

# Knights of Columbus mark 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary

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What started in 1882 as one young priest's vision to help his fellow parishioners in need has grown to become the world's largest Catholic layman's group.

This month, the Knights of Columbus will mark the 125th anniversary of the organization's first meeting.

On March 29, 1882, 24 men and their pastor, 29-year-old Father Michael J. McGivney, gathered in the basement of St. Mary's Church in New Haven, Conn., and decided to form a society dedicated to strengthening their Catholic faith and providing for the financial needs of families overwhelmed by the illness or death of a parent.

They decided to call themselves the Knights of Columbus to honor the boldness and courage of the knights of medieval Europe and of Christopher Columbus.

Use of the legendary explorer's name also was a symbol showing the unity of Catholicism and Americanism.

This was particularly significant in an era when many people erroneously thought of Catholics as second-class citizens who felt more allegiance to the Vatican than to the United States.

Other parishes in Connecticut and along the East Coast quickly responded to Father McGivney's idea.

The Knights' founder battled physical problems all his life, never fully recovered after contracting a case of pneumonia in January 1890, and died in August of that year.

His cause for beatification and possible sainthood is being considered by the Vatican.

By the time of Father McGivney's death, the organization had 57 councils.

In 1898, it entered Ohio with the founding of Council 274 in Youngstown.

All councils are numbered in the order of their establishment. One year later came the founding of Council 400 in Columbus.

By 1905, there were councils in every state.

The Knights of Columbus has continued to grow with the Church in America and elsewhere.

Today, it has more than 1.7 million members in more than 12,000 councils in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Guatemala, Guam and Saipan.

It recently began expanding into Europe with formation of the first councils in Poland. In its dimension as a fraternal benefit society, the organization has more than \$61 billion of life insurance in force and consistently earns the industry's highest independent rankings for fiscal management and ethical business practices.

All Knights have a chance to purchase insurance from the organization, but it's not a requirement of membership.

Pope John Paul II once called the Knights "the strong right arm" of the Church in America.

During his papacy, ties between the organization and the Vatican grew stronger than ever, as the Knights presented more than \$35 million to him over 27 years through their Vicarius Christi Fund and he sent a message to their convention every year.

Those links continue under his successor, Pope Benedict XVI. They include the Knights' annual sponsorship of the NBC network telecast of Christmas Midnight Mass from St. Peter's Basilica.

Financial help from the Knights also enabled networks around the world to present the funeral of John Paul and the installation of Pope Benedict in 2005.

In Ohio, the Knights have nearly 60,000 members in 336 active councils, said Gary Eckstein of Columbus, who as state deputy has led the organization in Ohio since July 2005, when he began a two-year term in the position.

The organization is dedicated to the ideals of charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism, with each of those principles serving as a base for one of the four degrees of membership in the organization.

Most Knights are third-degree members.

After one year of third-degree membership, they can choose to advance to the Fourth Degree, permitting them to wear the distinctive outfit of tuxedo, feathered hat, cape and sword which comes to mind when many people first think of the Knights.

Another outfit commonly associated with the organization is the bright-yellow vest with red lettering which Knights wear on street corners and in major shopping areas throughout Ohio while collecting each year for their "Measure Up" campaign for the mentally retarded.

The campaign gets its name from the plastic rulers the Knights distribute to every donor. It has taken place on either the last Saturday in April or the first Saturday in May every year since 1976.

Eckstein said that in the 30 years since it began, "Measure Up" has collected more than \$12 million.

It has no administrative costs, meaning 100 percent of the money collected goes to state and local agencies serving retarded citizens.

He said that last year, \$110,000 to \$120,000 of that money went to agencies in the 23-county Columbus Diocese. The first campaign collected \$186,000 statewide.

Eckstein said that in recent years, that total has grown to about \$440,000 to \$450,000 annually.

“Measure Up” is one of hundreds of charitable works each year conducted by the organization. Its largest such effort in Ohio is its annual Charities Campaign, which is under way and will conclude with a drawing for cash prizes in Cleveland on May 25. Knights sell \$5 raffle tickets for the campaign, and since its inception 60 years ago, it has raised more than \$30 million for local and state organizations.

Eckstein said between 89 and 91 percent of the money raised by the campaign each year is used for charitable purposes, an amount well in excess of accountability standards set by national monitors of fund-raising groups.

“The Internal Revenue Service has told us that if every organization practiced the same standards of giving we do, a lot more would be available to charities everywhere,” Eckstein said.

Most of the campaign money is returned to local councils, which use it for parish-based activities such as special education, religious education and encouragement of religious vocations.

