

At the time, ritual-based fraternal lodges and “secret societies” were luring Catholic men from their faith with the promise of life insurance benefits. After studying other fraternal benefit societies, Father McGivney and two dozen laymen founded the Knights of Columbus in 1882. The name was significant: They chose “Knights” to indicate the order’s ceremonial aspects and the noble principles of defending Catholic values and families, and they chose “Columbus” to honor Christopher Columbus, the Catholic explorer credited for discovering the Americas, as a way of underscoring the nation’s Catholic roots and to show one can be a loyal American as well as a faithful Catholic.



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Catholic men were drawn to the Knights not only for these benefits, but also for its emphasis on serving one’s Church, community, and family with virtue. “Unity and Charity’ is our motto,” Father McGivney wrote in 1883. “Unity in order to gain strength to be charitable to each other in benevolence whilst we live and in bestowing financial aid to those whom we leave to mourn our loss.” Over the next several years, fraternalism and patriotism were added to form the four core principles of the organization. By solidifying their understanding and practice of the Catholic Faith, and through works of charity, the Knights would champion the full rights of American citizenship for all Catholics.

What began as a pass-the-hat collection that disbursed funds to the families of sick or deceased members developed into a top-rated, multi-billion-dollar insurance program. Today the Knights of Columbus is the world’s largest society of Catholic men with two million members and some 15,900 local councils across more than a dozen countries. In 2019, the Knights raised and

donated \$187 million to the Church’s worthy causes and dedicated 77 million volunteer hours to serving persons and communities in need.

## DEATH

In 1884, Father McGivney was named pastor of St. Thomas Church in Thomaston, a factory town about thirty miles north of New Haven. In late 1889, the seemingly tireless pastor contracted influenza; by January he had developed pneumonia, possibly complicated by tuberculosis. With diminished strength, he was left bedridden until his death on August 14, two days after his thirty-eighth birthday. His funeral drew mourners from far and wide, including delegations from all fifty-seven Knights of Columbus councils in existence at the time. He was buried in the McGivney family plot in Waterbury. In 1982, his remains were reinterred in a sarcophagus in St. Mary’s Church in New Haven.

## BEATIFICATION AND CAUSE FOR SAINTHOOD

In 1997, Archbishop Daniel Cronin of Hartford opened the cause for Father McGivney’s beatification and canonization. In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed his life of heroic virtue and elevated him to the status of Venerable.

In May 2020, Pope Francis signed the decree recognizing a miracle through the intercession of Father McGivney, clearing the way for his beatification. The miracle involved the healing of an unborn child who had been diagnosed with fetal hydrops, a life-threatening condition.

Michael J. McGivney was scheduled to be beatified on October 31, 2020, at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford. He is the fourth U.S.-born male to be beatified and the first who spent his entire priestly ministry as a parish priest. Another recognized miracle would clear the way for his canonization as a saint.

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# Blessed Michael J. McGivney



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Founder of the Knights,  
Model for Our Day

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Father Michael J. McGivney Images: OSV File Photos 09/20

The newest U.S. born Catholic to be beatified was a man who left a legacy that stressed holiness, defending the Faith, helping those in need, and strengthening families. He spent his entire priestly ministry as a parish priest, hence was on the front lines of nineteenth-century Catholicism in the United States, which was often treated with animosity by the citizenry of the time.

Michael Joseph McGivney was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, on August 12, 1852, the first child of Irish immigrants Patrick and Mary (Lynch) McGivney. Michael's father worked under harsh conditions as a molder in a brass mill. His mother gave birth to twelve more children, but only six survived infancy.



Life was difficult for Catholic immigrant families. As simple laborers, they huddled in neighborhoods under impoverished conditions, and illness and diseases exacted a heavy toll. They experienced anti-Catholic bigotry in the form of job discrimination, social rejection, and derision from the vast Protestant majority. Signs in shop windows proclaiming “No Irish Need Apply” were common. Immigrants had to take dangerous factory or mining jobs, and many breadwinners suffered early death or disability from accidents, disease, and overwork, leaving their families with no means of support.

