

Good morning. Allow me to begin with thanks to State Deputy Mike Conrad and the organizers of the Nebraska State Convention of the Knights of Columbus for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you. In 2008, I wrote a dissertation for the Gregorian University in Rome on the role of lay associations in the mission of the Church in world. I chose for my case study the largest Catholic lay organization in the world, namely, the Knights of Columbus. The issue I studied was how lay organizations that enjoy the freedom of association and organizational autonomy sustain communion with the life and mission of the Church. Here is the issue: the Church recognizes that the laity have the freedom to associate, select their own mission, and govern their own affairs. This activity is a true participation in the saving work of Christ. Operating without the direct control of the hierarchy, how does the lay organization exercise its role in freedom while preserving unity with the Church?

Of course, I did not have to formulate that answer. Pope John Paul II did this in his 1988 Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. He proposed what he called the Criteria of Ecclesiality, or, a list of qualities that the lay organization should possess that would assist it in preserving unity. The criteria are five and include, 1. the primacy given to the call of every Christian to holiness; 2. the responsibility of professing the Catholic faith; 3. the witness to a strong and authentic communion; 4. conformity to and participation in the Church's apostolic goals; and, 5. a commitment to a presence in human society. My study evaluated the Supreme Office and International Headquarters of the Knights of Columbus during 2005-2006 through the prism of this criteria, and showed how the Order, functioning as a self-governing lay organization, sustained unity in the Church.

It is not my intention to give you a detailed report on this study. However, I needed to provide this introduction to frame my presentation this morning, entitled “Unleashing the Strong Right Arm of the Church.” For many years, the Knights of Columbus has enjoyed the honor of being called the Strong Right Arm of the Church. The Strong Right Arm of the Church refers to many things, and first among them is the muscle of the Order, the painting, building, cleaning, fund raising, pancake flipping, pavement pounding pro-life and family advocacy efforts that the Order contributes to the life of the Church. The phrase also captures the unity of the Order with the Church, the first responders role that the Order often has when Bishops and priests need something done in the Church, and need it done now. The strength which the Order brings to these appeals is inspiring and involves millions of volunteer man hours, and annual financial support of nearly 150 million dollars. Finally, the Strong Right Arm of the Church recognizes that this is a group of men who will come to the defense of the Church when it is attacked or ridiculed. As Supreme Knight Anderson once told me, there is an unwritten rule in the Order that we do not criticize our bishops and priests. Every priest is grateful for the solidarity the Order manifests to priests. Thank you. Truthfully, the Knights deserve to be honored with the title of the Strong Right Arm of the Church.

With a 128 year record as impressive as the Knights of Columbus, you might wonder what it is that I consider needs unleashing. I see it every morning in the mirror, and assume you do as well. I need unleashing. We all do. The work of Christ pushes on until He returns in glory, which means that the mission of the Church in the world, which is the role of the Knights of Columbus, is not yet finished. Charity, the first principle of our Order, needs to be fanned into flame, as St. Paul reminded his friend Timothy. Charity needs to be unleashed within us so

that the glory of Christ might shine forth with even greater brilliance on the Father's creation and the faces of His children.

An old friend of mine, and a Knight of Columbus for over forty years, invited me to lunch some time ago. He had a few questions he wanted to ask and when he was finished with his questions, I asked him mine: what are the people like who come to the State Convention? They are the nicest people you will ever meet, he told me. What do you think I should talk about? I asked. He told me that when he was a district deputy, he was able to get all the local councils in his district to agree to pray a daily rosary for the end of abortion. From this, he launched into what he believed was the most important work of the Knights of Columbus: namely, growth in holiness. Talk to them about that, he told me.

His insight has become the thesis of my talk this morning. To unleash the Strong Right Arm of the Church, we need saints. God willing, many of the nicest people I will ever meet are here in the convention hall this morning and will become the next canonized saints of the Knights of Columbus. It could include me! Yes, I am talking to myself, to the guy I see in the mirror each day who is not yet a saint and needs some work. However, these thoughts are for you as well and I hope they help.

