

Archbishop Lori's Opening Address: Knights of Columbus State Deputies Meeting

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Your Father's Oldsmobile

I am probably dating myself, but I clearly remember the mid-1980's attempt by Oldsmobile to market its cars to a younger generation. The slogan ran thus: "This is not your father's Oldsmobile". Those who grew up riding in our father's Oldsmobiles had fond memories of them as large, powerful, comfortable cars that took us on long road trips. Even if, as adults, we didn't want to buy one of those behemoths, we wondered why Oldsmobile would denigrate its own previous product line. Would the new Oldsmobiles really be better than the ones our fathers drove? Evidently not. The slogan didn't work and, as you know, that marque has long since faded into history.

This ad campaign functions as a cautionary tale for many companies that are trying to reposition themselves in the market and for non-profit organizations that are trying to reinvent themselves in a bid to capture more relevance in a rapidly changing culture. This failed ad campaign is also a cautionary tale for the Church. It will not regain relevance in the minds and hearts of the non-affiliated if it ends up denigrating, not only its customs and history, but its essence as well. We've seen this happen again and again in dioceses, parishes, and religious orders that deliberately broke from the past, not changing organically, but in fact repudiating their own history and leadership all the while touting themselves to be "new and improved". Like the ill-fated Oldsmobile slogan, this approach to change begs the question: If all that went before wasn't so good, what's to say that this new version is better?

So, in a bid to reinvigorate the Knights of Columbus in these times of crisis and

rapid change, I don't think we want to adopt the slogan, "This is not your father's Knights of Columbus". In fact, we are not searching here this weekend for a slogan to take home with us. And while it is tremendously important for us to look at all new and time-proven practical strategies and tactics for growing membership and for other areas of growth vital to the good of the Order, we are, in fact, looking to do something more profound, something that the whole Church must be prepared to undergo.

No, it's not a matter of slogans or monikers. It's not merely a matter of better programs, vitally important as they are. It's not just a question of our presence in social media, essential as that is. Nor is it merely a question of new strategies for membership and insurance sales, utterly important as these things surely are. My point is by no stretch of the imagination to undermine any hugely important initiative which the Order has wisely undertaken in recent times. My point is that the Knights of Columbus is a part of the Church in its local and universal manifestations, and it is the Church itself, which, while remaining true to itself, must undergo not merely a change of programming but indeed a change of culture. And what does this mean for the Church and for the Order?

Culture Change

Rivers of ink have flowed in efforts to describe what culture change actually is. We might, for example, study how Robert McNamara effected culture change at the World Bank during his twenty-year tenure beginning in 1968. Or we might read how an airline such as Southwest created a culture that has helped catapult a barebones experience into a winning formula. And yes, we might study various corporations that managed to reinvent themselves by successfully adapting to the public's changing tastes and needs. All that is very interesting and there are things to be learned there.

As you can see, I'm not an expert in culture change but I would venture this opinion. All successful culture change on the part of any organization entails an intense degree of fidelity to its original inspiration and purpose. A company that suddenly renounces itself so as to start over will likely sputter & die. Not too surprisingly, the Church itself has already thought of this. In the documents of the II Vatican Council

which mandated the renewal of the Church in our times, we read these words: “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase in fidelity to her own calling” (II Vat. UR, no. 6). In a word, attempts to renew the Church fail when they break faith with its vital Sources, its core mission and teaching, and its holy ones, its saints. Let me repeat: “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase in fidelity to her own calling” (ibid).

Beginning with the II Vatican Council and across four different pontificates, the Church has been called to engage in a profound culture change, tilting it, as the saying goes, “from maintenance to mission”. Pope St. Paul VI wrote a landmark exhortation on evangelization, on proclaiming and spreading the Gospel, not just in foreign lands but wherever the Church exists. In that document the saintly pontiff said that evangelization is not merely an activity or a program in which the Church engages, along with everything else, but is in fact, the Church’s deepest identity and her primary mission. Pope Saint John Paul II also wrote a landmark exhortation, addressed to the lay members of the Church, on the new evangelization – an evangelization that is not new in content – for “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever” – but new in its ardor and in its methods. It is addressed to people and cultures that are tired, angry, and skeptical, skeptical not only of the Church but also of the fundamental teachings of the New Testament. So too, Pope Benedict XVI called us again and again to the work of evangelization, reminding us insistently that “The Church is missionary by nature, and that her principal task is evangelization, which aims to proclaim and bear witness to Christ, and to promote his Gospel of peace and love in every environment and culture.”

