

# The Style of the Catholic League

Last month I addressed the question of the Catholic League's politics, so this month I thought I'd discuss the League's style.

If there is one criticism of the Catholic League that is persistently made it is that the League is entirely too hard-hitting in its style. Interestingly, this criticism comes predominantly from Catholics, though others have been known to make the same charge; some, in both camps, are friendly to the League, while others are not. At bottom, these critics say that the Catholic League's combative approach ill-suits the Catholic image: instead of fighting with our adversaries, these critics implore us to follow a more spiritual approach. Love and compassion, not heated rhetoric and confrontational politics, is the appropriate Catholic answer to adversity, they say.

To the accusation that the Catholic League has a rough edge to it, we plead guilty as charged. There is a reason for this: we are not a charitable organization, a fraternity or sorority, a social service outfit, a retreat house, a shelter or a wellness center. We are a civil rights organization. And like our analogues-ACLU, NAACP, NOW, ADL-we pursue justice in the public arena. As such, we must compete head-to-head with those who are working against us. That requires a certain toughness, a will to directly confront those who are abusive of individual Catholics and the institutional Church.

Responsibly aggressive. That's the way I like to describe the Catholic League. Love, compassion, and all those other fine humanistic virtues are critical to personal and social well-being. Similarly, prayer groups and retreats are honorable enterprises, worthy of wide acceptance. But in the battle for

religious and civil rights, the exclusive reliance on such attributes is not enough. Not, at least, if we are to win. And I don't like losing. None of this is to say that anything goes. Acting responsibly is, in fact, of special importance to any organization concerned with constitutional rights. But it does not follow that every Catholic organization ought to be judged from the window of a sacristy. I'm sorry, folks, one size does not fit all: it is just as wrong to judge pastoral work by the yardstick of a civil rights enterprise as it would be to judge a civil rights organization by the standards used to measure pastoral work.

And whoever said that being a good Catholic meant taking a strictly pietistic approach? The Catholics in my lifetime for whom I have the deepest respect-Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, Mother Teresa, Cardinal John O'Connor and Pope John Paul II-are not exactly shrinking violets. They are men and women who carry out their public duties with a gusto that excites. To be sure, they do so in a manner that is much less incendiary than the Catholic League, but no one at the League ever pretended that we are a match for any of them.

As for the unfriendly critics of the Catholic League, they seek not to instruct us on style, rather they seek to shut us up. When they counsel more dialogue and more tolerance, what they're saying is knock it off, stop confronting the enemies of Catholicism and get on with the task of building bridges.

Here's what they like to say: Don't you know that there are many out there who have been hurt by the Church? How do you expect to reach them if all you do is challenge them? Notice how the onus is always on us. Not sometimes-always. These critics are not battle fatigued, rather they have actively joined the battle against us. Did it ever occur to those who worship at the altar of dialogue that some of us are just plain fed up with having our religion trashed? We didn't start this culture war against the Catholic Church, we simply want to stop it.

I know what the sages say, "It's better to use honey than vinegar." Maybe so, but it still helps to have the vinegar handy. Personally, I like salsa the best, and I like it hot.