

HEROES

THEN AND AGAIN


BY FATHER MICHAEL P. ORSI

Father McGivney's life provides a model for reinvigorating the priesthood

PLUS Four recommendations for improving priestly formation and Catholic parishes

This essay was prompted by the biography, *Parish Priest: Father Michael McGivney and American Catholicism* by Douglas Brinkley and Julie M. Fenster. (Editor's Note: *Parish Priest* has recently been published in paperback; visit www.kofc.org for more information or to order.)

Father McGivney (1852-90) was a Connecticut priest and the founder of the Knights of Columbus. In 1997, the now retired archbishop of Hartford, Daniel A. Cronin, initiated the process for Father McGivney's canonization. I believe this book is particularly germane today, because it highlights priestly identity. It demonstrates the importance of early formation, and it reveals the alleged priest shortage to be more political than real.



Father Michael J. McGivney
in an undated photo with
other priests, perhaps at a
retreat.

PRIESTLY IDENTITY CRISIS

In the past, priestly identity was formed early in the development of the Catholic psyche. Religious biographies were important tools in promoting the priesthood. Such books were plentiful in Catholic literature and strongly embedded in Catholic education. Unfortunately, that genre has seen a precipitous decline since the latter part of the past century.

I believe this can be attributed to the egalitarian ethos that captured post-Vatican II ecclesiology, and which has played itself out theologically under the guise of “the priesthood of all believers.” That idea soon came to be erroneously taught as the equality of all vocations in the Body of Christ. In short order, the orthodox Catholic understanding of the “higher calling” ascribed to the priesthood and/or religious life became obsolete (if not considered a downright heresy) among the new elites ruling in Catholic education.

Consequently, many of the priest-heroes that once fired the imagination of Catholic youth — such as Junipero Serra, Isaac Jogues and Damien de Veuster (the “leper priest” whose feast day is May 10) — disappeared from the Catholic curriculum, and were replaced by secular “saints” like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Bobby Kennedy and now rock singer Bono. Who of us educated prior to Vatican II cannot recall daydreaming about being a priest like the ones we read about in our Catholic-edition history books or in the inspirational stories found in our Catholic readers? Who can ever deny the desire felt, if only for a moment, to become a priest after an itinerant vocation recruiter extolled the virtues and visions of his order’s founder? All these experiences helped to define the priesthood, and inspired many to want to emulate such hallowed figures in their vocations.

After reading about Father McGivney, I have come to realize that the present crisis in the priesthood has not been brought on by the sexu-

al abuse scandals, since everyone knows that this involved but a tiny fraction of American priests. I also no longer believe that there really is a priest shortage. I do believe, however, that we have an identity crisis regarding priests, which has been manufactured by a theological elite and a media-savvy liberal cabal that have systematically used the scandal to pave the way for a new model of priesthood in the Church — one which is quite contrary to the Catholic tradition.

EVERYDAY SELFLESSNESS

To counteract that identity crisis it is necessary to re-establish the image of the priest as hero. Traditionally, the word “hero” connoted someone who

Secular ‘saints’ like U2’s BONO have replaced priest-heroes like BLESSED DAMIEN DE VEUSTER



gave of himself to a cause, who risked his life for others, or who was willing to sacrifice himself for the common good, prompted by a love of God, neighbor or country. The concept necessarily presumed great courage in the face of adversity. (Of course, we must keep in mind that the appellation “hero” has become somewhat diluted in its contemporary usage. Today we have “sports” heroes, motion-picture “action” heroes, even “rock-’n’-roll” heroes. Nevertheless, for our purposes we shall presume this traditional meaning.)

The life of Father McGivney well exemplifies the heroic qualities of selfless love and personal sacrifice. Father McGivney was a man who, physically, emotionally and intellectually, had all the qualities necessary for a successful life in the world. Yet, for the good of the Church, he forsook wealth, family and even his health. For example, in a very poignant episode, Father McGivney’s biographers relate the story of a

young parishioner who committed a murder while intoxicated and was sentenced to death. Father McGivney visited the parishioner in prison daily, counseled him and his family (even accompanying the family to court), and celebrated the sacraments for the condemned man right up to the day of his execution. The man, we are told, died a saintly death because of Father McGivney’s ministrations. Contemporaries of Father McGivney believe that this event so drained the priest that it caused a rapid decline in his health.

Father McGivney’s selfless ministry was, for the most part, taken up with the everyday activities of a parish priest: administration of the sacraments, counseling, parish activities and, of course, the more mundane concerns like fundraising and building maintenance. He was also concerned about the social

well-being of his parishioners, which often included their personal financial needs. It was this concern that led to the founding of the Knights of Columbus. Father McGivney saw that Catholic families needed help in times of crisis, such as unemployment or the death of a breadwinner. It was his vision that the Knights would provide life insurance and benefits for those families in pre-Social Security America.

