

Archbishop Lori promotes civility in political, church discourse

In a divided country where discussions of politics and religion seem to grow more coarse and discordant by the day, Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori challenged his fellow members of the Knights of Columbus to model civility.

Addressing the 137th Supreme Convention of the Knights of Columbus in Minneapolis, Minn., Aug. 8, Archbishop Lori warned that “the anger and polarization that are sadly so much a part of our culture now also are finding their way into the life of the Church.”

“When members of the Church and – God-forbid – the order use anger and invective against one another, then, to use the famous words of Pope St. Paul VI ‘the smoke of Satan has entered the Church through some fissure,’” said Archbishop Lori, Supreme Chaplain of the Knights of Columbus.

The archbishop acknowledged that there are reasons for what he called “righteous anger,” especially in the case of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and the “failure of some bishops to address it forthrightly,” he said.

“Anger is justifiable when church leaders fail to lead – fail to communicate the fullness of the faith in love, fail to help form consciences, fail to evangelize the culture, faith in integrity – and the list could go on,” Archbishop Lori said.

“But righteous anger is not like the bitterness and vitriol we so often see today among so many Catholic commentators and among so many who engage in personal attacks on the character of others,” he said.

Anger is not righteous when its purpose is merely to defend an ideology, Archbishop Lori cautioned, be it of the right or of the left. Still less is anger righteous that employs “evil tactics” to attain its goals, specifically, the sins of calumny and detraction, he said.

“Calumny consists in making false and defamatory statements about others,” the

archbishop explained. "Detraction consists in broadcasting actual faults of others for no good reason."

"Winning an argument or making a splash in social media are not good reasons to muckrake," Archbishop Lori said, "to search out and publicize the faults of people one disagrees with."

The archbishop said he and his fellow Knights can start making a difference by getting their "own house" in order, beginning with their minds and hearts "that can so easily be overtaken by unrighteous anger towards others people, including those who have harmed us."

"When that spirit of peace which flows through Christ in the Holy Spirit lives in us," he said, "then we are equipped to lead differently, not so much by the exercise of power but by persuasive attraction of goodness."

He encouraged Knights to examine their choice of words in public and private. He also asked Knights to encourage one another to "reject websites that offend against Catholic unity and posts on social media that are in fact anti-social."

"We need to be the ones who stand up and say, 'Enough already!'" he said.

In the weeks leading up to the Knights convention, Archbishop Lori spoke out against inflammatory statements made by President Donald Trump against Baltimore on Twitter that called the city "disgusting" and a place where "no human being would want to live."

The archbishop said he was "saddened" to see Baltimore "severely denigrated" by the president.

Several other bishops, including newly installed Washington Archbishop Wilton Gregory, also later spoke out against the president's rhetoric. Archbishop Gregory said "we must all take responsibility to reject language that ridicules, condemns, or vilifies another person because of their race, religion, gender, age, culture or ethnic background."

President Trump has often used harsh language on Twitter, calling individuals

“losers” 288 times and “stupid” 209 times, while using other insults such as “low IQ.” He has also called people – including his own former secretary of state – “dumb as a rock” and has drawn criticism for speaking about undocumented immigrants in a way some have called racist.

Trump recently said four members of the House of Representatives should “go back” to fix the “totally broken” and “crime-infested” countries from which they came. (Three of the four women were born in the United States). The president later inspired chants of “Send her back!” at a political rally when he mentioned one of the representatives by name.

Other lawmakers have used bullying tactics, including Pennsylvania State Representative Brian Sims, who berated an elderly woman as the pro-life supporter was praying outside a Philadelphia abortion clinic in May. Sims then shared the episode on social media, along with a video asking viewers to provide the names of teens who were standing up for the right to life outside an abortion clinic. He later issued a statement saying he should not have engaged with the pro-life supporters.

Some left-leaning political activists have taken to shouting down government leaders in recent years. Former Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen was among their targets, getting heckled as she attempted to eat at a restaurant in the nation’s capital last year.

Divisiveness has found its way into Catholic commentary, with some websites challenging the pope’s Catholicity and legitimacy, referring to the Holy Father simply as “Bergoglio.” Others openly dissent from the church’s teaching on a wide range of issues or mock those with whom they disagree.

In his address to the Knights of Columbus, Archbishop Lori pointed to polls showing that people are “fed up” with anger and division that “runs rampant in our politics and what passes for entertainment.” He asked his brother Knights to support a civility campaign organized by the Knights of Columbus.

“As the largest fraternal order in the world and the largest lay Catholic organization,” he asserted, “we can have a lot of influence on our society, on the culture at large, on our politicians, and on those who write and speak divisively.”

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