

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 24, 2012 at 6:28am

About those Knights: time to worry

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

If you've thought the recent hierarchical flailing about -- going after nuns and Girl Scouts and issuing dire warnings about the death of religious liberty in the United States -- has a certain Chicken Little quality about it, the Knights of Columbus, the organization that is a principle engine behind the religious liberty campaign, has provided the words and images to confirm your suspicion. Except that the group's latest warning is no child's fable. It's downright dangerous.

As Steve Schneck, director of Catholic University's Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies and a board member of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, explains:

The current issue of Columbia, the monthly magazine of the Knights of Columbus, should give faithful Catholics pause. The cover is Orwellian, featuring an illustration of an apparent cowboy, astride a black horse, with a 30-30 Winchester in his right hand and a large crucifix around his neck. Emblazoned in red across the bottom the words read: "Freedom Is Our Lives." The issue is devoted to mobilizing Knights to fight for religious liberty against the Obama administration.

Cracking the cover, it turns out that the Cowboy With Rifle and Crucifix illustration is a stylization of General Enrique Gorostieta Velarde. In the 1920s, Gorostieta was a guerilla leader in the Cristiada uprising against the dictatorial Mexican president Plutarco Calles. Calles blended the '20s-flavored dictatorships of Mussolini and Lenin with homegrown peasant populism. A zealous atheist, he outlawed Catholic religious orders, outlawed Catholic education, and severely restricted the practice of faith, including the administration of the sacraments. Thousands died as a result of his persecution. Perhaps best known to Americans through Graham Greene's novel, The Power and the Glory, priests were summarily executed by firing squads, churches were burned and looted,

and Church land and properties were seized by the state.

So what's one to conclude from the Knights' hyperventilating?

Schneck takes it on:

A new Cristero War? Rifles with crucifixes? Let's note what's ridiculously obvious. There is no persecution of Catholics in the United States.

Catholics, though only one-quarter of America's population, hold the majority of seats in the Supreme Court, hold about one-third of American governorships and about one-third of the seats of Congress. The false charge that the Obama administration is anti-Catholic runs directly in the face of the fact that the Vice President is Catholic and that more Catholics hold Cabinet positions under this president than probably any other administration in history. Catholics are significantly over-represented in the leadership of both political parties. Catholics are freer to participate in the nation's public life than at any other time in American history?and overwhelmingly do so. By every conceivable measure Catholics are thriving today, thanks in no small part to American pluralism and to the modern protection of religious liberty by government since the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The danger in all of this, of course, is that these loud and well-funded, if absurd, characterizations of Catholic concern are permitted to become THE Catholic narrative in the general culture. The loudest voices are increasingly partisan and increasingly fringy. Schneck notes that the head of the Knights, Carl Anderson, was once an aide to "one-time segregationist" Sen. Jesse Helms and was also a White House operative during the Reagan administration.

When all of this is rolled together with the scandalous behavior of bishops in recent decades, the damage done to the church is incalculable. We are losing the best and brightest; young people are avoiding our churches as if there were something dangerous about them; we are taken less and less seriously each time our leaders or their surrogates name a new phantasm to explain what's wrong with us. And what's wrong with us is fairly evident to most. Our house is in great disorder and the cause of that disorder is mostly an inside job. Is there a bishop, just one, who might stand up to this latest Knights' excess and say: "They don't speak for us or the church!"

Read the rest of Scheck's analysis here, and be glad our institutions yet accommodate voices of reason who can point out the real dangers in our midst.

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