Lastly, Pope Francis has called upon the Church, in his encyclical, “The Joy of the Gospel”, and in many other writings, to undergo what he calls “a missionary transformation”, “a missionary impulse” capable of revitalizing the whole of the Church’s life, revitalizing preaching, teaching, parish life, the priesthood and religious life, the role of the laity, marriage and family, young people in the life of the Church. When the Gospel is heard and accepted, everything changes. When a person moves from being not only a recipient of the Gospel but also someone who is responsible for the spread of the Gospel, then it is that such a person has become a missionary disciple.

What, then, are these successive Popes speaking of, especially Pope Francis? Are they not calling the whole Church to a change of culture – not a change of teaching, not a change of its polity, not a change of its mission – but rather a culture in which the Gospel is everywhere preached and borne witness to with vigor, integrity, and deep pastoral charity, a culture through which people's hearts are set on fire, people's lives are changed. In the process, our dioceses and parishes begin to undergo change, as more and more people become missionary disciples – not only recipients of the Gospel but indeed its responsible proponents.

The Knights of Columbus

About now you are rightfully saying, thanks for all that, Supreme Chaplain, but what does any of it have to do with us and with our relatively brief tenures as State Deputies? If I've teed my presentation up properly, I hope you can see that it has plenty to do, not only with launching a new fraternal year, but also in being a wise and faithful change-agent in your jurisdiction, an agent of change that is pulling in the same direction as the II Vatican Council and four successive pontificates, including and especially that of Pope Francis. In other words, if the essence of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel, then the essence of the Knights of Columbus must be to practice a charity that evangelizes – both its members and those who are assisted. The essence of the Knights must be to address those men, already in the Church, some of whom no doubt are wavering in their faith due to various pressures. We are called to help them address not only their doubts, questions, and faults but indeed their deep underlying desire for God's infinite mercy and love, their deep, underlying desire for meaning and purpose that can be found only in God. In a word, we have to change the culture of the Order such that in every Council, every district, every state, every program, every activity, every decision – the spirituality of men is uppermost in all that is said and done in the name of the Order.

By spirituality I do not mean a vague feeling of affinity toward God – as is commonly said – being spiritual but not religious. As we know, a growing number of people claim to be spiritual but are now unaffiliated with any religion and that is the first giant step toward a practical atheism, living as if God did not exist. Our mission field is those who are remaining or those who are wavering or those who have left but really want to find their way back to the Church. You might think I'm suggesting

that you pick the low hanging fruit and maybe I am. Or to put it another way, at a time when the Church is bleeding membership, the first thing we must do is to stop the bleeding, and then to bring about healing, and then full recovery and renewed health. In doing this, we are, to paraphrase the II Vatican Council, 'increasing our fidelity to that which Fr. McGivney has called us'. That is to say, the first concern of this great and holy parish priest in founding the Knights of Columbus was the faith of husbands and fathers who tended to practice the faith less and to be more detached from it. The men whom he first sought for his Knights were his parishioners, baptized yes, catechized, most probably, but evangelized, many of them not. He wouldn't have used this precise word back in 1882, but Fr. McGivney was out to evangelize the men he attracted to the Knights, to set their faith on fire, to enable them to grow closer to Christ, and to live their faith and their vocation with great integrity and love. I don't know if Fr. McGivney liked pinochle and beer but I do know that he loved and respected his men and their families and he was out and out dedicated to their evangelization - taking their latent faith and making it come alive, shine forth, blaze brightly in the midst of a culture that was anything but friendly to Catholics, in a way that would ultimately win the respect of many in that culture & far beyond.

Not only has the Council and four successive Popes identified evangelization as the first, indeed the supreme priority of the Church - so too has our Supreme Knight made evangelization job one - and not just recently and not just here of there but insistently, as insistently as the Church herself has been insistent. And in many places this has caught on like wildfire and where it has the Order is growing, councils are expanding, a younger demographic is entering the Order, families are living the faith, vocations are being produced, and the parishes where this is happening benefit, and not just a little but a lot, for the Knights have become an evangelizing engine in the midst of the parish community. This is a little bit different than an endless business meeting that is mired in often heated discussions about the minutiae of some activity or mired in personality disputes, jealousies, and enmity among members. This is also a bit different, I would say, from a Council that has become a club, a self-referential club, happy to be together but loathe to admit new members, lest their comfort be upset by new people with new ideas and new energy.

