

**Homily for the Knights of Columbus 4th Degree Exemplification Mass
January 31, 2015
4th Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year B**

**St. Aloysius Parish
Springfield, IL**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: of the many duties that I undertake as a bishop, one of the most frequent is visiting various parishes to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation to the young people of our diocese. Before each Confirmation, I take the opportunity to meet with the candidates, during which I explain some of the symbols of our faith, in particular, the symbols that are a part of my vesture as a bishop and the symbols used in the Rite of Confirmation. I explain to the candidates that the Catholic Church is full of symbols and that it is important for us to understand these symbols as they help to deepen our understanding and experience of what we believe.

At this Mass, we are celebrating several members of the Knights of Columbus who have entered into the Fourth Degree of the Order. Many people, when they hear of the 4th Degree, immediately think of the visible symbols of that degree, namely the colorful uniforms and the swords that

some of its members wear for various honor guards. While this is an important part of what the 4th Degree does, it is only a part of what it means to be a part of this honored group of Knights.

The more universal symbol for the 4th Degree is the special emblem that is associated with it, a symbol which depicts a dove hovering over the earth. Every aspect of this relatively simple symbol has meaning as it relates to the role of the 4th Degree of the Knights. I'd like to focus on one part of that emblem as it gives a good focus on what is expected of these men who make up this group.

The symbol that I would like to focus on is the red cross that lies underneath the dove and the globe on the emblem. The Cross is an important symbol for all of Christianity, as it is our sign of victory, for through that Holy Cross, Christ has redeemed the world. But there is more to the story of the Cross on the emblem. The cross is a variation of the Crusader's Cross, a symbol which was found on those who participated in the Crusades to save the Holy Land from unjust aggressors in the Middle Ages.

The Crusades have been viewed by many as a black mark on the history of the Church, and so it may seem a little odd that this symbol has

been incorporated in the emblem of the 4th Degree. The popular opinion is that the Crusades were an act of religious intolerance on the part of Christians who tried to seize land and force non-Christians to convert to the faith. This does not seem to match the spirit of the Knights of Columbus.

Dr. Thomas Madden from St. Louis University, a leading expert in the study of the Crusades, states that such perceptions are simply not true. While it is true that some of the actions of the Crusaders were unjust and quite sinful, the initial motivation behind the Crusades was to protect Christians from the unjust aggression of those who were threatening Christianity. In an article in *First Things* magazine in 2009, Dr. Madden wrote that “[a]ll the Crusades met the criteria of just wars. They came about in reaction to attacks against Christians or their Church.”¹

When understood from this perspective, we can see how fitting the symbol of the Crusader’s Cross is to the emblem of the 4th Degree of the Knights of Columbus. An important part of the charge of the 4th Degree is to “hold unwaveringly to what is right and honorable, working to keep God in the civic arena, serving the life of the Church, and defending laws that recognize the sanctity of life and true religious liberty.”² These causes

which the 4th Degree, and indeed all Catholics, are called to advance are met in many ways by resistance and hostility in our society. We cannot back down from the fight of defending that which is of greatest importance to us, the gift of our faith and the Catholic Church. In that sense, we are all called to be a part of the Crusade to work to protect our faith against the forces that are being waged against it. Unlike the Crusades of medieval times, we do not have to travel far to battle that opposition, because it is among us in our country and in our local communities. It is at this level, in particular, that the Knights of Columbus are called to carry on this modern-day Crusade for the faith.

With the many ways in which our faith is being challenged in our world, it can be tempting to think that it is a lost cause. Indeed, many people have fallen to that temptation and no longer put forth any effort to live or defend their faith. When faced with these challenging circumstances, we who are committed not to give up in this regard draw strength from our faith which reminds us that “for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

In the Gospel for today’s Mass, we hear the story of Jesus’ encounter with a man who had an unclean spirit. Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit

and told him with great authority: "Quiet, come out of him!" (Mark 1:25). The disciples were amazed at this display of divine power, an amazement which would have strengthened their faith to believe more firmly that God's power was strong enough to overcome any obstacle. The faith of those disciples would continue to grow by witnessing other miracles of the Lord so that, when it was their turn to continue the Lord's mission, they did not back down from the task, but rather boldly proclaimed the Gospel in both word and action.

These miraculous events in the life of the Lord were not meant just for the benefit of those who witnessed them first-hand. They have also been given to us to strengthen our faith to know of the difference that God makes in our lives. Regardless of how overwhelming the task may seem, God will not abandon us, but will give us the grace necessary to carry out His will in our lives and in our world. This is the type of faith that we all must have as we seek to take up the cross of Christ and confront the challenges that face our country and our Church.

My brother Knights, you have accepted a noble task of being men who are willing to commit to defending and spreading the Gospel in the world around you. In order to fulfill this duty well, it will be important for

you to strive constantly to grow in your faith, practicing it with greater intentionality and devotion. By staying close to the Lord in this way, your hearts will not become hardened, like the people who wandered hopelessly for forty years in the desert. Instead, your heart will remain on fire with the love of Christ and His Church, a love that urges you to continue to labor and fight for the Church and our country.

As we prepare to receive that love of Christ in the Eucharist, may our hearts be strengthened to continue our journey. May we never lose hope, regardless of the obstacles that we may encounter, for we follow Christ, our King, who has already secured the victory of good over evil, and who promises that those who remain with Him will also share in the reward of that victory in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Madden, Thomas. "Inventing the Crusades." *First Things*, June 2009.
<http://www.firstthings.com/>.

² Knights of Columbus, *The Patriotic Degree of the Order*, <http://www.kofc.org>.