

Remarks to Knights of Columbus State Chaplains

Introduction

I'd like to begin by offering my warmest thanks to the Chaplains of the Order. I am delighted that so many of us are gathered together and that we can have this time to support one another in our ministry in behalf of our brother Knights and their families.

I often mention at these meetings that we are the successors of Father McGivney. He was far ahead of his time in recognizing the importance of lay leadership and in creating a vehicle for lay leadership in the Church's life. Because he was a born leader, he easily could have headed the Order and, in fact, I believe for a short time did serve as Secretary of the Order. But that was not his vision. As a parish priest and as the founder of the Order, he recognized that the laity are "on the front lines" - at home, at work, at leisure - and he found a way to help the men of his parish to be formed in their faith, to practice their faith, and live their faith while protecting the financial future of their families. He didn't manage the Order or control it - but deeply influenced it by his goodness as priest, by his holiness, and by his pastoral care and concern. Part of his genius is that he kept it simple. He didn't propose a complicated "spirituality" or even a unique spirituality. He chose well and wisely principles that are the heart of the Gospel, principles that every Knight could know, understand, and put into practice.

Some 125 years after his death, we're doing the very same thing in the various state jurisdictions that we represent. Our challenges are different than those Fr. McGivney faced in the 19th century but the principles of charity, unity, fraternity, & patriotism are as valid as ever. How important that we root our leadership in the Order in those same principles and reflect them through a robust ministry of personal influence, influence our brother priests who serve as Council Chaplains, influence of the leadership of our State jurisdictions, an influence that extends to local councils and many K of C families. And what we are looking to do is not to sway people to our private opinions or to gain popularity for ourselves but rather to help

those we serve to be faithful to principles of the Order not only in times of calm or when some program or project is being undertaken but also when there is disagreement and discord. Our role is not one of crisis management but of Gospel reconciliation.

Year of Mercy

And that is a pretty good segue to the Extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy which Pope Francis has announced. It will open December 8, 2015 and close November 20, 2016. Throughout the Jubilee Year Pope Francis will be speaking on the theme of mercy in his weekly audiences and other talks.

The theme of mercy is near and dear to the Holy Father's heart. His motto, "*miserando atque eligendo*" literally means, "by having mercy, by choosing him" but is often rendered "lowly yet chosen." On the Feast of St. Matthew in 1953, a young Jorge Bergoglio was touched by the mercy of God and felt the call to religious life in the footsteps of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Throughout his papacy he has sounded the theme of mercy many times but with special intensity in announcing the Year of Mercy, "How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bring the tenderness of God! May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already in our midst." Pope Francis links the Holy Year of Mercy to his call of evangelization - to encounter Christ and to missionary discipleship in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Mercy is not only at the heart of the Gospel but it is a condition for its credibility. The source of mercy is God the Father... and indeed the theme of the Year is "Merciful like the Father..." "Mercy, he says, "is the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness...."

We should not imagine that the Holy Father envisions mercy as "cheap grace" - as presumption on God's goodness, as an excuse not to undergo conversion of life - but really quite the opposite - a living invitation to open our hearts to the love and compassion of the Father which transforms of our lives. Touched by God's compassion, we are called to be compassionate towards others. And so the Holy Year stresses the abundant mercy available to us in the Sacramental Life of the Church,

especially the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is to be administered with great generosity and compassion. And it also stresses the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It is a way to reawaken our consciences, the Pope says, too often grown dull in the face of poverty.

Brothers, we can instantly see that this special Holy Year is tailor-made for an organization that claims charity as its first principle. Following the example of our holy founder, Father McGivney, ours is not a cold and impersonal sort of charity bureaucratically dispensed. Rather, the charity practiced by the Order has a neighborly quality to it.. whether it's reaching out to a brother Knight and his family in time of trouble or disaster relief, wheelchairs, scholarships, or the protection of unborn life. Finding its source in the Father's mercy, the charity of the K of C seeks to restore and affirm our wounded human dignity.

If the Order would take full advantage of this special Holy Year, the first step is for those who in the leadership of the Order to open ourselves personally to the God who is "rich in mercy". During this Holy Year, I would like to stress the importance of reigniting among our brother knights and their families greater love for the sacramental life of the Church. I already mentioned at Mass today the simple step of encouraging as many of our K of C families as possible to recommit to never missing Mass on Sunday - availing themselves of the One Sacrifice that brings salvation, mercy to the world. And now I would like to stress the importance of encouraging brother knights and their families to avail themselves of the Sacrament of Penance, not just once or twice but a monthly reception of the Sacrament of Mercy, or more frequently if and when one of us becomes aware of having committed a moral sin. Along with that I will devote my monthly column in Columbia to the various ways in which mercy is exemplified in the Church's life - in Scripture, Liturgy, Sacraments, notably the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the writings of the fathers and the example of the saints, and especially in and through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. There will be many resources for the Year of Mercy but the columns and articles in Columbia, Knightline, and the Chaplains' Report are "bite-sized" approaches that people can easily read and digest. But the piece de resistance of the Holy Year is allowing the overflowing mercy of the Father that comes to us through Christ and the Church so to shape our lives that we become men of mercy, apostles of mercy, men whose charity is expressed as mercy toward others. This would also

