

This Crisis Calls for Knights’

The Order will strengthen the Church by forging new paths that stay true to the founding vision of Father McGivney

by Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson

Supreme Knight Carl Anderson addresses state deputies during the midyear organizational meeting in November.

JANUARY 2020 ♦ COL UMB I A ♦ 7

On Nov. 23, I delivered the following address at the Order’s midyear organizational meeting of state deputies in Orlando, Fla. I encourage all Knights to read and reflect on these remarks about the mission and future of the Knights of Columbus and a historic moment in the life of our Order — the introduction of a new, optional combined exemplification of our principles of charity, unity and fraternity.

EACH YEAR in November, we take stock of what we have done and what still remains to be done. Yet this year is different. Why? Because we’ve reached a turning point. We’ve reached a crossroads as an Order, and in the Church itself.

A rising tide lifts all boats, and there has been a rising tide since the Second Vatican Council. The council opened the floodgates of lay involvement and lay leadership in our Church. The Knights of Columbus has been there at every level of the Church in service and in solidarity. In so many ways, we have been indispensable as the strong right arm of our pastors, our bishops and even, at times, our popes. As an Order, we have nearly doubled our size since the middle of the 20th century, and in recent years, we exponentially increased our charity.

But there is another tide — a tide that is no longer rising. In fact, it is a tide that is receding, and it is receding fast — and it’s pulling much of what we love out to sea. We all can see what is happening; it’s impossible to ignore.

Over the last 50 years, more than 26 million Americans have left the Catholic faith, along with millions more in Canada. In the past several decades alone, baptisms have fallen by more than 40%; sacramental marriages have plummeted by two-thirds; and the percentage of Catholics who attend Mass every week has dropped from more than half to just over 20%.

Approximately four out of every 10 “born and raised” Catholics no longer identify as Catholics, and for every person in the United States who converts to the Catholic faith, seven leave. This year marked the first time that a majority of Hispanics in the United States said they don’t identify as Catholic. Although the recent scandals have contributed to this trend, the involvement of Catholics in our Church — usually measured by attendance at Mass — has been declining for many decades.

This is a crisis for our Church. This is a crisis for our Catholic families. We are not talking about abstractions. We are talking about *our* parishes, *our* communities, *our* councils, *our* families and *our* friends.

And this is a crisis for our Order. The hard reality is that the Knights of Columbus is not immune to these trends. You know as well as I do that we are finding it harder to recruit men — especially younger men. And while many jurisdictions are still adding members and inspiring more good works, in other jurisdictions this is no longer the case.

This trend makes clear that our long-term future is far from secure — both as a Church and as an Order. We cannot expect someone else to come in and make everything right. The

challenges are too great. All of us have a responsibility. We must step up and we must act now. *This crisis calls for Knights.*

OUR ESSENTIAL ROLE

Our popes have been calling our attention to this crisis for decades — most importantly when they speak about the Church’s mission of evangelization, as did Pope St. Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope St. John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* and, most recently, Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. We can see why this is a crisis of evangelization when we examine the reasons Catholics themselves say they leave.

First, large numbers of young adults rebel after years of catechesis and sacramental practice under their parents’ guidance. Many of them find they were only going through the motions with their parents; they never really internalized the Catholic faith and now they find it boring. A second category is made up of Catholics who choose a lifestyle contrary to Catholic moral teaching and leave the Church. And a third group is made up of Catholics who faced a crisis and needed help, but did not receive support from their fellow Catholics.

My brother Knights, this crisis in our Church is really a crisis of evangelization — or rather, it is a crisis of a *failure* to evangelize. In a particular way, it is a failure to evangelize the Catholic family and to evangelize *within* the Catholic family. Such a crisis cannot be adequately responded to without the action of Catholic husbands and fathers.

Three decades ago, St. John Paul II told us that the lay faithful have “an essential and irreplaceable role” in the Church’s mission of evangelization (*Christifideles Laici*, 7). Today, I say to you that the Knights of Columbus has “an essential and irreplaceable role” in confronting the crisis we now face as a Church.

