

State's Knights preparing to host order's international convention in 2007

Andy Telli

From all across the United States and Canada, from the Phillipines and Puerto Rico, from Mexico and Poland, Knights of Columbus will gather in Nashville next August for the Supreme Meeting of the 1.7-million member strong Catholic fraternal organization.

“The opportunity to welcome the Knights of Columbus to Nashville on the occasion of their 125th anniversary convention will be a moment of great blessing for ... the three dioceses of the state and for all the members of the Knights of Columbus in Tennessee,” said Nashville Bishop David Choby, who with the bishops of Memphis and Knoxville will play host to 75 or more of their brother bishops and cardinals and as many as 2,500 or more Knights, guests and their families.

“The organization has such a degree of commitment to living the life of faith, announcing the faith and supporting the life of faith, their presence will be a great opportunity to have our faith inspired by the example of this wonderful organization,” said Bishop Choby, who attended the 124th Supreme Meeting of the Knights in Orlando, Fla., Aug. 1-3. While in Orlando, Bishop Choby and the Tennessee delegation invited their brother Knights to Nashville for the convention at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel Aug. 7-9, 2007. And the leaders of the Knights in the state are expecting a large turnout when the order gathers in Tennessee.

“We already know interest is extremely high,” said State Deputy Bill Wicke of Knoxville, the highest ranking Knight in the state. “People want to come to a new place.” The convention will be one of the largest gatherings of Catholics in the state of Tennessee ever, and will be the largest gathering of bishops and cardinals in the state's history. The turnout of hierarchy could double the more than 40 bishops who attended Bishop Choby's ordination and installation last February.

“The supreme council meeting every year is one of the largest gatherings of church hierarchy anywhere in the world outside of the Vatican,” said Ron Tracz, administrative assistant to the Knight's top official, Supreme Knight Carl Anderson.

The Knights of Columbus have been in Tennessee for more than 100 years – Council 544 in Nashville was the first council established in the South – but the last time the state hosted the annual convention was 1942 in Memphis.

Tennessee, with about 10,000 Knights, will be the smallest jurisdiction to host the Knights annual international convention, said Wicke.

“This will showcase the fact that we're not a little jurisdiction anymore, we have the ability to do a job for the Supreme” Council, the highest level of officials in the order, which is headquartered in New Haven, Conn., said Marty O'Haver of Mt. Juliet, and Wicke's predecessor as State Deputy. “One byproduct might be they will put Tennessee in a rotation of convention sites and come back to Tennessee in 10 years or so.”

Years in the making

The Tennessee State Council has been working on bringing the Supreme Meeting to Nashville since 2000.

It started with Chase Wilson of Dayton. After attending the Supreme Meeting in 2000, Wilson wrote a letter to the Supreme office requesting that Tennessee be allowed to host

the convention in 2006, 2007 or 2008, explained Past State Deputy Bill Gunter of Mt. Juliet, who is a parishioner at St. Stephen Church in Old Hickory.

Shortly after Gunter was elected State Deputy in 2002, Wilson suffered a stroke and died, Gunter said. "I talked to the other state officers and said we want to continue this and make it a go."

One of the first questions that had to be answered was whether Tennessee had a facility large enough to meet all the Knights' requirements, including enough rooms for guests, a space for the opening Mass, which normally draws about 2,300 people, as well as for the 2,000 people who usually attend the convention's opening banquet. The Opryland fit the bill.

"That was a beautiful site," said Supreme Secretary Robert Lane, whose office has chief responsibility for organizing the convention.

After holding a smaller mid-year meeting for state deputies at the Opryland Hotel in November 2003, the Tennessee Knights were told they would host the 2007 convention. "And we've been working on it ever since," Gunter said.

The effort was loosely organized for the first year, but in the last year, the convention planning committee, with subcommittees working on specific aspects of the event, have been formed and have been working.

With one year to go, those committees will be meeting monthly, said Gunter, a co-chair of the planning committee with O'Haver.

Each of the 83 councils in Tennessee has been assigned to a committee, Wicke said. Individual Knights and councils are invited to be more involved with the Supreme meeting if they want, Wicke explained, but "we assigned them to say you're going to be involved at least at this level."