be a great year to settle as many fraternal disputes as possible within our own ranks, disputes that sap the strength of the Order, and make it less desirable to join.

How State Chaplains Can Assist State Officers to Ensure that the Knights of Columbus priorities at the Council/Assembly Level Align with the Pastoral Priorities of the State Bishops' Conference and Individual Diocesan Pastoral Plan

The next topic is how you, as Chaplains, can work with your State Officers to help achieve, as best you can, an "alignment" of the pastoral priorities of the dioceses in your jurisdictions and the Knights of Columbus priorities.

We seem to be a Church that appears to be awash in priorities, and one of the great dangers we face is missing the forest for the trees. Underlying our priorities there needs to be a sense of urgency - urgency with regard to existential threats the Church is facing in so many places; and that urgency that prompted St. Paul to say: "Caritas Christi urget nos." But let's take a moment to look at the trees. The USCCB has priorities - we'll be voting on them in November! And that is true of Bishops' Conferences in all the countries where the K of C is active. State Catholic Conferences have priorities, usually legislative rather than pastoral. Occasionally regions and provinces have priorities or shared projects. And, of course, dioceses have priorities, plans, and projects. But why stop there? Parishes and other Catholic ministries have priorities of their own. If I die and find myself sitting a room others and being led by a facilitator, I will know my sins were pretty bad and I wound up in the wrong place!

Now, let's look at the question of K of C priorities. We've already heard the Supreme Knight describe the situation of the Church today and the urgency of responding with faith, intelligence, and strength to those threats. In that light we need to view the priorities of the Supreme Council, & the WSK will lay out the Order's priorities in tomorrow's report to the Convention. He also does so regularly in the State Deputies meetings at the beginning of the fraternal year and mid-year. In a perfect world, every jurisdiction, assembly, and council would be plugged in. Yet in an organization as big and as diffuse as the K of C we know that's not the case. Take, for example, the program on building the domestic church. It is being done in many places but there are places where no one seems to have heard of it. Then, there are

priorities and plans at the State level. With every new State deputy priorities and plans are adjusted. That is often due to local conditions, for example, jurisdictions where there is a Ferguson or a Baltimore may prioritize differently than places that have gone through a natural disaster. I think differing priorities, on the ecclesiastical side and the K of C side, make sense because the Church ministers almost literally everywhere in the world. And then at the Council and the Assembly level, there will be further plans and priorities, often projects and activities. The more closely aligned a council is to a parish or to a group of parishes, the more likely it is that it will be supporting pastoral priorities.

So what's a State Chaplain to do? First, brothers, we need to approach the times in which we live with eyes wide open. We are not called to be alarmists or cultural warriors but we are called to play a prophetic role, to exercise real pastoral leadership. St. Gregory the Great describes pastors as men in a watchtower, who take the long view so as to lead and guide the Church well and wisely. In addition, I would say that you and I are called to play a mediating role. This means paying attention to the priorities of the Church in our country, in our state, in our parishes, not just knowing what they are but also understanding them. It also means paying attention to an understanding the priorities of the Order - at all the levels of the Order, from the loftiest plans to the most local - again, not just knowing them but also understanding them. And often you are in the position of communicating what those priorities are to the leadership of your State jurisdictions and helping them shape their own plans accordingly. Here, I think we have to take to heart what successive Popes have said about pastoral planning. It is important, even necessary, but it none of it bears good fruit if it does not respond to a realistic assessment of the culture in which we minister, and if it is not grounded in the fundamental mission of the Church: the encounter with Christ, missionary conversion, accompanying those we serve, bringing the Gospel outward to the "margins". So as chaplains we must "x-ray" pastoral priorities and see how they fit together not in some abstract systematic way but rather how they fit together in the logic of the Gospel. We are not looking for everyone, everywhere to have the same priorities but rather to have complementary priorities rooted in the selfsame kerygma.

Let me add a further note. As one who has been in diocesan administration for a long time, I am keenly aware there can be a gap between the vision and goals of a

diocese and the vision and goals that might exist in parishes. Some are on board and others are not. It's probably not much different in the Order. The principle of unity, however, should make us want to narrow that gap... indeed to close the gap between Supreme and State jurisdictions, or between State jurisdictions and local councils. For the Order to fulfill its mission we have to be ministers of unity.

