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# Unity, Charity, and Fraternity: Father Michael McGivney and the Knights of Columbus

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Unity, Charity, and Fraternity:

Father Michael McGivney and the Founding of the Knights of Columbus

Kathleen Bruno

During the late Nineteenth Century, anti-Catholic organizations silently persecuted members of the Catholic Church in America.<sup>1</sup> Often, these groups did not use violence, but viewed Catholics as inferior, trying to remove their religion from society.<sup>2</sup> Father Michael J. McGivney, a parish priest at St. Mary's in New Haven, Connecticut, recognized the need for the Catholic Church in the everyday lives of its members, particularly concerning

the loneliness that ran through displaced populations; the reassessment of the role of the family in the face of technological advances that progressively decreased reliance on group living; the pressure to judge self-worth purely on a monetary basis; the availability of low-cost inebriants with the industrialization of breweries and distilleries; and a transient society's tendency to undermine the adult sense of responsibility, due to the increasingly simple and acceptable options of moving far away from inconvenient obligations.<sup>3</sup>

Father McGivney acknowledged the necessity of a faith-based, fraternal organization for the members of the parish. From his perspective, "Catholics were objects of a prejudice that placed them at a social and economic disadvantage."<sup>4</sup> To overcome these obvious obstacles, Father McGivney created the Order of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic, fraternal organization, based not on race, but religious tradition. During the 1800s, a multitude of fraternal societies existed, offering their members "social and business advantages during life and provision by insurance for the member's family after death."<sup>5</sup> These societies might appeal to Catholic men searching for a sense of acceptance in America, which McGivney feared would cause a loss of faith in their Catholicism. McGivney proposed that the principal objective of the Knights of Columbus was "to promote the principles of unity and charity, so that the members may gain

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Francis Egan and John B. Kennedy, *The Knights of Columbus in Peace and War*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Knights of Columbus, 1920), 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Brinkley and Julie Fenster, *Parish Priest: Father Michael McGivney and American Catholicism*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006), 128.

<sup>4</sup> *The Knights of Columbus in Peace and War*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

strength to bestow charity on each other.”<sup>6</sup> Father Michael McGivney’s primary concern in founding the Knights of Columbus was to provide a community organization for Catholic men as an alternative to the “secret societies” of the Nineteenth Century.

Father Michael J. McGivney was born on August 12, 1852, in Waterbury, Connecticut. His parents, Patrick and Mary McGivney, had immigrated to the United States from Ireland and raised thirteen children in Connecticut, only seven of whom survived.<sup>7</sup> After attending the College of St. Hyacinth in Quebec, Canada, Michael McGivney, the oldest of the surviving children, attended seminary at Our Lady of Angels Seminary in Niagara, New York and later at St. Mary’s College in Montreal.<sup>8</sup> McGivney completed his studies at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland, and was ordained a priest on December 22, 1877 at the Baltimore Cathedral.<sup>9</sup> He returned to Connecticut as curate of St. Mary’s Church in New Haven, the city’s first parish and the state’s second parish.<sup>10</sup> At the age of twenty-nine, after working at St. Mary Parish for approximately four years, McGivney proposed the idea of a fraternal organization for the Catholic men of the parish. This brotherhood was the beginning of the Knights of Columbus.

Michael McGivney understood the trials of discovering “a place to fit in” while remaining both an American and a Catholic.<sup>11</sup> In one of his first letters concerning the Knights of Columbus, McGivney wrote that he longed to establish a local society for Catholic men who would be able to “gain strength to aid each other in time of sickness; to provide for decent burial and render pecuniary assistance to the families of deceased members.”<sup>12</sup> When drafting the by-

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>7</sup> The Knights of Columbus, “Father McGivney,” (2003-2009), [www.kofc.org](http://www.kofc.org), (accessed 18 April 2009).

<sup>8</sup> The Knights of Columbus, “Father McGivney Video Stream,” (2004-2008), [www.fathermcgivney.org](http://www.fathermcgivney.org) (accessed 24 April 2009).

<sup>9</sup> “Father McGivney,” [www.kofc.org](http://www.kofc.org).

<sup>10</sup> St. Mary’s Church, “Saint Mary’s Priory,” (24 September 2009), [www.stmarys-priory.com](http://www.stmarys-priory.com), (7 October 2009).

<sup>11</sup> *Parish Priest*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> McGivney to Ford., “Dear Sir” letter, 1882.

laws of the Knights of Columbus, Father McGivney set up “an age of admission...from eighteen to fifty years” and included the idea that the organization would need to implement ritualistic ceremonies for its members.<sup>13</sup> Though the idea for the organization was his, McGivney assigned leadership to the laymen of the Church, insisting that this was to be an association made up of and for Catholic laymen, not the ordained.

The vast majority of the people of the Catholic Church are the laity. Some may look down upon the laity because they are neither formally ordained nor consecrated in the Church. This is especially true during the time before the Knights of Columbus, when the laity’s only responsibility was to “pray, pay and obey”: pray in Church, monetarily contribute to the Church’s collections, and obey the commandments of God.<sup>14</sup> Since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Catholic Church states that without the laity, the pastors of the Church cannot fully be effective in their ministry.<sup>15</sup> Together, the ordained, consecrated, and laity are “one in communion and in ministering; He [Christ] equips her [the Church] with various gifts of a hierarchical and charismatic nature, a giving life, soul-like, to ecclesiastical institutions and instilling into the hearts of the faithful the same mission spirit which impelled Christ Himself.”<sup>16</sup>

In Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes the Church as a body and writes that God

gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Knights of Columbus, Knights of Columbus Finding Aid KC-1-2, (New Haven, Connecticut: Knights of Columbus), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Whitehead, The Principle Calling and Mission of the Laity, [online] 1996, (accessed 3 November 2009), [http://catholiccharismatic.us/ccc/articles/Whitehead/Whitehead\\_009.html](http://catholiccharismatic.us/ccc/articles/Whitehead/Whitehead_009.html).

<sup>15</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 238.