"We've told them it's going to be a Tennessee convention, because if it's a Nashville convention, we will fail," O'Haver said. "Everybody's involved."

Tours and entertainment

Hosting the Knights of Columbus Supreme Meeting can be a complicated matter that requires lots of volunteers.

Although the official dates of the convention are Aug. 7-9, many of the people attending will arrive in Nashville three or four days early. The responsibility of the host state council is to provide a schedule full of entertainment and tours for the all the guests to enjoy in the days leading up to the official start of the convention, Wicke said.

The Supreme Council staff is in charge of planning all the activities once the official meeting starts, including three large liturgies and the annual States Dinner, which kicks off the official portion of the convention.

Although there will be only about 500 voting delegates at the meeting, the number of people registered once families and guests are included typically reaches about 2,500, Tracz said. But the number of people at the meeting grows once people who might only attend one of the Masses during the convention or other similar events are included, he added.

Many of the non-delegates who attend come every year for the camaraderie and the chance to meet dignitaries in the order and the church, Tracz explained. "Usually after the first couple of experiences when they come here, they get hooked. ... It's a real time to enjoy themselves around seeing the business of the order being conducted."

Some of the guests use the supreme meeting as their summer vacation every year, Wicke said. That's one of the reasons a key to hosting a successful convention is having a variety of tours and events that will attract people to come a few days earlier, he added. The Tennessee State Council is already busy organizing several tours, including trips to Graceland, Elvis Presley's home in Memphis; the Jack Daniel's Distillery; the Grand Ole Opry; the Hermitage; the General Jackson showboat; a tour of local churches, and others, Wicke said.

The Tennessee Knights also are planning a dinner and show the night before the official meeting begins that will have some special entertainment. They hope to attract a well-known country music act, and as a special treat and opening act, Merlin and the Court Jesters, which is the only certified magicians troupe made up of people with intellectual disabilities, will perform. The Knights have supported the group financially for several years through the Tennessee MR Foundation.

"They don't know how good of a show they're going to see," State Advocate Mike Wills of Knoxville said of next year's attendees.

"When those kids get done, there won't be a dry eye in the house," added Mike Horten, a past state deputy from Chattanooga.

Another attractive aspect of bringing the meeting to Tennessee, is it's a new place, Tracz said. "The attraction with Nashville is it's not a regular stop on the (Knights') convention tour," he added. "It provided a little different atmosphere, a little different cultural perspective."

Big crowd

Typically, on the peak nights of the meeting, the Knights fill 1,100 to 1,200 hotel rooms, Lane said.

Wicke and the rest of the convention planning committee are confident they will draw a larger than normal crowd for next year's meeting. Besides the entertainment they're planning, they believe Nashville's easy access to so much of the country's population by car or plane will help boost attendance.

"More people will come because they don't have to fight with the airport," O'Haver said. "They can just jump in the car and go."

But a larger crowd means the need for more volunteers to do everything from greeting people at the hotel to picking up dignitaries at the airport.

"Our goal is to get 300 volunteers," Wicke said. "We've identified about 100 so far."

He and the other state officers are encouraging Tennessee Knights to plan their vacations next year for Nashville during the Supreme Meeting, so they can work a day or two as a volunteer.

The planning committee is also urging local councils to bring their pastors to the opening Mass and the States Dinner later that night, O'Haver said.

Tennessee's Knights are getting excited about the chance to host and attend the Supreme Meeting, Wicke said. "It's a once in a lifetime thing."

KC Conv bishop invites

Photo by Andy Telli/Tennessee Register

Bishop David Choby of Nashville, surrounded by the last three state deputies for the Tennessee Knights of Columbus, (from left) Marty O'Haver, Bill Gunter and Bill Wicke, invites the delegates at the Knights' Supreme Meeting in Orlando to next year's international convention, which will be held at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville.

KC conv mike wills cheers

Photo by Andy Telli/Tennessee Register

Mike Wills of Knoxville, state advocate for the Tennessee Knights of Columbus, cheers during the singing of "Rocky Top" at the States Dinner, which was the opening banquet of the Knights of Columbus Supreme Convention in Orlando, Fla., Aug. 1-3. As a state officer, Wills is helping to plan the 2007 Supreme Convention, which will be held at the Gaylord Opryland Hotel in Nashville next August.