



Knights of Columbus **Florida State Council**

State Deputy Address to the Delegates of the 120th Annual Meeting of the Knights of Columbus Florida State Council May 24, 2024

Your Excellency, Reverend Monsignor and Fathers, Worthy Supreme Treasurer, Worthy Supreme Director, Worthy Supreme Master Emeritus, Worthy State Officers, Worthy District Master, and Directors, Worthy Past State Deputies, Worthy Regional Administrators, Worthy District Deputies, Worthy Former Masters, Worthy State Directors and Chairmen, Worthy General Agents, and Worthy Delegates, Brothers Knights and Ladies:

Once again, I want to welcome all of you to the 120th Annual Meeting of the Knights of Columbus Florida State Council. We are here this weekend to gather in Fraternity, to celebrate the achievements of the past Fraternal Year, to conduct the necessary business of the Florida State Council, and hopefully, in the process, learn something new to bring back to our Council members across the Jurisdiction.

I can honestly say that the past year has been one of tremendous success throughout Florida. As I traveled around the State on our Spirit of Unity tour early in the year, I was tremendously uplifted by the dedication and enthusiasm shown by so many Council leaders for the mission of our Order. And you have followed through with your commitment all year long. Hundreds of activities have been reported from across the Jurisdiction, including such varied programs as feeding families in need and the homeless, fundraising for pregnancy centers, providing volunteer and financial support for Special Olympics of Florida, and conducting Holy Hours and Eucharistic Processions. And I know that there are many, many more programs that go unreported by Councils. Service programs are at the center of every Council's mission, and it gratifying to see so many Councils taking this to heart.

This has also been a great year for charitable fundraising by Councils in support of our causes. About 70 Councils participated in the traditional Citizens with Disabilities campaign through Florida K of C Charities, collectively raising over \$250,000, with over \$75,000 raised for Special Olympics of Florida alone. 36 Councils raised over \$58,000 directly for the American Wheelchair Mission. Over 100 Councils contributed \$180,600 to support 261 seminarians through the Order's RSVP program. As of May 1, 56 Councils this year have participated in the Order's Aid and Support After Pregnancy program, otherwise known as the ASAP, program, supporting pregnancy centers and maternal homes, and have raised over \$213,000, which currently puts Florida number one in the Order! And that doesn't even count our State fundraising campaign in May for seven pregnancy centers serving the poorer areas of each Florida Diocese, which has exceeded \$54,000 so far! As for Ultrasound projects--\$390,000 has been raised for 7 projects that have been completed or approved by Supreme, with another 3 under review and 2 more underway!

I also know that many Councils have taken on the new Cor initiative to introduce spiritual development into our activities. While we don't have any good statistics on Cor, I do know that many Councils have reported tremendous success with Cor. As Catholics, Knights of Columbus should never ignore the spiritual component of our work, and Cor is great way to systematically incorporate spiritual development into the life of a Council.

It has also been a tremendous year for membership growth. Already, as of mid-May, 142 Councils in Florida have achieved their membership goals, representing 43% of our active Councils, and another 69 are within range of making their goals by June 30. As well, 54 of our 86 Districts have also met or exceeded their membership goals. Your commitment to growing the Order has enabled the Florida Jurisdiction to exceed its membership goals on May 9, which, I am told, is one of the earliest dates that has ever been accomplished! That is certainly not my achievement—it is a result of your collective dedication and successful recruiting efforts! Now, if all 211 of these Councils can meet the other requirements for Star Council, I think we could say this would be one of the best years ever for the Florida State Council!

But we should always remember that this is NOT about the numbers or about getting a plaque for a trophy case. Those of you who have heard me speak on our Spirit of Unity tour know that Star Council goals set by Supreme relate directly to the mission of the Knights of Columbus, and so Star Council is a measure of a Council's success in executing that mission. The more Councils that can achieve those goals, the closer we get to achieving that Spirit of Unity across the Florida Jurisdiction and the Order.

