

Knights of Columbus Mid-Year Meeting

Introduction

As Archbishop of Baltimore I am especially proud to welcome you, my brother Knights, to what we call the Premier See as we celebrate our 225th anniversary. I am very grateful that you will be taking part in the special Mass on Sunday at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, in thanksgiving for the many blessings of these past years and in earnest prayer for God's continued help and guidance as we move forward with a strong and active faith.

For me this celebration brings many things together. We are in the city where, in 1877, at St. Mary's Seminary, Fr. McGivney completed his studies and was ordained to the priesthood. I like to think of my Archdiocese as a remote launching pad for the Knights of Columbus! This celebration is also a link to our shared concern to promote and defend religious liberty in the United States first and foremost by being the best Catholics we can be. So among the many thoughts and sentiments that crowd on my heart today, I think of the Knights of Columbus and our role of defending the church. I think of how many of our brothers died defending our freedoms and how staunchly the Knights defend threats to religious liberty in these days.

When the Archdiocese was established George Washington was president, the Constitution was new and the Bill of Rights not yet ratified. Although the colony Maryland began as a haven of tolerance for Catholics and for other religious minorities, events in England, the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, brought such toleration to an end. Catholics could no longer practice their faith openly, nor could they hold political office. This state of affairs persisted until the eve of the American Revolution.

So the Archdiocese of Baltimore was established when our nation, an experiment in freedom and limited government, was in its infancy. It was also something of an experiment for the church and both the nation and the church had to find its way. The first bishop, John Carroll, charted a wise and careful course as he sought to

organize the Church in America and set in place a sound foundation.

Today I think also of how this Archdiocese of Baltimore and its leaders appreciated the constitutional guarantees of God-given religious freedom and planted the faith in the fertile soil of our free nation. I think of the many immigrants who came to Baltimore seeking a better life in a land where, for all its flaws, fundamental human freedoms were protected. Today more than ever we realize we cannot take our freedoms for granted. We lament the massive persecution of Christians in so many parts of the world and we are alert to the erosion of religious freedom in the United States, Canada, and the other nations which, happily, we the Knights of Columbus represent. That erosion is taking place due to administrative rules such as the HHS mandate, the accusation of bigotry we face because of our support for traditional marriage, and more hidden bureaucratic assaults on religious freedom in the area of employment law, licensure, and accreditation.

Freedom of Indifference/Freedom of Choice

As we seek to defend our freedom, we, the leadership of the Knights of Columbus, must be clear on the origin and purpose of our God-given freedoms. What is freedom for? How should we use it? As you know, many people today think of freedom merely as a grant from the government not as a gift from God. The trouble is, if the government gives us freedom it can also take it away. Freedom is a gift of God, it is part of our innate dignity as human beings.

Many people today think of freedom merely as freedom of choice. It is merely the human ability to choose one thing over another so long as we don't bump up against the law and so long as we don't run into too much social pressure. Those who say that human freedom has no moral content or meaning subscribe to a view we call "freedom of indifference" - This view claims that there are no fixed truths about human nature and that all moral claims are relative...my morality is not your morality, & so forth. It's a sort of divorce between morality and desire for happiness. We are free to choose whatever we want, so long as we don't get into trouble, regardless of whether it is right or wrong, good or evil, usually we would say, as long as no one gets hurt. In a way, we might not notice this way of thinking because it is like the air we breathe, so pervasive is it in our culture. In fact, those who say that there is link between freedom and moral responsibility are often cast as enemies of

freedom. Others think that freedom of indifference coupled with moral relativism is the only way for our diverse society to respect the competing ideas & rights of all. But sooner or later, no matter how diverse a society is, it must face the question of truth, especially the truth about the human person, about what is right and wrong, true or false, what makes human beings flourish and what leads to their demise.

One who understood this well was St. John Paul II. When the Declaration on Religious Freedom was being debated at Vatican II, he memorably said, “There is no freedom without truth”. He knew that if there were no fixed truths about human life and dignity then sooner or later human freedom would be abolished... not necessarily by force but certainly by the imposition of the will of stronger on the weaker.

