Knights of Columbus

The Knights of Columbus have done much to enrich and nourish the Religious Heritage of our Country for over 100 years; a century of service to the Church, community and to our fellowman.

The founder of the Knights, Father Michael J. McGivney, was a man who not only read the signs of his own times, but also envisioned the ever present need for an organization of Catholic men devoted to the principles of charity, unity, fraternity, patriotism and support for the priesthood.

Father McGivney's gifts were many and various. He was an unassuming pious priest who easily elicited the implicit trust of the laity. Concerned with the strong appeal of the prohibited secret societies among Catholic youth and with the plight of the widows and children who suffered the loss of the breadwinner, he was eager to form a fraternal insurance society imbued with deep loyalties to Catholicism and to the American experience.

After many meetings, Father McGivney and a small group of laymen decided to establish an independent society rather than become a branch of one of two existing Catholic benefit societies. In early February, 1882, they placed their fledgling fraternal order under the patronage of Christopher Columbus. According to the few surviving documents, the Columbian motif represented several facets of the group's Catholic consciousness. Columbus was the symbol par excellence of the Catholic contribution to American culture. By showing the discovery of America as the Catholic baptism of the nation, the Knights were asserting Catholic legitimacy. Just as the heirs of the Pilgrims invoked the Mayflower as the Protestant symbol of their pedigree as early Americans, so the Knights invoked the Santa Maria as the symbol for the Catholic pedigree. Though the early Knights were Irish-American, Catholicism was at the center of their ethnic consciousness. Hence Columbus was viewed by them as a Catholic — rather than as an Italian — hero and one with whom all Catholics of North America, regardless of national origins, could identify.

Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli, Vatican secretary of state (later Pope Pius XII), visits the Supreme Office in New Haven, Conn., on Oct. 13, 1936. Seated are Bishop Francis F. Spellman, Cardinal Pacelli and Supreme Knight Martin J. Carmody. Standing are Assistant Supreme Secretary John Conway, Supreme Secretary William McGinley and Count Enrico Galeazzi, Knights of Columbus representative in Rome.

The Columbian motif represented a deep patriotism for the new republic and each Knight was instructed to behave as a Catholic gentleman. The Knights developed strong ties to the American Catholic experience, in contrast to those ethnic associations which cultivated old-world loyalties.

The Order's ceremonials were like the "rites of passage" into Knighthood and were designed to convey the lessons of Columbianism. The initiates were instructed on the truths of their faith, on the moral teachings of the Church, on the respect for ecclesiastical authority, on how the principles of charity, unity and fraternity were embodied in the program and on the struggle for Catholic legitimacy in a hostile environment.

When Father McGivney died in August, 1890, there were 5,000 Knights located in 57 councils in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Fifteen years later, the Order was established in every state in the union, five provinces in Canada, Newfoundland, Mexico, the Philippines and was poised to enter Puerto Rico and Cuba. Such rapid growth can be explained only as the expansion of a unique fraternal society which forged strong ties of Catholic peoplehood.

The Knights exemplified the highest ideals of Christian character in their membership. To illustrate the extent of the idealism of the Order, Thomas H. Cummings, the first national organizer, wrote an article on "Catholic Gentlemen in Fraternity," in which he compared the ideal of Columbian fraternalism to the "kinship and brotherly love" of the early Christians. Inspired by Columbus, who was a "prophet and a seer, an instrument of Divine Providence (and) a mystic of the very highest order," each true Knight "becomes a better Catholic and a better citizen." Though the order was predominantly Irish-American, it always viewed itself as cosmopolitan. The ideal Columbian citizen was not to be arrogantly Catholic but rather was to exemplify the utmost of civility within his pluralistic society. As he passed through the ceremonials, the Columbian citizen was to be so immersed in the Catholic heritage in America that he could feel confidently secure and proud of his American character.

The establishment of the Catholic University of America in 1889 was a strong manifestation of the compatibility between Catholicism and American culture. Appropriately the Order and the University developed a close association.

By supporting the Catholic University, the Knights dissolved the confusion resulting from slurs against Catholic loyalty to American democracy. During the rise of the American Protective Association, a society organized solely on the basis of anti-Catholicism and one which reached its peak in the election of 1896, the Order would not dignify the association by explicitly struggling against it. However, its Catholic, anti-defamation role, which was deeply embedded in Columbianism, was expressed vigorously in the addresses and writings of leading Knights. The A.P.A. extolled the mythic little red school house as the sole source of love for American democracy and attacked Catholic schools as representative of a papal invasion of American education.

In 1921 Pope Benedict XV called upon Columbianism's Catholic anti-defamation character to respond to religious prejudice in Rome. The occasion was a Knights' pilgrimage to Europe, which included the unveiling of an equestrian statue of Lafayette, a K of C gift to the city of Metz, and which culminated in a private audience with the pope in Rome.

Within a year after this historic audience, the Order had appointed Past Supreme Knight Edward Heam as commissioner of the Order's Roman project, had established a $1 million Italian Welfare Fund through a per capita tax on the membership and had received permission to construct recreation centers, the most significant of which was St. Peter's Oratory, located within the shadows of St. Peter's Basilica.

In recent times the Knights of Columbus saw an increase of tremendous proportions in the service of Church and country. In 1954, the United States bishops started construction of the upper church of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. The shrine had functioned since 1926 as a crypt or basement church. Now the bishops were constructing the seventh largest church in the world as the national Catholic shrine to the Blessed Mother. Running short on money, the bishops asked the Knights to save the planned campanile or bell tower. The Knights agreed, and pledged $1 million for the 329-foot campanile with 56 bells. The dedication of the campanile, known as the Knights' Tower, took place in November 1959. The tower of the largest church in the Western hemisphere stands as a memorial to the generosity and service to their Church by the Knights.

The Knights of Columbus gave notably greater service to the Holy See and bishops of various nations.

At the Holy See, the Knights developed a "satellite uplink" program in 1975 that provided the transmission of up to four satellites circling the globe. This brought three papal ceremonies each year to people of all nations, and permitted the world to watch the funerals, elections and installations in a year of great changes. Then in 1977 the order funded a Vatican Library of all known film footage of past popes dating from Leo XIII, who was pope when the Knights of Columbus was born.

In the United States, the Knights were at the leading edge of developments, providing generous needed support for dozens of church programs: tuition tax credits, pro-life programs, annual contributions to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C.

The Knights likewise set aside $1 million for the Father Michael J. McGivney Fund for New Initiatives in Catholic Education.

The Knights of Columbus have come a long way from the day a young Catholic priest called together a group of men in the basement of St. Mary's Church in New Haven, Conn. to respond to the needs of their times. Today this response is freely given by 1.3 million Knights in 7,200 councils in the United States, Canada, Mexico, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Guam, the Virgin Islands, Panama and the Dominican Republic where the remains of Christopher Columbus are entombed in the Mother Cathedral of the Americas.

The Knights are challenging our nation to reaffirm our Religious Heritage handed down to us by our Founding Fathers, to be involved in Church, community, family and youth. May our Blessed Mother watch over, protect and guide us all!

Special thanks to Mr. Elmer Von Feldt, Editor of ***Columbia*** *magazine for his help in providing information for this article.*