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Thoughts on a New Knighthood

October 25, 2010

United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado

None of you wants to sit through another classroom lecture. So my comments will be brief. Then we can get to some questions and answers. I'm also going to skip telling you how talented you are. You already know that. You wouldn't be here if you weren't. What you'll discover as you get older is that the world has plenty of very talented failures – people who either *didn't* live up to their abilities; or who *did*, but did it in a way that diminished their humanity and their character.

God made you to be better than that. And your nation and your Church *need* you to be better than that. Scripture tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps 111:10). Wisdom – not merely the knowledge of facts or a mastery of skills, but wisdom about ourselves, other people and the terrain of human life – *this* is the mark of a whole person. We already have too many clever leaders. We need wise leaders. And the wisest leaders ground themselves in humility before God and the demands of God's justice.

I want to offer you just four quick points tonight. Here's the first. *Military service is a vocation, not simply a profession.*

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means to call. In Christian belief, God created each of us for a purpose. He calls each of us by name to some form of service. No higher purpose exists than protecting other people, especially the weak and defenseless. This is why the Church, despite her historic resistance to war and armed violence, has held for many centuries that military service is not just “acceptable.” It can also be much more than that. When lived with a spirit of integrity, restraint and justice, military service is virtuous. It's *ennobling* because – at its best – military service expresses the greatest of all virtues: charity; a sacrificial love for people and things outside and more important than oneself. It flows from something unique in the human heart: a willingness to place one's own life in harm's way for the sake of others.

The great Russian Christian writer Vladimir Solovyov once said that to defend peaceful men, “the guardian angels of humanity mixed the clay [of the earth] with copper and iron and created the soldier.” And until the spirit of malice brought into the world by Cain disappears from human hearts, the soldier “will be a good and not an evil.”ⁱ He expressed

in a poetic way what the Church teaches and believes. And you should strive to embody this vision in your own service.

Here's my second point. *Protect the moral character you build here, and remember the leadership you learn here. You'll need both when the day comes to return to civilian life.*

I think it's unwise for people my age to judge the world too critically. The reason is pretty simple. The older we get, the more clearly we see – or think we see -- what's wrong with the world. It also gets harder to admit our own role in making it that way. Over my lifetime I've had the privilege of working with many good religious men and women, and many good lay Christian friends. Many of them have been heroic in their generosity, faith and service. Many have helped to make our country a better place.

And yet I think it's true – I *know* it's true – that my generation has, in some ways, been among the most foolish in American history. We've been absorbed in our appetites, naïve about the consequences of our actions, overconfident in our power, and unwilling to submit ourselves to the obligations that come with the greatest ideals of our own heritage.

Most generations of Americans have inherited a nation *different in degree* from the generations that preceded them. You will inherit an America that is *different in kind* – a nation different from anything in our past in its attitudes toward sexuality, family, religion, law and the nature of the human person; in other words, different and more troubling in the basic things that define a society. My generation created this new kind of America. Soon we will leave the consequences to you.

And this brings us back to my second point: here the leadership and moral character of my generation failed, you need to succeed. The task of Christian *moral* leadership that will occupy much of your lives in the future will not be easy. It will place heavy demands on people like you who learned discipline and integrity in places like this.

Here's my third point. *Guarantees of religious freedom are only as strong as the social consensus that supports them.*

Americans have always taken their religious freedom for granted. Religious faith has always played a major role in our public life, including debate about public policy and law. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution explicitly guarantees this freedom. But that guarantee and its application are subject to lawmakers and the interpretation of courts. And lawmakers and courts increasingly attack religious liberty, undermine rights of conscience, and force references to God out of our public square. This shift in our culture is made worse by mass media that, in general, have little understanding of religious faith and are often openly hostile. As religious practice softens in the United States over the next few decades, the consensus for religious freedom may easily decline. And that has very big implications for the life of faithful Catholics in this country.

Here's my fourth and final point. *Given everything I've just said, how do we live faithfully as Catholics going forward in a culture that's skeptical, and even hostile, toward what we believe?*

Knighthood is an institution with very deep roots in the memory of the Church. Nearly 900 years ago, one of the great monastic reformers of the Church, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, described the ideal Christian knights as Godly men who “*shun every excess in clothing and food. They live as brothers in joyful and sober company (with) one heart and one soul. ... There is no distinction of persons among them, and deference is shown to merit rather than to noble blood. They rival one another in mutual consideration, and they carry one another's burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ.*”ⁱⁱ

Bernard had few illusions about human nature. And he was anything but naïve. Writing at the dawn of the crusading era, in the early 12th century, he was well aware of the greed, vanity, ambition and violence that too often motivated Europe's warrior class, even in the name of religious faith.

Most of the men who took up the cause of aiding eastern Christians and liberating the Holy Land in the early decades of crusading did so out of genuine zeal for the Cross. But Bernard also knew that many others had mixed or even corrupt and evil motives. In his great essay “In Praise of the New Knighthood” (c. 1136), he outlined the virtues that should shape the vocation of every truly “Christian” knight: humility, austerity, justice, obedience, unselfishness and a single-minded zeal for Jesus Christ in defending the poor, the weak, the Church and persecuted Christians.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our life today may seem very different from life in the 12th century. The Church today asks us to seek mutual respect with people of other religious traditions, and to build common ground for cooperation wherever possible.

But human nature -- our basic hopes, dreams, anxieties and sufferings -- hasn't really changed. The basic Christian vocation remains the same: to follow Jesus Christ faithfully, and in following Jesus, to defend Christ's Church and to serve her people zealously, unselfishly and with all our skill. As St. Ignatius Loyola wrote in his “Spiritual Exercises” - - and remember that Ignatius himself was a former soldier -- each of us must choose between two battle standards: the standard of Jesus Christ, humanity's true King, or the standard of his impostor, the Prince of This World.

There is no neutral ground. C.S. Lewis once said that Christianity is a “fighting religion.” He meant that Christian discipleship has always been -- and remains -- a struggle against the evil within and outside ourselves. This is why the early Church Fathers described Christian life as “spiritual combat.” It's why they called faithful Christians the “Church Militant” and “soldiers of Christ” in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

The Church needs men and women of courage and Godliness today more than at any time in her history. So does this extraordinary country we call home in this world; a nation that still has an immense reservoir of virtue, decency and people of good will. This is why the

Catholic ideal of knighthood, with its demands of radical discipleship, is still alive and still needed. The essence of Christian knighthood remains the same: *sacrificial service rooted in a living Catholic faith.*

A new “spirit of knighthood” is what we need now -- unselfish, tireless, devoted disciples willing to face derision and persecution for Jesus Christ. We serve our nation best by serving God first, and by proving our faith with the example of our lives.

ⁱ Vladimir Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good: An Essay on Moral Philosophy*; translated by Nathalie Duddington; edited and annotated by Boris Jakim (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005) 349; original Russian text published in 1897

ⁱⁱ Bernard of Clairvaux, “In Praise of the New Knighthood,” *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux, V. 7* (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 1977) 127-167

ⁱⁱⁱ Note that Bernard, who preached the Second Crusade, wrote his essay *specifically* as an apologia for the founding of the first military-religious order, the “knights of the Temple” or the Knights Templar. The Templars took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, lived in common and dedicated themselves to the defense of Christians in the Holy Land. But as R.J. Zwi Werblowsky writes in his introduction to Bernard’s essay in *The Works* noted above, Bernard was also concerned with “the theology of a reformed and sanctified knighthood” in contrast to the frivolity and vanity of worldly chivalry.