While we take a pause this weekend to celebrate our achievements, we also should recognize that, in the words of one of my brother State Deputies, the end of the Fraternal Year is not a destination, it is a checkpoint. In that vein, I hope that all Council leaders this weekend not only take the time to celebrate your accomplishments, but that you take the opportunity to get new ideas and learn new ways of doing things. To that end, we are, for the first time, introducing workshops into the State Convention. I think we have chosen timely topics—Knights of Columbus Charitable Fund, Cor, Safe Environment, and website training. We know we may not get this entirely right, and so we really want your feedback on these workshops. Ultimately, we want to ensure that we can continue to improve the service we provide to our parishes and our communities.

While we want to continue to conduct and enhance our service programs and charitable works, the upcoming Fraternal Year poses a special challenge. 2024 is, of course, an election year. I don't have to tell you that the polarization and partisanship in our nation is intense, but we must remember that, as Councils and individual Knights, we cannot be involved in partisan politics. This is a very strict rule of the Order. As an individual, of course, one may be involved in partisan politics as a matter of free will, but a person cannot represent himself as a Knight in such activities, nor can Councils as an organization. Even the appearance of involvement in partisan politics must be avoided.

However, having said that, the situation is very different when it comes to nonpartisan issue advocacy, and there is a very grave issue that will be on the ballot in November—namely, the Proposed Amendment 4 to the Florida Constitution which will enshrine unregulated abortion and make Florida one of the most pro-abortion states in the nation. The amendment language is very problematic, using undefined terms like “healthcare provider”, “patient health”, and “viability”, which will very likely lead to allowance of second and third trimester abortions and take physicians completely out of the picture. And the amendment, if passed, would jeopardize existing laws and prohibit new ones that protect the health and safety of women, and would eliminate parental consent for a minor to have an abortion—which would make abortion the only medical decision for which parents have no say. The Florida Bishops have issued a strong joint statement against this proposed amendment, and all of us here should become familiar with their position.

What is our role as the Knights of Columbus? Quite simply, it is to do everything we can to support our Bishops and our clergy in opposing this amendment. This is truly a lay evangelization mission, and we should take on this mission boldly and confidently, under the leadership of our Bishops. But how do we do this?

First and foremost, our Bishops have asked us to pray, for without prayer, we will accomplish nothing. A

specific prayer has been composed, which is already available digitally. You will see prayer cards in your registration packets. I would ask all Knights of Columbus Councils to recite this prayer at meetings and other gatherings, as a constant reminder of what is at stake.

Second, we must promote the reasons why this amendment is wrong. The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops is starting to publish support materials for Dioceses and parishes to promote opposition to this amendment. At least one Bishop has already produced a video message on the subject. Let's use those materials in our evangelization efforts to promote opposition to the amendment, particularly among our fellow Catholics.

Third, encourage all Knights—and all Catholics—to register to vote, and to vote “No” to this proposed amendment in November. Nonpartisan voter registration drives have always been a proper Knights of Columbus function.

Finally, in our evangelization efforts, we should also take this opportunity to reflect on why, as Catholics, we oppose abortion. I am certainly the last person to give you theological exposition on the topic, but I can tell you the way I think about it as a lay Catholic.

- God made human beings in His image
- God took on our humanity as Jesus Christ, and through His Death and Resurrection, He has called each and every one of us to share in the Divine life, body and soul, and to be with Him in all eternity.

What that means is that all human life is sacred, from conception to natural death. So why do we oppose abortion? Because all human life is sacred. Why do we oppose euthanasia and the death penalty? Because all human life is sacred. Why do we as Knights support pregnancy centers and maternal homes? Because all human life is sacred. Why do we partner with and support Special Olympics and American Wheelchair Mission? Because all human life is sacred. Why do we conduct and participate in programs to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and provide coats to children in need? Because all human life is sacred. In my view, every service program we conduct as Knights is based, at least in part, on belief that all human life is sacred.

Tomorrow, we will be hearing more from a representative of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, and they will have a table in the foyer. But let us resolve now to get behind our Bishops in this most important task.

I am proud to be a Knight of Columbus. And I am proud to stand beside all you you as we continue to serve our parishes and our communities. And as this second year of the National Eucharistic Revival draws to a close, let us continue to deepen our faith as we step up our service and our evangelization efforts, and continue to make the Order flourish in the Florida Jurisdiction.

Vivat Jesus

Veni Sance Spiritus

Rick Hughes
State Deputy