Many of you may remember Father Gabriel O'Donnell, the postulator for the cause of Fr. Michael J. McGivney. He was also the head of Catholic Information Service for the Order, and had a monthly column in *Columbia* magazine for several years. I met with him during one of my visits to New Haven, and asked him about holiness in the Knights of Columbus. He told me, 'Father, Knights are uncomfortable with the word holiness. It conveys to them an image of plaster of

paris saints in dimly lit churches. Knights just want to be good Catholics, good fathers, good husbands,' he explained. Some people might consider this vision rather modest and unassuming. For Father O'Donnell, this was a heroic path to sanctity. Whatever words are used to describe how the Knights as a group perceive holiness, something is evident: there is a desire in the men for goodness, and this needs to be tapped, fueled and freed so that the Knights of Columbus becomes a burning furnace of charity in the world today.

Here is an outline of what follows: First, I want to define holiness, especially for the layperson. Next, I want to show the relationship between holiness and the lay apostolate. Finally, I want to propose that holiness, as the root of fruitfulness, will be the means of unleashing the Strong Right Arm of the Church.

Holiness. Despite the discomfort the word holiness might evoke in the minds of some Knights, it is the vocabulary of the Church, and thus it helps to define it and use it, so that our desire to be good Catholic gentlemen, good husbands and good fathers can be furthered in union with the mind of the Church. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council began their treatment on the call of everyone in the Church to holiness with the insight that the Church is holy in a way that will never fail because she is the bride of Christ. Christ, who alone is holy, gave Himself up for the Church, to sanctify her, to make her holy, to enable her to be the temple of the Holy Spirit--His Spirit--for the glory of God. We participate in the quality of holiness because the Church is holy and we are the Church, the bride of Christ.

The most precise definition of holiness is something that should cause no alarm to a Knight of Columbus. Holiness, wrote the Fathers of the Council, is the perfection of charity. Christ's command to become perfect as our heavenly Father

is perfect means to live the life of God, Who is love. Holiness therefore, is the work of perfecting within ourselves the life of love, toward God and one another. Lest we despair at the very outset of this journey, the words of the Council Fathers strengthen us. “Christ,” wrote the Fathers of the Council, “stands as the author and finisher of this holiness of life.” As author, He sends His Spirit into our lives according to His purpose and grace. This is not our own doing; it is Christ’s. In baptism, we are justified in the Lord Jesus, becoming sons of God and sharers in His divine nature. In this way, we are truly made holy. Echoing the teaching of Vatican Council II, Pope John Paul II taught that holiness is the first and fundamental vocation received by the baptized person, a sure sign of a disciple of the Lord. Jesus’ gift of the Spirit further inspires us from within to love God with our whole heart and soul, our mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as Christ loves them. In this way, holiness within us grows, conforming us to His life and radiating His love in the world.

As the finisher of holiness, we acknowledge that God alone sanctifies, God alone can take this clay we call our human existence, and perfect it. As we begin to see more clearly the rule of sin in us, the damage that sin has done to us, the barriers to love that sin has created in us, we appreciate more our entire dependence on God for the gift of holiness and any progress we make in it. We are bound to pray each day that God will forgive us our trespasses. We are lost without Him. May it be His good pleasure to finish the work in our souls here on earth, but it may be necessary that some elements of this work will be completed only after death. It is the expression of His abundant mercy that He seeks not the death of the sinner, but brings to perfection the work He began in us, providing we remain steadfast in our love for Him.

Having received the gift of holiness from God, it is our task to sustain it, to cooperate with God's action in our lives and allow holiness to deepen. The wisdom and experience of the Church assists us in identifying the path of holiness through the lives of those who achieved this state, whom we call saints. The faith of our fathers has shown that holiness is deepened and preserved by contemplation on the Word of God; participation in the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Eucharist and penance, prayer, self denial, service to others, and the cultivation of the life of virtue.

Holiness is deepened first through what some have called Radiation Therapy. What they are referring to is time spent before the Blessed Sacrament, time spent in prayer, either liturgical or private prayer, and time spent in reading and meditating on the Word of God. In prayer we encounter the One who is holy, in meditating on the Word of God, we hear the Holy One speak. In our sacraments, we receive the One who is the source of all holiness. These activities, done for love of God, expose us to His burning love, which penetrates our minds, our souls, our hearts. In this way, He refashions us like gold is refashioned by fire, to become even more pure, and strong, and brilliant. As the prayer of our liturgy on Holy Thursday expressed it, to love God is to be made holy, and these three activities: prayer, meditation on His Word and reception of the sacraments are the means He has provided for us to love Him and experience His love. Holiness is inaccessible without radiation therapy.

