

# THE MODERN KNIGHT

by  
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## INTRODUCTION

The following presentation was delivered by the Supreme Council Grand Chancellor (RMOKHSJ) Count **Ndubuisi Nnaji**, G.Cd.H.S., Capt. H.G.H.S., K.C.S., K.C.S.A., Kt.B., at the Seventeenth Annual General Assembly of The Religious and Military Order of Knights of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. Count Thuben has made many contributions to the field of Chivalry in general and this Holy Sepulchre Order in particular. The distinguished Knight and Nobleman is from Nigeria.

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## The Modern Knight

The words *knighthood* and *chivalry* have been interchangeably used to mean the same thing for hundreds of years. Chivalry is often used as a synonym for civility, nobility, and good manners. There is a very good reason for that use which we will find in the following discussion of what a knight is, what he has been, and what he should be.

The noble estate of knighthood has fluctuated in importance since the middle ages, but the ideals of knighthood have increased steadily in relevance and importance over the last thousand years. The knight has been written about as a warrior *par excellence*, as a defender of the faithful and the weak, as a romanticized figure of exceptional qualities in legends and folk tales, and, at some point in history, a mercenary exploited by kings and queens. Generally speaking, the knight is the first stage prior to or leading to nobility in the aristocratic hierarchy. That is, the "knight" is a kind of entry level into the Nobility. What kind of person was made a knight?

According to Hugh, Count Tiberias, a knight was a person who "must not be consenting to false judgement, or be a party to treason; he must honor all women and damsels, and be ready to aid them to the limit of his powers; he must hear when possible, a mass every day, and must fast every Friday in remembrance of Christ's passing."

In that definition, you see the Christian religious influence on knighthood. Ramon Lull paints an even more saintly picture of what a knight is supposed to be: "He was a man courteous and nobly spoken, well clad and generous. He prized honor before all, and eschewed pride, false-swearing, idleness, lechery, and especially treason." The knight's duties were to take up his sword to uphold justice, protect the weak, and

defend the church. According to Maurice Keen, only the most loyal, most strong, and most noble of courage, were chosen to be knights.

Early writers on chivalry such as Ramon Lull, Geoffrey de Charny, and Lambert of Ardres, suggest that kings and queens were encouraged, advised, and even expected to appoint their ministers and important officials of their royal courts from among knights because the knights were the *creme de la creme*, the finest quality of men in the society.

So, it is not at all surprising that when Kings and Queens, Dukes and Princes, Popes and Patriarchs needed the finest warriors and most loyal and trusted officials or emissaries, they turned to the knights. That was one of the reasons for Pope Urban II's appeal of 1095, at the beginning of the Christian crusades to liberate Jerusalem.

In short, from the traditional oath and charge of knighthood, we get the idea then, that nobility, courage, loyalty, courtesy, largesse (generosity), hardiness, prowess, humility, and tenacity, are the *sine qua non* characteristics of knighthood. Were these attributes and ideals attainable? I say, Yes. History is replete with stories of famous knights who kept to the ideals of chivalry and thus became immortalized, knights such as William the Marshall, Godfrey de Bouillon, Joan of Arc, Arnold of Ardres, Geoffrey of Anjou, to name a few.

As a point of departure, we should ask the "million dollar" question: Are the ideals and attributes of knighthood still attainable in this modern age? The answer is--Yes! Are knights of this era able to meet the challenges similar to those faced by the medieval knights? The answer is again--Yes!

What then are some of the challenges facing the modern knights? How can the knight meet and overcome these challenges?

### **Challenges and Ideals**

In order to do some justice to this question, one only has to look at any of today's newspaper to see the ills facing society. Every day in the news, you hear or read of rape and murder, betrayal and larceny, smallness of character and acts of cowardice, oppression of the weak and incivility of the worst kind. Those are some of the challenges that face the knight in this age.

John of Salisbury once said that chivalry (knighthood) was a "profession that had been instituted by God and that is in its own right necessary to human well-being." Each modern knight has, in his or her own right, the ability to change the world by changing his or her sphere of influence.

