**The Story of Father Michael J. McGivney: Roots**

Father Michael McGivney was born in Waterbury, Conn., on August 12, 1852. His parents, Patrick and Mary (Lynch) McGivney, had arrived in the great 19th century wave of Irish immigration. Patrick McGivney became a molder in the heat and noxious fumes of a Waterbury brass mill. Mary McGivney gave birth to 13 children, six of whom died in infancy or childhood. Therefore, the first child, Michael, with four living sisters and two brothers, learned early about sorrow and the harsh grip of poverty. Thanks to his parents’ example, he also learned about the powers of love and faith, and family fortitude.

Michael went to the small district schools of Waterbury's working-class neighborhoods. A good student, he was admired by his school principal for "Excellent deportment and proficiency in his studies." Then, after the Civil War, when Connecticut's metals industry was booming, he left school at age 13 to go to work. His job in the spoon-making department of a brass factory provided a few more necessary dollars for family survival.

When Michael reached the age of 16 in 1868, he left the factory. With the priesthood clearly in mind, he traveled with his Waterbury pastor to Quebec, Canada. There he registered at the French-run College of St. Hyacinthe. He worked hard on subjects, which would prepare him to apply for seminary admission.

After two academic years at Our Lady of Angels Seminary, which was attached to Niagara University in Niagara Falls, N.Y., young McGivney moved to Montreal, where he attended seminary classes at the Jesuit-run St. Mary’s College.

He was there when his father died in June of 1873.

**Priesthood**

Lacking funds and concerned about his family, McGivney went home for his father’s funeral and lingered awhile in Waterbury. Then, at the request of the bishop of Hartford, he entered St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, Md. After four years of study, on December 22, 1877, he was ordained in Baltimore's historic Cathedral of the Assumption by Archbishop (later Cardinal) James Gibbons. A few days later, with his widowed mother present, he offered his first Mass at Immaculate Conception Church in Waterbury.

Father McGivney began his priestly ministry on Christmas Day in 1877 as curate of St. Mary's Church in New Haven, the city's first parish. The original Church of St. Mary’s was destroyed by fire and so a new stone church had been built on Hillhouse Avenue, one of New Haven’s finest residential streets. However, since Catholics were not liked, to say the least, there was neighborhood objection to the Catholic Church which even the *New York Times* noted in 1879, under the headline: “How An Aristocratic Avenue Was Blemished By A Roman Church Edifice.” So, Father McGivney’s priestly ministry in New Haven began with tension and defensiveness among the working-class Irish families he served.

One of the responsibilities of St. Mary's priests was pastoral care of inmates in the city jail. In a notable case, a 21-year-old Irishman, while drunk, shot and killed a police officer. James (Chip) Smith was tried for first-degree murder in 1881, convicted and sentenced to be hanged. Father McGivney visited him daily.

After a special Mass on the day of execution, the priest's grief was intense. The young offender comforted him: "Father, your saintly ministrations have enabled me to meet death without a tremor. Do not fear for me, I must not break down now."

Father McGivney worked closely with the young people of St. Mary's parish, holding catechism classes and organizing a total abstinence society to fight alcoholism. In 1881 he began to explore, with various laymen, the idea of a Catholic fraternal benefit society. In an era when parish clubs and fraternal societies had wide popular appeal, the young priest felt there should be some way to strengthen religious faith and at the same time provide for the financial needs of families overwhelmed by illness or death of the breadwinner.

He discussed this concept with Bishop Lawrence McMahon of Hartford, and received his approval. He traveled to Boston to talk with the Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters, and traveled to Brooklyn to consult the Catholic Benevolent Legion. He met with other priests of the diocese. Wherever he could, he sought information that would help the Catholic laymen to organize themselves into a benefit society.

**Founder**

People who knew Father McGivney in this period were impressed by his energy and intensity. Father Gordian Daley later recalled, "I saw him but once, and yet I remember this pale, beautiful face as if I saw it only yesterday. It was a 'priest's face' and that explains everything. It was a face of wonderful repose. There was nothing harsh in that countenance although there was everything that was strong."

