

The follow is an abridged version of a talk presented to the NSW State Conference Dinner 2007 by the Supreme Knight Bro. David Huppertz

Brother David was asked to speak on “The relevance of the KSC in today’s Secular Society”

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you tonight about the Order of the Knights of the Southern Cross and it’s role in today’s society.

As you are aware the Knights started in Sydney in 1919 on a platform of Social justice at a time of discrimination and animosity towards Catholics. At that time the order had a clear purpose – a clear goal to overcome these prejudices and support fellow Catholics particularly in the area of employment.. However, can we say that the challenges facing Catholics today are any less. I think not. They have simply changed.

We need to put this in the context that we live in a secular society that has become more so in recent years than it was in the past. What then does this mean for us as Catholics and as Knights?

In an Address to the 12th assembly of the Conference of European Churches – Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria an Orthodox representative put it this way. He said-

“ In secular society Christian Values are being more and more marginalized, God is being driven to the outskirts of human existence. It is now almost taken for granted that religion can exist only at a private level: you are free to believe in God or not, but this should in no way be manifested in your social life. Churches and religious communities are tolerated as long as they do not trespass their own borders and do not publicly express opinions that differ from those consonant with ‘ political correctness’ – Should they begin to express such opinions , they are readily accused of intolerance”

We are faced every day with the pressures to conform to the secular way of doing things. I have for many years worked in the State Education system and did so at a time when education was “Value Free” and it was considered inappropriate to express one’s own values in the school setting. It was inappropriate to mention “God” or hint at anything that may be of a “spiritual nature”. In some schools they now say it is politically incorrect to talk of Christmas or Easter except in the commercial or secular sense.

While I was in Africa I had the privilege to visit a village school in rural Zimbabwe. As you can imagine given the economic state of this country the school had virtually no resources. Given the circumstances the teachers were doing a wonderful job in educating their students. When I spoke to the teachers about their conditions I was always replied to with a shrug and a smile and the response of “What can you do?”

It is important that when faced with the pressure of a secular society we do not respond in the same resigned way – “ But What can you do?”

In his many talks His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI has repeatedly drawn attention to the distinctive and irreplaceable role of the Laity in the renewal of the Church’s mission in the modern world. That mission I believe is not very far removed from that of the Knights of the Southern Cross.

At the triennial conference in Hobart in 2003 The National Conference adopted as its mission statement the following

“ To instill and maintain Christian values and ethics in society”

If this is truly what we believe is our mission then there is a lot “We Can Do” The role of the Knights is just as relevant today as it was those 88 years ago. The objects of our order are just as appropriate today as they were when they were first written.

Having said that, I believe, that we have to some extent reinvent ourselves if we are going to achieve our objects and meet the needs facing us in today’s society.

We need, I feel, to strengthen our capacity to do this. We need to engage in formation which develops a strong understanding and knowledge in our faith so that we are better prepared to face those issues which may undermine Christian values, morals and ethics.

We need to educate ourselves so that we better understand these issues. We need to be aware of the arguments of those groups supporting abortion, euthanasia, unethical medical research or changes to our marriage laws and be able to formulate informed counter arguments on sound reasoning and the principles of our faith.

There is an irony in the fact that we talk about the pressures on our Christian values by a secular society. The irony is, as I see it, that secularism must have a sectarian foundation. There must be a core of values that stem from a set of beliefs by which society is prepared to govern itself – Australian values are based on those proclaimed by Christianity. It is convenient for us to say at times that any behaviour that contravenes these values is un – Australian yet at the same time there is support for actions which clearly go against true Christian values eg abortion and therapeutic cloning.

Therefore it is important for us to work to preserve those Christian values on which Australia was built and by doing so continue to “Promote the advancement of Australia”

One issue that needs to be openly discussed at all levels of the order is the notion that we are “non-political”. What do we really mean by this? Does this stop us from commenting on issues raised in the political arena or questioning our political representatives on social justice or moral and ethical issues?

In the recent election document from the Bishop’s conference mention was made of such issues as –

- Sanctity of human life
- The needs of refugees and asylum seekers
- The rights of working families
- Access to quality education
- The need to achieve lasting dignity and justice for indigenous peoples
- Access to quality health care for all Australians
- Environmental responsibility
- The promotion of generous overseas aid

Is it appropriate for us as an order to issues statements on these or other issues? If we are to fulfill our mission statement I believe it is. How we go about this is certainly something that needs some thought. We can not afford to make statements that are ill prepared that could harm the order. Perhaps a fear of this has prevented us from doing so in the past. Nor would it be appropriate for us to make statements that had a particular party bias.

Getting such statements or articles printed is of course another matter. Wouldn’t it be great if for example the catholic press came to us for comment on social issues. Of course such statements can bring hash criticism that we need to be prepared for. It is interesting, and goes back to the statement of Bishop Hilarion. When the Australian Bishops put out a statement concerning the recent Government actions in Aboriginal Communities, The headlines bellowed – “Bishops accuse Government of being racist.”

I mentioned in my address at the triennial conference in Adelaide about the need to be visual, vocal and vibrant. We need to see and be seen. We need to see when action needs to be taken which means we need to be aware. We need to be seen in action. We need to be heard speaking in way which shows confidence in our faith. We must be vibrant and enthusiastic in our commitment to the church and our order.

Some would however be quick to remind us that the order was once such a vibrant organization. Now, unfortunately there seems to be a wide and growing perception that the order is tired, too old and in decline. The sad thing is that this is not only an outside perception but also one that is often heard from within our own ranks. Brothers this is only so if we believe it to be so. I for one don't believe this to be so and I feel strongly that if any of you did you wouldn't be sitting here tonight. The strength and future of our order lies with us. We have to be strong in our faith and loyal to our mission and our objects.

88 years ago the needs facing Catholic men and their families were identified and action was taken to address them. The order was born. I believe that the needs facing Catholic men today may not necessarily be the same but are just as great. As a prominent lay men's organization within the church it is our responsibility to look at ways in which we can address these issues and give support to our brothers in faith. Some of these issues I see as being –

- The break down of the family and the trauma and pressure this can cause.
- Fathers as single parents
- The pressures caused by unemployment, retrenchment, unreasonable work expectations.
- The need for catholic men to have the opportunity to explore and grow in their faith in the company of other Catholic men.
- The loneliness that can be faced in old age.

I'm sure that if we were to brainstorm this tonight we could add considerably to this list.

The opportunities are there for us to reach out to men faced with these situation whom I am sure would be comforted by knowing that others care about their problems. There are many Catholic men who sit at the margin of their religion not fully participating in church life for one reason or another – some I have met even feel marginalized by the church itself. Surely these are men we could be trying to reach out to. I am confident that if we were seen to be putting our faith into action in this way men would be ASKING to join our ranks.

Is the Knights of the Southern Cross still relevant in today's secular society? Absolutely!! – Not only is it relevant but it is vital that it continues to play it's important role in fostering, maintaining and strengthening our Christian way of life. We can all do this as individuals but we can be more effective if we do it as part of a strong unified organization. We do need to grow to meet these changing time. We need strength of loyalty, discernment and unity. But above all we need to act with a strong sense of fraternity and with joy of serving.

As Cardinal Bertone, Secretary of State to his Holiness said in his address to the recent convention of the Knights of Columbus.

“ There are two recurring themes in Pope Benedicts' teachings which are absolutely essential for the animation of the entire lives of the lay faithful 'friendship and Joy' These I believe are the keys for grasping Pope Benedicts' thoughts on what it means to translate faith into action”

In this spirit I wish you all great joy as to fulfill your vocations as lay men and women in God's service.
Thank You