‘PRIESTS RAISE PRIESTS’

Aside from founding the Knights of Columbus, Father McGivney’s work was not dissimilar from that of many priests whom I have come to know over the years. Here are a few examples: As a boy, I can recall the pastor of my home parish, the late Msgr. Arthur W. Pote, tirelessly trying to raise money in order to rebuild a poorly constructed church while at the same time trying to maintain two schools — all at the cost of his own popularity (people complained, “All he cares about is money!”), as well as his health.

Or, I think of Father Thomas Lyons, our associate pastor, who for 27 years tirelessly walked the parish,

making sick calls and visiting the hospitalized. I vividly remember my first pastor after ordination, Msgr. Eugene Kernan, staying up all night with a dying parishioner, and how lovingly he ministered to the family during and after the funeral. (I'm sure you, dear reader, can provide many of your own examples of the heroic actions of priests you have known.)

RECOMMENDATION Good Catholic biographies should be re-introduced at all levels of Catholic education.

The above examples are no doubt the product of grace, but grace that is also nurtured by formation. It has always been recognized that the earlier young people are trained for special tasks, the more adept they will be in their professions, whether in the arts, the military, scholarship, sports or any other field. The same has always held for the priesthood (Michael McGivney began his seminary career when he was 17 years old), though in recent times the sad fallacy that one must experience life before entering the seminary has come into vogue. Pushing back entrance into the seminary only dissuades vocations, leads to emotional conflicts and, practically speaking, causes a loss of valuable time necessary for molding a man to the priesthood.

In the delayed-entrance scenario, the laws of nature mitigate against vocations, because the message implicit in the idea of "experiencing life" is actually: "Try everything else. If it doesn't work out, you can always go to seminary later!" Potential priests can be led away from the path of discernment by the distractions of worldly life. For instance, a young man who continues to date is really looking for a spouse, not discerning a vocation. There is bound to be some wonderful young woman whose presence promises fulfillment for his life — until he wakes up one day and asks himself if he missed his true calling.

I believe that the case against delaying seminary is validated by Jonathan Englert's *The Collar: A Year of Striving and Faith Inside a Catholic Seminary* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006). Englert spent a year observing five men preparing for sec-

ond-career vocations, and he describes his subjects' thoughts, doubts and fears. One man wonders how he can trust the feeling that he is being called to the priesthood when his feelings about other things in his life have often been wrong. Another is afraid of being lonely. The third misses his hunting dog. Suffice it to say, when you're young, your experiences can be formed; as you get older (like Englert's five seminarians), your experiences form you.

I attended Cathedral Prep in Brooklyn, N.Y., a minor seminary for boys interested in the priesthood. I vividly remember the faculty telling us over and over again, "Priests raise priests." We had excellent role models who were not only outstanding teachers but gave themselves to students before and after school in guidance, sports and other extracurricular activities. We all wanted to be like them. The lesson here is that, although today's seminary faculties include many outstanding laymen and women, the majority of seminary professors should be priests — in fact, the best priests of their dioceses. Of course, there are those (especially bishops) who will protest, "We have a priest shortage! How can we spare a priest to teach math?" But the fact is that sacrificing a good parish priest to seminary work will pay enormous dividends in the numbers and quality of our future presbyterate.

The long years of seminary life also provide time for careful examination of the prospective priest by the seminary staff. There is little doubt that after eight to 12 years of seminary training, the seminarian knows the life of a priest, and is also well known by his fellow seminarians. Such mutual understanding lessens the possibility of a mistake being made. (I am proud to say that of those ordained from my prep-seminary class, not one of us has left the priesthood or been accused of sexual misconduct. Perhaps a study could be done to determine whether this has been replicated in the experience of other prep seminaries.)

Another benefit of early training is the bonding of classmates, an *esprit de corps*, that takes time and multiple shared life experiences.

During my early years at Cathedral Prep, we had Thursdays off and went to school on Saturdays. That schedule continually reminded us that we were different, and it forced us to rely on one another for companionship. I joyfully recall traveling from one part of Brooklyn to another for a class softball game or visiting a classmate's home. We all knew each other well, and we also got to know each other's families. Growing up together as seminarians provided a support group that has continued throughout life.

To illustrate: A number of years ago, I had a hernia operation. Upon hearing about it, my friend of more than 40 years, Father Anthony Manuppella, insisted that I recuperate at his rectory. Similarly, when my mother was in need of nursing home care, Msgr. Fernando Ferrarese helped get her into a wonderful Catholic facility. Father Glenn Hartman, knowing that I live far away from Mom, occasionally makes a three-hour trip by public transportation to visit her. When I am visiting home and am without a car, Fathers Sean Ogle and Robert Romano often chauffeur me to various events. We even look out for each other after death. A year after the passing of Father Ted Kazaneki, I was notified that our class would gather to celebrate a memorial Mass, followed by a dinner hosting his mother and sister.

I thank God for all these gentlemen every day.

