, the general consensus has been that the Supreme Court has abandoned its role as a non-partisan interpreter of the law in favor of political warfare poorly disguised with *post hoc* legal arguments. The general consensus could not have been more strongly confirmed by the circus that was the 2018 Senate confirmation hearings for Justice Brett Kavanaugh. After those hearings Elizabeth Bruenig had very good reason to wonder whether our political culture is suffering from a near complete dissolution of the trust required for a democratic republic to function.⁵

There is a deep and growing sense that the whole “public thing” is little more than a rigged game; rigged by a

tiny few who have become skilled at disconnecting it from justice and the common good in favor of their own narrow set of interests and/or those of their paymasters. The polarization and disconnect of our national politics have a symbiotic relationship with the polarization and disconnect within the broader culture. In a world dominated by smartphones and social media, many find themselves increasingly disconnected from the physical, the embodied, the real—and especially from authentic encounters with “the other.” Given the unprecedented ease of travel and mobility, those with the resources to do so most often choose to live in actual and virtual communities who think pretty much like they do. Whether it is the news we watch, the websites we visit, the people we follow on social media, our physical neighbors, our actual and virtual friends, our churches, or the people with whom we socialize, many of us consume information and engage ideas in ideologically comfortable, largely disconnected communities that rarely force us to examine critically the received wisdom of our ideological community.

The ideas of those with whom we think we disagree are often mediated by journalists, academics, or others who do not take such opposing views seriously. Most who watch MSNBC or Fox News channel—or read the *Drudge Report* or the *Huffington Post*—do not expect a balanced, nuanced approach. Such media are designed to be consumed with the expectation that part of what it means to be a member of an ideological community (or, perhaps better, “tribe”) is that we define ourselves by our opposition to “the other side” well before we even engage their ideas and arguments.

It appears that our primary love is not for ourselves and our own political tribe, but more a “love to hate” of our perceived enemies.⁶ Far from being motivated by a positive vision of the good, the body politic in the United States is motivated by fear and hatred of people (tribes) assumed to be bad or dangerous. Surely, in the last twenty years the hatred and fear for “the other side” has doubled—not least because politicians and media corporations continuously stoke it for their own benefit.⁷

Especially after the 2016 election, some started to articulate what was happening using the term “tribal epistemology.” Depending on a person’s place on the political spectrum, “the other side” was often understood to be so hopelessly ideological that they could not distinguish truth from falsehood. A liberal like David Roberts blames right-wing authoritarianism.⁸ A conservative like Mark Hemmingway blames left-wing groupthink.⁹ Not only can we not agree on what the facts are (though that would be bad enough), but we consider our opponents so biased as to be *incapable* of knowing what the facts are. And it is difficult to see how such people could be worth engaging. They can only be defeated.

In the 1990s a median Democrat and a median Republican were not that far apart, but the politics of defining-by-opposition has pushed those medians further and further apart.¹⁰ For ordinary people, such polarization surfaces most clearly during those increasingly rare times when we have to engage ideas that differ significantly from our own. Perhaps it is over Thanksgiving dinner or other interaction with our family (one of those increasingly few

sets of relationships we do not choose), or during a required course in college, or while watching a presidential debate. When confronted with the views of a candidate from “the other” party, have you ever felt so upset that you simply had to change the channel in anger or disgust? Have you ever become profoundly anxious at the prospect of having to engage with your family about politics? Have you ever transferred out of a course because you couldn’t handle the ideology of the instructor? Have you avoided or even left a church community because you disagreed with the views of the pastor or most of your fellow worshippers? Many have, and as these trends accelerate it is more evident that many refuse to have their perceived enemies, even thoughtful ones, challenge their safe, comfortable views. We just prefer not to engage.¹¹

This disconnect and polarization then leads to an incoherent simplicity in our own ideas and in how we speak about and argue for them in public discourse. The ideological communities to which we belong are (still) almost always viewed through the lens of a narrow liberal/conservative binary—a binary into which all issues, regardless of their complexity, are shoved and made to fit. But in the face of truly complex issues, such simplistic and reductive thinking falls apart.

