

Closing Remarks, 2015 Knights of Columbus Supreme Convention

Introduction

They say that time passes quickly when you're having fun. I must be having a lot fun serving as Supreme Chaplain because it is really hard for me to believe that it has been ten years since I started serving in this role as your Chaplain. My first Convention as Supreme Chaplain was in Chicago - and while I had attended previous conventions as a priest and as a bishop, I must say that my first Convention as Chaplain was a real learning experience. I had no idea of how much hard work & preparation goes into a successful Convention and I didn't fully appreciate how great these Conventions really are - what a wonderful experience it is to be together as the Knights of Columbus.

After the Convention in Chicago, as some of you might remember, the Order held a Eucharistic Congress and we concluded it by bringing the Blessed Sacrament in Solemn Procession through Grant Park. I was privileged to carry the Blessed Sacrament in a large monstrance - and it was really a moving expression of our faith in the Eucharistic Lord - and the Eucharistic roots of our principles of charity, unity, fraternity, and patriotism. But the day was hot and sunny, and the monstrance was heavy, so when my photo was published on the front cover of Columbia, my Dad wanted to know if I had a backache and Mom wanted to know if the sun was in my eyes. "Bill, dear, "she said, "You should smile more!"

I can tell you this much - we should all be smiling over the success of this 133rd Supreme Convention and over the inspired leadership which our Worthy Supreme Knight, Carl Anderson, is giving to our beloved Order. We can never express our thanks too often!

Birthplace of Liberty

During this convention we have focused on the theme, "Endowed by their Creator with Life and Liberty." And we've been in exactly the right place to focus on that theme - here in Philadelphia, the birthplace of American Liberty.

We are men of faith who love our Church and love our homelands. In a time when many do not see the relevance of faith and religion in their lives, you have chosen to be active, practicing Catholics and you have strengthened your faith through membership in the Knights. In a time when our fundamental freedoms are being threatened, especially our first freedom, religious liberty, many of you & many of your family members have fought to defend those freedoms, and some of your loved ones have paid the ultimate price for freedom. I sincerely thank you, brother knights!

Almost everyone says that they are living in difficult times. My grandfather used to talk about the Depression, Dad would talk, only reluctantly, about the action he saw during World War II, and my generation came along in the 1960's and 70's. Every decade presents new challenges but in our days together I think we have become aware that in these days there are existential threats to the gift of life and liberty with which the Creator has endowed us.

Endowed With Life

Almost every country represented here, for example, suffers from unjust laws that legalize the killing of helpless, innocent unborn children. No organization has been stauncher in the defense of life than the Knights and brothers, I thank you for building a culture of life in season and out of season. Yet the United States and indeed all the work has been rocked by the revelations of just how brutal and callous the abortion industry has become. We realize this as we watch Planned Parenthood represented dickering over the price they might receive for the body parts of aborted babies and discussing the techniques used in aborting them so as to preserve their organs in order to sell them. It is an ugly manifestation of the culture of death and it has shaken the consciences even of those who claim to be pro-choice. Let us continue and even step up our ultrasound program and let us continue promoting the culture of life in our jurisdictions and councils, and to do so with boldness and confidence. Each person, including the most vulnerable, is endowed by the Creator with life.

In many places, physician assisted suicide masquerades as compassion for the dying, the terminally ill, and even the chronically ill. Their quality of life is deemed to be unacceptable. They are thought of as a burden on their loved ones, emotionally and

financially. Better to take a handful of pills (about 90) and get it all over with. As a priest of nearly 40 years, I have stood at the bedside of many a dying patient. I have held their hands as they entered eternity to meet God and have seen the graces of those last days and weeks of life. I have seen also the love of caregivers who not only alleviate pain but affirm the worth and dignity of the dying. Dear brother Knights, once again I thank you for being at the forefront of these efforts to defeat physician assisted suicide and to hold civilized society accountable for the lives of the vulnerable. We are indeed endowed with life by our Creator. We are its stewards not its creators or owners.

Endowed with Liberty

Reading the Official Visitors' Guide in my hotel room this week, my eye caught a headline that reads, "Brotherly Love: Celebrate Family and Spirituality in Philadelphia, a City founded on Religious Freedom." Who knew that Archbishop Chaput writes for the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce!

Every city worthy of the name is founded on religious freedom. Every city worthy of the name appreciates family and spirituality. Now providential that Pope Francis will come to this city to speak on religious freedom and to celebrate marriage and family in God's plan. Again, no organization will provide greater support than the Knights of Columbus as preparations for this historic visit go forward.

Yet, we are living in times when that liberty with which the Creator has endowed us is not only being called into question - it is in danger of being all but extinguished - except that it is never possible fully to extinguish the gifts of God. In our days together we have heard about religious persecutions that may seem to be taking place in faraway places but in these days of global terrorism these faraway places are at our doorstep and these innocent believers who are being martyred are our brothers and sisters. Just prior to our convention, the Supreme Court by a majority of one decided to upend the definition of marriage that God inscribed on the human heart, the definition of marriage as between one man and one woman which is fundamental to his plan of salvation and thus the good of the Church and the good of society. Distressing as this is, we should not leave this convention without being clear about what many proponents of so called same sex marriage want next: they want to disqualify Catholic ministries from competing for government grants,

especially Catholic charities throughout the United States, and they want to remove the Church's tax exemption – a step that would financially hobble the Church's ministries of education and service to the poor. The Supreme Court's majority opinion said we're free to advocate in our churches for marriage as between one man and one woman but said nothing about our freedom to act upon our sincerely held conviction and beliefs outside of Church. Unless we give in to a majority of one, we will be punished. The Holy Father's words to us are ringing in our ears: "The cornerstone [of our freedoms] is religious freedom, understood not simply as the liberty to worship as one chooses, but also for individuals and institutions, to speak and act in accord with the dictates of their consciences." We are here to say that we are endowed by our Creator with both life and liberty.

