

Address to Graduates

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Congratulations, dear graduates! It's an honor for me to welcome you to the ranks of Institute Alumni.

Today is special day for you — the culmination of years of prayer, discernment and study. And if you're like me, you will think back on your time at the Institute with great fondness. For me, it set my life on an entirely new trajectory. And whether in my work for the Knights of Columbus, or in my vocation as husband and father, I can honestly say that a day does not go by when I don't rely upon the education and formation I received at the Institute.

I'd like to thank your families who have stood with you and supported you over the past few years. I will never forget the conversation I had with my parents — telling them I was leaving a promising career as a Navy lawyer to study theology. Let's just say they were more nervous about the move than I was.

I would also like to thank Father Lopez, Dean Crawford and all the faculty of the Institute who have been your expert guides through the thought and teaching of the great Pope of the Family, St. John Paul II.

I cannot fail to note with sadness the absence of one especially distinguished member of the faculty. I speak, of course, of the late Dr. David L. Schindler, a friend and mentor to many of us here and an intellectual giant of the Institute and the Church. He is dearly missed.

I see in the congregation that we are also joined by one of the great champions of the Gospel of Life, the Superior General of the Sisters of Life – Mother Agnes Mary Donovan. We are so grateful that you are here, Mother.

It's a special joy to welcome Dr. Peter Kilpatrick, whose presence here bears witness to the wonderful relationship the Institute enjoys with The Catholic University of America. President Kilpatrick, thank you for being here.

Finally, I would like to thank Bishop Barres for that beautiful Mass and homily.

I love that the experience of learning at this Institute culminates with the Eucharist, which is the most profound act of thanksgiving that we can offer.

And today we do indeed give thanks for all the Lord has done in bringing you, dear graduates, to this day.

Last month, I had the privilege of meeting privately with Pope Francis at the Vatican. Among the many things we discussed, I spoke of how the Knights of Columbus is working very closely with our priests and bishops in a multitude of ways.

I focused in particular on a new initiative we have undertaken to evangelize and form men as husbands and fathers. This piqued the Holy Father's interest, and he proceeded to speak with great conviction about the need for "co-responsibility" of the laity and clergy for the life of

the Church. He said, and I quote: “This co-responsibility is important. You must talk about this. You must teach this.”

Now, I don’t consider myself to have a papal mandate, but in all humility, I do feel duty bound to do what the pope asked of me — and reflect on this theme of co-responsibility.

This begs the question: What, exactly, is “co-responsibility”? In recent years, there has been a fair amount of discussion on the topic, especially as it relates to one of the principal vices it is ordered against — that is, “clericalism.” Yet, as with so much of our public discourse, both within and outside of the Church, there has been more heat than light. I don’t propose to completely untangle the issue in these brief remarks, but I do want to offer a few thoughts, based on my experience in the Knights of Columbus and my own studies at the Institute.

First, a clarification. No understanding of co-responsibility can ignore the truth that the common priesthood of the baptized and the ordained priesthood are different in essence. In other words, co-responsibility cannot mean what is often referred to as the “clericalization of the laity.”

As graduates of the Institute, you already know well the theological reasons for this important distinction. And you know that any push to clericalize the laity ultimately reduces the Church to a merely human institution in which the most important dynamic is power. According to this view, if the ordained priest or bishop has more practical power, then the laity should demand an equal measure of practical power, in the name of co-responsibility. This line of reasoning is dangerous, and more importantly, it is theologically flawed.

So, if the question of power is not the right starting point, what is?

The Second Vatican Council starts the conversation about co-responsibility not from power but from the Church’s mission — with a special emphasis on evangelization. Subsequent popes, from St. John Paul, to Benedict, to Francis, have each contributed to a proper understanding of this dynamic of co-responsibility. And I’d like to think that the Knights of Columbus has a special understanding of the concept. In fact, if I may be so bold, the Knights represent a kind of micro-history of the broader realities of co-responsibility for the Church in the United States.

