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A note for Knights of Columbus

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 4, 2006 All Things Catholic

Even if they had no financial resources whatsoever, the Knights of Columbus would still be an important force in Catholic affairs. With 1.7 million members, principally in the United States, they are the largest lay Catholic organization in the world. Supreme Knight Carl Anderson is an influential Catholic intellectual and speaker. Members of the Knights are known around the world for their commitment, perhaps especially to pro-life causes.

Yet there's no doubt that the Knights' financial clout puts the group in a class by itself. A fresh reminder came this week, as some 1,000 Knights gathered in Orlando, Florida, for their 124th Supreme Convention. The gathering attracted some 80 bishops and archbishops, including ten cardinals.

During the meeting, Anderson informed the Knights that their insurance program, which boasts a staff of 1,400 agents, has grown by nearly 50 percent in the last five years. It now has $60 billion of life insurance in force, and a staggering $13 billion in assets. (Among other things, that figure towers over the Vatican's roughly $800 million in assets).

During the past decade, the Knights have donated more than $1.208 billion to charity; this year alone, the group has given $140 million. Yet the Knights also contribute to myriad ecclesiastical causes, making friends in high places in a way that other Catholic groups can only dream about.

A brief story illustrates the point.

Just after I arrived in Rome in the summer of 2000, a long-awaited refurbishing of the lighting system in the *scavi*, the excavations below St. Peter's Basilica where the bones of St. Peter are believed to rest, was unveiled. I didn't sign up for a tour for journalists, busy with my Italian classes. Shortly thereafter, however, I got a note from the home office saying NCR wanted a cover story on the *scavi* in a matter of days. I feared I had blown it, since normally it takes two weeks to get a tour. I faxed in an emergency request, however, and within five minutes I got a phone call asking if 8:00 am the following day would be convenient; I asked if my wife could join me, and was told "of course."

We arrived just before 8:00, and found a group of English-speaking pilgrims assembling. We assumed we had simply been added to the group, so we purchased tickets and waited. Just as the group was departing, however, a troika of distinguished-looking men in dark suits approached, calling out my name. It turned out to be Pietro Zander, from the Vatican's excavations office, along with Nazzareno Gabrielli, the avuncular director of scientific research for the Vatican museums, and one of Gabrielli's aides.

Gabrielli spent the next two hours with Shannon and me, explaining complicated points of microbiology and art history, taking us into sealed-off nooks and crannies that ordinary tourists never see. At one point, we stepped inside a locked area of the pagan mausoleum buried under the basilica because Gabrielli wanted to explain

something about the masonry. He proceeded to thump the ornate first century B.C. walls, and encouraged us to do the same. His blows swiftly brought down a small chunk of the wall, which elicited little more than a bemused *mama mia* and a shrug.

Though the experience was delightful, I couldn't help but wonder if the brain trust at the *scavi* did this for every reporter who faxed in a request.

As we finished, we exited St. Peter's Basilica and came out under a portico. Zander took me by the arm, pointed up to an exterior part of the basilica, and explained that funding from the Knights of Columbus had paid for its restoration.

"I want you to know how grateful we are," he intoned. "Grateful," he repeated, for emphasis.

Then I got it: The VIP treatment had nothing to do with me. These officials had gone out of their way for an American Catholic in order to return a favor to the Knights. I suppose Zander assumed I would get word back to the right people. By no means am I suggesting there was anything sinister about this -- quite the contrary -- but it does illustrate how the generosity of the Knights spawns gratitude.

Come to think of it, I never did what Zander implicitly asked. So to the Knights, albeit six years late, on the occasion of your Orlando convention, this relayed message: The Vatican says "Thank You."

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