Our Response

What is our response to these challenges? Brothers, we are Knights, Knights of Columbus. Our response can never be to engage in wishful thinking. Our response can never be to imagine that eventually things will turn around and that happy days will be here again. Nor can we be timid or unthinking or uncaring no matter how persistent and virulent the attacks of our opponents may be. No, as Knights we must courageous go to the roots of the problem.

The roots of the problem are not the politicians or the social media or the news media, or even the general coarsening of culture. These factors contribute to the situation in which we find ourselves but the roots of these challenges go deeper and we can do something about them.

The roots of these problems are to be found in lukewarm faith, in believers who have not yet opened their hearts to Christ and allowed him to transform them into his disciples. This is what Pope Francis calls us to again and again. He calls us not merely to be practicing Catholics and not merely to be followers of Jesus – but missionary disciples, men who know and love the Lord and their faith and who are on a mission every day to spread the light of faith amid the darkness. We know that missionary discipleship bears the good fruit of the Gospel. Four, almost five decades of dedicated pro-life prayer and hard work is paying off as more and more people in society are coming to recognize the humanity of the unborn child. The same kind of dedicated pro-life prayer and hard work is necessary to convince a new generation

of the truth about marriage and to the need to protect the lives of the ill and vulnerable from euthanasia.

The same is true of religious freedom. In our countries, there wouldn't be so many challenges to religious freedom if more people loved God more – loved him enough to get up and go to Mass on Sunday morning, loved him enough to make their homes a true domestic church, loved him enough to pass the faith along to their children and their children's children. The attacks on religious freedom are politically possible because opinion makers see a weakening in commitment to organized religion. When I was growing up, nearly 75% of Catholics went to Mass each Sunday and now in many places in the United States only about 20% go each Sunday. If religious faith isn't important to our fellow believers, then our politicians and judges will not be willing to take the risk of protecting even so fundamental freedom as religious liberty. The roots of our challenges have to do with evangelization before all else.

Suppose it could be said that every Knight of Columbus and as his family went to Mass every week? What a difference that would make in our various jurisdictions. Our State Conventions are tremendous opportunities to be evangelized ourselves, together with our families, and to recommit ourselves to the faith – that's what we experienced here this week! And our Council meetings – we have think carefully about them – we can't simply engage in business as usual. Instead, we have to make our Councils places where men can grow in their spiritual lives, come to grips with the real life problems they are facing, and find the support needed to live the faith and to live it virtuously and vigorously. The more our local Councils are perceived to be places of spiritual growth, the more our Councils will grow and flourish. So while there is always business to transact and projects to do – and these things remain very important and very necessary – the Council should be true to Father McGivney's original vision – that the Knights are a way for men to embrace their faith and to be a front-line evangelizing force in society.

Extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy

As you know, Pope Francis has decreed that the coming year will be a special Holy Year, dedicated to God's mercy. Mercy is the key to evangelizing and evangelizing is key to protecting God's gifts of life and liberty. When people put aside their

caricatures of God as vengeful or uncaring, when they see in the Church the image of Jesus who in turn is the face of the Father's mercies – that often strikes a chord in their hearts and gives them the freedom they need to admit their need for that forgiveness and love which we access by faith in the God of love.

In the year ahead I plan to use my monthly column in Columbia to develop the theme of mercy according to the teaching of Pope Francis so that we might indeed become missionaries of the mercy for which the human spirit longs. Cardinal George was a great friend of the Order and a true prophet. He once said that, 'The world permits everything and permits nothing. God and the Church do not permit everything but forgives everything.' Our permissive culture is in fact an intolerant culture. The answer to this is mercy, God's mercy, and the way we manifest God's mercy is by seeking it ourselves. What would be the impact if, during this Holy Year of Mercy, the nearly 2 million knights and their families got back in the habit of going to confession at least once a month? What would be the impact if we tried to reconcile in a fraternal way as many disagreements and rivalries within our ranks as possible? Or if we linked the charity that we engage in to the mercy that we receive from the generosity of God?

Conclusion

Brothers, serving as your chaplain brings me many blessings as a priest and bishop. I thank you for the privilege of doing so. Every morning I thank God for the raising up of this Order in the life of his Church, an order whose importance and relevance grows with each passing day. I thank the Lord for Father McGivney who was ordained a priest in the Basilica Cathedral of the Assumption in Baltimore, only steps from my home. And I thank God for each of you asking that the Lord will bless you, bless your families, bless your daily work, and bless you in living the Gospel principles of charity, unity, fraternity, and patriotism.

God bless you and thanks for listening!

Vivat Jesus!