Since our founding 140 years ago, the Knights of Columbus has been committed to having laity and clergy work together to advance the mission of the Church. This is one reason why Blessed Michael McGivney, when he founded the Knights, entrusted its leadership to laymen. For much of our history, this co-responsibility emphasized the commitment to works of charity, especially to caring for widows and orphans. It has also involved defending the Church in times of attack from third parties — such as from the Ku Klux Klan, Know-Nothing attempts to prohibit Catholic schools, and the persecution of the Church in Mexico in the 1920s and ’30s.

More recently, the Knights have modeled leadership and co-responsibility in the pro-life movement, the defense of religious liberty, and our ever-expanding works of charity, both on the local and international levels. We continue to support Catholic education, as evidenced by our ongoing sponsorship of this Institute and by our important relationship with The Catholic University of America. And for a vast majority of our members, our co-responsibility involves simply being available to the parish: Knights are always ready to help “Father” with anything he needs — from fixing up the parish hall to providing food or winter coats to families and children in need.

What is true of the Knights is true of the history of the Catholic Church in the United States more broadly. The largest and most impressive system of Catholic hospitals and educational institutions in the world was envisioned, built and led through this kind of collaboration between the laity, religious and the clergy.

But our current circumstances have now changed. Christianity has ceased to be the formative basis of our shared culture that it once was — a truth evident not only in popular culture but in the large number of people who have left the faith or have no faith at all. This means that our co-responsibility as baptized Catholics for the mission of evangelization is more vital than ever.

This has been and continues to be the consistent message from the Chair of Peter over the last five decades. In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II wrote, “Today, in particular, the pressing pastoral task of the new evangelization calls for the involvement of the entire People of God, and requires a new fervor, new methods and a new expression for the announcing and witnessing of the Gospel” (18).

Pope Benedict affirmed and developed this point on many occasions. But perhaps the most emphatic statements have come from Pope Francis. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes, “Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’” (120).

The pope goes on to say, “Let us look at those first disciples, who, immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus, went forth to proclaim him joyfully: ‘We have found the Messiah!’ (Jn 1:41). The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus and many Samaritans came to believe in him ‘because of the woman’s testimony’ (Jn 4:39). So too, Saint Paul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, ‘immediately proclaimed Jesus’ (Acts 9:20; cf. 22:6-21).”

The Holy Father then concludes: “So what are we waiting for?”

This is the essence of co-responsibility: to proclaim Jesus in thought, word and deed. A great many Catholics have embraced this calling, and in the U.S. alone, there are now hundreds of lay apostolates devoted to preaching the Gospel. And some of the most effective voices for the Gospel are lay voices.

Yet there is still a great deal of work to be done, because, despite these efforts, evangelization can still be seen as something someone else does — something those professional lay Catholic speakers do at conferences and other events.

Those conferences are important, but their impact pales in comparison to an individual life committed to Jesus Christ. This is the most effective witness to a deeply divided world in search of meaning, true life and genuine love.

As graduates of the Institute, this is the life you are called to lead. And as you do so, I have two notes of encouragement for you. The first is this: Live the Gospel with others and let that life be made manifest to those around you.

This isn’t easy. Faithful Christian marriage and raising children in the faith are, by necessity, “a sign of contradiction” in these post-Christian times. They run against some of the

most passionately held beliefs of the modern world. A life well-lived and devoted to the truth, whether it ends as St. Thomas More's did or it is blessed with evangelical success like John Paul II's, is the most effective way to convince others that Jesus Christ really is the way, the truth and the life.

My second encouragement is this: Given your connection to the Institute, you have been given a special task in developing and practicing co-responsibility for the life of the Church.

Think of this as similar to what's happened with marriage and the family. With the sexual revolution, our society's shared understanding of marriage became unraveled. In response, the Church went back to its theological roots and applied them to the challenges of the time. This was the genius of St. John Paul II's anthropological teaching and his founding of the Institute.

We need an equivalent clarification of the theological roots of co-responsibility, and, because of your training, you are prepared to articulate it. It seems to me that the insights offered by the Second Vatican Council still have not been fully developed or sufficiently mined, and therefore not broadly taught or realized. Consider that you may have a task in this area as well — and do what you can to help ground the whole Church in a deeper understanding of our shared mission to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations.

As Pope Francis has said, what are we waiting for?

Again, my warmest congratulations to all of you.

May God bless you, your families, and our shared work in service to the Church's mission.

Thank you.