The Knights of Columbus will rise to meet this challenge. We will take up our essential and irreplaceable role. We must become again a Church that evangelizes — a Church that evangelizes its children and families and at the same time reaches out to those who do not yet know Christ who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” We can and we must do this by our witness and our charity.

Today, the Knights of Columbus has the tools to meet this crisis on two important levels. First, because of our Faith in Action model we now have effective programs to meet the challenges we face — programs to evangelize and strengthen Catholic family life with our men’s spirituality and marriage spirituality programs like *Into the Breach*, *Complete My Joy*, and *The Family Fully Alive*.

We are also inspiring a new generation of Catholic men by the witness of brother Knights who are true *Everyday Heroes* through the video series with that title. Our Office of Youth Protection offers a robust program to enhance a safe environment for our children, and the film *Protecting Our Children: A Family’s Response to Sexual Abuse* offers families knowledge and concrete steps to help keep their children safe.

We continue in countless ways to bring Christ’s love and concern to millions who suffer and are in need. We provide a charity that evangelizes because it sees in the face of all those who suffer the face of Christ. And this must be especially true for our brothers and sisters in our parishes who face hardship and suffering. We must redouble all these efforts, and we must bring the programs in our Faith in Action model to even greater heights.

We must forge a new generation of Knights — men who see in our principles of charity, unity and fraternity a path to leading a Catholic way of life that can strengthen their families,

their parishes and their communities. Just as our forefathers rallied to meet the challenges of their day, we must inspire the men of our day.

We must reach out to meet these men where they are. And when we do, we must show them that they are called to be men of charity, unity and fraternity. Because of this, we are acting to make our Order more inviting and more accessible. Our online membership initiative has already opened the door to membership where no local councils may be active. Early in the New Year, we will begin offering a new and groundbreaking combined exemplification of our principles of charity, unity and fraternity.

A NEW CEREMONY FOR A NEW ERA

This historic new ceremonial is rooted in our past and tailored to our present. It will inspire more men to join us. Most of all, it is essential to the sustainability of the Knights of Columbus, as it will empower us to advance our mission and grow in the years ahead. It is essential to our ability to meet the crisis we now face.

Before I explain *what* the new ceremony entails, let me first address *why* it is necessary. The current degrees are products of the late 19th century. At that time, the Knights of Columbus competed with other fraternal societies. In those days, men wanted secrecy and the sense of progression that came with multiple degrees. That's why our founder and first members initially created a system of two ceremonies. Over time, a third and then a fourth were added.

The idea of a journey through knighthood in which men progressed from one degree to the next was meant to encourage greater participation in the activities of the Order. It was meant to inspire men to seek leadership roles in our local councils — and for a time it worked well. But the men of today are not the men of the 1880s, or even the men of the 1980s.

In recent decades, we have found it harder to bring men, especially young fathers, into the Order. When we ask them why, they tell us three ceremonies are too time-consuming and too difficult to attend. They also tell us that secrecy is unnecessary, and sometimes, it is even an impediment to joining.

Many local councils lack ceremonial teams or the manpower to organize degrees. This means many candidates wait far too long to fully join our ranks. Some give up. Too many never take their Second and Third degrees. Last year, little more than half of the men who took their First Degree also took their Third Degree.

This situation will not improve during the coming decade as the number of ceremonial teams — especially Third Degree teams — decline. Today, our current system is too often a *stumbling block*, not a *gateway* to membership. Today, our current system too often fails to promote a truly Catholic fraternal membership according to the vision of Father McGivney.

Our ceremonials have always been an essential way we teach the principles of charity, unity and fraternity. But today, too many men never hear the lessons of unity and fraternity. The current inability of our system to reach so many brother Knights and teach them the lessons of unity and fraternity must have an impact on the character and life of many local councils. All this threatens the future of our Order. We have the responsibility to act and to act now.

