

# The McGirney Letters

*The surviving writings of the Knights' founder show a pastor determined to meet the spiritual and temporal needs of his people*

by Kevin Coyne



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Just 13 letters and a few quotes recorded by the local newspapers — that is what remains of all the words written and spoken by Father Michael J. McGivney across his 38 years. Much of what we know about him comes from the testimonies of people who knew him, but what do his own words tell us?

Some of his letters are of a kind that priests write routinely, such as a recommendation to his bishop on behalf of a young man discerning a religious vocation. But more than half of the letters chart the earliest days of the Knights of Columbus — the spiritual vision behind it, as well as its practical workings and the initial challenges it faced.

### SHEPHERD OF SOULS

Father McGivney's earliest surviving letter shows that he could bear a heavy load. "I have been alone all summer with the whole work of a parish on my shoulders," he wrote in October 1878 to Father Alphonse Magnien, a favorite professor at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, where he had graduated the previous year. Father McGivney was referring to his first assignment — at St. Mary's Church, a New Haven parish struggling with a \$165,000 debt (approximately \$3.8 million today, adjusted for inflation) and an ill pastor. "I have not had time for even one day's vacation since I left," he added.

The young curate was not the kind of priest who believed his ministry ended with the Mass. He walked fast but spoke slowly, with perfect diction and the authority of faith, in a voice so clear and pleasant that an old blind man, not even Catholic himself, came to Mass each Sunday just to hear it. Father McGivney was — as William Geary, a founding member of the Knights, would later write — "a great favorite of the people, and was particularly intimate with the energetic pushing go-ahead young men."

His ministry didn't end with his parish either. He made regular pastoral rounds to the local jail, where his spiritual counsel was especially prized by James "Chip" Smith, a young man sentenced to death for killing a police chief. Five days before the execution date, Father McGivney celebrated a High Mass for Smith at the jail Aug. 28, 1882, after which he said, with his voice breaking: "I am requested by Mr. Smith to ask pardon for all faults he may have had and all offenses he may have committed, and at his request I ask for the prayers of all of you, that when next Friday comes he may die a holy death."

As reported that day in the *New Haven Daily Palladium*, he then asked for prayers for everyone who would be present at the execution, himself included. "To me this duty comes with almost a crushing weight. If I could consistently with my duty be far away from here next Friday, I should escape

perhaps the most trying ordeal of my life, but this sad duty is placed my way by providence and must be fulfilled."

### ESTABLISHING THE ORDER

Father McGivney's vision extended far beyond New Haven, too. "By permission of our Rt. Rev. Bishop, and in accordance with an Act of the Legislature of the State of Connecticut, we have formed an organization under the name of the Knights of Columbus," he wrote in April 1882 to a long list of parish priests in Connecticut. He saw the fledgling Order as addressing a pressing need of the Catholic Church in America, and concluded with an earnest request: "that you will exert your influence in the formation of a Council in your parish."

Father McGivney was disappointed at the initial response. "Our beginning is extremely slow," he wrote two months later to Michael Edmonds, secretary of another fraternal society, the Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters. "The Order I was endeavoring to establish fell back almost lifeless but not dead."

After continuing to promote the Knights' founding ideals of charity and unity, the young priest was encouraged when he heard from some men in Meriden, Conn., the following year. They had read about the Knights in *The Pilot*, Boston's Catholic newspaper, and wanted to know how they could start a council of their own. Father McGivney replied quickly.

"I am glad to hear that the Meriden Catholic young men are not behind their age in looking for their own benefit," he wrote to P.J. Ford on April 17, 1883. "You will see that when we are

well established in the diocese, we can bid defiance to the secret societies and bring our fellow Catholics to enjoy without any danger to their faith all the benefits which those societies offer as inducements to enter them."

In an Aug. 25, 1883, letter to the editor of *The Connecticut Catholic*, he wrote, "We are advancing slowly, but surely."

Eleven councils would be established by November 1884, when Father McGivney was named pastor of St. Thomas Church in Thomaston.

"I have been with you for seven long years, visiting your sick and guiding the steps of your children in the paths in which they should go," he said in his farewell homily on Nov. 10. "Wherever I go, the memory of the people of St. Mary's and their great kindness to me will always be uppermost in my heart."

Parishioners wept openly in the pews. "Never, it seemed, was a congregation so affected by the parting address of a clergyman as the great audience which filled St. Mary's yesterday," the *New Haven Evening Register* reported. "There was never a more energetic or hardworking young priest stationed in New Haven than he."