The other three behaviors important for our growth in holiness, namely self-denial, sacrifice and the cultivation of virtues can be practiced in the environments of one's home, business, and social spheres. Opportunities for these activities are present on a continuous basis in our daily living. In truth, every daily task, act, and

interaction can become a vehicle for perfecting the life of charity within us. Holiness consists in discerning wisely these daily experiences, judging prudently what should be done, and walking faithfully in love. This is growth in holiness. Nothing more, nothing less, accessible and attainable for all.

You might wonder, “Father, if it is so doable, why aren’t more people doing it, and why do I find it so difficult?” The answer, in part, lies in the great separation that has taken place in our time between faith and life. We experience life as if we live in two distinct worlds: the first is the world of daily living, of work, of wife and children, of household responsibilities, of social activities, and the second is the world of my faith, which has become largely a private, personal matter.

Sometimes these worlds interpenetrate, when a 9-11 happens or a Katrina hurricane hits. It is then we experience how vulnerable we are to the forces of man and nature, and that we need Someone greater than ourselves to protect us. These events also offer the experience of the profound solidarity that exists among us, that we all are responsible for all. However, the affairs of the world soon assert themselves against the meaning of these matters, and in short order, our focus returns again to the daily living of jobs, and soccer games, and the Tuesday night card party. All of these things are good, but lacking meaning that comes from faith, these activities remain simply profane moments, obstacles rather than vehicles for growth in holiness.

It need not be that way for us. The profane practice of attending our child’s soccer game, for example, can become a vehicle for holiness when we allow it to be an exercise of love, done for love of God. Here we take up the responsibility for the formation of virtue in our child, we have the opportunity to show goodness to our neighbor, solidarity with other parents, and assistance to the coach or the referee.

When we offer a little pocket change to the group manning the refreshment booth, drive our soccer van home in a way that the children arrive safely, and kiss our wife as we come through the door, we live the life of love. We call this holiness. We do not have two lives, but one, which God has elevated by assuming us into Himself. The supernatural reality of our life must function and be as real to us as our every day experiences of seeing a sunset, smiling at a child, and enjoying a cold beer. Living this mystery of supernaturalized everydayness overcomes the separation in our life between life and faith and offers every element of our life as the material for growth in holiness.

A final thought about holiness. I do not believe it is possible, nor is it God's desire, that we make the journey into holiness alone. Rather, the Lord offers us countless people and things to aid us. My experience is that this aid often comes in the form of ideas, from a book I am reading, a tape I am listening to, a passage of scripture that I hear or read, a moment of insight during Mass or confession, and these begin to shape my understanding and lead to decisions about my life and my behaviors. For example, earlier this week, I was reading a homily given by Pope Benedict XVI in which he stated that penance is a grace. Often, we think of penance as a penalty. The pope was exposing its more important reality: that it is curative, that it strengthens us, that it enables us to give a gift of love, and that even to have the inspiration to do penance is a grace from God, since penance will lead to the perfection of charity--that is, union with God. The point I want to make is this: the insight into penance came to me because I was scanning the headlines of the ZENIT wire service, which is a Catholic news service, and saw the article which had as its headline something about a homily given by the pope at a Mass with the Pontifical Biblical Commission. I gleaned this little pearl of wisdom about penance from a swift reading of that homily. Amazingly, I have recalled it

several times this week and it has been very helpful to me. We need Catholic ideas, teaching, stories, inspiration flowing into us. We need to find the resources where these ideas are contained, and make them part of our lives. Holiness is a spiritual reality that grows first through the intellect. We need to feed our minds with ideas, Catholic ideas, holy ideas. As St. Paul told the Philippians, “Brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4.8).

Perhaps the greatest barrier to holiness today is that many people do not think often enough, deeply enough, accurately enough about the truths of God, and thus are not directing their will and their behaviors toward the perfection of charity--which is holiness.

