Mabuhay!

Your Excellencies, Archbishop Langdamao, Bishop Quevedo, Bishop Odchimar, Worthy Philippines Deputies, Worthy Supreme Director, brother Knights and Ladies, my dear friends:

Thank you for inviting me to your National Convention and for serving as such gracious hosts to me and my wife, Dorian. I remember well my visit to Manila in March 2005, five years ago. During that trip I got to see firsthand the dynamic leadership and strong spirit that drive the Knights of Columbus in the Philippines to consistently great efforts in membership growth and charitable service.

When the devastating floods hit the Manila area last September, my heart and mind went back to my visit there, and I knew that Knights throughout the Order would unite to help their brothers in need – and they did. I am very proud that we were able to send $100,000 through the Supreme Council to the Philippines Bishops’ Conference for humanitarian efforts.

I also congratulate all of my Filipino brother Knights here who took part in local relief efforts. I know many of you from Luzon were directly affected by the storms, yet this did not stop you from stepping aside from your own hardship to help those in even greater need. That is the spirit of the Knights of Columbus.

It is appropriate then that we meet now in Cebu City, in Visayas, for the 8th Philippine National Convention under the theme “Volunteerism: Neighbors Helping Neighbors.”

And who is my neighbor? Filipino Knights know the answer – my neighbor is anyone in need!
In keeping with that theme, I wish to speak tonight about the close and unbreakable bonds between the American and Filipino people.

Although we are separated by half a world, we are neighbors. We are united by a history and by values that transcend distance, and that have seen Filipinos and Americans united side by side in the common cause of freedom and democracy.

Whenever I come to the Philippines, I am always struck by the importance of the twin pillars of any strong culture, any strong society: the two pillars of faith and family.

Because of those two supports, and our dedication to them, the Knights of Columbus has taken solid root in the Philippines. And it’s little wonder that, dedicated to these two principles, the Knights of Columbus has grown exponentially here for more than a century.

Faith has been a significant catalyst to this growth. First – there is the common faith that those first Knights shared with the men they recruited here in the Philippines. It came down to the fact that as Catholics, they were all part of a universal Church.

And the same is true today. That faith – manifested through the first principle of our Order – Charity, leads naturally to our second and third principles – unity and fraternity.

Here it didn’t matter if Knights were American or Filipino, if their names were Edralin or Willmann, they were neighbors, indeed they were brothers. They were Catholic men called Knights!

This close association between the Filipino and American people goes back more than a century, just about as long as the association between your country and the Knights of Columbus.

It is very significant that, although the first council in the Philippines – Manila Council 1000 – was started by American citizens who were here after the Spanish-American War, our Order was handed off seamlessly to Filipinos in Manila.
It was natural for the American Knights to invite Filipino men into their council – after all, this is a country that is mostly Catholic. So when those first members of Council 1000 looked around, they saw not strangers, but fellow Catholics and future brother Knights.

In fact, Filipinos began joining Council 1000 only two years after its inception.

This bond of brotherhood could not be broken by war, nor by natural disaster. Indeed, the worse things got, the stronger the bond grew between the Knights themselves, and between the Knights and those most in need.

When General MacArthur was forced to leave the Philippines to fight another day, he promised “I shall return.” He kept his promise.

But ladies and gentleman, I am proud of the fact that in 105 years, the Knights of Columbus have never left.

Not in the face of disaster, or invasion, or any other difficulty.

More than 65 years ago, General MacArthur made good on his promise to return to his beloved Philippines and lead its liberation. We’re all familiar with the photos of MacArthur landing at Red Beach on Leyte and wading onto the shore, his face set in determination to press northward against enemy forces. The Americans progressed at a slow but steady pace. But as MacArthur made his way up to Luzon and passed the fortifications at Bataan and Corregidor he was forced to abandon three years before, the emotional toll of his return overcame the general.

It was an emotional moment for MacArthur and he found himself unable to complete his address to the recently liberated people in Manila. Instead, he asked those assembled to recite the Lord’s Prayer with him. MacArthur – never a churchgoing man – nonetheless knew the value of Christian faith to the Filipino people. In a city bearing the fresh wounds of war and harsh occupation, Americans and Filipinos stood shoulder to shoulder in prayer, as they had fought in war, and as American and Filipino Knights had stood together in charity for more than 40 years.
The liberation of 1945, and the hardships suffered by the Filipino people beforehand, is familiar history to us. But just as war brings out the worst in people, it also brings out the best.

