

The Knights of Columbus: Challenges for 21st Century

One of the most active organizations in our diocese and across our country is the Knights of Columbus. The Knights were founded in 1882, by Father Michael J. McGivney, who is presently being considered for sainthood. Because Christopher Columbus symbolized the Catholic foundation of the New World, the Knights proudly proclaimed him as their patron and adopted his name.

The Knights of Columbus was established for three reasons. First, it functioned as a Catholic fraternal organization for immigrant men. Fraternal organizations were very common during the 19th century, offering men and women an opportunity to socialize in a healthy atmosphere and focus attention on particular interests, such as social work. Fr. McGivney wanted to provide immigrant Catholic men with a parish-based organization where they could enjoy each other's company while at the same time deepen their faith.

Second, as a young priest ministering to an expanding immigrant community in New Haven, Connecticut, Father McGivney grew concerned about the financial plight of widows and their families. In order to reduce that financial burden, the Knights initiated a Catholic insurance company which provided all forms of insurance at a reasonable cost.

Third, the Knights desired to assist the bishops in protecting the faith of Catholic immigrants in the face of widespread anti-Catholic nativism. Between 1820 and 1920, nearly 17 million Catholics emigrated to the United States. In response to this Catholic influx, mainline Protestant denominations launched a series of home mission campaigns intended to convert Catholics. Financed through funds from national treasuries, home missionaries initiated contact with Catholics at the landing docks, where they provided them with emergency services. In the immigrant neighborhoods themselves, missionaries offered the newcomers employment counseling, recreational materials and spiritual consolation, all with the hope that they would join the Protestant Church. The Knights were a strong bulwark against these efforts, supplying their own social services while inviting Catholics to remain close to the Church.

During the last 100 years, the Knights of Columbus has been responsible for a number of projects that continue to contribute to the advancement of the faith. For example, the Knights offer dioceses funds for the education of seminarians.

They built a library for Vatican films at the University of St. Louis and many of the programs from the Vatican that we see on EWTN are underwritten by the Knights. The order's Vicarius Christi Foundation yields more than 2 million dollars annually for the pope's private charities. With over 1.5 million members and nearly 20 billion dollars in insurance, the order contributes approximately \$100 million annually to charitable projects around the world, which is accompanied by almost 200 million hours of volunteer work by the Knights

On the Road to Jerusalem

BISHOP GEORGE V.
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themselves.

In recent times, the Knights have turned their attention on two important areas: vocations to the priesthood and the protection of unborn human life. In light of the numerous legal threats to the life of the unborn and the need for more priests to serve the people of God, both of these focal points are crucial. At the same time, however, I want to add one more challenge for the 21st century, one which harkens back to the reason why the Knights were founded.

A study conducted by USA Today found that only 49 percent of Catholics said that religion was "very important" in their lives. That number was higher than that for mainline Protestants, of whom only 36 percent said that religion was "very important" in their lives, but dramatically below African American Protestants at 85 percent and European American evangelicals at 79 percent.

Given those numbers, I first want to encourage young men in the Diocese of Youngstown to join the Knights of Columbus. As a strong Catholic organization, the Knights have made an outstanding contribution to the life of the Church in the United States. They need new, young members to carry on that mission. I hope that young men reading this column will give serious thought to the Knights and contact a local council about joining.

Second, I want to urge the Knights in our diocese to work with our priests, deacons and lay leaders to inspire a renaissance of faith among our Catholic people. By actively promoting the faith in what they say and do, the Knights can participate in the New Evangelization which is so needed and become living examples of a commitment to the Gospel as were the first Knights of the 19th century.

The Lord has richly blessed our country and our diocese through the work of the Knights of Columbus. Much has been accomplished, but there is much to do. I pray that the Knights will continue to promote vocations and defend all human life from conception to natural death. I also hope that they will share their faith with those who either do not know the Lord or who have forgotten the sound of his voice. In those ways the dream of Father McGivney will flourish and we will journey farther **On the Road to Jerusalem.**