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## ‘INCALCULABLE GOOD’

At his new parish, Father McGivney established the 18th K of C council in April 1885, at a time when councils were forming at a rate of two per month.

In May, he crafted one of the most eloquent of his extant letters, which was a sharp defense of the Order against doubters. When a priest writing anonymously to *The Connecticut Catholic* questioned whether the Knights of Columbus was itself just the kind of “secret society” the Church proscribed, Father McGivney sent a tart reply.

Not only was the Order categorically not a secret society, he wrote, but: “The constitution and by-laws of the Knights of Columbus contain nothing collusive to the rules of the Church. Although but a few years organized, the Order has effected incalculable good in many households.”

Just a few weeks before Father McGivney wrote that letter, the Knights had paid out their first death benefit; and just a few weeks after he wrote it, he rode in a carriage at the head of a line of 1,500 Knights who paraded through downtown New Haven. He no longer served as the supreme secretary but remained the Order’s supreme chaplain, and its spiritual heart. The last piece of writing we have from his hand is a postcard sent to William Geary in February 1886, announcing an upcoming visit back to New Haven.

“[W]ill try to find you all information I can regarding K of C,” he wrote.

When Father McGivney died Aug. 14, 1890, at age 38, his survivors included 6,000 members of the Order that started in the basement of St. Mary’s Church Oct. 2, 1881.

“[W]hen we look back at the gathering of the sixteen members on that fateful Sunday afternoon,” Geary, who was among those 16, later wrote, “we can fully realize in their action the hand of Divine Providence.”

Father McGivney’s name, Geary concluded, “is written upon the heart of every true Knight of Columbus, and his name will be revered for generations to come.” ♦

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## ‘UNITY AND CHARITY’ IS OUR MOTTO

### Father McGivney on the Knights of Columbus

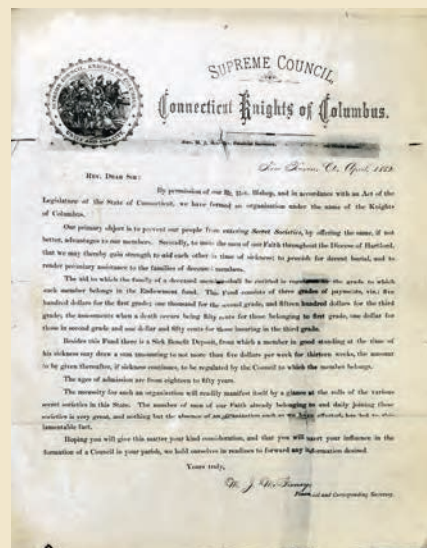
*In the 13 surviving documents written by Venerable Michael McGivney, there are numerous references to the Knights of Columbus and its founding mission. Here are four excerpts of Father McGivney’s writing about the Order.*

“Our primary object is to prevent people from entering *Secret Societies*, by offering the same, if not better, advantages to our members. Secondly, to unite the men of our Faith throughout the diocese of Hartford, that we may thereby gain strength *to aid* each other in time of sickness; *to provide* for decent burial, and to render pecuniary assistance to the families of deceased members.” — *To Connecticut parish priests, April 1882*

“You ask what is the membership. We only number about a hundred yet. The reason of this small number for the time established is that I have met with great opposition from the Foresters — a very strong organization in this state, especially among our young men — and again because anything new is always a hard thing to maintain.” — *To Martin I.J. Griffin of Philadelphia, Feb. 12, 1883*

“We have set the wheel in motion, and with willing cooperation in a work that tends so much to our own welfare, we venture to say that soon, very soon, the Order of the Knights of Columbus will hold a prominent place among the best Catholic cooperative corporations in the Union. ... ‘Unity and Charity’ is our motto. 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 have to mourn our loss.” — *Letter to The Connecticut Catholic, Aug. 25, 1883*

“The Order of the Knights of Columbus is the same now as when first instituted. viz.: It is an Order composed of Catholics and instituted for the welfare of Catholic families. ... Not only in sickness, but when death takes the support of the family away, the Knights of Columbus comes to the relief of the widow and the orphan in a very substantial manner.” — *Letter in response to “Clericus” in The Connecticut Catholic, May 30, 1885*



Father McGivney’s letter to Connecticut priests, typed on Supreme Council letterhead with the words “Unity and Charity” visible on the seal, was written shortly after the Order was officially incorporated in 1882. .