



The Personality of Father McGivney

*A contemporary remembers the founder of the Knights of Columbus
as a humble and warm-hearted priest*

by Father Joseph G. Daley

EDITOR'S NOTE: In commemoration of Father Michael J. McGivney's birth (Aug. 12, 1852) and his death (Aug. 14, 1890), below is an abridged text of an article that appeared in the June 1900 edition of *The Columbiad*, the Order's official publication before *Columbia*.

In the annals of the priesthood of New England no name deserves brighter honor than that of Father Michael Joseph McGivney. His short life of 38 years, closing in the summer of 1890, was yet rich in every priestly virtue — the love for souls of the true *alter Christus*, the childlike piety of the Curé d'Ars, the zeal of Vincent de Paul for works of mercy, the unfatigued optimism of the associates of Ozanam — these traits, so precious in the sight of man and heaven, were clearly mirrored in the soul of that good, simple, honest priest of Connecticut.

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. Thanks to his labors, the Society of the Knights of Columbus was organized in 1882. Its purpose was to create among Catholic laymen a confraternity which, while not being a religious society in the strict sense of the word, exacted from its members certain religious qualifications, that is to say, the open profession of the Catholic faith and filial devotion to the Church in all matters of doctrine, discipline and morals.

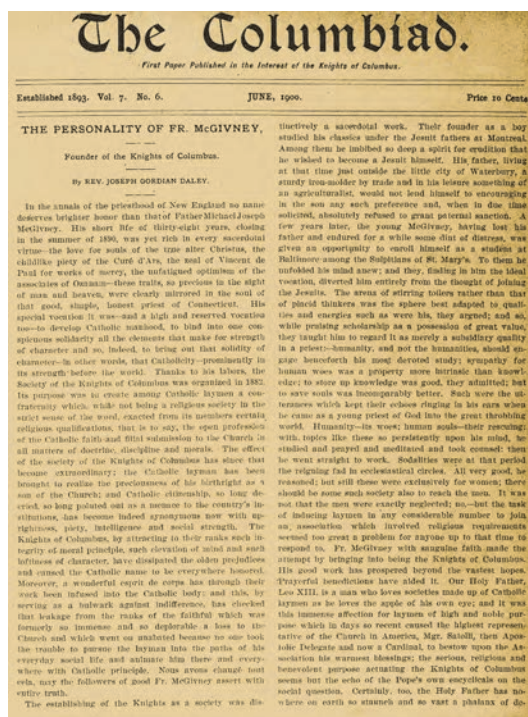
The effect of the Society of the Knights of Columbus has since that become extraordinary; the Catholic layman has been brought to realize the preciousness of his birthright as a son of the Church; and Catholic citizenship, so long decried, so long pointed out as a menace to the country's institutions, has become indeed synonymous now with uprightness, piety, intelligence and social strength. The Knights of Columbus, by attracting to their ranks such

integrity of moral principle, such elevation of mind and such loftiness of character, have dissipated the olden prejudices and caused the Catholic name to be everywhere honored. ...

The establishing of the Knights as a society was distinctively a priestly work. Their founder as a boy studied his classics under the Jesuit fathers at Montreal. Among them he imbibed so deep a spirit for erudition that he wished to become a Jesuit himself. His father, living at that time just outside the little city of Waterbury, a sturdy iron-molder by trade and in his leisure something of an agriculturalist, would not lend himself to encouraging in the son any such preference and when in due time solicited, absolutely refused to grant paternal sanction.

A few years later, the young McGivney, having lost his father and endured for a while some faint of distress, was given an opportunity to enroll himself as a student at Baltimore among the Sulpicians of St. Mary's. To them he unfolded his mind anew; and they, finding in him the ideal vocation, diverted him entirely from the thought of joining the Jesuits. The arena of stirring toilers rather than that of placid thinkers was the sphere best adapted to qualities and energies such as were his, they argued; and so, while praising scholarship as a possession of great value, they taught him to regard it as merely a subsidiary quality in a priest; — humanity, should engage henceforth his most devoted study; sympathy for human woes was a property more intrinsic than knowledge; to store up knowledge was good, they admitted; but to save souls was incomparably better. Humanity — its woes; human souls — their rescuing; with topics like these so persistently upon his mind, he studied and prayed and meditated and took counsel; then he went straight to work. ...