It was a time for heroes, and therefore it was a time for the Knights of Columbus.

It was a time to sustain the people’s spirits, to bring spiritual nourishment to those in places where the sacraments were unavailable, to perform works of mercy for the suffering and to bravely express their patriotism at the risk of death. It was indeed a time for the Knights of Columbus.

In the crucible of World War II, the faith of the Philippines shone all the more brightly, and we, the Knights of Columbus were a part of that.

I want to remember with you today the legacy of those early Knights and their single-hearted dedication to charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism.

The growth and success of the Knights of Columbus in the Philippines is an outstanding example of the Order worldwide. This success is the harvest of seeds planted by men like Father George Willmann and Father Isaias Edralin, one an American and the other a Filipino. Both of these priests were instrumental in raising a generation of Catholic men who would stand unswervingly by their country and their Catholic faith.

The Knights never gave up in the Philippines because Knights don’t give up. As long as there is work to be done, the Knights know only one direction: forward!

In fact, at the end of World War II, Father Willmann – often reverently called the Father McGivney of the Philippines – wrote an article in Columbia proudly describing the activities of Knights in the Philippines before, during and after the war: From running basketball leagues for underprivileged boys to sneaking medical supplies to survivors of the Bataan Death March imprisoned in Camp O’Donnell, from housing and feeding refugees in blockaded Manila to providing American and Filipino soldiers with a place of rest amid the last engagements of the war.
In the darkest hours of the last century, Knights of Columbus’ activities in the Philippines “refused to die,” wrote Father Willmann.

This American priest from Brooklyn was fiercely proud of his brother Knights in the Philippines. And he was especially proud in the words of the title of his article, that “The Knights Stayed on the Job” – even when all seemed lost.

And if the Knights’ activities have always “refused to die” here in the Philippines, it was Father Willmann who helped give birth to and raise the Order here.

After the war, as the Philippines was slowly rebuilding, Father Willmann was expanding the reach of the Knights of Columbus. In 1948 he oversaw the chartering of the second Philippine council, Cebu Council 3106 (applause!) and then two others, before holding the first Philippines National Convention in late 1949.

And like Father McGivney, Father Willmann had great men to work with. For instance, during the war there was a persistent effort by the Japanese to turn the Filipinos against the Americans – but this effort went nowhere with the Knights. Father Willmann wrote:

“The military tried hard to persuade our Filipino Knights, especially prominent members, to participate in radio propaganda and cooperate in other ways with the Japanese. But our Knights steadfastly refused … the Japanese said, ‘You call yourselves Filipinos – but you are really pro-American, just as pro-American as the Archbishop.’ The Knights were highly honored by the comparison.”

The Filipino and American Knights then, as now, knew that brotherhood transcended the Pacific Ocean. They were brother knights – finding unity, fraternity and even patriotism together in the cause of charity.

By the time of Father Willmann's death in 1977, there were 457 councils in the Philippines, where there had been one when he began. He groomed the leadership of the Filipino Knights to take the reins after his death, and in 1989, the Philippines was divided into the three jurisdictions we have today – Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.
And from that time, I was honored to know and work with each of the Supreme Directors from the Philippines: Mardonio Santos, Patrocinio Bacay, and of course, Alberto Solis.

And just as Father Willman was doing his great work, another priest, this one a Filipino was also making great strides for the Order here.

I mentioned Father Isaias Edralin earlier – a Jesuit priest from Nueva Segovia, who was greatly responsible for the growth of the Order in Mindanao.

He was a Knight imprisoned in a concentration camp and, later, under house arrest. Yet he was unapologetic of his faith and duties as a priest and unrelenting in his love of his country.

A past Grand Knight of Council 3108 remembered this about Father Edralin: he was “the livewire insofar as Columbianism in Mindanao was concerned. He urged and recruited as many as he could to become Knights of Columbus.” And who would not be persuaded by this priest’s heroic witness in time of war? He embodied the Christian value of self-sacrifice, risking his life to bring the sacraments into the prison camps, and to be a beacon of hope in that very dark time.

Father Edralin drew men to the Knights of Columbus because he pointed to something so much greater than himself: to a calling to serve where needed and to a faith that transforms the worst moments of human history into a victory for the witness of Christian charity, and a victory for the unity, fraternity and patriotism of those involved.