We must find new ways to bring the men we need — and the men who need us — into our Order. We no longer need a journey through knighthood based upon a progression of degrees that nearly half our men are unwilling or unable to take. Today, we need an exemplification of our principles that presents, in a clear and convincing way, how charity, unity and fraternity can come together to form a Catholic way of life for today's man and his family.

Our most recent Supreme Convention adopted a resolution from Illinois to consider combining our current First, Second and Third degree ceremonies into one and removing the condition of secrecy. Following the Supreme Convention's action, I directed an in-depth review of our ceremonials with an eye toward staying true to our roots while at the same time presenting our principles of charity, unity and fraternity in a more clear and convincing way. We undertook an inclusive process with supreme directors, state officers and ceremonialists with many decades of experience in the exemplification of our degrees.

The result is a new ceremony that stays true to our traditions while addressing the needs of our times. Instead of having separate ceremonies, all three degrees can now be conferred in a single ceremony. The new exemplification focuses on the history and principles of our Order. It presents a fuller and richer understanding of who we are, what we stand for and what we are called to be. It hearkens back to the simple ceremonies of unity and charity first approved by Father McGivney. Our new ceremony can be held in a council chamber or in a church with families and friends seated in the pews. They will see firsthand the organization that their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons and friends are joining — the principles and values they are committing to and why it matters.

FOLLOWING OUR FOUNDER

Now, I recognize that this is a significant change. Like so many of you, I have a special fondness for the old degree ceremonies. Yet, also like you, and every leader of our Order, I want to see the Knights of Columbus thrive and grow. The Knights of Columbus needs the men of today. In the 1880s, Father McGivney oversaw reforms that were needed to allow his young organization to flourish. Looking back on those changes, our founder proudly declared: "The Knights of Columbus is the same now as when first instituted."

My brother Knights, I say the same to you today. Together with our online membership initiative, our new combined ceremonial will form the two wings upon which membership growth can soar to new heights. All of this will be supported by a new branding and marketing campaign that will be released early in the New Year. It will focus on how we can more effectively invite men to join us. And it will show that "one-on-one recruiting" is most effective when it expresses our own personal experiences in the Order.

We are making a paradigm shift. Years ago, when each of us accepted the responsibilities of fraternal leadership, few of us thought that those duties would one day include taking up programs to support the Church's mission of evangelization. Yet, such are the circumstances we face. Throughout our history, the Knights of Columbus has been called to adapt to change. Now we are again taking bold steps. But boldness is what the times demand. We cannot shrink from the crisis around us. We must meet it head-on, with firm reliance on our faith and in each other.

Today, we face a great crisis throughout the Church in North America. We are at a crossroads we cannot avoid. At such times, our thoughts turn to Father McGivney.

During his trip to the United States in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of our founder. He said Father McGivney represented "the secret of the impressive growth" of the Catholic Church in our continent. We should be inspired and humbled that a pope should highlight Father McGivney in such a way as a model for our fellow Catholics. We continue to pray for his canonization — that through the example of his heroic virtue, his vision and his intercession, millions of Catholics will be inspired.

Father McGivney's example and his vision can again be the reason for the "impressive growth" of our Church in the days ahead. Father McGivney saw that Catholic men united in charity could form a brotherhood that would enable them to fulfill their mission to manifest Christ to others by their witness and in that way contribute to the sanctification of the world. For Father McGivney, the path of charity, unity and fraternity was to be an enduring path of Christian discipleship.

Then, Father McGivney did something that made all the difference — he entrusted this great task to the Catholic laymen he called his brothers. He could have chosen to serve as the leader of the new organization that his vision and his determination had made a reality. Instead, he trusted laymen, in unity with their clergy and with their guidance, to direct and carry out their own part in the mission of the Church. This is the great legacy that you and I have inherited.

May the intercession of Father McGivney guide, sustain and enable us to fulfill our vocation as leaders of this great Order for the welfare of our brother Knights and the renewal of our Church.

Vivat Jesus!