I remember meeting with Father McGivney in New Haven in 1883, the year after the first incorporation of the Knights. He was then in the prime of his vigor, entrusted by a good but delicate pastor, Father Lawlor, with the management of St. Mary's, a parish lying close under the towers of Yale College and at that time the most aristocratic parish in Connecticut. Father McGivney himself was anything but aristocratic; he was a man of extreme grace of manner in any society, but without any airs, without any "lugs," if you will pardon the expression. I saw him but once and yet I remember his 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



Opposite page: A photograph of Father Michael J. McGivney seated in a rectory setting circa 1880 is attributed the New Haven photography studio of John J. Tierney, a parishioner at St. Mary's Church and a member of San Salvador Council 1. • The first page of the article titled "The Personality of Fr. McGivney" is seen above as it appeared in the June 1900 edition of *The Columbiad*.

repose; there was nothing harsh in that countenance, although there was everything that was strong; there was nothing sordid, nothing mercenary, nothing of the politician, nothing of the axe-grinder. Guile and ambition were as far from him as from heaven. To meet him was at once to trust him; children actually loved him; and the very old people of the neighborhood, whom he hunted up and who got part of his time even on busiest days, called him a positive saint and meant it.

At the city jail the wardens still hand down anecdotes of what Father McGivney said and did during visits which he paid the prisoners. Elsewhere, too, incidents abound to his credit. A blind, aged man who used to live by charity, but who was not a Catholic went every Sunday to Mass at St. Mary's to hear "that voice." Non-Catholics found in Father McGivney a soul of immense sympathy, which invited them strongly toward investigating the religious truths his lips proclaimed.

Among the conversions due to God's grace in Father McGivney are two which to this day everyone still talk of at New Haven. One of these converts was David Buell, famous in his Yale days as a musician and author of the opera *Penikeese* — but now unknown to the world, though a member of the Society of Jesus. The other notable convert was Miss Harwood, daughter of Rev. Dr. Harwood, the rector of the most distinguished Episcopalian congregation in the whole state, and a man of large scholarship and wealth. Miss Harwood's conversion attracted notice by reason of her distinction in the ranks of society, the refinement of her home and circle, and the great brilliancy of mind which she possessed, together with her superiority of education and extreme personal grace. The death of Miss Harwood which came all too early was yet attended with every consolation our holy faith could bestow.

Father McGivney's influence over men was something extraordinary. Young men particularly were attracted to him and hung upon his words with an eagerness which he himself often wondered at; hundreds petitioned for the light of his counseling and sent others too, to share his advice. ...

It is a source of edification to note how these young men of the earliest councils have rounded out their mature careers. Cornelius T. Driscoll is the present mayor of the city of New Haven; Stephen Maher, M.D., having taken his degree at Edinburgh, has now a large repute in medical circles; John J. Phelan, living comfortably at Bridgeport, has seen himself elected Secretary of State in the Nutmeg Commonwealth, serving under Gov. Luzon Morris. John T. McPartland, who at one time seemed destined for the Church, has grown rich in business; and Edward Downes, a member of perhaps the oldest, richest, and most respected Catholic family of New Haven, who seemed once destined for politics, has come at length to reveal a vocation for the Church.

Two members of the old guard have clung exclusively to K of C affairs. These are Wm. M. Geary and Daniel Colwell. Mr. Geary, although well on in his 47th year, looks still young and handsome, still possessing energies which give ample scope to a great ambition for business and splendid tact for management. Mr. Colwell is a busy man and in business hours cannot brook disturbance. But yet once in a while he does make an exception when a stranger from afar comes in to bother him at his desk in the offices of the Board of Directors of the Knights of Columbus. ... From time to time, he dropped back into personal recollections, naming often, and yet always with a noticeable tenderness, that kind young priest of 20 years ago whose image was in both our minds and whose large portrait stood upon the desk in front of us — Father McGivney, the warm-hearted priest of Christ's Church of Charity....

Rev. Richard Foley of Brooklyn, N.Y., who was a close seminary chum of Father McGivney, told me recently that the three points of character most noted in Father McGivney were his sense of orderliness, his depth of piety, and his fund of good humor. His taste for order was indeed remarkable. During his stay at Baltimore, the Sulpicians would not be content with anyone else for the post of sacristan. His good humor too was often apparent; for everywhere that he is spoken of, his happy words, his genial utterances, weighing more than nuggets of gold, are still remembered, and still treasured up. His piety too has been referred to. That piety crystallized itself in his immense charity.

In the McGivney family, there were three sons, both of the brothers being much younger than himself: and if Father McGivney could be said to have ever had one single worldly ambition, it was to hope that his brothers might enjoy a good education. The dearest wish of his heart has since that time been realized; for all three sons of the family have alike become priests, both of the others still surviving him. The elder of these is the Rev. Patrick J. McGivney of Middletown, Conn., at the present time state chaplain of Connecticut; the other is Rev. John McGivney of Bridgeport, a young man of less than 30 years, well spoken of for his earnest yet graceful preaching.

Father McGivney the institutor of the Knights died as pastor of the parish of Thomaston, Conn., in August 1890. He died without leaving any pecuniary debts; but he died also without owning a dollar: and the reason of it was that in his heart of charity he had given his last dollar away.♦

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FATHER JOSEPH G. DALEY (1866-1935) served as a priest of the Diocese of Springfield, Mass., and was the author of several books of fiction.