Practically speaking this means being in communication with your State Deputy and developing your relationship with the State Officers. Much of this proceeds by way of relationship rather than flow charts & spread sheets. It also means reaching out to the dioceses where we serve to ensure that the Order is included in its pastoral plans, not just on an ad hoc or emergency basis but as part of diocesan life. In particular, we should urge dioceses to encourage parish-based councils.

Prayer, Catechesis, and Formation - "Male Spirituality"

As we think about growing the Order, we should to think about what the men, whom we hope to attract to the Order, need; and we should think about what the Order has to offer them. Father McGivney founded the Order with the understanding that the spiritual life of men - of husbands and fathers - needed attention. It's not that there is a different Gospel for men and women but men and women are different - a fact that seems to annoy some people. The Church recognizes the equality of men and women but also difference: they have gifts that differ; one is not complete without the other. The physical complementary of men and women betokens a deeper complementary that extends all the way to our relationship with God in the Church. Our culture is ambivalent and confused about sexual identity and I would daresay that confusion is experienced most profoundly by men - by husbands and fathers - who are no longer sure of their role at home & in society. They are also longer sure of their place in the Church... for while there is much talk about how the Church is "male-dominated" - in fact, most of the Church's ministries today are carried forward by women and there are women in church than there are men.

The Order does not propose to address this confusion with "macho" spirituality but rather with prayer, catechesis, and faith formation so that men can be better husbands, better fathers, better priests and deacons, who are engaged in healthy ways with their families and communities, especially through the prime principle of the Order, viz., charity. What we are seeking is to develop men whose life of prayer

and whose practice of the faith is generative – having the ability to propagate itself first within their families but also within the broader community, men who bear witness to their relationship with Christ and engender that relationship in others.

Men's groups have sprung up in many places. They get up early on Saturday morning to read Scripture, to pray, to talk. Dioceses have large gatherings of men who want to take their faith seriously. If you've ever heard confessions in those groups you know what I mean. They are among the most honest confessions we will ever hear. And it gives us some sense of what men are dealing with today in their personal lives. You see in men a desire for genuine conversion and a capacity for great good.

The Knights of Columbus needs to be there for them. There is no doubt that resources abound. Yet getting men starving for spirituality to the table is a real challenge. I think about the importance of the "Building Domestic Church" program which, in its revised form with stress the role of husbands and fathers. I think about the many resources offered by Order and if I may put a little plug in here for my book based on columns I wrote for Columbia, a one volume explanation of the faith, entitled, *The Joy of Believing*. But there are many other resources besides produced by the Order. Most of all, we should try to influence what happens at Council meetings. It shouldn't be our grandfather's council meeting but should include a chaplains message (which should seek to evangelize & catechize), with time set aside for prayer. There should be other opportunities created for members to pray and to be formed in the faith. Here too as Chaplains we don't run the organization but we exercise a ministry of influence and we serve as catalysts.

Assisting Older Knights of Columbus Members to be Open to Attracting Younger Members

The long-term health of the order depends on recruitment of younger members. As we look at membership statistics we see some growth but we also see that our membership is aging. And we do not want to break faith with the men who have been Knights of Columbus for many, many decades, nor do we want to pull the rug out from under them by making the Order nearly unrecognizable. Some of the older fellows worry that the new guys will change things too much.

We need to face the problem that some councils don't want new members. It has become like a lodge with which the members are comfortable. They are also comfortable with the thought that sometime soon one of their number will be the last to leave and will have to turn out the lights. In some cases, there may not be much we can do.

Parish-based councils tend to be different because they can attract more easily young men with families. It is part of parish life and the many of the projects support the parish's mission. Many of us, as chaplains, are also pastors so it makes a lot of sense of us to promote parish-based councils and to work with our fellow priests in our dioceses and religious institutes so that they will be open to the formation of councils in their parishes.

Part of helping older men welcome younger men is an appeal to their sense of fatherhood, their sense of responsibility for the next generation. In some cases that might be very literal, asking them to invite their own sons to join the Knights of Columbus. It might also be as simple as asking prospective members to join in a project or to help a council do the kinds of projects it used to do but can't any longer. Certainly every Knight is concerned about his family and helping the older Knights see how the K of C could benefit their children and grandchildren - spiritually and financially - could help.

Conclusion

I'd be happy to open the floor for questions and comments. Thank you so much for your service to the Order and please join me in thanking Father Kalish for his wonderful work day in and day out on behalf of us chaplains!

Vivat Jesus!