I turn now to the relationship between holiness and the lay apostolate, which will require that I first address the nature and mission of the lay apostolate.

The Knights of Columbus was born in a period of emerging Catholic lay involvement in the social issues of its time. Like many things which happen in the Church, the lay contribution to the work of the Church came not from the central headquarters of the Church, but from the hearts of the faithful, and in the case of the Knights of Columbus, Father Michael J. McGivney and the small band of men gathered with him in the basement of St. Mary’s Church on Hillhouse Avenue in New Haven, Connecticut on October 2, 1881. Their intent was to form a fraternal benefit society, to care for the material well being of one another especially in time of sickness or death, and to support one another in their Catholic faith. The society was legally incorporated in the state of Connecticut on March 29, 1882, as the

Knights of Columbus. By 1895, the password of ‘diligence, devotion and defense’ was coined by the Order to identify a Knight in good standing. The diligent Knight was a hardworking man, persevering in his obligation to care for his family, attentive to the needs of his brother Knights, faithful in his attendance at meetings, with a public reputation as a man of Catholic virtue. The devoted Knight was devoted to his Church and the practice of his faith, a man of piety and religious commitment. He was also devoted to the Order and to its principles of Charity, Unity, Fraternity and Patriotism. Finally, a Knight came to the defense of His Church against the attacks of nativism and anti-Catholicism, not in a vindictive manner, but with civility and respect, as a model Catholic gentleman. I share these historical facts to underscore the idea that before the vocabulary of lay apostolate took shape in the Church, the Knights of Columbus was practicing it.

Furthermore, the manner in which the Order responded to the call of the laity by the Second Vatican Council and the formation offered the Order by Pope John Paul II clearly place the Knights of Columbus within the category of what the Church calls the lay apostolate.

What is the lay apostolate? The mission Christ assigned to the Church is to proclaim the gospel and perfect the temporal sphere, that is the social order. We might summarize this entire work as a mission of love, to achieve the Lord’s prayer to the Father which He offered at the last supper, namely, that they may be one as we are one. In the vocabulary of the Church, this unity with God and one another is given the title communion. It is the nature of the Church to be communion, a union with God and a unity among all those who share in His life. Communion is simultaneously our mission, to bring this good news of union with God to all, that the entire human family might become the brotherhood of the Lord.

The activity undertaken to carry out this mission of communion is called the apostolate.

For the Christian, membership in the Church is begun in Baptism. This gift initiates the recipient into the Christian life, which includes not only the share in divine life and access to the saving grace of Christ, but the obligation to live the life of Christ, which means to share in His mission for the salvation of souls and the perfection of the world. The Council Fathers taught, “The Christian vocation is also a vocation to the apostolate.” No one can be merely a passive member of the Church, but all must contribute to the development of the Church.

According to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, the layperson, incorporated into Christ’s Body through Baptism and gifted by the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, is “assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself.” The Holy Spirit, as the agent of Christ, pours into the hearts of the faithful the gifts of faith, hope and charity. He sanctifies the People of God and gives them special gifts according to His own designs and the needs of the Church. However, since the nature of the Church is communion, and the Church’s mission is communion, a layperson’s activity on behalf of the Church’s mission must serve to enhance and further communion in the Church. These gifts originate from communion and are to be exercised on behalf of communion.

We can summarize what has been said with this statement: the lay apostolate is a vocation that flows from the gift of baptism and the call of Jesus Christ to serve the mission of the Church, which is communion. The relationship between holiness and the lay apostolate becomes self evident. Holiness, defined as the perfection of charity, is the life of love, a love that seeks union with God, a love that seeks unity with others for the love of God. Love is the fuel underlying communion, which builds the Church. Put

another way, holiness, which is love, is the source of every authentic missionary action, which is to say that holiness is what drives the mission of the Church and builds her up. According to Pope John Paul II, because holiness is the first vocation of a baptized person, and a sure sign of a disciple of Christ, holiness is the first gift offered by the follower of Christ to the mission of the Church. Holiness is the first work of the lay apostolate.

