

This has not been an easy year for Catholics like me.

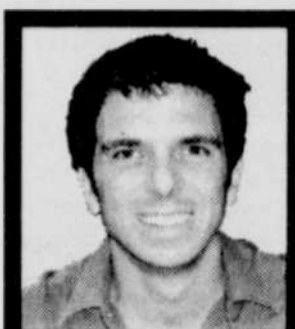
In February, the U.S. Conference of Bishops reported that during the past 50 years, more than 4,000 American Catholic priests have been charged with the sexual abuse of more than 10,000 children. Even worse, only 14 percent of the abuse reported to bishops was brought to the attention of the law, and 95 percent of the perpetrators avoided criminal charges.

I'm beginning to think that kids receiving their first communion should also receive a can of Mace.

The church has already ponied up more than \$600 million to atone for the sins of the fathers. (That's a lot of bake sales.) But I think it's time they replaced some of those clerical collars with electric ones.

The report has had a tremendous effect on parishioners (or, as the church calls them, lay people—perhaps that's where the confusion began). It's gotten so bad that altar boys refer to the confessional as the Panic Room. And when you say, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned," the priest just shrugs, "So who hasn't?"

Response by the pope has been unconscionably inadequate. On the very day the report was published, his only response was to denounce in vitro fertilization. The next day, by way of variety, he weighed in against gay marriage. And on the third day, he arose again and ordained Michael Jackson. (At least Jackson's taking his molestation charges seriously. He's put up a sign at his amusement park that says, "You must be at least this tall to ride



The Gospel According to Marc
by Marc Acito

Heaven help us

The Catholic reformation

the pop star." In fact, so few children now come to Neverland that Jackson has taken to dangling his lawyers off the balcony.)

Back at the Vatican, the pope is looking shakier than Martha Stewart's testimony. It's obvious he needs to step down and finally give poor Prince Charles a chance.

Yet despite this pontiff being adrift in the holy see, I still believe in the church itself. Nearly a third of those 10,000 children were abused by just 149 serial pedophiles. That's 149 too many, but a fraction compared to the thousands of hardworking parish priests who don't try to anoint altar boys with massage oil.

The easy solution for us lay people is to walk away from the church, but that would be throwing the baby out with the holy water. Catholics everywhere need to continue practicing our religion—and keep practicing until we get it right.

Allow me to steal a trick from a certain carpenter from Nazareth and tell you a parable. There once was this gay Catholic columnist who wrote a little column about being gay and Catholic. And there was much rejoicing.

OK, there wasn't any rejoicing, but he did get a letter from a lesbian by the name of Lori Gardner. Lori said she felt drawn to the church but had a ton of questions that the columnist

couldn't answer because he's better at being gay than Catholic.

He referred her to another reader whose name happened to be Hart. Mr. Hart invited Ms. Gardner to his church because it was a "welcoming congregation" and, lo, then there was much rejoicing because not only did Lori embrace Christianity, she also met a woman there and fell in love and it was good.

The woman's name was Joy. A year later, Lori and Joy invited the columnist to witness Lori's baptism and confirmation at Easter Vigil. This was unlike any Easter Vigil the columnist had ever seen.

When Mr. Hart said his was a welcoming

congregation, he meant it: black women in huge hats, gay men in shiny robes, Latina girls in tight pants—it was less like Mass and more like "It's a Small World." And all of it sung in that folk Mass style that makes one think of Godspell.

*There's plenty good room
Plenty good roo-oom,
Good room in the father's kingdom...*

The Mass was performed in English and Spanish, giving new meaning to the phrase "UNENDING hymn of praise." In fact, the Exchange of the Peace took so long it amounted to an intermission. Some congregants even slipped out for a quick smoke.

*Plenty good room, plenty good room,
Why don't you choose your seat
And sit down?*

The baptism itself was an Esther Williams extravaganza, the full Dunk 'n' Sunk, requiring more towels for one night than the Ritz-Carlton.

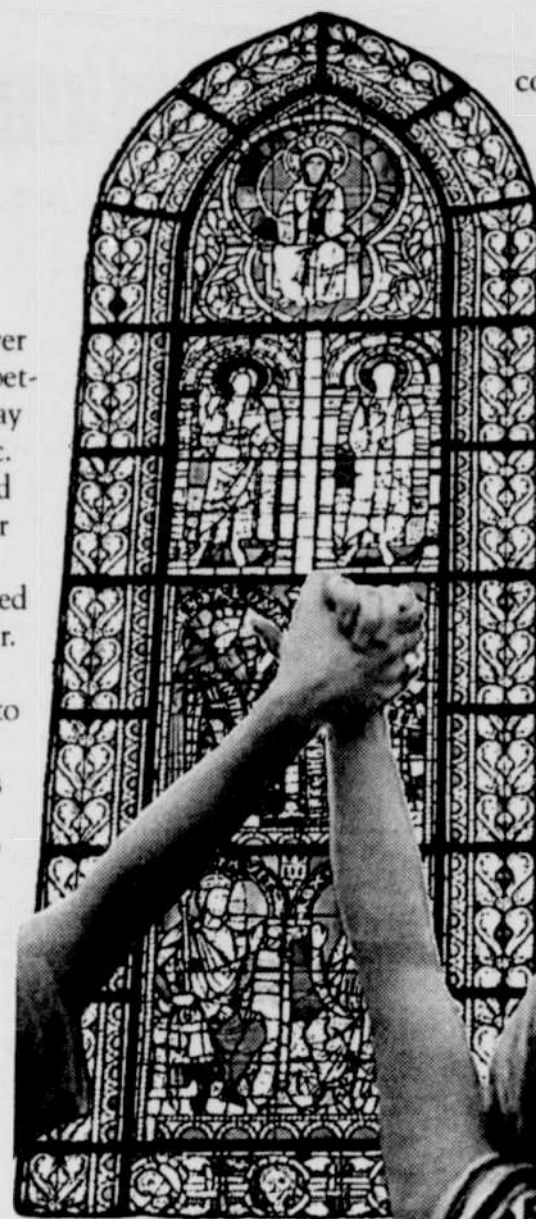
And as the columnist watched, he realized that in spite of all the church's troubles, true Christian fellowship still exists. For it was here, because of a man named Hart, that love bloomed for Lori Gardner.

So on this Easter I urge you all to consider renewing your connection to your own faith, whatever it might be.

Perhaps, like Lori, you too will find Joy.

And that, my friends, is The Gospel According to Marc. ☛

MARC ACITO's first novel, *How I Paid for College*, will be published in September. Write him at marc@marcacito.com.



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GO BOTH WAYS..."**



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