

TO: State Deputies

FROM: Paul R. Devin, Supreme Advocate

DATE: August 21, 2008

RE: Inaccurate Reporting of Events  
2008 Massachusetts State Convention

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In recent weeks, a wave of e-mail messages has been circulating, suggesting that the Knights of Columbus is insufficiently pro-life because a handful of elected officials who are also Knights have not been expelled from the Order.

These e-mails commonly contain misinformation and outright falsehoods, mixed with just enough factual information to make them sound plausible. In this respect, they're a lot like the chain letter e-mails that fill our inboxes these days, which have become so ubiquitous that whole websites (Snopes, and the Urban Legends section of About.com, for example) have been created just to debunk the nonsense.

Here are the essential facts:

A small number of Catholic elected officials who are members of the Knights of Columbus have taken positions that are contrary to the teaching of the Church and the well-established position of the Order in opposition to abortion and in favor of preserving and protecting traditional marriage. In most cases, these are men who joined decades ago when their views were more reflective of church teaching. A significant number of such men have voluntarily withdrawn from the Order, but some remain.

Under our laws and rules, there are just two membership requirements that must be met: one must be at least 18 years of age, and be a "practical Catholic." The sole authority on the question of whether a person is a practical Catholic is the ordinary of the diocese (the bishop or archbishop) in which an individual resides. (In very rare cases, the pope may decide.) If the bishop considers a person a member of the Catholic Church, the Knights of Columbus will not second-guess or ignore that decision.

Many of the remaining elected officials whose views are at odds with the church are from Massachusetts. At this year's state convention in Massachusetts, a resolution was offered that would require the expulsion of the men in question. The resolutions committee recommended that the resolution be ruled out of order, and the convention delegates voted to approve that recommendation. The Supreme Advocate, who was in attendance, did not issue a ruling of any sort, and did not call upon the delegates to vote one way or the other. At no time did he meet with the resolutions committee on the matter. The sponsor of the resolution told the convention that he accepted the vote, and said he had simply offered it out of frustration. In that, he is certainly not alone.

But we have never applied any political test for membership, nor have we ever required adherence to a particular position on any public policy issue, and there is no provision in our Constitution that provides for suspension or expulsion for such a reason.

Once a man has received his first degree, he has become a brother Knight, and the principles of unity and fraternity, to which we have all committed ourselves, apply. If he strays from the precepts of the faith, it is our responsibility to try to help him by means of "fraternal correction." The sometimes uncomfortable truth is that our duty to evangelize must sometimes involve those who are already Catholic but who have gone astray, and not just those who are outside the Church.

In any case, there can be no doubt about this fundamental fact: the Knights of Columbus is thoroughly and unequivocally pro-life. As an organization we will continue to do everything in our power to end the terrible scourge of abortion and to preserve the traditional family as the institution in which life is both given and nourished.

The means by which we pursue these goals will include prayer, persuasion, appeals to conscience and the tools of democracy. We will never let up in our fight against legal regimes that permit the wanton destruction of innocent human life in the womb, and even as we wage that battle, we will also do all that we can to encourage and assist women to allow their babies to be born.