

Knights of Columbus Supreme Convention - Remarks of the Supreme Chaplain

I. Introduction: the Election of Pope Francis

Let me begin with words of deepest gratitude to you, my brother Knights. Like my fellow chaplains, I draw much strength from being with you in these days and find much joy in my service as Chaplain of the Order. Let me also ask you to join me in thanking our Worthy Supreme Knight for his utterly dedicated, inspired, and effective service to our Order & to our Church! I also want to express special appreciation for the excellent resolution on religious liberty and for the efforts of the Order to protect and defend this first and most fundamental of our freedoms!

Our Convention has taken both its inspiration and its theme from Pope Francis. We have been inspired by his example of self-less charity – a priest, a religious, a bishop, and now a pope who lives evangelical poverty in a spirit of solidarity and deep love for the poor, the immigrant & the marginalized, a Pope among whose first words were: be protectors of God's gifts! Knights are called to defend, to protect, and guard and to foster. I thank you for being protectors of God's most precious gifts: the gift of life, the gift of human dignity, the gift of religious freedom, the gift of marriage and family, the gift of our faith which is best protected by sharing it. As Knights we protect God's gifts by a charity that is at once massive and personal – Thank you, brother Knights, for protecting God's gifts!

While in Brazil, Pope Francis met with the Bishops of that country. In his talk to them, he laid out the pastoral challenges facing the Church not merely in that country but in all of America, including North America, as she goes about her mission of evangelization. Referring to the story of the disciples of the road to Emmaus, disciples who were leaving Jerusalem after the death of Christ, the Pope said this: "The two disciples left Jerusalem ... they are scandalized by the failure of the Messiah in whom they hoped and who now appeared utterly vanquished, humiliated, even after the third day. Here (the Pope said) we have to face the

difficult mystery of the people, who, under the illusion of alternative ideas, now think that the Church – their Jerusalem – can no longer offer them anything meaningful and important. So they set off on the road alone with their disappointment ... ”

Applying this story into the present, the Pope continued: “We need a Church unafraid of going forth into the night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on the way. We need a Church capable of entering into their conversation, ... able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning ... ”

II. Fathers for Good

At first glance the Pope’s words may not seem to apply to our members. After all, the Knights of Columbus are by definition “practical Catholics” and we count among our ranks some of the Church’s most faithful members. Yet, we should not imagine them to be entirely insulated from the disappointment which so many have experienced, from the alienation which so many manifest, and from the sadness which accrues when people feel that cut off and alone. Certainly many of their family members, including the young, experience this. Certainly the younger men we hope to recruit into the Order may have a tenuous relationship with Christ and with the Church ... not because they are necessarily upset with the anything the Church says or does ... but because they have not yet found in the Church the guidance they need as men, as husbands, and as fathers. Let’s dwell on this for a moment.

First, the men who are Knights or who would benefit from becoming Knights, live in a world where the role of men and of fathers is ambivalent at best. All we have to do is to look at how men and fathers are portrayed in popular entertainment and in so much of what passes for learned commentary. If you’ve ever tuned into to *Family Guy* or *American Dad* or *Two and a Half Men* you know what I’m talking about. Today, men, in their role as husbands and fathers are often portrayed as insensitive to their wives and the worst possible role model for their children. When we talk about so-called “same-sex marriage” we tend to focus on its likely bad effects on children and the challenges it presents to religious freedom. But it also throws up into the air what it means to be a man, what it means to be a husband and a father – and how men and women relate to one other. In the inner-city, most families are

fatherless, the father is often in prison or is unemployed or just generally absent. Many young men today do not complete their education. Many fathers in suburbia have a way of being absent from their families, either because of work or because of other activities that claim their attention. And even the husbands and dads who are part of intact, traditional families may find that their authority within their own families are called into question.

And we should remind ourselves that it is often no longer the case that mom manages the home while dad is the breadwinner - the men who come to our council meetings make a lot of sacrifices to be there, giving up what little precious time is left over when the cooking is done, the diapers are changed, and the kids are delivered to school, sports events, and many other things besides.

Add to all of the above the sense of powerlessness so many faithful men feel today - whether it's the de-construction of marriage in so many parts of the world, or the ready availability of on-line pornography, or the H.H.S. mandate and eclipse of religious freedom, or the marginalization of manly virtues and values - these and other factors tend to make men feel powerless. Yet, the Knights can help them tap into a hidden source of strength, viz., Christ, especially Christ in the Eucharist, Confession in which we encounter a love more powerful than sin, the comradeship of like-minded men who are on the same journey. The Knights can remind men and help them what *is* in their power to do: to improve their marriages, to be better fathers, to do grow in virtue, to serve the needs of others more generously, to be a better citizen.

And the second point is this: when we talk about growing the Order, about recruitment, we need to think about the existential situation of men today ... we need to be that Church that walks with them, enters into their dialogue or (helps get it started) and offers them a sound understanding of and support for their role as men, as husbands, as fathers in our contemporary world.