Michael excelled in public schools and graduated at the age of thirteen. He found work in the spoon-making department of a brass factory to assist his struggling family. At sixteen, having discerned a call to the priesthood, he was off to seminary studies in Canada and New York.

In 1873, Patrick McGivney died, and twenty-year-old Michael rushed home with the intent of resuming his

factory job to help support his family. Fortunately, his family found the means to make ends meet, and Bishop Francis McFarland of Hartford, Connecticut, provided funds for Michael to complete his priestly formation at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, who was ordained by Archbishop James Gibbons on December 22, 1877.

Father McGivney's upbringing endowed him with an authentic understanding of the challenges to Catholic immigrants. As a man of faith and reason, he knew that he must be concerned with both the spiritual and temporal needs of his parishioners.

At St. Mary's Church in New Haven, Father McGivney confronted the anti-Catholic spirit of the day. Many residents resented the very presence of the Catholic church in the neighborhood, and the Catholic faithful were subject to mockery and rejection. Father McGivney handled relationships with non-Catholics with extreme care and encouraged parishioners to remain faithful in the face of the prevailing culture. He became known for his excellent spiritual direction and for winning converts to Catholicism.

Seeing many young men growing lax in faith and abusing alcohol, he founded St. Joseph's Total Abstinence and Literary Society to help them become active in their parish and community. Members organized sporting events and theater productions, and Father McGivney provided a meeting space stocked with edifying books, journals, and a piano. His keen interest in helping young men kept many of them in the Church.

Over several months, Father McGivney ministered to a 21-year-old prisoner on death row who had shot and killed a policeman while intoxicated. His effect on the prisoner was so profound that local news reporters took notice. Another time, after a parishioner died, leaving a widow and four sons, Father McGivney volunteered in court to serve as guardian to one of the teenage boys, thus sparing him from being sent to a public orphanage.

## HIS LEGACY

For more than a century, the Knights of Columbus have followed the vision of Blessed McGivney. Today, through its Faith and Action initiatives, members assist the faithful and those in need through programs including Food for Families, Coats for Kids, Ultrasound Initiative, Special Olympics, Vocations Support, Global Wheelchair Mission, and Christian Refugee Relief.

Several lessons gleaned from Blessed McGivney's life underline his importance and relevance for Catholics today.

**Catholics must stand up for their faith.** Cultural trends and people of other religious beliefs will frequently oppose our faith and moral values. We must be well catechized and commit to a spiritual life rooted in prayer and the sacraments in order to remain firm amid these challenges.

**Lay people are called to holiness.** Decades ahead of the Second Vatican Council and its teachings on the “universal call to holiness,” Father McGivney understood that ordinary Catholics — and not just clergy — have a unique vo-

cation to holiness and a vital role to play in the life and growth of the Church.

**We must be “practical Catholics.”** For Father McGivney, to be Catholic meant more than being faithful to Church teachings and attending Mass. It also meant putting into practice Jesus' commandment of love. As “practical Catholics,” we must love God, our home, family, and Church, but our faith must lead us out into the world to extend Christ's love and compassion to others, especially to the needy and neglected around us.

**Men must stand firm in faith.** Today there is a growing concern for masculine spirituality, for men to “stand in the breach” as exemplars of faith, virtue, and action. As a priest who knew Father McGivney wrote of him in 1900: “His special vocation was to develop Catholic manhood, to bind into one conspicuous solidarity all the elements that make for strength of character and so, indeed, to bring out that solidity of character — in other words, that catholicity — prominently in its strength before the world.”



**Faithful Catholics can be patriotic Americans.** The Catholic Faith has a rightful place in society. We must proudly uphold our faith and moral values in social interactions, in the workplace, in leadership roles, and in the political sphere. We should be proud to be Catholic and proud to be American.

Having seen firsthand how devastating it can be when the father and primary wage-earner dies, Father McGivney earnestly sought an answer to this grave problem.

## THE KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

Four years into his tenure at St. Mary's, Father Mc-

Givney began meeting with a group of men in the church basement to discuss the establishment of a fraternal benefit society that could strengthen Catholic men in their faith and provide security for their families in case of death. Such support would help surviving families stay together rather than be divided by court-ordered orphanages or foster homes.