



# Father McGivney's Spiritual Genius

*In anticipation of our founder's beatification, we reflect anew on our call to be a true fraternal community*

by Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson

AS WE LOOK forward to the beatification of Father Michael McGivney, each of us should reflect on how his example can deepen our lives as Knights of Columbus.

Pope Francis writes in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, “I especially ask Christians ... to offer a radiant and attractive witness of fraternal communion. Let everyone admire how you care for one another, and how you encourage and accompany one another” (98).

Throughout history, religious communities such as the Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits have offered this witness. The spiritual genius of Father McGivney lay in his inspiration to found a *fraternal* association to which married laymen could belong — men required to be in the world to support their families.

In the Knights of Columbus, Father McGivney offered these men the opportunity to serve their families, parishes and communities by joining a brotherhood dedicated to charity and unity. Soon, a third principle, fraternity, was added to explicitly emphasize that the Knights of Columbus was more than an association; it was intended to be a true fraternal community.

It is precisely in *fraternal* charity and *fraternal* unity that the Knights of Columbus transcends other charitable organizations. Seeing our neighbor as a brother makes all the difference. Pope Francis also reminds us in his exhortation of the importance to “live in fraternity” (91) and to relate to others with “a fraternal love capable of

seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbor, of finding God in every human being” (92).

This was Father McGivney's approach to living the Catholic faith. At a time when the Catholic identity of so many was being tested by the harsh economic, social and political realities of 19th-century America, he offered a way forward without compromising the faith. The newly organized Knights of Columbus would not withdraw into enclaves. Knights would engage society by living the Catholic principles of charity and unity.

Since that time, the authentic expression of a truly fraternal charity and unity has been the secret of the dynamic growth of the Knights of Columbus.

“An authentic faith,” Pope Francis writes, “always involves a deep desire to change the world ... to leave this earth somehow better than we found it” (183).

This spirit animated Father McGivney to provide a financial safety net for widows and orphans, and to defend the religious liberty so necessary for Catholic institutions, including the Knights of Columbus, to flourish.

In 1900, patriotism was added as the Order's fourth principle — emphasizing that faithful Catholics, as good citizens, were committed to the common good of all and not narrow sectarian interests.

“The Church,” observes Pope Francis, “cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice” (183).

Within a decade of establishing the patriotic degree, the Order expanded to Mexico, the Philippines and Cuba to help the Church in those countries



confront new challenges following war and revolution.

The Order's principle of patriotism was also tested by the First World War. Yet, the Knights would be praised as the only wartime service organization that opened its doors to all, regardless of race, color or religion, under the banner “Everybody Welcome.”

Patriotism, when tempered by charity, unity and fraternity, provides a robust defense against excessive nationalism.

Early in its history, the Knights of Columbus recognized that, as Pope Francis affirms, “Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression” (116). This cultural engagement continues today as the Order expands into Poland, Ukraine, Korea and France.

One final observation from *Evangelii Gaudium*: Pope Francis notes, “Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children, the most defenseless and innocent among us” (213). How fitting, given the Order's longstanding commitment to the sanctity of life, that the miracle attributed to the intercession of Father McGivney was the healing *in utero* of an unborn child.

St. John Paul II often challenged the Christian family to “become who you are.” The beatification of Father McGivney is a clarion call to Knights of Columbus everywhere to become, in even greater ways, who we are.

*Vivat Jesus!*