This was the spirit of the Venerable Father Michael McGivney: a determined belief that when ordinary people of faith become united as brothers in the common cause of charity, they can do great things for the people of their country. In other words, it’s fraternal unity acting in charity that leads us to a real patriotism, a real love for the common good of all our countrymen.

And as I mentioned, this dynamic has happened not only in times of war. For over 100 years, American Knights have experienced a strong solidarity with their brothers in the Philippines. When natural disaster strikes, Knights in America have been eager to offer aid, and on the ground, Knights in the Philippines are quick to the scene, doing the Order proud by their organized response of relief efforts.
After the Luzon earthquake in 1990, the Knights of Columbus were there.

When Mount Pinatubo erupted a year later, the Knights of Columbus were there.

When floods swept through Manila last September, the Knights of Columbus Supreme Council was among the first organizations to respond with a major donation toward the Philippine bishops’ relief efforts – and Filipino Knights were there, opening their own damaged halls and standing in the mud to distribute food and supplies to their neighbors-turned-refugees.

From their founding, Knights in the Philippines have proven themselves to be dedicated to the good of their country. In World War II, this meant opening a shelter for relatives of prisoners in Camp O’Donnell, and risking their lives to get food and water to the broken and emaciated soldiers on a death march.

And more recently, it meant that thousands of Knights in Luzon, Mindanao and right here in Visayas took to the streets in a “Walk for Life” – it was a coordinated effort with all three events taking place on the same day to underscore the absolute and unbreakable unity of the Knights on the pro-life issue, with all of our brothers voicing their opposition to laws that fail to uphold human dignity and that cheapen the value of human life and human love.

Since we are here in Cebu City, I would like to highlight for a minute the impressive works of the Visayas Jurisdiction, under Deputy Dionisio Esteban, who greeted me last evening at the airport with such a hearty ‘Mabuhay!’

As I mentioned, the second council in the Philippines, Cebu Council 3106, was founded in 1948 by Father Willmann. The growth of the Visayas region since that time has been strong, and you now have 53,000 brother Knights here. Of course, growth requires programs of outreach and support, and Visayas Knights have performed them with distinction. There is a comprehensive spiritual formation program under council chaplains and lay formators that is bringing to life the Catholic faith of our Knights and their families. Serving the poor is also a priority, and Visayas Knights have launched a Livelihood Program in which needy families are taught to grow their own organic produce and to market it with the help of Knights. In this way, these families are able to become more self-sufficient and supplement their income. To protect
the environment, Knights here have tree planting projects to slow soil erosion and help clean the air.

In these ways, Visayas Knights are caring for their spiritual lives, helping their neighbors in need, and protecting God’s creation. I commend you all for the good work.

Fifteen years ago, when Venerable John Paul II came to Manila for World Youth Day, he exhorted Filipinos to seek the renewal of the Church in their country. He stressed that the laity in particular must lead this renewal.

And tonight I tell you that the Knights of Columbus must lead the laity in this great effort.

The Knights of Columbus in the Philippines have been a part of this for over a century, and the Knights here continue to flourish because of the dedication to charity – to witnessing to the beauty and power of faith in action. With God’s grace and continued strong leadership, may Knights in the Philippines continue to serve as the strong right arm of the Church.

As that strong right arm, I urge you to keep up this good work. I ask you to teach the sanctity of human life in your homes, in your schools and to defend it in the public square. Teach about the beauty of marriage and marital love, and the central role of the family in the health of a just society. We in America, we at the Supreme Council, we will stand with you as you seek to preserve, defend and promote the Catholic culture of the Philippines.

We have spoken much about history this evening, but we cannot live on the achievements of the past, we need to build on them. We need to move forward to build a stronger history for the Knights of Columbus, and we are doing this already in the Philippines.

The Philippines is now the second largest jurisdiction in the Knights of Columbus, and this means that the Philippines, in the years to come, will have an even greater leadership role in the Knights of Columbus, a leadership role that will not stop at its shores. It will begin to extend that role into new regions of Asia, in a role of evangelization to regions that have not known much of Christianity. That will be the full legacy of the Knights of Columbus in Asia.
Brother Knights of the Philippines, I urge you to hold the banner of Columbianism high. You are a strong link within our Order, and I am personally and deeply grateful for all that you do to bring honor to the Knights of Columbus.

Let us work together as brothers so that a century from now, of history may record your programs and activities and proclaim, as Father Willmann did, “The Knights Stayed on the Job.”

_Salamat! Salamat!_  
_Vivat Jesus!_