



Father McGivney's Vision

The Knights' founder recognized that evangelization and charitable witness begin in the parish and depend on the laity

by Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson



MICHAEL JOSEPH MCGIVNEY was born to Irish immigrants in 1852 in Waterbury, Conn. He was the eldest of 13 children, six of whom died in childhood. His father, Patrick, worked in one of the city's brass mills, and at age 13, Michael left school to work in one of those mills like his father.

After five years of study in Canada, Michael returned home to help his mother care for the family when his father died in 1873. Before long, he returned to his seminary studies, this time in Baltimore, and was ordained four years later.

In 1882, within five years of his ordination, Father McGivney founded the Knights of Columbus. Eight years later, he died at age 38 while serving as pastor of St. Thomas Church in Thomaston, Conn., and Immaculate Conception Church in Terryville.

We most likely think of Father McGivney as Pope Benedict XVI did in his 2008 homily in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral — as that “exemplary American priest” whose legacy is so much a part of the “impressive growth” of the Catholic Church in America during the 19th century. But we also do well to recall that many of the struggles Father McGivney faced were similar to those we face today.

The Catholic Church in Father McGivney's time faced a serious priest shortage as a result of illness and premature death. During the 12 years of Father McGivney's priestly ministry, 70 of the 83 priests of the Diocese of Hartford died, including both of the young pastors under whom he served.

Although for different reasons, many parishes today have to consolidate due to the priest shortage in the United States and elsewhere.

As a young pastor, Father McGivney had to oversee two parishes. He celebrated three Masses on Sunday mornings between those two parishes. He was, like most priests today, tremendously overworked. Nine months into his assignment at St. Mary's Church in New Haven, he wrote, “I have been alone all

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Summer with the whole work of a parish on my shoulders. I have not had time for even one day's vacation since I left [seminary].” And he would not have a vacation for the next four years.

Like many parishes today, financial debt was a major burden. When Father McGivney arrived as a newly ordained priest at St. Mary's, the parish faced a debt equivalent to about \$3.5 million. *The New York Times* derided St. Mary's as not only an “eye-sore,” but also as a “complete failure as a business enterprise.” Much of Father McGivney's efforts would be spent confronting this debt, and he would even “re-gift” to the parish the personal donations given to him at Christmas.

And like today, immigrants were a strong presence in the United States. At

St. Mary's, those immigrants were mostly Irish. However, Father McGivney had entered seminary in Quebec in part because it would help him better serve the many French-Canadian Catholics living in Connecticut at the time.

In fact, Father McGivney responded in a very personal way to the problems confronting his immigrant parish community, including homelessness, substance abuse, violence and family break-ups. This is demonstrated, for instance, by his prison ministry to Chip Smith and his probate court appearance on behalf of Alfred Downes.

In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict wrote about the need to cultivate a “heart that sees” where love is needed. Such a charitable heart was at the center of Father McGivney's ministry as a parish priest and was the basis for his founding the Knights of Columbus.

In a 1992 address, Pope John Paul II said, “Parishes must be centers of charity, open to the spiritual and material needs of the wider community. The time has come to commit the Church's energies to a new evangelization beginning in the parish, a mission whose fruitfulness depends in no small measure upon the laity.”

More than a century earlier, Father McGivney appeared to have already understood this great truth. Then, as now, his vision is our mission.

Vivat Jesus!