

Founder of the Knights of Columbus Approved for Beatification

[adapted from an article in *CruxNow*]

On Wednesday, the Vatican announced that Venerable Father Michael McGivney, founder of the American charity organization the Knights of Columbus, will now become a “blessed,” meaning there is one more miracle required for his canonization.

Speaking to *Crux*, Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, said the announcement of McGivney’s beatification is “an incredible moment” for the organization.

“The Church is affirming both Father McGivney’s heroic life and virtue and his miraculous intercession. Part of that heroic life and virtue, in fact, the most well-known part, was his founding of the Knights of Columbus,” he said, insisting that for those who have been living out McGivney’s vision, “this moment had an incredible meaning and is a great affirmation of our work.”

Noting that McGivney’s beatification will happen as the world grapples with a modern coronavirus pandemic, Anderson said the man so often hailed as a model of the “Good Samaritan” could also be seen as “a pandemic patron.”

“He cared for the faith and wellbeing of those on the margins. He became a priest knowing that often meant an early death. Then he died of a pandemic similar to this one - possibly caused by a coronavirus. So I think the timing of his beatification is providential because his connection to the pandemic gives us someone to intercede for us, and because this connection also reminds us of the many other aspects of his life and ministry that remain important today,” Anderson said.

Born in Waterbury, Conn. on Aug. 12, 1852, McGivney is globally recognized as an example of charity, evangelization, and the promotion of laypeople in the American Catholic Church.

The son of Irish immigrants to the United States, McGivney from childhood had tasted the prejudice, social exclusion, and financial difficulties that so many other Catholic immigrant families were subjected to at the time.

Yet despite the poverty and anti-Catholic prejudice he endured, McGivney was known to be a man of deep faith and keen intelligence, graduating from school three years early and going to work as a spoon-maker in a brass factory to help provide extra income for his family.

In 1868, at age 16, McGivney left home and entered the seminary. Known for his intellect, personal virtue and concern for others, McGivney almost left the seminary to support his family when his father died in 1873. However, seeing the family's need and McGivney's profound desire to be a priest, his bishop provided the financial support allowing McGivney to complete his studies.

McGivney was ordained a priest in December 1877 by then-Archbishop James Gibbons and assigned as assistant pastor of St. Mary's Church in New Haven, where he quickly gained a reputation for his wise counsel and was known for the role he played in numerous conversions to the Catholic Church.

He also worked hard to provide for the material needs of his parishioners and launched numerous activities for his community. He was especially known for his kind demeanor and pastoral zeal, often encouraging laypeople to take primary roles in parish initiatives.

He worked closely with the city's leading Catholic men, holding frequent meetings in the basement of his parish to discuss the idea of a Catholic fraternal benefit society, the goal of which would be to help keep men in the Church, to financially assist families who had lost their breadwinner, and to promote the notion that one could be both a good Catholic and a good citizen.

In 1882, McGivney's dream of establishing a fraternal society came to fruition when he founded the Knights of Columbus.

Primary goals for the organization were to be an antidote to secret anti-Catholic societies which at the time offered social and employment opportunities to men, often at the expense of their faith; to help keep families together when a breadwinner died with financial help through their insurance program; and supporting full American citizenship rights for Catholics.

Named after Christopher Columbus as a means of highlighting the deep Catholic roots in America, the Knights were formally granted a charter establishing them as a legal corporation March 29, which to this day is celebrated as “Founder’s Day.”

Focused on unity and charity, the Knights later added fraternity and patriotism to their list of core principles. After McGivney refused to be named the head of his new organization, a layman, James Mullen, a Civil War veteran, was elected to the position, while McGivney assumed the role of secretary.

Two years later, once things were solidly up and running, McGivney resigned from his position and became the organization’s chaplain.

After transferring to another parish, he fell ill during a pandemic in 1890, contracting pneumonia. He died Aug. 14 of that year, just two days after his 38th birthday. Recent scientific studies suggest that the pandemic which claimed McGivney’s life, similar to COVID-19, may have been also been caused by a coronavirus.

McGivney is buried at St. Mary’s church in New Haven, where he founded the Knights of Columbus, who now number over two million in North and Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Europe. They lead countless charitable projects throughout the world, including support for persecuted Christians in the Middle East, food programs, the Special Olympics, and relief for impoverished countries struck by natural disasters.

McGivney’s sainthood cause was opened in the Archdiocese of Hartford in 1997. He was declared a Venerable Servant of God in 2008.

According to a press release from the Knights of Columbus, the miracle approved by the Vatican allowing for McGivney's beatification involved an unborn child in the United States who in 2015 was cured of a life-threatening condition in utero after the family had prayed for healing through McGivney's intercession.

A date has not yet been set for McGivney's beatification Mass; however, the Knights have confirmed that the Mass will take place in Connecticut.