<sup>16</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Hiesberger, ed, *The New American Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

McGivney would “as long as necessary...support the effort as a kind of backbone, but his ambition was for others to learn how to run” the organization.<sup>18</sup> By assigning the laymen of the Church such leadership, Father McGivney presented an opportunity to the non-ordained to become deeply involved in the Church’s activities. McGivney saw the importance of the Catholic laity in the 1880s, before the Catholic Church as a whole acknowledged its value almost a century later. “In suggesting a plan by which he would work with laymen as equals, Michael McGivney was crossing into new territory” by proposing the Knights of Columbus.<sup>19</sup> During this time, many believed that “a priest held himself at a certain remove, and tradition suggested it was elevated remove” from the rest of the laity.<sup>20</sup> In addition, “the fact that it was to be in a civic setting—and one in which the laymen would hold all of the power—made his project downright revolutionary.”<sup>21</sup>

The Catholic laity in America, particularly immigrants, experienced extreme nativism during the Nineteenth Century. In 1830, there were approximately 318,000 American Catholics, but in 1870, there were over 3,500,000 American Catholics.<sup>22</sup> Fearing the Catholic population, Nativists drew from “‘hate literature,’ some of which was financed and actually written by Protestant ministers.”<sup>23</sup> Most of this nativism stemmed from the assumption that “the pope commanded more loyalty from them than the U.S. president.”<sup>24</sup> In the 1830s and 1840s, anti-Catholic sentiments exploded. In 1834, after Reverend Lyman Beecher, a Protestant minister, delivered a sermon to a mob of nativists in Massachusetts, these nativists set fire to an Ursuline

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<sup>18</sup> *Parish Priest*, 89.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Kauffman, *Patriotism and Fraternalism in the Knights of Columbus*, (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Parish Priest*, 41.

convent in the same neighborhood.<sup>25</sup> In 1835, Beecher continued his persecution of American Catholics by publishing *Plea for the West*, “a call for united action against the impending crisis of Catholic immigrants.”<sup>26</sup> Some nativists burned Catholic churches in Philadelphia after the Bishop of Philadelphia successfully appealed to the school board to allow Catholic students to read the Catholic Bible; during three days of violence, nativists killed thirteen Catholics and injured over fifty.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the United States during this time, “the message was simple: Protestantism was as synonymous with republicanism as Catholicism was with disloyalty.”<sup>28</sup> Some Americans even believed that “Roman Catholicism and Slavery [are] alike founded and supported on the basis of ignorance and tyranny [they are] therefore, natural allies in every warfare against liberty and enlightenment.”<sup>29</sup> Bishop John Carroll of Maryland, the first Bishop of the United States was known as “one of the grand, staunch, patriotic prelates” during this time.<sup>30</sup> Carroll encouraged Catholic participation in “parish governance by elected lay trustees” and reminded nativists that “Catholics’ ‘blood flowed as freely...to cement the fabric of independence as that of any of their fellow-citizens.’”<sup>31</sup>

However, most Protestant Americans believed that anti-Catholicism was acceptable in the Nineteenth Century.<sup>32</sup> In the 1840s and 1850s, the Whig Party in America, notorious for their division over slavery, united against the Catholic presence in the anti-Catholic American Party. This party, also referred to as the Star-Spangled Banner Party, was founded in 1854 and immediately recognized as a secret society because of its ritualistic tendencies.<sup>33</sup> “Since its

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<sup>25</sup> *Patriotism and Fraternalism*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

members refused to reveal their aims and objectives, it was referred to as the Know-Nothing Party.”<sup>34</sup> The Know-Nothings were focused on “immigrant restrictionism, revision of the naturalization laws...and the exclusion of immigrants from ever holding office.”<sup>35</sup> During the elections of 1854-55, the “Know-Nothing Party gained victories in local, state, and federal elections on eleven states, including New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut; smaller Know-Nothing victories occurred in Pennsylvania and Maine.”<sup>36</sup> Even area magazines and newspapers supported the Know-Nothing Party. *The Hartford Current* [sic], a Connecticut newspaper, often ran articles and editorials “featuring the standard fare of papal conspiracies” concerning Catholic Americans.<sup>37</sup> The Know-Nothings survived until the mid-1850s, when the Republican Party emerged in the United States. To most Catholics, “the suspicion remained that the anti-Catholic vendetta of the 1850s—the Know-Nothing uprising—was only barely submerged” and was still prevalent in America.<sup>38</sup>

After the decline of the Know-Nothing Party, the American Protective Association (APA) was founded in Iowa in the 1880s. Its founder, Henry Francis Bowers was a Masonic lecturer who preached against the Catholic vote. The APA was particularly concerned about “making democracy safe from ‘papal imperialism.’”<sup>39</sup> The APA descended from the Know-Nothing Party. “With the rise of the American Protective Association, an organization dedicated to the mid-nineteenth century Know-Nothings’ goal of restricting Catholics from the political and economic life of the nation,” anti-Catholicism continued.<sup>40</sup> Members of the APA pledged to “struggle against all forms of Romanism” and “swore not to engage in any business with or to

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Parish Priest*, 178.

<sup>39</sup> *Patriotism and Fraternalism*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



hire any Catholics.”<sup>41</sup> Newspapers of the 1880s, such as *The International Review* and *The Unitarian Review*, published articles stating that the teachings of the Catholic Church were “not in accord with American ideas of Christian morality.”<sup>42</sup> Father McGivney and the members of St. Mary’s Parish were aware of the bias against American Catholics. Determined to combat anti-Catholicism, McGivney initiated the primary meeting of the Knights of Columbus in New Haven.

