

Catholic League Members Rally to the Cause

It's quite gratifying to receive so many letters from Catholic League members complimenting us on our feisty style. It should be noted that our members are no wimps either. Consider the following.

Over the past few months, Catholic League members have been asked to support new anti-condom ads and to sign petitions demanding fair treatment by the media when the Holy Father visits New York. The result: we not only have money to support new ads in New York and Washington, we have enough to pay for advertisement in the Boston rail system as well. As for the petitions, they have been coming in by the thousands. And that's daily! Put that together with the fact that we can now claim well in excess of 100,000 members nationwide, and the results are impressive by any standard.

It is precisely this kind of support that enables the Catholic League to do its job. The job of the Catholic League – defending the rights of Catholics and responding to assaults on the Church – is important, but just as important is the effect we hope to have on fellow Catholics, clergy as well as laity. To be explicit, our job is to energize the faithful, too many of whom have become disinterested and lacking in initiative.

There are several reasons for this lethargy. Unlike some other segments of society, Catholics have never forged a collective identity that approaches the level found among blacks and Jews. For one reason, ethnicity has competed with religion, allowing the Irish, Italians, Poles, Slavs, French, Latins and others to establish bonds of affection based on their lineage. Hence, the urban phenomenon of having Irish, Italian and Polish churches, all within walking distance to each other.

Just consider the pain that so many of these parishes are now experiencing because of the need to merge these previously disparate parishes. Irish-Catholics, Italian-Catholics and Polish-Catholics may all be Catholic, but it is what precedes the hyphen that ultimately keeps them distinct.

Blacks have never had this problem, though it is certainly true that those who trace their ancestry to Africa do not see themselves, and are not seen by others, as having a heritage that is identical to blacks from the West Indies, for example. There are Chinese Jews and Iraqi Jews, as well as Jews from Europe and Africa, and there are marked distinctions – especially in Israel today -between Ashkanazic and Sephardic Jews. But both blacks and Jews still have a sense of peoplehood that Catholics lack. That is due, in large part, to the legacies of slavery and the Holocaust, catastrophes for which there is no single analogue in the Catholic experience. Success has also stymied Catholic energy. While job discrimination against Catholics continues to be reality, it is true that most Catholics do not experience anything like the degree of antipathy that greeted their grandparents. Having become comfortably middle class, many Catholics have shut themselves off from societal issues, even when those issues touch home. Tocqueville called this individualism, the tendency among democratic people to withdraw into the circle of family and friends, absenting themselves from the affairs of their neighborhood and the society at large. Individualism, the great Frenchmen argued, was not synonymous with narcissism (he saw that as egoism), it was synonymous with an indifference to the chores of community.

Above all, what explains the Catholic response, or lack thereof, is the inability of Catholics to see attacks on their Church as attacks on themselves. This dichotomy is partly the social consequence of a hierarchical structure, the result of having clear lines of authority drawn between clergy and laity. Unfortunately, too many Catholics still think that they

have little or no role to play in defending their Church. Yet when the Church is attacked, it is foolish and indeed dangerous to think that the clergy can do it all. Vatican II put the ball in our court. "The laity carry out their manifold apostolate both in the Church and in the world," reads chapter three of the "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity," by engaging itself in "important fields of action: namely, church communities, the family, youth, the social milieu, and national and international affairs." That's a lot of ground, providing opportunities for everyone.

By acting as a catalyst, the Catholic League hopes to propel all the laity and the clergy to action. It is neither possible, nor desirable, to expect all Catholics to become full-time warriors, but it is important to mobilize the conscience of Catholics. There are shots being taken against the Catholic Church today that are deeply disturbing. That they are coming not so much from kooks but from the establishment itself is all the more troubling.

The good news, however, is that the Catholic League, backed by its incredibly enthusiastic members, is growing in numbers, stature and influence. Perhaps most gratifying of all is the evidence we have that the clergy very much appreciate our efforts. They not only compliment us, they more frequently are adopting our combative style. And to the extent that we can impel a besieged clergy to respond in a tougher fashion than they would otherwise, we will have accomplished a great deal.