Father McGivney enjoyed his seminary career and his classmates. Later, he generously supported his brother priests when they were in need, and he also relied on them for help. Why? Because when you are trained like a family — and not simply as professional associates — you act like a family. And, in the end, isn't that what the priesthood is supposed to be?

RECOMMENDATION The prep-seminary should be reconsidered for attracting vocations, and as a valuable means of formation.

THE MYTH OF A 'PRIEST SHORTAGE'

Father McGivney's story helps to unveil the myth of a priest shortage.

The number of Catholics attending Mass and requesting the sacraments during his lifetime was not dissimilar to our present priest-to-parishioner ratio. (An 1875 Catholic almanac estimated the priest-per-Catholic population at one priest for every 1,298 Catholics; the report did not include statistics from the large dioceses of Brooklyn and Baltimore. In 2006, the ratio is one priest for every 1,636 Catholics.)

Likewise, the contemporary situation of priests having more than one parish was not uncommon during Father McGivney's era. He pastored two parishes himself after he left St. Mary's in New Haven (and, I might add, he did not have a car to travel between both of them).

Our most common mistake is forgetting that God will always provide for his Church. He will send us the priests we need to convey the grace he wishes to give us. Indeed, a case could be made that there has always been a priest shortage. After all, we originally started off with only 12. The problem is that we were spoiled by an unusual abundance of vocations during the middle part of the 20th century.

An interesting set of statistics can be found in Paul D. Sullins 2002 study, "Empty Pews and Empty Altars: A Reconsideration of the Catholic Priest Shortage." Sullins tells us that the decline in vocations actually began before Vatican II, and he points out that the decline in the priest-to-parishioner ratio after Vatican II has been largely offset by the decline in Catholics attending Mass and requesting the sacraments. He then reminds us of the many deacons who now help with preaching, baptizing, marrying and counseling — help that past generations of priests did not have. Finally, he reports this sobering fact: "...up until about World War II, about a third of Catholic churches did not have a pastor in residence; after mid-century, that proportion has gradually declined to about a fifth. As is evident, far from

being unusually high, the rate of non-residing priests is current at its lowest point in the century."

The current fabrication of a priest shortage is being promoted as an excuse by those who wish to remove the celibacy requirement and/or want to open the priesthood to women. This alleged shortage has induced a psychological sense of hopelessness in many priests, causing them to acquiesce to the idea of expanding ordination beyond celibate males. Jesus knew that lies are the devil's tool, and warned against buying into this defeatist attitude. He said, "The harvest is indeed great, but the laborers are few" (Mt 9:38). He also said to St. Paul, "My grace is enough for you" (2 Cor 12:9).



I hope that in these reflections you may recognize in your PARISH PRIEST part of FATHER McGIVNEY'S story



Would it be nice to have more priests? Sure! But the shortage has existed from the beginning of the Church, and look what has been accomplished!

We should never be immobilized by seemingly overwhelming odds. Challenge is exactly what heroes thrive on.

RECOMMENDATION The facts pertaining to the priest-parishioner ratio should be provided by Church officials and placed in diocesan publications.

FATHER McGIVNEY: ONE OF MANY

We must also never forget that the work of a priest spans well beyond his own parish and lifetime. Just imagine how many souls were saved by God working through Father McGivney in his brief ministry. He was only 38 years old when he died, yet God continues to touch lives through him. First, in the priests who have been inspired by his example; second, through the gener-

ations by the lay people whom he touched during his faithful ministry; and finally, in the work of the Knights of Columbus. Acutely aware of this intergenerational impact of priests, I have in my living room a gallery of photographs of priests who have inspired and continue to inspire me by their priestly life, love and example.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur once said: "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away." Well, not only do old priests not die, they don't fade away either. They live on in their brothers from one generation to the next, and continue to serve as mentors and role models.

This essay is a testimony to both Father McGivney and my brother priests. Father McGivney is a reminder of the heroic lives that priests lead. His life tells us of the importance of early formation. And finally, it

calls each priest to trust that Jesus' work continues in him, and thus will bear much fruit.

RECOMMENDATION Pray for Father McGivney's cause for sainthood. Pray for all parish priests.

I hope that in these reflections you, dear lay person, may recognize in your parish priest — or you, dear Father, may see in yourself — part of Father McGivney's story.

I know Father McGivney. He has been my pastor, my teacher, my friend and my colleague. He represents many of the saintly priests who have touched my life. If his cause for sainthood is successful, he will be the first native-born American priest to be canonized. I can say from my own experience that there should be many more. ■

Father Michael P. Orsi is a priest of the Diocese of Camden, N.J. He is presently serving as chaplain and research fellow in law and religion at Ave Maria School of Law in Ann Arbor, Mich. This article appeared in the February 2007 edition of *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* and is reprinted with permission. Father Orsi is a member of Flatbush Council 497 in Brooklyn, N.Y.