The upshot is that you and your team are called to change the culture, and identify

those District Deputies or Grand Knights who are unmotivated or too complacent and who are allowing their districts or councils to stagnate through indifference. Culture change is not easy, simple, or quick, as you know, and as has been said already, is much more than a change of slogans, programming, the organizational chart, or technology. We are aiming at a profound change that will make us true to who we are and at the same time responsive to the world pastoral need that is out there. There are lots of rules of thumb for culture change, many of you know them, and they are easily found on the internet, but for our purposes, I would suggest four things to take home with you:

1. As mentioned this morning, it's critical to work on your own spiritual life, your own life of prayer, your conversion from sin, a renewal in virtue, a searching examination of one's own humanity as the basis for one's encounter with Christ, one's service and leadership.
2. Culture change is never effected by just one person no matter how great a leader he may be - it requires a team effort. This is especially true since your terms as State Deputy are relatively short. If we are to change the culture you will have to build a team that is committed for the long haul, over the administration of successive state deputies, to making the Knights, in the spirit of Fr. McGivney, responsive to the spiritual searching and aspirations of those men who rightfully should be members of the Order. This means getting your team together for prayer, for retreat, for adoration. It means talking about these matters in a totally fraternal manner. Of course you have to talk about the practicalities but in fact nothing is more practical than praying about and discussing what is most basic to our lives, to our Church, and to the Order.
3. Tap into the spiritual heritage Fr. McGivney left us, namely, the spirituality of our three principles - charity, fraternity, and unity, coupled with love of country. Sometimes, I fear, the principles are regarded as three great ideas that find their way into our degree ceremonies and our rhetoric but in fact, if you study them closely, you will find that they are an ingenious summary of the Gospel we hope to spread. We can't take it for granted that everyone see this or that everyone understands the principles or even knows what they are. It's not that they haven't been proclaimed, explained, and exemplified. They surely have! But have we done so

in a way that prompts men to say, “That’s for me!” “That’s what I’ve been looking for!” “That’s how I want to live!”? Fidelity to who we are as Knights is the way forward.

4. Someone once said that integrity is choosing courage over comfort and surely that the choice of comfort over courage is at the heart of the crisis that is currently besetting the Church. Integrity is an essential element in healthy culture change. A leader who does not have integrity can change the culture all right, but he will change it for the worse or maybe even deform it. Integrity means conducting your office and that of your team according to the highest ethical standards and having the courage to make changes where those standards are breached. It also means having the courage to say what needs to be said when complacency and even laziness are the order of the day. Integrity takes us and our brother knights beyond our comfort zone. Changing the way our meetings are conducted, getting a club-like council to open up, speaking with prospective members, putting faith and holiness at the forefront as we engage in charity – all this is critical to culture change done with integrity.

5. Father McGivney created the Knights as a lay organization and the laity are in fact the primary agents in the new evangelization. That said, you need good chaplains, both at the state and local levels, priests who are our friends and well-disposed to us, to be sure, but also priests who will challenge us to become missionary disciples, who will open doors for us, the doors of Scripture and the Sacraments, the doors of our parishes and dioceses, the doors of hospitality for those men who need to come in and join us in our journey of faith.

6. When your state team and your district team and your council leadership see the Knights as a way for themselves and their fellow men to grow in their faith, to grow in holiness, to spread the Gospel, then the programs and services offered by the Knights will be well-received, especially Faith in Action. These programs won’t seem to come out of the blue but they will be seen rather as ways of helping the Order, from top to bottom, to be an agent of evangelization and a means for men to grow in holiness. This doesn’t mean there won’t be glitches or a need for adjustments, only that a oneness in purpose and mission will help make these programs and initiatives bear the good fruit of the Gospel.

Reasons for Hope

If you think that I may have been bitten by the loquacious bug on my way up here, it would be quite understandable, because my talks are longer than usual! But we are at a crossroads, brothers, and a lot is riding on what happens not in some misty future but now and in the immediate future. In a word, the pressure is on.

What I have identified today is more ambitious than any goal or program but I do not hesitate to lay out the case for culture change based on the Church's mission of evangelization and the identity of the Order. I do not hesitate because I stand with you as men who are filled not only with faith but also hope, who keep our eyes fixed on the Risen Lord and are open to the Holy Spirit, men in whom the Lord Jesus himself can speak, act, change and transform. To him be the glory, power, and dominion, now and forever! Vivat Jesus!