On October 2, 1881, Father McGivney assembled nine male lay parishioners, in addition to himself, at an organizational meeting in the basement of St. Mary’s Church in New Haven, Connecticut, to discuss his idea for a unique, fraternal organization based on American patriotism and Catholicism. The group held elections for officers and established a Supreme Council at their February 2, 1882 meeting, and less than six months later, on March 29, 1882, the order was incorporated under the laws of the state of Connecticut.<sup>43</sup> Certain insurance companies, such as “Connecticut General, Aetna, Connecticut Mutual, and Travelers...covered the country with policies.”<sup>44</sup> However, most working class families did not have insurance policies from large companies, both for fear of insurance scandals and lack of income needed to acquire such insurance. McGivney claimed that the Knights of Columbus was the “genuine Catholic action” that was needed in Connecticut.<sup>45</sup>

McGivney had searched for a Catholic organization within Saint Mary’s Parish that would enthusiastically offer the young men of the parish a sense of brotherhood and unity, as he noticed “look[ing] out over the pews...the ranks of the male parishioners were pathetically thin,

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Parish Priest*, 178.

<sup>43</sup> Finding Aid KC-1-1.

<sup>44</sup> *Parish Priest*, 138.

<sup>45</sup> Finding Aid KC-1-1.

except for the boys and the old men. St. Mary's looked like a church in wartime."<sup>46</sup> He did not plan to found the Knights of Columbus as an entirely new organization, but McGivney hoped that he could further aid another fraternal Catholic organization and prevent Catholic men from joining secret societies. For instance, in 1878, McGivney attended the initial meeting of the St. Joseph's Young Men's Total Abstinence and Literary Society at St. Mary's Church.<sup>47</sup> To McGivney, the history of Total Abstinence (TA) Societies was much too convoluted: "St. Mary's TA society was called St. Joseph's; St. Patrick's was called St. Mary's; and St. John's was called St. Aloysius's."<sup>48</sup> The young men who joined St. Joseph's had pledged not to drink any alcoholic beverages, as the Catholic Church was troubled by alcoholism and alcohol abuse among immigrant groups, particularly Irish-Americans.<sup>49</sup> The members of St. Joseph's were workers of the parish, but many, including James Mullen, who would later become the first Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, did not join the TA society. He was a liquor dealer, and did not believe that a man had to give up alcohol in order to belong to a fraternal society.<sup>50</sup> Many Catholic men shared his views, and the TA societies became less popular throughout the 1800s.<sup>51</sup> The TA societies did not offer Catholic men the sense of brotherhood and excitement that Father McGivney believed was necessary in the Church. The majority of the primary members of the Knights of Columbus had been involved in Temperance Societies, and wished to bolster the sense of community and brotherhood that had begun in the TA societies. Father McGivney understood the short-comings of the Temperance Societies from his observations of St. Joseph's Society. Serving as Supreme Secretary and later as Supreme

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<sup>46</sup> *Parish Priest*, 83.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Chaplain of the Order of the Knights of Columbus, McGivney was free to offer guidance to its members without domination of the organization.<sup>52</sup>

In choosing the name for the new brotherhood, McGivney first proposed the “Sons of Columbus” to relate the order to the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus, who was the courageous, fervent, valiant—and Catholic—discoverer of America.<sup>53</sup> The society came into being ten years before the four hundred year anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of North America, and McGivney saw the irony that Protestant Americans viewed Columbus as a national hero, yet still held prejudices against American Catholics; “even in the anti- Catholic climate of the late nineteenth century, Columbus figured as a national hero.”<sup>54</sup> The men agreed that the council of the Knights of Columbus was to be named the San Salvador Council after the first island that Columbus landed on when he discovered the New World. However, for a multitude of reasons, McGivney chose to replace the word “Sons” with “Knights.” First, each of the original members, with the exception of Father McGivney and Father Patrick Lawler, the pastor of St. Mary Church during this time, belonged to the Red Knights, an Irish Catholic social organization founded in 1874 by members of the Sarsfield Guards. These men belonged to a Connecticut National Guard militia unit whose “general goal [was] the advancement and mutual improvement of the young men of our race...[and] to bring about an acquaintance and maintain a feeling of brotherly love between young men of our race.”<sup>55</sup> Although McGivney explicitly states that the Knights were neither a continuation of nor affiliation of the Red Knights, they helped form the order because of their “strong will.” According to Daniel Colwell, the historian of the order, McGivney met with a representative from the Red Knights to work in collaboration

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<sup>52</sup> Finding Aid KC-1-2.

<sup>53</sup> Finding Aid KC-1-1.

<sup>54</sup> *Parish Priest*, 146.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Kauffman, *Faith and Fraternalism: The History of the Knights of Columbus 1882-1982*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 10.

when attempting to launch the order.<sup>56</sup> Second, as suggested by James T. Mullen, the parishioner who would later become the first Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, the title “Knights” evoked a certain ideal of nobleness and patriotism. These “knightly ideals...of spirituality and service to the Church, country, and fellow man” were McGivney’s quintessential ideals for the order.<sup>57</sup> According to the original founders, the Knights were

designed to help Catholic men remain steadfast in their faith through mutual encouragement, to promote closer ties of fraternity among them, and to set up an elementary system of insurance so that the widows and children of members in the group who might die would not find themselves in dire straits.<sup>58</sup>

Third, because many Protestant Americans persecuted Catholics, Father McGivney realized that this was “a militant struggle against the strong anti-Catholic...sentiment so prevalent in traditional New England society.”<sup>59</sup> For these reasons, the Knights of Columbus became the title for this small group of local laymen wishing to create an organization where they would be accepted and welcomed as Catholics united in brotherhood.

Throughout the Nineteenth Century, before the founding of the Knights of Columbus, other individual Catholics, as well as Catholic groups, had attempted to create inclusive societies to ward off anti-Catholicism and provide insurance for their members. One of these societies, the Irish Catholic Benevolent Union, or I.C.B.U., attempted to create a national organization of insurance benefits to provide financial assistance to Catholic families who were struggling economically, either because the father was suffering from sickness or had died and the family did not have money to pay for the burial.<sup>60</sup> Because of the common need for insurance, particularly for life insurance, “there were hundreds of smaller death-benefit and burial societies

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<sup>56</sup> Daniel Colwell, “The Knights of Columbus,” *The Columbiad*, January 1910.