Polarization, Incoherency, and Christian Communities

We might be tempted to dismiss what has just been described as simply what a pluralistic Western republic has to put up with. After all, in a culture that genuinely tries

to welcome multiple and even antagonistic understandings of the good, could there really be another outcome? Especially if we have low expectations for what is possible in an authentically diverse political culture, perhaps we need to put up with significant incoherency as we try to provide freedom and autonomy for individuals and groups with conflicting points of view.

Throughout this book we will critically examine this understanding of pluralism and autonomy. Significantly, the polarization and incoherency. Not only do they shove the complex issues of our day into a simplistic framework, they view their ancient theological tradition through the political lens of the right/left culture wars of the late 1970s in the United States. The result, most often, is that Christian liberals and Christian conservatives often hold views indistinguishable from those of secular liberals and conservatives. In this context, Christianity is at the service of the American secular political tribe with which they identify—and, even more importantly, the defeat of the secular political tribe they perceive as the enemy.

Anyone who prizes critical thinking and authenticity should be skeptical of views that line up neatly with those of a particular political team, but in this regard Christians ought to be particularly sensitive. Authentic attempts to live out the insights and values of scripture and tradition not only provide the chance to lead a more coherent and less idolatrous life (with the God of Jesus Christ and his Body, the Church, as the ultimate concern—not a liberal or conservative tribe's ideology), but they also provide a helpful critique of our secular political culture's incoherency.

Reasons for Hope

Despite this gloomy state of affairs, there are several reasons to be hopeful. US Americans increasingly refuse to accept a lazy liberal/conservative binary. Just ten years ago 34 percent of Americans identified as Independents, but according to Gallup that number today has risen to 44 percent—the highest percentage in seventy-five years of the Pew poll tracking this number.¹² By contrast, the poll found only 27 percent who identify as Democrats and 26 percent as Republicans. Millions who identify as both socially conservative and economically liberal have become increasingly frustrated that they have no one to represent them in US politics.¹³ Though if this group could use different language to describe their beliefs, they almost certainly would. A major 2018 study of political affiliation in the United States, “Hidden Tribes,” found that most people “do not see their lives through a political lens, and when they have political views the views are far less rigid than those of the highly politically engaged, ideologically orthodox tribes.”¹⁴ Two-thirds of US Americans belong to what the study called an “exhausted majority.” Their members “share a sense of fatigue with our polarized national conversation, a willingness to be flexible in their political viewpoints, and a lack of voice in the national conversation.”¹⁵

These observations suggest that the simplistic assumptions underlying a two-dimensional right/left, liberal/conservative, model of thinking about politics must be replaced with something that reflects what people actually believe. Post-Trump, forces may well have been set in motion that will lead the old model, finally, to collapse. The current

realignment in American politics has been highlighted by dozens and dozens of public figures—everyone from Chuck Todd,¹⁶ to Michael Barone,¹⁷ to Eugene Robinson,¹⁸ to Karl Rove,¹⁹ to Tom Brokaw,²⁰ to Peggy Noonan.²¹ Robinson stated bluntly, “My view is that the traditional left-to-right, progressive-to-conservative, Democratic-to-Republican political axis that we’re all so familiar with is no longer a valid schematic of American political opinion. And I believe neither party has the foggiest idea what the new diagram looks like.”