An inseparable connection exists between the lay apostolate in the Church and the vocation of every Christian to holiness. Both are a call from Christ. Both find their source in Baptism. Both are an essential element of Christian discipleship. Holiness and apostolate are so integrated, that if holiness is not confirmed and enhanced by the apostolate, then the activity cannot claim to share in the mission of the Church. The Church is not demanding that every action undertaken by the Christian be apostolic, but it does maintain that if a person wishes to claim that an action is an authentic participation in the mission of the Church, it must flow from Christian love, which is to say, it must be holy.

At the beginning of this talk, I mentioned the Criteria of Ecclesiality that Pope John Paul II identified as qualities of a lay apostolate that would preserve them in communion with the Church. The first quality the Holy Father listed was the primacy given to the call of every Christian to holiness. It was listed first because it is the most important. Holiness defines the identity of the follower of Christ. It is the first and fundamental call Christ gives to every disciple. It is a sure sign of discipleship. Holiness is the glue that anchors and sustains a person in union with Christ, and His mission of love in the world.

It is now my task to show that holiness makes the apostolate fruitful and is the key to unleashing the Strong Right Arm of the Church.

The relationship between holiness and fruitfulness is a mystery, and we need to guard against the temptation of trying to explain it fully. The mystery of fruitfulness is Christ, the source of all fruitfulness, who bestows His gifts as He sees fit. Not everyone preaches, or cures, or leads and thus fruitfulness is different for all, according to the design of God and the capacity of each to cooperate with His grace. However, scripture gives understanding to this relationship, and among the most important is the teaching of Christ found in St. John on the vine and the branches. Jesus instructs his disciples that He is the vine, they are the branches. They become life giving by remaining in union with Him. The Lord further states that apart from Him, they can do nothing.

The lives of the Saints bear witness to the relationship of holiness with fruitfulness. One thinks, for example, of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, St. Thomas More, St. John Vianney, the great founders of religious Orders in the Church, the holiness of the parents of the little flower, St. Teresa, and the remarkable event of the Knights of Columbus itself, springing from its Venerable Servant of God Michael J. McGivney. What makes a saint in the Church is not their fruitfulness, but their holiness. Fruitfulness is a sign of the presence of God, of the fire of the Holy Spirit, of a person disposed to be a vessel of God's love and mercy in the world. Generally, it is the experience of the Church that holiness bears the fruit of the advancement of the gospel, of conversions or people returning to the practice of the faith, of social transformation, and of happiness in those who practice it and those who encounter it. On a personal level, while we might not understand the effect of our holiness on others, we know the fruit of its opposite in us, namely sin. Sin causes timidity of heart, darkness of the mind, and dampening of zeal. It depresses the spirit, saps our energy, displeases God and frustrates the action of His grace in our lives and thus our capacity to serve Him.

We do know that God gives us the grace to live a holy life in the place He has called us. If God has called us to the apostolate of the Knights of Columbus, the grace is given to live it fruitfully for His kingdom. I believe this is the case for every man who embraces the ceremonials of the Order, linking himself with others in the cause of charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism as the Strong Right Arm of the Church. The holiness needed to fulfill this mission lies within through the grace of God who has called us to this apostolate. It is ours to live holiness, so that the fruitfulness of the Order might be achieved.

Do we wish to unleash the Strong Right Arm of the Church? Holiness is the way. We need to commit ourselves to it. Recalling the words of Pope John Paul II, a primacy must be given to the call of every Christian to holiness. In other words, it is THE most important work of the Knights of Columbus. We need to make ourselves and our men saints. We do this by prioritizing the tools to holiness in our meetings, our projects, and our behaviors. We begin with prayer. We form our intention when we go into action: this work is done for love of God and love of one another. We end with prayer. We prioritize the spiritual life of the council, through Communion Masses, spiritual devotions, retreats, and encouragement in daily prayer. We call to mind that when the sword was placed upon our shoulder, we committed ourselves to the service of Christ, to union with Him. Knighthood means holiness. The honor and task of Strong Right Arm of the Church, of a Knight's service to the mission of Christ in the world, finds its singular source of power, purpose and action in holiness. Nothing else will unleash us. Nothing else will fan the fire within us. What the Order needs is saints, and it is ours to unleash holiness in our own hearts, and in the council of our brothers.