Clearly freedom of indifference will not do. We, as citizens and believers, and especially as Knights of Columbus, are called to uphold another view of human freedom – and it is called “freedom for excellence”. We might say that our human hearts are meant for love, for friendship with God, a friendship in which we discover a way of life that is truly ennobling. Even though our freedom is flawed by original sin, it is naturally ordered toward God’s love and this puts us on a path of growing in excellence. It means that the highest and best use of human freedom is to love God above all and to love our neighbors as ourselves, that is to say, to want for them what we want for ourselves: what is right, true, good, and just. We are using our freedom not for a self-centered way of life (I did it my way) but rather we are using it to respond to our vocation to love. Suddenly things that appeared to be moral restraints on freedom are seen in their true light: they are paths to freedom – the freedom for discipleship, virtue, and service.

Defending Religious Freedom: A Work of Evangelization

As long as human freedom is seen merely as the freedom to choose, I’m not so sure that anyone will be passionate about defending religious freedom. In fact, we see a growing secularism, a growing number of people who claim no religion. Some people think of religious freedom as freedom from religion; they no longer see the relevance of religious faith in their own lives and in the lives of the wider society. Thus they seek to make religion less public, less influential, to reduce religious freedom to freedom of worship, and they seek to regulate it the way one regulates

other societal nuisances.

Defending religious freedom is not just a matter of protesting unjust laws & rules, nor is it just a matter of securing protections in our nation's laws, important and necessary as these steps are. We would like to think that even those who do not practice a religious faith value and respect the rights of those who do...and many do, but also, many don't. At the end of the day, religious freedom is best protected when more people come to see its value in their lives. In a word, defending religious freedom is part of evangelization. When people have opened their hearts to Christ, to the Gospel, to Jesus crucified and risen, and discovered in the church the path to holiness and joy, then they are much more likely to see the importance of religious freedom – because they have engaged this God-given gift as it was meant to be engaged, they have exercised true freedom of excellence!

The Four Principles

What do we bring to the table as Knights of Columbus? First, we are practicing Catholics but here in this room this morning, we are more than merely Catholics in good standing. We are leaders of the Knights of Columbus, we have been chosen by our brother Knights to represent them, to lead the Order and to lead our jurisdictions – because they have recognized in us the virtues of Catholic manhood, the virtues of fatherhood, and the virtues of the Order – charity, unity, fraternity, and patriotism.

This indeed is what we bring to the table: we are the largest Catholic lay organization in the world, we practice a charity that bears witness to the goodness of God & to our faith in God; we practice unity which corresponds to Jesus prayer, that 'may they be one, Father, that the world may believe!'; we practice fraternity, care for one another and for one another's families; and we love our countries even as we long for our true home in heaven. We the Knights promote priestly vocations and family life; we're there when disaster strikes or when great need arises; we are in service to one and in service to all.

As officers, chaplains, and state deputies, we have to be convinced that the Knights of Columbus is the best way for men in our parish communities to take their faith seriously, to use their God-given freedom for what is truly good, most especially

living the vocation of marriage and family. To meet our membership quotas, we need make the Order in our jurisdiction attractive – in all the various ways suggested by fraternal services, but at the end of the day, every one of our councils must have the attractiveness of the Gospel. This is how we invite men to use their freedom for good, for excellence, and at the same time defend and promote religious freedom in our homelands.

There is another way in which we, the Knights of Columbus, help defend freedom: and that is by our promotion of sound family life. We've heard a lot in recent days about the Synod of Bishops and, of course, the media has played up the more controversial side of the Synod. But let's not take our eye off the ball. The family is where young people open their hearts to the Gospel. It's where parents transmit the faith to their children, where they receive life itself and the new life of faith. It is also where young people learn how to use their freedom for excellence. Defending and promoting family life is also part of fostering religious liberty.

We need to help families that are in trouble but we also need to help families that are trying really hard to be good families and to support families that are succeeding in living this great vocation. The Knights are preeminently a family organization and so I cannot commend strongly enough to you and your fellow Knights the vigorous promotion of the Knights program on Building the Domestic Church. When our families are strong, so too our Order, our Church, and our homelands.

Welcome once again to Baltimore! Thanks for listening! Vivat Jesus!