

Knights vow ongoing efforts for the unborn

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Holding their 110th annual convention Aug. 4-6 in New York under the theme "500 Years of Faith," the Knights of Columbus displayed signs of strength and undiminished pride in their patron.

The 460 delegates also received a message of commendation from Pope John Paul II, who recipient of Knights' assistance on several church and charity projects. The pope praised the Knights' work with the bishops "in programs of evangelization ... at the approach of the third millennium."

The organization's stature was further evidenced the participation of Mother Teresa and President George Bush. Prelates from Rome, across the United States and other countries also attended in great abundance.

The convention was highlighted by a speech by Cristobal Colon, who was named an honorary member of the Knights. A 20th-generation descendant of Christopher Columbus, Colon holds the titles Duke of Veragua, Duke of La Vega, Marquess of Jamaica and Admiral of the Indies.

Laying a wreath at Manhattan's Columbus Circle monument on the Sunday before the convention, Supreme Knight Virgil C. Dechant acknowledged "a few dark threads in the remarkable fabric of (Columbus') events and accomplishments." But he said the Knights "celebrate the lofty inspiration and the noble conviction, the faith in God and the dedication to life's enlargement, that were personified in Christopher Columbus."

During a press conference following the convention's final session, Dechant said delegates considered the event's most important accomplishment to be its actions to reaffirm "support of life from the time of conception till death."

Acting on a suggestion of New

York's Cardinal John J. O'Connor, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities, delegates voted to work for the establishment of a "tomb of the unborn" in at least one Catholic cemetery in every diocese where Knights are present.

During the convention's final session, delegates adopted a large number of resolution — almost all of them by consensus without any debate. Among them was one titled "Crusade for Life," in which the Knights pledged "to remain in the forefront of those groups working to restore full legal protection for the unborn."

The resolution opposed RU-486, research with aborted tissue, the Freedom of Choice Act, and government funding for abortion or for abortion referrals in family planning clinics.

It reaffirmed "our established policy of not inviting to any Knights of Columbus event persons, especially public officials, who do not support legal protection of unborn children against abortion or who advocate the legalization of euthanasia." Such persons are also prohibited from renting Knights' facilities and from holding offices or honorary positions for Knights-sponsored events.

Dechant said the Knights were non-partisan, but invited Bush to speak because of his office. Dechant said the Knights responded to Bush with evident warmth because he supported their position on two issues of foremost concern — abortion and parental choice in education.

He said Democratic candidates Bill Clinton and Al Gore would not be invited as long as they held their current positions on abortion.

Pro-life activities reported by the Knights also included support of Birthright and other programs to aid mothers with problem pregnancies; financial and in-kind assistance to the bishops' pro-life committee; large-



AP/Wide World Photos

PRESTIGIOUS GUESTS — Above, a New York policeman accompanies Mother Teresa Aug. 5 as she walks outside St. Rita of Cascia Church in the Bronx. Mother Teresa traveled to New York to attend the Knights of Columbus convention. Below, another notable speaker during the convention was President George Bush who gestures here about aspects of campaign news coverage.

scale presence at the annual March for Life in Washington; and efforts to influence legislation.

Some reporters at the press conference asked about recent criticism that Dechant's compensation — reportedly \$455,000 per year — was excessive.

He declined to discuss the issue, saying it was a decision of the organization's board of directors.

Officials had previously pointed out that the supreme knight's job involves not only leading a fraternal body but also carrying responsibility for a major insurance business.

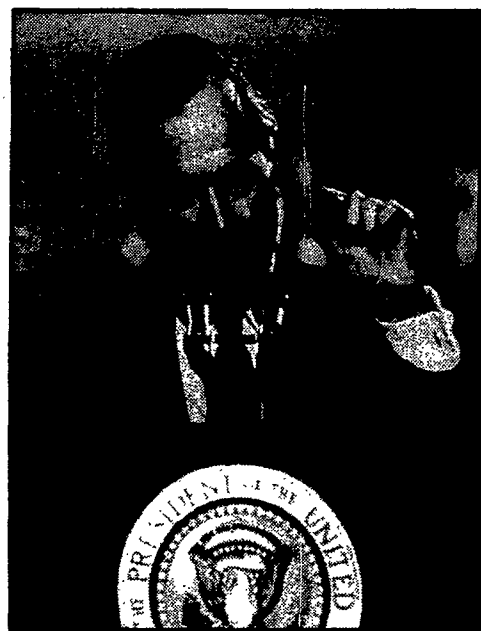
The officials also said the salary was not high compared with other insurance salaries.

Dechant's annual report showed \$3.2 billion in insurance policies written in 1991 by 1,300 agents, with a net gain of \$2 billion.

That brings the total at year's end to \$19.9 billion, earning the Knights a ranking of 85th among 2,400 North American Companies for individual life insurance.

Membership in the Knights has increased every year for 20 years, Dechant said adding that the organization attracted 95,000 new members in "fraternal year" 1991-92.

After deaths and other losses, the Knights experienced a net membership



gain of 17,000, raising the total to 1,525,426 members as of June 30.

Dechant reported that the Knights donated \$95 million in 1991 — \$80 million by state and local councils and \$15 million by the international council.

Funds go not only to various church causes, but also to youth programs and such charitable works as the Special Olympics.

The Knights also reported giving 42 million hours of volunteer service during the year.

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