The old coalitions do seem to be falling apart. Donald Trump won without being clearly liberal or conservative and has remade the Republican party (if it still exists at all) into a very different thing. At the same time, many Evangelical Christians, whose “moral majority” generated the last iteration of the Republican party in the late 1970s, are increasingly uncomfortable with today’s GOP.²² Southern Baptists have begun to distance themselves from the Republican party, as evidenced by the protests surrounding Mike Pence’s speech at the Southern Baptist Convention in 2018.²³ Working class Catholics—once the Democratic base—have now been pushed out by a hypersecular party driven by sectarian identity politics. Large numbers of Latinos and Latinas, despite the Democratic party’s “all-in” stance and purity tests on abortion, strongly identify with the goals of anti-abortion pro-lifers.²⁴ Democrats once believed in regulating free trade via tariffs, but today 72 percent of Democrats believe new US tariffs will harm the economy in the long run. Eighty percent of Republicans, once the party of free trade, believe either that

tariffs will have no effect (18 percent) or will be helpful (62 percent). Perhaps the most-discussed critique of capitalism in 2019 came from—wait for it—conservative Fox News host Tucker Carlson.²⁵

Two years after Trump's election many pundits see the trend reflected in the 2018 midterm elections, arguing that the changes in voting reflected not a so-called "blue wave," but the uncertainty and turbulence of a country undergoing a profound political realignment.²⁶ The ranks that took shape in the 1970s and 1980s left/right culture wars are finally breaking apart. And it may be younger people who finally make them scatter. Consider these facts about the millennial generation:²⁷

- Half refuse to identify as Democrat or Republican.
- They are fiercely committed to service and social change.
- They don't see politics or government as a primary way of effecting positive social change.
- Seventy-one percent see a need for a new major third party.²⁸

With this new generation rising and the broader political culture disintegrating, we have an opportune moment to change the way we think and talk about politics. As Michael Steele, former head of the Republican National Committee, put it, these young people "are going to destroy the old silos, scatter their elements to the wind, and reassemble them in ways that make sense for them and the new century."²⁹

There is no script for replacing a political culture. Some worry that radical moral diversity will leave us so fragmented that we will never find a way to write such a script together. And, indeed, if we plow ahead too quickly in our realignment—if we settle for more politically-motivated “ten-point plans” or “contracts with America”—we will miss a rare and important opportunity to do something lasting and significant. This moment of uncertainty offers us a chance to hit the pause button and catch our breath. We can set down the burden of our political anxieties and tend to our deep spiritual wounds. The source of our cultural sickness does not lie in politics or policy. As important as those concerns are, the problem is rooted more deeply in our foundational understandings of the good.

Jonah Goldberg recently said, “Politics cannot fill the holes in our souls.”³⁰ Without doubt, a hyper-focus on politics and policy whips up a superficial froth of anxiety that distracts us from or even blocks our ability to recognize the opportunity for foundational introspection that this cultural moment provides. In speaking recently to pro-life groups, for instance, I’ve suggested that maybe the most important thing we can do right now is to take a deep, cleansing political shower. Scrub away grime that has built up over years or even decades. Put salve on our neglected wounds and burns. Step away from the anxieties of the news and election cycles and focus instead on fundamental questions. What do we value most in life? What grounds those values? How do those values suggest a way of living together with our neighbors?

This moment gives us an opening where we can explore these questions and thereby help a culture desperate for answers. Having the opportunity to provide them is...well...a reason for hope.

Thesis and Goals of This Book

During the heart of the 2016 Presidential election cycle, Archbishop Gomez of Los Angeles said, “It is clear that we need a new politics—a politics of the heart that emphasizes mercy, love and solidarity.”³¹ In this book I will show that a revitalized Consistent Life Ethic (CLE)—especially as understood and articulated in the Roman Catholic tradition by Cardinal Bernardin, Pope St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and (especially) Pope Francis—could demonstrate how to unify a fractured culture around a vision of the good. As noted above, the disintegrating political culture of the United States is trapped in a simplistic, binary left/right political imagination obsessed with arguments about policy prescriptions and the political maneuvering used to enact them. But through the Church’s CLE, rightly understood, a new generation not only can challenge this impoverished and incoherent political imagination but can begin the hard work of laying out the foundational goods and principles upon which whatever comes next can be built.