Every year since 1976, when the Columbus Clippers brought International League baseball back to Columbus, the 34 councils which make up the Knights’ Greater Columbus Chapter have sponsored “K of C Night with the Clippers” at the team’s first Friday home game in June. The Knights sell general admission tickets which can be used for any Clippers home game from the start of the season until that night.

Since the promotion began, the Clippers have held the price of those tickets at \$2. In that same period, the cost of other general admission seats has increased to \$6 a ticket. The Knights donate \$1 from each of their tickets to the Special Olympics. As with the “Measure Up” campaign, there are no administrative expenses, allowing the total amount raised to go to the intended charity.

Eckstein said about \$420,000 has been collected in the 31 seasons since the promotion began, thanks to the assistance of Clippers president **Ken Schnacke**.

Councils in the Columbus area combine to aid a number of other activities, including the **diocesan Rosary Sunday every October**, the televised Mass shown each Sunday on **WWHO-TV, Channel 53 in Columbus**, and 21 “Keep **Christ** in Christmas” billboards placed throughout Central Ohio in November and December. Knights visit the veterans’ hospital in Chillicothe every month and will be increasing their work at the Wylie Center for veterans in Columbus as it expands.

Eckstein said the organization donated about 1,200 man-hours and provided 8,000 items for residents of the hospital last year.

The Knights also conduct several fund-raising drives among the organization’s own members to help the Church.

These ongoing efforts include campaigns for diocesan vocations and religious education departments, which in 2006 respectively, raised \$61,000 and \$48,000 statewide. Council also sponsor a number of annual events to raise money for church- and community-related charities and to serve the community. For example, Council 5253 in Reynoldsburg annually has fish and

spaghetti dinners, conducts a basketball free-throw shooting contest for boys and girls, sponsors a Cub Scout troop and cleans the roadside along a two-mile section of U.S. Route 40 every three months.

“In Solidarity With Our Priests” is this year’s national theme for the Knights, emphasizing the commitment to supporting the clergy which has been part of the organization from its earliest days.

This past February, Knights of Columbus councils in the Columbus area showed that support during their 10th annual Clergy Night, at which the organization provided dinner for all priests, deacons, women religious and seminarians in the diocese who chose to attend.

More than 500 people were on hand, with money donated by the laymen and women in attendance being given to the diocesan vocations department.

Eckstein said there are about 8,600 Knights in the diocese, representing an increase of about 3,000 since 1989.

The combined membership of councils in the Greater Columbus Chapter, which covers Franklin County and nearby areas, is about 4,500.

Council 400 is the “mother council” of the Columbus area and from 1899 to 1943 was the only council in the region. At its peak, it had about 3,000 members.

In the 1920s, it built a headquarters that included a meeting room, pool room, bowling lanes, exercise room, handball courts, steam room, restaurant, lounge, and sleeping rooms which were rented to armed forces personnel and to students at the **Pontifical College Josephinum**, which at the time was downtown.

“It was the best bargain in town,” recalled Dick Sheehan, a four-term grand knight of the council and its treasurer since 1984. “For the \$10 or \$15 it cost for dues for a year, the whole family could enjoy all these facilities.”

Council 400’s membership declined as more councils were formed and the suburbs expanded. The building was sold in 1969 to the **Salesian Fathers**, who have used it since then as a youth center.

The council now has about 70 members and meets in the undercroft of **Columbus St. Joseph Cathedral**.

Sheehan said its major activity is assembling Christmas baskets for the poor, a tradition which goes back to its earliest days and to an era when it sponsored a Christmas party for all the children at the old St. Vincent’s Orphanage. He said the council helped 30 to 40 families last year and has assisted nearly 3,000 families in his 39 years as a member.

Eckstein said Ohio membership in the organization peaked at about 66,000 in 1982 and 1983 and has been on the rise for the past three years.

He said one reason for the increase has been a return to the organization’s roots in individual parishes.

“Parish-based councils have become the standard,” he said. “This generation of members isn’t interested in supporting a bar or a building, but in family activities, and our councils try to focus on events designed for all members of the family.

“If you’re a young man who’s an active Catholic, over 18, and would like to associate yourself with people who have strong Catholic values and principles and believe in the ideals of serving the Church and each other, I’d encourage you to join the Knights,” Eckstein said. “This kind of person will benefit from being a member and will benefit the organization through his presence.”

For more information about the Knights, visit [www.kofc.org](http://www.kofc.org) and [www.kofcoho.org](http://www.kofcoho.org).