William Geary, one of the Order’s charter members, said that at the first council meeting in 1882, Father McGivney was "Acclaimed as founder by 24 men with hearts full of joy and thanksgiving; recognizing that without his optimism, his will to succeed, his counsel and advice they would have failed."

Father McGivney had originally suggested Sons of Columbus as a name for the Order. This would bind Catholicism and Americanism together through the faith and bold vision of the New World’s discoverer. However, the word “knights” replaced “sons” because key members of the organizing group who were Irish-born Civil War veterans felt it would help to apply a noble ritual in support of the emerging cause of Catholic civil liberty.

The first public references to the Order came on February 8, 1882.  Both the *New Haven Morning Journal* and the *New Haven Courier* reported that the Knights of Columbus had held an initial meeting the night before.

On March 29, the Connecticut legislature granted a charter to the Knights of Columbus, formally establishing it as a legal corporation. The Order’s principles in 1882 were "unity" and "charity." The concepts of "fraternity" and "patriotism" were added later. Each of these ideals played a major role in ceremonials from the beginning. The Columbus-linked themes, says historian Christopher J. Kauffman, "reverberated with pride in the American promise of liberty, equality and opportunity."

**A New Order and Pastor**

In April 1882, Father McGivney, with the permission of Bishop McMahon, wrote

an informative letter about the Knights of Columbus to all the pastors of the Diocese of Hartford. In the letter, Father McGivney stated that the Order’s primary objective was to dissuade Catholics from joining secret societies by providing them with Catholic societies that had better advantages at times of death or sickness. He urged each pastor to exert influence "in the formation of a council in your parish." Father McGivney personally installed the first officers of San Salvador Council 1 in New Haven, in May 1882.

By May 1883, Council 2 had been instituted in Meriden, Connecticut and Bishop McMahon, so impressed with the organization, became a member of Council 11 in 1884, and served as its council chaplain. By the end of 1885, there were 31 councils in Connecticut.

Father McGivney’s dedication to the Order was evidenced in trips he made to all parts of Connecticut and in handwritten correspondence—little of which survives—about K of C business. Despite all this, he remained an energetic curate at St. Mary’s and had constant concern for every parishioner’s problems.

In November 1884, he was named pastor of St. Thomas Church in Thomaston, Conn., a factory town 10 miles from his hometown. Heavily in debt, the parish served working-class parishioners with few resources beyond their faith. With prayerful acceptance, Father McGivney put his seven years at St. Mary’s behind him and traveled to Thomaston.

His New Haven parishioners, in a testimonial resolution which was elaborately superimposed on the drawing of a chalice and host, declared that despite burdens and afflictions, his courtesy, his kindness and the purity of his life had, "Secured the love and confidence of the people of St. Mary’s, which will follow him in every future field of labor."

In six subsequent years at St. Thomas, Father McGivney wrestled with the church's debt and built the same close ties of devotion and charitable concern that he had developed in New Haven. He continued, as well, to serve as supreme chaplain of the Knights of Columbus, personally involved in helping the Order to extend its membership into Rhode Island. Later, from 1901 to 1939, his younger brothers, Msgrs. Patrick and John J. McGivney, served the Order as supreme chaplains.

**Death**

Never robust in health, Father McGivney was suddenly stricken with a serious case of pneumonia in January 1890. It hung on. Various treatments for consumptive illness were tried, but his decline continued. The young priest lost physical strength just as the Order he founded was moving toward new vitality, and died on August 14, two days past his 38th birthday.

Later that August, one of the largest funerals in the history of Waterbury, Conn., took place.  Many civic leaders and throngs of other attendees joined the bishop of Hartford and more than 70 of Connecticut’s Catholic priests. It was reported that mourners rented every available carriage within miles for the great procession.

Father McGivney’s funeral was an indication of the love and respect the people felt for this hard-working, holy parish priest. It also reflected the deep personal appeal that immigrant Catholics immediately found in the Knights of Columbus.

Delegations were present from almost every one of the 57 Knights of Columbus councils that had been chartered in the Order’s first eight years.

To mark their 100th anniversary in 1982, the Knights of Columbus brought the remains of Father McGivney from Waterbury back to St. Mary’s Church in New Haven, where he founded the Order. There he now rests, in a setting in which daily Mass is offered for deceased Knights and prayers are said in his honor.