Some might understandably be skeptical that the Church has the vision to take the lead in this endeavor. Especially in light of the sex abuse crisis (which even to this day has been horrifically mishandled at the highest

levels—a failure many people understandably cannot get beyond) do we want to focus our attention on this tradition? It is more than legitimate to point out the flaws of a tradition from where the CLE comes. But this is a tradition that, for all its dramatic faults, has stood the test of centuries. When other political cultures and even entire civilizations have collapsed, the Church has provided a foundation for rebuilding. Significantly, it has been able to do this while transcending its own profound failures and deep sinfulness.

And despite a secular discourse that tries to marginalize explicitly religious points of view, a Gallup poll found that the number of people who say they have confidence in the church/organized religion is higher than almost any other US institution.³² Religion, contrary to what prominent talking heads often presume, is actually a positive, moderating force in politics.³³ Speaking at a Georgetown conference on political polarization, David Brooks, a non-Catholic thinker, suggested that a Catholic social vision is “all we have” to resist the forces that are tearing us apart.³⁴ And, significantly for this project, millennials of many different religious and political stripes view Pope Francis in positive light.³⁵

Although the CLE comes out of the Roman Catholic tradition, Pope Francis’s pontificate has demonstrated that the tradition’s insights and values are attractive outside Catholicism. Because CLE principles come from the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture and other parts of the Christian tradition, biblically-focused Evangelicals will find much that resonates with them.

Furthermore, because the CLE often addresses its arguments to “all people of good will,” those who have faith in something other than Christianity (including those who have no explicitly religious faith) will find much to engage as well. Values like the irreducible dignity of the person, nonviolence, hospitality, encounter, mercy, conservation of the ecological world, and giving priority to the most vulnerable are written on the hearts of many kinds of people. And this book will show how those values can provide the basis for unity among a fractured people.

How This Book Will Proceed

Most of this book will focus on applying the central principles of the Consistent Life Ethic to polarizing contemporary moral issues, but the first chapter will focus on the CLE more generally. From where did it come? How did it develop during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI? How has this tradition been shaped and revitalized through Pope Francis’s call to resist throwaway culture and build up a culture of encounter and hospitality? The tradition is articulated through a somewhat vague and imprecise set of connections between ideas. Can it generate a clear set of moral principles that can be applied to the diverse moral issues and problems our fracturing US political culture faces?

The book will proceed by applying the lessons enumerated in the first chapter to the most difficult moral issues within particular contexts: sex and sex cultures; reproduction and abortion; duties to the poor, immigrants

and refugees; ecology and non-human animals; euthanasia and the margins of life; and state-sponsored violence. A readable book, of course, could not make a comprehensive academic argument about each of these topics in a single chapter. But my primary goal is to show how the goods and principles laid out in chapter 1 can and should be applied to the above topics in order to illustrate what a new moral and political vision might look like. Though I try to do this carefully, especially by addressing in each chapter multiple objections to my positions, I will leave it to others to elaborate these issues in a purely academic fashion.

It was frustrating to realize that I could not include other topics. In earlier drafts, for instance, I intended to critique the violence of a throwaway culture in sports like football and ultimate fighting. Editorial decisions, however, led me to set aside that chapter, as well as others: human cloning, (neo)colonialism, police violence, violence directed against gays and lesbians, homelessness, torture, and gun violence. Perhaps others can apply the framework of this book to these and other issues that I do not touch upon.

In its conclusion this book will return to the questions raised above. The book overall, including the conclusion, however, will avoid making arguments for particular policies; doing so would distract us from the opportunity of the present moment. Instead, it will try to show that the seeds of morality necessary to generate a new politics can take root only if we focus first on living out the CLE in our daily life choices. It will make reference to Pope Francis's insistence on a culture of encounter whereby we meet the

vulnerable and marginalized personally by disrupting our routines and going to the peripheries of our familiar communities. In the larger scheme of things this may seem small, especially for those who focus on big policy debates. But small seeds produce saplings, then trees, then forests—in this case, the trees and forests necessary to support a new and healthy political ecosystem.