Think for a moment how different the history of Columbine High School would have been if chivalry was the language always spoken there among the students. At the same time, think about what would have happened if one knightly teacher had not risked and sacrificed his life to warn as many students as possible. Think for a moment how different the history of South Africa would have been if there were more knights upholding the ideals of justice, largesse, and defense of the weak. Think for a moment

how different the history of the United States would have been if there were more knights, more than a century ago, upholding the ideals of justice for all, courtesy, courage and nobility.

The knight is armed (symbolically in this age) with a sword to do battle against all forms of evil--injustice, racism, and intolerance, terrorism in all forms, genocide in all shapes and pretexts, and oppression. To be successful, the knight must be courageous. Sacrifices are often required in order to do the right thing.

A true knight does not look away when women and children and the weak are being molested or oppressed by the strong and powerful. Edmund Burke once wrote that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing!" Let us therefore examine some of the traditional attributes of knighthood.

- **Loyalty**

The commercialization of society has made the attribute or ideal of loyalty more and more rare. The knight yesterday and today was, and is, supposed to be loyal to God, his liege, and his country. Loyalty demands honesty and faithfulness, being law-abiding, and promoting the ideals for which you were made a knight.

- **Courtesy**

The ideal of courtesy demands civility, respect, gentle manliness, and kindness. Take a drive on the streets of Washington, New York, Los Angeles, or perhaps even Greeley (Colorado), and you have an idea of some of the challenges knights can face daily. A driver cuts in front of you without warning, and if you dare to honk to warn him of the danger he is creating for both of you, he makes an obscene gesture. A driver wants to overtake you on a street or highway where it is absolutely dangerous to do so, and if you don't get out of his way quickly, bullets may start flying.

The increasing absence of respect, civility, courtesy and gentleness in our society is a challenge that every knight faces. The dedicated knight can combat and counter these tendencies by being courteous on the road, ignoring the finger-shaking highway terrorist, keeping a safe distance from others, and, where necessary, using the appropriate law enforcement system to stop further deterioration of order.

Helping and opening the door for women and children, the handicapped, and the elderly (and even the not-so-elderly) should be a matter of habit for the knight. Teaching your children and your wards the art of civility is the duty of every knight.

- **Largesse (generosity)**

An important duty and attribute of knighthood is generosity--the giving of one's time, money, wealth, and knowledge. The modern day chivalric Orders tend to pay a lot of emphasis on this aspect of chivalry for good reason.

Charity (or giving) is a virtue of the highest order. Many Orders of Chivalry

expect you, and indeed require you, to give to charity every year. Some Orders have built hospitals, schools, orphanages, and other institutions for helping others. As a knight in this day and age, giving to charity is an important way of promoting justice and defending the weak.

- **Hardiness, prowess, and tenacity**

In medieval times, prowess was judged by the knight's abilities as shown in jousts and tournaments. In this age, prowess should be judged by the knight's abilities and dexterity in combating evil in society, and his diplomacy in dealing with hostile elements.

His tenacity is judged by his readiness and relentless commitment to success on the ideals of chivalry. As one writer once said: "Chivalry involves a constant quest to improve on achievement and cannot rest satisfied."

- **Humility**

In modern society where humility is sometimes mistaken for weakness, it is a challenge for the knight to be strong, tenacious, noble, courageous, kind and yet humble. When you consider that knights are usually selected from among the *creme de la creme* of society, you realize that you find among knights those who have the most to be proud of, and yet Chivalry demands that humility is as important as achievement.

In conclusion, I wish to leave you with a charge from a late 13th century romance of Dumart le Galois to a group of new knights who were readying to do battle on behalf of the Queen of Ireland against the usurping King Nogans. Dumart said to them:

**My Lords, a knight must be hardy, courteous, generous, loyal, and fair of speech: ferocious to his foe, frank and debonair to his friend.... Seek therefore this day to do deeds that will deserve to be remembered, for every new knight should make a good beginning.**

So let it be with each of us.

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