<sup>57</sup> The Knights of Columbus, Knights of Columbus Archival Finding Aid KC-1-1, (New Haven, Connecticut: Knights of Columbus), 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Faith and Fraternalism*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

among Catholic immigrant groups [besides the Catholic fraternal insurance societies]” for one distinct reason: to provide economic aid for burying the breadwinner of a family.<sup>61</sup> Although the Knights of Columbus was not the first Catholic fraternal organization, it was unique and well supported; the membership in the order and recognition of the association easily surpassed the similar societies.<sup>62</sup> Father McGivney “didn’t think of himself as an Irishman, not even a part-time one. His parents had brought him up as an American. That was how he regarded his parishioners, too, even the many who had been born in Kerry, Derry, or Donegal: Americans.”<sup>63</sup> By focusing less on the ties to the Old-World and more on American patriotism and moving forward in the country, the Knights of Columbus would expand from one council in Connecticut to an internationally renowned Catholic fraternal organization. Catholics at St. Mary’s Church had attempted to integrate themselves seamlessly into American labor societies, but still faced many prejudices as Irish-Catholic immigrants.

In the Nineteenth Century, many Catholic workers were affiliated with a labor union known as the Knights of Labor. In a time where the working class needed “social well-being and job security,” the Knights of Labor attempted to offer Catholic workers both.<sup>64</sup> Created to withstand and oppose the anti-labor attitudes of capitalists during this time, the Knights of Labor appealed mainly to Irish immigrants, who were experiencing both nativism and anti-labor sentiments.<sup>65</sup> Founded in 1869 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by Uriah Stephens, the organization became prominent in 1879 under the leadership of Terrance V. Powderly, a devout Catholic. Many Catholics, including some American Bishops, agreed that a labor union was imperative, as “the Capitalists made it necessary for working men to join an organization for

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Parish Priest*, 85.

<sup>64</sup> Henry J. Browne, *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor*, (New York: Arno Press, 1976), xvii.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

their own safety.”<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, many American Bishops spoke out against Powderly’s position, as he “knew the teaching of the Church on such societies [as the Knights of Labor].”<sup>67</sup> The Catholic Church nearly condemned the Knights of Labor as a secret society because it forced its members’ involvement in ceremonial rituals, contained a declaration of an oath of secrecy on the Bible, and upheld the “practical means of enforcing secrecy of ‘the impenetrable veil of ritual, sign grip and password.’”<sup>68</sup> These rituals were contained in a booklet titled “Adelphon Kruptos” (“Secret Brotherhood”), which was distributed to all members of the Knights of Labor, so that each could memorize the “Secret Work and Instructions” of the society.<sup>69</sup>

During the late-Nineteenth Century, the Catholic Church in America and the Knights of Labor were constantly at odds. The Knights of Labor discovered that if the society remained secret, it would hinder its own purpose of aiding the workers as a labor union. E.A. Stevens, a Chicago member of the Knights of Labor, advised Powderly that there were “questions of real interest to *labor* which should take up [their] time,” rather than questions on Scripture or secrecy, and members from within the organization began reform of the society.<sup>70</sup> Powderly himself advised against an oath in the organization, and pressure from Catholics within the Knights of Labor also aided in the abolishment of the oath in 1881 and the public revelation its name on January 1, 1882.<sup>71</sup> Even with the end of ultimate secrecy, the Holy See continued to condemn the Knights of Labor in the United States. In 1887, although many American Catholics, both the laity and clergy, became more accepting of the Knights of Labor, the Church in Rome stood firm

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii, 42.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 55, 62.

in its stance against the organization. Pope Leo XIII, the reigning Pontiff, staunchly condemned the organization. Fortunately, the Pope met with Cardinal James Gibbons, then the Archbishop of Baltimore, on February 16, 1887, at the Vatican to discuss the official position of the Catholic Church on the Knights of Labor.<sup>72</sup> Gibbons was able to convince Pope Leo XIII that involvement in labor unions was a necessity to prevent the exploitation of Catholic laborers.<sup>73</sup> In his defense of the union, Gibbons stated “that besides involving dangers for the Church and being impossible to enforce, a condemnation of the Knights [of Labor] was unnecessary and would be wasted...because...the form of the Order had so little promise of permanence.”<sup>74</sup> In the interest of Catholic workers, Pope Leo XIII withdrew his condemnation of labor unions, specifically the Knights of Labor, and many Catholics came to view Cardinal Gibbons as a supporter of foreign-born Catholic workers.<sup>75</sup> However, the Catholic Church still held its position against other secret societies in America.

Another one of these organizations, the Ancient Order of the Foresters, also simply known as the Foresters, was a secular society based on “Robin Hood and his merrie [sic] men.”<sup>76</sup> Father McGivney had attempted to incorporate the St. Joseph’s Total Abstinence Society into the Foresters in 1881, but the Bishop Lawrence McMahon, the Bishop of Hartford, denied his request to merge the two distinct societies.<sup>77</sup> In its understanding of this order, the Catholic Church considered the Foresters a “secret” society because of their secular doctrine.<sup>78</sup> Soon after receiving McMahon’s response, McGivney became aware of the obvious tension between the Foresters and the Catholic Church. When McGivney refused to allow the Foresters, wearing

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>75</sup> *Faith and Fraternalism*, 85.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

their societal badges, into St. Mary's for the funeral of one of their Catholic members, the society "turned right around" and "decided not to attend the funeral at all, not without their badges."<sup>79</sup> McGivney believed that the Foresters placed "a higher value on a bunch of badges" than on "the chosen church of their deceased friend."<sup>80</sup> When McGivney learned that Reverend Patrick J. Ford, a priest in Meriden, Connecticut, was considering joining the Foresters, McGivney wrote to him, expressing his "sorrow" that Ford would consider seriously supporting the Foresters as an organization.<sup>81</sup> Father McGivney then observed the need for the Knights' expansion through multiple councils throughout Connecticut. If there already was a "Catholic organization similar to the one he envisioned, then there would be no need to start from scratch."<sup>82</sup> Although certain other fraternal societies did exist during the Nineteenth Century, McGivney could not find one of these societies which had the necessary amount of enthusiasm or loyalty from its members that he believed was necessary for a successful organization. Afraid that Catholics would turn to secret societies instead, this only further convinced Father McGivney that an order such as the Knights of Columbus was imperative to the Catholic community.

