

Where's the rage, Catholic men?

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With Pope John Paul II ailing, Catholics are starting to think about the next pope. My choice? Marine Corps Lt. Gen. James Mattis, the crusty leatherneck now in trouble for saying that in war, it's fun to shoot bad guys.

The Marine general told his audience: "You go into Afghanistan, you got guys who slap women around for five years because they didn't wear a veil. You know, guys like that ain't got no manhood left anyway. So it's a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them."

Whoa! That's a real man talking. OK, OK, I'm not serious about wanting the Marine Corps' Dirty Harry serving as the Vicar of Christ. Still, my church needs a leader who takes visceral satisfaction in delivering justice to bullies. If John Paul had pitilessly shot down the careers of molester-shuffling American bishops early on, the church would be a better place today.

"I loathe cruelty and injustice," Teddy Roosevelt once wrote to a friend. "To see a boy or man torture something helpless whether in the shape of a small boy or little girl or dumb animal makes me rage." It's fine to be conventionally virtuous, he said, but if these qualities are unsupported by "something more virile, they may tend to evil rather than good."

"The man who merely possesses these traits, and in addition is timid and shirks effort, attracts and deserves a good deal of contempt," wrote Mr. Roosevelt.

By that chivalrous understanding of manhood, we Catholic men – bishops, priests and laymen – are a pretty contemptible lot these days.

Father Matthew Bagert, a Grand Prairie priest, was picked up on child pornography charges last week. Days later, Bishop Charles Grahmann turned up in the parish pulpit, weeping and telling the flock to "welcome him back," as Jesus supposedly would have. Once again, a bishop counsels cheap grace to thwart justice, corrupting the concept of Christian mercy as part of an excuse-making strategy for the clerical class.

And you know what? It works. If the recent past is any guide, Father Bagert's ultimate guilt or innocence won't much matter to most Catholic men, who remain largely mute and accepting as unspeakable things come to light.

Why aren't the men who run the Catholic church raging against the cruelty of priests who prey on kids? Why do so many good priests and Catholic laymen remain as docile as eunuchs despite it all? Do we think we're not going to have to answer to God for our moral cowardice?

Within the church, there is a culture of what C.S. Lewis called "men without chests." Most of us go along to get along, shirking our duties as Christians and men to protect the weak and guard the integrity of the religious community.

Here we are on the fourth Ash Wednesday of the church's long scandal-ridden Lent. As we examine our consciences in Mass today, we ought to be asking ourselves what our sons and daughters, if they remain Catholic, surely will one day: Where were you when the church needed good men to stand up to defend what's right?

We don't have to stay silent. Look what the men (and women) of Rockwall's Our Lady of the Lake parish – who had enough of their pastor, Father Bill Richard, and the parish's sex-offender liturgist – accomplished by taking a public stand against the pair. Last weekend, the dodgy duo resigned. If we

Catholics were real men and not company men, we would knock as many heads as we had to, figuratively speaking, and get this mess sorted out.

"In all times the laity have been the measure of the Catholic spirit; they saved the Irish Church three centuries ago and they betrayed the Church in England," said the great Cardinal Newman. By that standard, the American Catholic spirit is passive and demoralized. We cannot let this stand. The church, if it is to be saved, will not be delivered, in the main, by today's clergy.

I used to think it'd be great if my boys grew up to be priests. Now I'd rather they joined the U.S. Marines: men with chests, men with backbones, men who know evil when they see it, and who aren't afraid to fight. I am privileged to count a few priests like that as friends. They are true warriors of faith. They are also truly rare.

When the Catholic Church rids its clerical ranks of the Grahmanns and the Richards, and starts producing bishops and priests with even half the moral courage of Gen. Mattis, the vocations crisis will solve itself. Until then, no man graced with valor and honor will long to give up his life to run with a herd of moral geldings.

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