III. What Would Father McGivney Do?

There is precedent for this. One of the reasons why Father McGivney founded the Knights of Columbus was to help the men of his parish to take ownership of their faith and to support them in their role as husbands and fathers. Indeed, Father

McGivney was ahead of his time in many ways, among them his focus on evangelization and his work with the laity. He saw every aspect of the Knights of Columbus as contributing to the Church's vitality and relevance - as a way of walking with disciples in their darkness, whether it was the death of a loved one or the hostility that Catholics often faced in those days. While the challenges faced in his day and in our day are somewhat different, our duty to follow in Father McGivney's footsteps have not changed. How important that the Knights of Columbus continue to be a way in which men can not only hang on to their faith but find meaning in it for themselves and for their families.

And so how important that our councils be open to these men. It truly isn't merely a matter of doing a membership blitz, important as that is; what really helps us attract men is when the Grand Knight and Council officers set the tone that theirs is not a closed group, a kind of a club, but a group actively seeking men to join because we want them to be good men, good Catholics, good husbands and fathers, good citizens. We are not looking for perfect men - all of us have our faults - we are looking for men who are willing to take their faith seriously.

We have to see the Knights of Columbus as a practical way of evangelizing husbands, fathers, and their families, of helping them to understand what the culture often rejects, viz., how men and women should related to one another in complementary ways, and how important husbands and fathers are to children. The Knights also are a way of helping men embrace their manhood - not the culture of machismo but a solid, sturdy, secure manhood - which includes having the courage to defend life, to defend virtue, to defend authentic values. Men do not have a monopoly on this but they have a big role to play, a role which the culture would have them shy away from. Evangelization is not an abstract disembodied presentation of truths. It is helping people make a connection between themselves and Christ, between themselves and the Church's teaching. How can we make the Knights an instrument of the New Evangelization?

First, Pope Francis keeps reminding us that no one makes the journey alone. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were leaving Jerusalem, they were adrift, walking alone on the road, with only disappointment to share. Pope Francis told the young people in Rio and he told us that we do not follow Christ alone but as a community of

disciples, in our parishes, yes, but also in a circle, a roundtable, a council.

Second, outside this convention hall is a “billboard” advertizing “Fathers for Good”. I would urge you to make full use of this very important K of C resource “Fathers for Good” – if you haven’t done so already – and in your role as leaders of the Order to make use these resources that offer a renewed and healthy understanding of what it means to be a man, a husband, and a father – not to create some kind of a male sanctuary – but rather to equip ourselves and our brothers to relate well to women, to wives, to mothers, and to the world around us.

Third, I would hope we’d continue the work of transforming council meetings. One big step was moving from a chaplain’s report to a chaplain’s message, but more often than not the chaplain is absent because priests are stretched thin. Here is where your role as State Officers and leaders is so important, in supporting and encouraging Council chaplains to take up their role. The presence of the chaplain should help ensure that the bulk of the meeting is not taken up by arguments about the cost of beer, coffee, and hot dogs, but rather about living the faith and serving others in need. An initial effort was made to provide instruction in the faith by the series I did on the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and I hope that remains a helpful resource. But we also need to make the link between Gospel and life, between Christ & us. Our message should reflect Fr. McGivney’s intent – to help men be good Catholic men, active in the Church, good husbands, fathers, breadwinners, and leaders in the wider community.

To that end, I am planning to work with the editors of *Columbia* to devote the chaplain’s pages for the next 24 months to men’s spirituality – drawing on themes from the faith of the Church and citing examples of saints such as St. Joseph, men who were martyrs and fathers of families ... and applying all this to the real-life challenges that men face in our culture today. It’s a hefty undertaking, so I’ll welcome both your prayers and suggestions.

Let’s fold in here a word about the charity of the Knights. One of the Knights’ hallmarks is hands-on charity – it’s not just the check-writing variety of charity. Sometimes the gloom can be dispelled and the confusion addressed by moving from the armchair to the streets – that is to say – to those places where those in need are

encountered and where we extend ourselves to meet their needs. Charity has a way of evangelizing the one who gives. Charity has a way of evangelizing the one who receives.

IV. The Four Principles

This is how I hope we'll continue to look at the Four Principles of the Order: they really are principles of evangelization. I encourage you and myself to continue reflecting on them, understanding and internalizing them, helping fellow Knights to take them seriously and live them.

This too is how we must understand efforts to increase membership in the Knights. It is part of the process of evangelization, one on one, one man at a time, one family at a time. This is very much in accord with what the Order is proposing for membership: "One new member per council per month ... One star council per district ... One new council per diocese, per jurisdiction, per year ... One first degree per council per district per month. There you have it – the power of One! Chaplains have an important role to play in helping to make the Order at the local level an agent of evangelization that addresses the real needs and challenges of men, especially young men, in living their faith and their vocations – I urge you to work closely with them in your efforts to grow the Order.

Let me end by offering a sincere word of personal thanks especially to Fr. John Grace, whose service to the Order and to his brother Chaplains has been outstanding. Let me thank all of you, dear brother knights, and your families, for your loyalty to the Order, your love for Christ and the Church. May you continue to be protectors of God's gifts and may God bless you and your families; may he bless abundantly our beloved Order; and may he bless our native lands as we strive to replace a globalization of indifference with a civilization of love!

Thank you and God bless you! *Vivat Jesus!*