Beginning in the 1870s, secret societies in America had burst forth, attempting to gain members, particularly from the immigrant working class and lower strata of the American people. The membership of these societies exploded from "a couple of thousand to more than five million" from the years 1880 to 1901.<sup>83</sup> In order to prevent members of the Catholic Church from joining any secret societies, McGivney wrote that an organization comparable to any one of these societies must be created. Many clergy presented scrutinizing accusations against Father McGivney and the Knights, condemning the organization as a secret society itself. In 1885, a

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<sup>79</sup> *Parish Priest*, 125.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> McGivney to Ford, 1882.

<sup>82</sup> *Parish Priest*, 138.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.



priest who called himself “Clericus” wrote to the *Connecticut Catholic*, the foremost Catholic newspaper, denouncing the idea of the Knights of Columbus, particularly taking issue with the concealment of certain laws and ceremonies of the Order.<sup>84</sup> “Clericus” also took issue with Catholic Bishops approving the organization, since the Church had condemned secret societies in the United States prior to the Knights’ founding. McGivney articulately replied to his accusations, stating that, although the Knights of Columbus held “rites unknown to the prying public, any priest was allowed to attend any meeting” of the organization at any time.<sup>85</sup> He countered the second attack against the Bishop by citing that Bishop McMahon had only “given permission” to the society and had not “approved the order.”<sup>86</sup> Using a slight technicality to his advantage, Father McGivney deftly defended the Knights of Columbus from accusations of a secret society. After this trial and defense of the organization, numbers in the Order surged. By 1890, in a span of less than a decade, 6,000 Catholic men joined the ranks of the Knights of Columbus in Connecticut, and the membership continued to increase steadily, even after Father McGivney’s death.<sup>87</sup> By 1892, the Knights of Columbus had spread beyond the Connecticut border into Rhode Island, and by 1899, the Order had one council in Canada.<sup>88</sup>

Secret societies were prevalent in nineteenth-century America, and McGivney’s fear stemmed from the controlling nature of these societies. What constituted a society as “secret” included “rituals, incantations, and signs known only members.”<sup>89</sup> According to Brinkley, McGivney believed that “secret societies were distracting at best—and sacrilegious when taken to their extreme...the Church had no use for them and specifically forbade Catholics to

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<sup>84</sup> *Faith and Fraternalism*, 48.

<sup>85</sup> *Parish Priest*, 226.

<sup>86</sup> *Faith and Fraternalism*, 49.

<sup>87</sup> *Parish Priest*, 252.

<sup>88</sup> *The Knights of Columbus in Peace and War*, 61, 75.

<sup>89</sup> *Parish Priest*, 85.

participate in secret rituals.”<sup>90</sup> McGivney feared that certain secret societies, specifically the Protestant Freemasons, might attempt to take Catholic men into their ranks, and that the men, yearning for acceptance and brotherhood, might join one of these perilous secret organizations. McGivney wrote that he believed the primary object of the Knights was to “prevent people from entering secret societies by offering the same, if not better, advantages to [their] members.”<sup>91</sup> Secret societies had been a part of the American colonies’ culture since the English rule. Originating in Great Britain, the Freemasons are members of a society that is over three hundred years old.<sup>92</sup> First begun as a Roman Catholic trade guild for masons in Great Britain, the aristocracy soon took over the institution, creating an enormous non-Christian secret society, which is divided into individual Lodges under one Grand Lodge.<sup>93</sup> The Freemasons have many offshoots, including the Royal Masonic Institution for Girls, the Royal Masonic Institution for Boys, the Royal Masonic Benevolent Institution, the Royal Masonic Hospital, and the Masonic Foundation for the Aged and the Sick.<sup>94</sup> This new Freemasonry guild was extremely popular, with Lodges both in England and the colonies. The Freemasons offered life insurance, including burial funds, to its members. However, many Catholic clergy feared that the Freemasons, who were “a secret society of men who take the most solemn oaths...who recognize each other by secret signs, and who then extend favours to each other even though this conflicts with their public duties,” might appeal to Catholic men.<sup>95</sup> The Freemasons were a secret society, condemned by the Catholic Church and, in turn, Father McGivney as well.

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> McGivney to Ford, 1882.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen Knight, *The Brotherhood: The Secret World of the Freemasons*, (London: Grafton, 1987), 17

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World’s Most Powerful Secret Society*, (New York: Arcade, 1999), xi.

In 1738, Pope Clement XII “condemned Freemasonry and prohibited Catholics from affiliating with it or aiding it in any way under penalty of an excommunication [which excludes a Catholic from any function in the Church, as well as from receiving the Eucharist<sup>96</sup>] from which they could be released only by the Holy See.”<sup>97</sup> With this statement, the Catholic Church declared that it “would not tolerate any Catholic remaining in a position “so opposed to the positive laws of the Church, and so dangerous to the integrity of the faith.”<sup>98</sup> The clerical response in the United States was varied: “Some priests ignored the impetuous American personality and forbade decorated members of such societies to enter churches. Other priests ignored the tenets of the Church on the subject and let anyone in, with regalia or without.”<sup>99</sup> The Catholic Church was noticeably divided on the controversial issue of secret societies, and, as a priest, Father McGivney “could not ignore either side.”<sup>100</sup> He did not want any sense of the Catholic faith to be absent from a society comprised of Catholic men. McGivney also understood that if these secret societies were the only source of brotherhood and belonging for Catholic men, it was imperative that the Church have an organization of “a lively group of ‘brothers’” to encourage each other in their faith.<sup>101</sup>

Although McGivney advocated against a society filled with rituals, as he felt it may have been misinterpreted as a secret society, the first members “state[d] with much force that if [they] intended to have a society, [they] must have one of ritualistic form, that it was only such that would hold the men together...and on motion it was voted...a ritualistic society.”<sup>102</sup> In order to be a privileged society, the Knights felt that the organization was in need of rituals, official

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<sup>96</sup> CCC, 878.

