

# The Politics of the Catholic League

Unfriendly news reporters often tag the Catholic League as “the archconservative Catholic League,” or something to that effect. Friendly news reporters don’t make that charge, but they are curious as to how I respond to such charges. Now that I’ve been president of the Catholic League for two years, the time is right to clear the air on this matter.

The Catholic League defends the right of the Catholic Church to say whatever it wants, free of bigotry and insult. The only politics we have is the politics of the Catholic Church. Personally, I would find it difficult to classify exactly what that politics is. After all, the Catholic Church’s positions on marriage and the family are quite conservative, but its positions on the poor and dispossessed are quite liberal. How to score such an admixture is not easy. Perhaps that is why it’s more accurate to say that the Catholic Church has no politics. If that is true then neither does the Catholic League.

Still, the perception persists that the Catholic League is a conservative organization. What gives rise to this perception is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the whole debate.

Anti-Catholic bigots cover the political spectrum from left to right. Some are Democrats, some are Republicans, some belong to extremist parties and some belong to no party at all. We get hate mail from all of them. But it is nonetheless true that we spend more time fending off bigotry from the left than from the right, and it is this reality that gives rise to the perception that we are a conservative organization.

If we spend more time fighting left-wing anti-Catholic bigots, it is not because the left is more bigoted than the right,

rather it is because the sources of bigotry on the left are more establishmentarian than they are on the right. For example, the typical right-wing anti-Catholic bigot is an uneducated lout, whereas the typical left-wing anti-Catholic bigot is an educated elitist. It's the difference between rednecks and Ivy Leaguers, or between Archie Bunker and Norman Lear. Some live on Main Street and others own it.

Uneducated bigots usually aren't organized and therefore their impact is rather confined. Educated bigots use their influence in activist organizations, governmental agencies, colleges, universities, media offices, publishing quarters, etc. to disseminate their hatred of Catholicism to a very wide audience. The Catholic League does not generally respond to bigotry that comes from the gallery; it directs its attention to those in the first row, and those who sit there usually sit left of center.

We have no reliable evidence as to the politics of our members, but judging from the letters we receive, it appears that conservatives outnumber liberals. This is not surprising. Generally speaking, the more orthodox the Catholic the more conservative are his views. Our latest survey demonstrates this, as does a wealth of other empirical data. It makes sense that those who want the Church to make the most dramatic changes are also the least sensitive to charges of anti-Catholic bigotry: many on the left can't distinguish between bigotry and criticism, even in cases that are pretty clearly marked.

Here's an anecdote that is appropo. About a year or so ago, our direct mail consultant contacted a well-known liberal Catholic publication to see if we could buy its mailing list. The response he got was quite telling: the employee said that no, the list would not be made available because readers of the publication would not be interested in anti-defamation issues. Imagine the readers of a liberal (or conservative) Jewish publication not being interested in anti-Semitism. I

can't.

For the record, it should be known that the first act I engaged in as president of the Catholic League was to publicly criticize anti-gay Catholics from obstructing a Mass in a New York church. That earned me threatening letters and phone calls from crazies on the right. Over the past two years, we have defended liberal members of the clergy and we have aligned ourselves with gay groups in criticizing Louis Farrakhan. We have attacked Republican and Democratic office holders and we have defended the Catholic Church on issues that have been politically liberal as well as politically conservative. We will continue to do so.

So what about me? I started as a Democrat and then became a Republican. Now I've switched again: I'm a registered Independent. Just like the Catholic League.