<sup>97</sup> *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor*, 7.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>99</sup> *Parish Priest*, 127.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

colors, and a hierarchy of Knights. Unlike the previous societies, the Knights of Columbus needed to “operate entirely in line with the Church, although officially separate from it.”<sup>103</sup> This presented a challenge to the organization. When the members of the laity disagreed on aspects of the Order, they could not appeal to the Catholic Church for a ruling. McGivney observed that the majority of obstacles actually came from within the Order and the Catholic Church.<sup>104</sup> The Knights were unable to add members to the organization when the internal members could not agree with each other on mundane issues. Bart Healy, an original member of the Knights, withdrew from the Order because “he never knew a society to prosper which had a priest at its head.”<sup>105</sup> In addition, some priests also criticized the Knights of Columbus throughout its formation. They callously compared Father McGivney to “a shadow bishop” and stated that he was attempting to gain the support of the Knights of Columbus to create “his own power base” in Connecticut.<sup>106</sup> Amid this criticism, Father McGivney offered to resign, but his faithful parishioners refused; they understood that “the Knights of Columbus was the cause closest to his heart...[he had to] try to keep the group together and moving forward.”<sup>107</sup> McGivney saw that the Order’s permanence was not just a fanciful idea; if the Knights of Columbus could overcome criticism and attacks, it would continue to prosper throughout the next century.

Today, the Knights of Columbus includes over 1.7 million members, with councils located in each state and throughout the world. According to the Order, “the Knights of Columbus has grown from several members in one council to more than 13,000 councils and 1.7 million members throughout the United States, Canada, the Philippines, Mexico, Poland, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Panama, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Cuba, Guatemala,

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

Guam and Saipan.”<sup>108</sup> Members of the Knights believe that “the proudest boast of all time is... ‘I am an American Catholic citizen.’”<sup>109</sup> The Knights have continued to demonstrate their founding ideals of unity, charity, and fraternity throughout the Twentieth- and Twenty-first-Centuries. The Order still offers affordable life insurance coverage, scholarships and fellowships, and financial assistance to its members and their families.<sup>110</sup> In 2009 alone, the Knights added over 22,000 men to the organization.<sup>111</sup>

In 1997, over one hundred years after McGivney’s death, Daniel Cronin, the former Archbishop of Hartford, was instrumental in bringing McGivney’s case for canonization into sainthood before the Vatican.<sup>112</sup> The process of sainthood is complicated and lengthy. Each candidate for sainthood must have his or her case “proven” to the Vatican. The first requirement is one miracle attributed to the candidate after his or her death. After one miracle is proven, the person “Blessed” through beatification. In 2008, the Holy See proclaimed Father McGivney “Venerable Servant of God,” and, if the Pope declares him beatified, McGivney will be declared “Blessed.”<sup>113</sup> With confirmation of a second miracle attributed to the priest, he may be declared a saint. If this occurs, “McGivney would be the first American-born parish priest to be canonized.”<sup>114</sup> McGivney’s influence on Catholicism in the United States is still prominent. The Knights of Columbus continues his works today. The Knights continue to fund institutions and memorials in the name of their founder, such as the Father McGivney Center for Cancer Care at the Hospital of Saint Raphael in New Haven, Connecticut; the McGivney Hall at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.; the Father Michael J. McGivney Boulevard in

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<sup>108</sup> Knights of Columbus, [www.kofc.org](http://www.kofc.org).

<sup>109</sup> *Patriotism and Fraternalism*, 3.

<sup>110</sup> Knights of Columbus, [www.kofc.org](http://www.kofc.org).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Parish Priest*, 256.

<sup>113</sup> Knights of Columbus, [www.fathermcgivney.org](http://www.fathermcgivney.org).

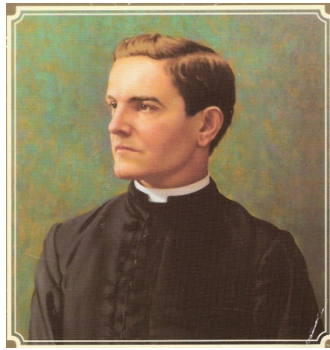
<sup>114</sup> *Parish Priest*, 257.

Waterbury, Connecticut; and the McGivney House in British Columbia.<sup>115</sup> Undoubtedly, McGivney's vision of a fraternal brotherhood for Catholic men has truly been recognized in the Knights of Columbus.

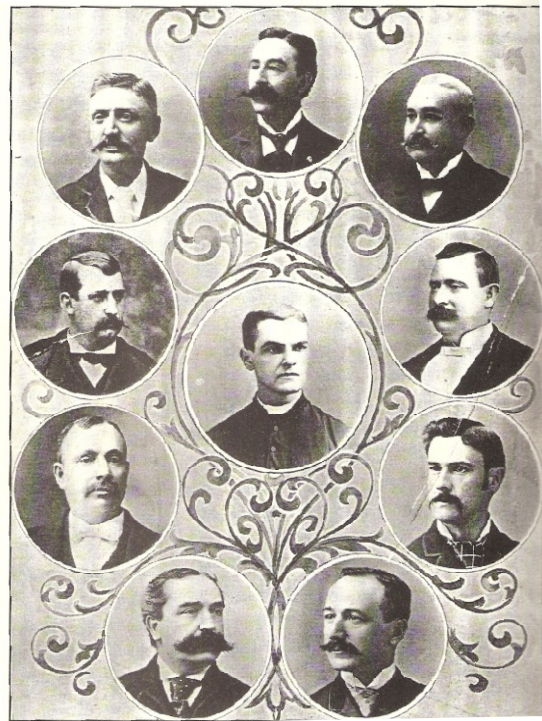
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<sup>115</sup> Knights of Columbus, [www.fathermichaelmcgivney.org](http://www.fathermichaelmcgivney.org).

## Appendix



Father Michael McGivney (cover of *Parish Priest*)

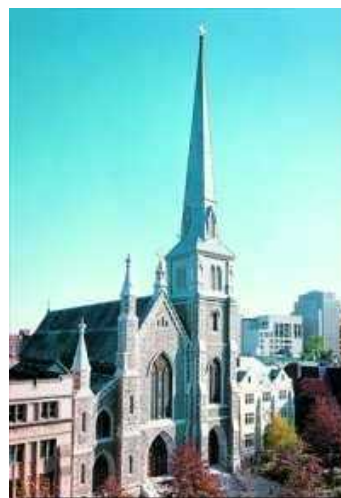


The Nine Original Members of the Knights of Columbus and Father McGivney (*Parish Priest*)

**1** Members of the Order of Knights

NAME.	Age.	Council.	No.	Location.	Nativity.	Occupation.	Ir.
McKinney M. J. Rev.	33	St. Mary's	1	New Haven	Waterbury	Clergyman	Feb.
Mullen Jas. T.	31	St. Mary's	1	"	New Haven	Mechanic	"
Roberts Daniel	36	"	"	"	Massachusetts	"	"
Ferrigan John J.	28	"	"	"	New Haven	Postal Clerk	"
Hedley Wm. M.	31	"	"	"	"	Clerk	"
McMahon Jas. F.	29	"	"	"	"	Carrage Mkr	"
Driscoll Cornelius P.	35	"	"	"	Ireland	Lawyer	"
Curran Michael	37	St. Mary's	1	"	"	Undertaker	"
O'Connor Matthew C.	33	"	"	"	"	Physician	"

Signatures of the Original Members of the Knights of Columbus (*Parish Priest*)

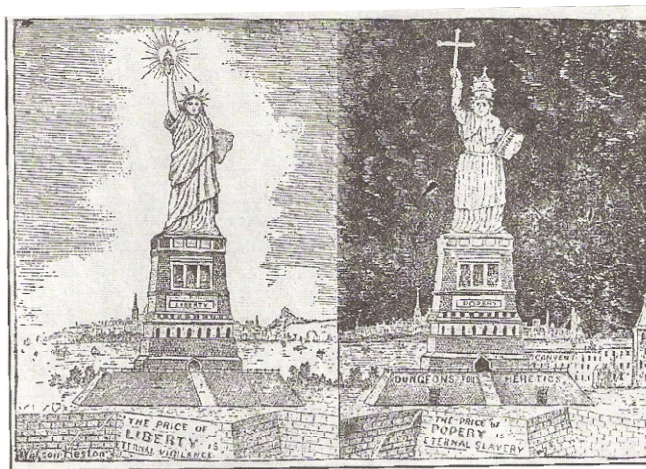


Then and Now - St. Mary Church, New Haven, Connecticut (*Faith and Fraternalism* and Knights of Columbus website)



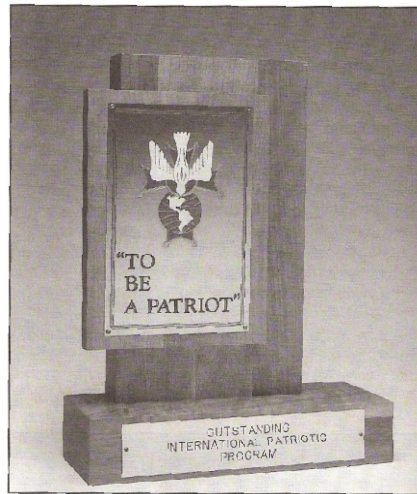


Supreme Council Headquarters, New Haven, Connecticut (Knights of Columbus website)



This cartoon, which depicts the light of liberty threatened by the darkness of "popery," was a warning against Catholics who feigned patriotism to advance "papal power." Cartoon by Wm. Lloyd Clark, Rail Splitter Press.

### Anti-Catholic Propaganda (*Patriotism and Fraternalism*)



Fourth Degree Patriot Award (*Patriotism and Fraternalism*)

#### Brotherhood

ACCORDING to the Master's plan,  
 Ours is a BROTHERHOOD of Man;  
 Yet, as we tread life's busy way,  
 Seeking success from day to day,  
 How prone are we to scan and note  
 In our brother's eye the mote;  
 Whereas, if we were just and kind,  
 Withholding judgment and trying to find  
 Some good behind that outer veil,  
 I warrant our efforts would not fail.  
 In every soul there is a spark  
 Of goodness shining through the dark.  
 'Tis the duty of each faithful Knight,  
 With strong endeavor to seek that light;  
 With patience and kindness trying to sow  
 The seed of charity, and show  
 The world we are doing all we can  
 To strengthen the BROTHERHOOD of Man.  
 Shoulder to shoulder, as the Knights of  
 old  
 Faith and justice and truth to uphold.  
 While our aim shall always be,  
 As valiant Knights of the K. of C.,  
 According to our Master's plan,  
 To foster the BROTHERHOOD of Man.

—William L. Kelly, Council No. 120,  
 Boston, Mass.

“Brotherhood” (from Knights of Columbus Archives)

# The Knights of Columbus

First meeting of the Order—Determination to have ritualistic ceremonies—The adoption of a name

By Daniel Colwell, Historian of the Order

(Continued from last issue)

IN response to an invitation extended personally by Father McGivney and the writer, a meeting of what may be properly termed the faithful few (for even in our early days, there were those who dropped from the enterprise through lack of confidence in the success of the movement) was held at my office, 157 Church street, in the city of New Haven, February 2, 1882. There were present at this meeting Rev. M. J. McGivney, James T. Mullen, Daniel Colwell, William H. Sellwood, William M. Geary, Michael E. Tracy, John Tracy and James T. McMahon.

Michael E. Tracy called the meeting to order, and on motion James T. Mullen was made Chairman.

The first subject taken up was the selection of a name for the new society. Father McGivney suggested as a name "Sons of Columbus," stating that by the adoption of this name we would be indicating in a way the Catholic and American character and tendency of the Order. James T. Mullen took the floor, and in his remarks said that if he understood the situation correctly, the new society was to be a ritualistic one. If such were the case, he would offer an amendment to Father McGivney's suggestion, and that the society should be known as the *Knights of Columbus*.

The precipitation of a ritual or ceremonials for the society was considered of sufficient importance to induce the meeting to temporarily set aside the question of name.

James T. Mullen was requested to outline his ideas of a ceremonial and the object he proposed to gain through the same. He showed in his convincing way the success attained by various non-Catholic organizations which had availed of the uses of a ritual, and drew attention to the short life usually attending organizations where ceremonials were lacking. He believed that an initiation, with proper ceremonies, was indispensable to success, and that the adoption of a ritual appealed to him with great force, and was undoubtedly the wisest course to pursue; that a ceremonial based or founded on Catholic-American subjects would prove successful. It would serve to attract to the membership beyond any other scheme, and would be productive of a praiseworthy ambition by members in conferring the degrees or sections.

The theme, he said, should be along educational lines, which would embrace social features not found in cold and formal societies. Mr. Mullen believed that a call had reached the observant Catholic layman in behalf of many young Catholic men, who were daily entering prohibited organizations, and the best remedy was a suitable substitute.

In order to impress this fact upon his hearers, he cited the case of a young man of his own acquaintance, a clever and singularly successful business man, who was held in high esteem by the business people of the city and state. This young man had had a good Catholic father and mother, and a good early Catholic training. His business brought him into daily contact with other men at home and abroad, and often, when away from home, after the completion of the day's work, he had only his hotel or the theatres to visit, and in consequence was often very lonely. Not so with his fellow salesmen, many of whom were members of societies of a general or national extent. These men would visit the lodges of the societies of which they were members, and on their return to the hotel, recite the pleasures and oftentimes profits that came to them through their identifications with their membership. These stories, or repeated, finally overcame the scruples of the friend, and he at last joined one of the prohibited societies. He regretted his action, and said that if the Catholic men had an organization of similar nature, he would never have entered the prohibited ranks; that the establishment of such an institution would put an end to such lapses, greater in number than was generally known, on the part of Catholic men.

Mr. Mullen continued: "Let this new organization be the medium through which the need or remedy may be applied." The speaker closed his remarks by saying: "I believe we have a grand mission before us; a rare opportunity to uplift and exalt from a Catholic layman's point of view, our fellow men."

Father McGivney concurred, as did others, in all Mr. Mullen had said, and it was voted that the new society should have ritualistic ceremonies, provided that no objection should be raised by Church authorities.

Father McGivney volunteered to take the matter up with his Lordship, Bishop McMahon, at Hartford, Conn., at once.

This important subject having been concluded, the meeting took up the subject of a name.

Father McGivney stated that after having heard Mr. Mullen's reasons, he was in favor of the name as Mullen had suggested, and it was then and there voted that the organization be known as the "Knights of Columbus."

Daniel Colwell stated that it was necessary that the organization be incorporated under the laws of the State of Connecticut, and advised that a committee be appointed to draw up the articles for presentation to the Legislature, then in session.

It was voted that Mr. Mullen appoint such com-

mittee. The Chairman announced that he had appointed Daniel Colwell as said committee, and requested Mr. Colwell to expedite the preparation of articles of incorporation, in order that the same be considered and passed upon by General Assembly of the State, then in session. The meeting adjourned subject to call of the Chair.

All the earlier gatherings were simply conferences, having in view the formation of a fraternal benefit society.

The meeting of February 2, 1882, must be regarded as the first meeting of the Order of the Knights of Columbus.



REV. M. J. MCGIVNEY

## Father Hecker, The Citizen

(Continued from page 2.)

works Judge O'Sullivan has described to you tonight.

My friends, I am not here to discuss or describe the spiritual fruits of Father Hecker's career. I want to point your attention now to the wonderful services he has rendered this country as one of its citizens. All his letters and diaries show from the very beginning his appreciation of the fact that there was but one force which could keep this country republican, and that Catholicism. The collapse of the democratic movement throughout Europe, irreligious as it was, confirmed his belief. He knew this was the most successful government the world had ever seen; but what was its essence? Why, it was built upon confidence that men could be entrusted with power, and that they would not abuse it; that they could be entrusted with powers to govern, which powers would not be abused by the majority, who are always poor, to the plunder and oppression of the rich, who are always a minority.

### Based on Revelation

That was in conflict with all the notions of all the philosophers that ever wrote. The very essence of every philosophy that dealt with government was that man was so depraved that he could be restrained from taking his neighbor's goods only by fear—fear of punishment, fear of prison, fear of torture, fear of death. And Father Hecker asked himself where, then, do we find the first suggestion of this idea that man is necessarily depraved, but that also he is capable of wonderful improvement; and, as his works show, he found it in the revelation which came from the very throne of God through the very lips of His Son—the first suggestion ever made upon this earth that man was capable of infinite perfectibility is made in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And there was not a single manifestation of virtue or excellence that He made as Man throughout His whole life that you or I or any human being that ever lived could not imitate in our lives. True, His divine perfection no one could hope to equal; but all could strive to imitate it, and in the endeavor to imitate it we must improve ourselves immensely.

That was the origin, as Judge O'Sullivan has suggested to-night, of this democratic government under which we live and under which we prosper. We find it not in any monument of human wisdom, nor in any charter of human liberty extorted from some tottering tyrant or established by force of arms on a battlefield; but we find it in the word preached by the shore of the Sea of Galilee—the word which had for its fundamental feature the truth that all men were equal in the sight of God. Of that truth the necessary fruit was a government which had for its cornerstone the political belief that all men are equal in the sight of the law.

From the hour that the Gospel of Christ was preached, the dawn of republicanism was inevitable. True, the process was slow. But Father Hecker realized, when seeing it here in its splendor and in

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