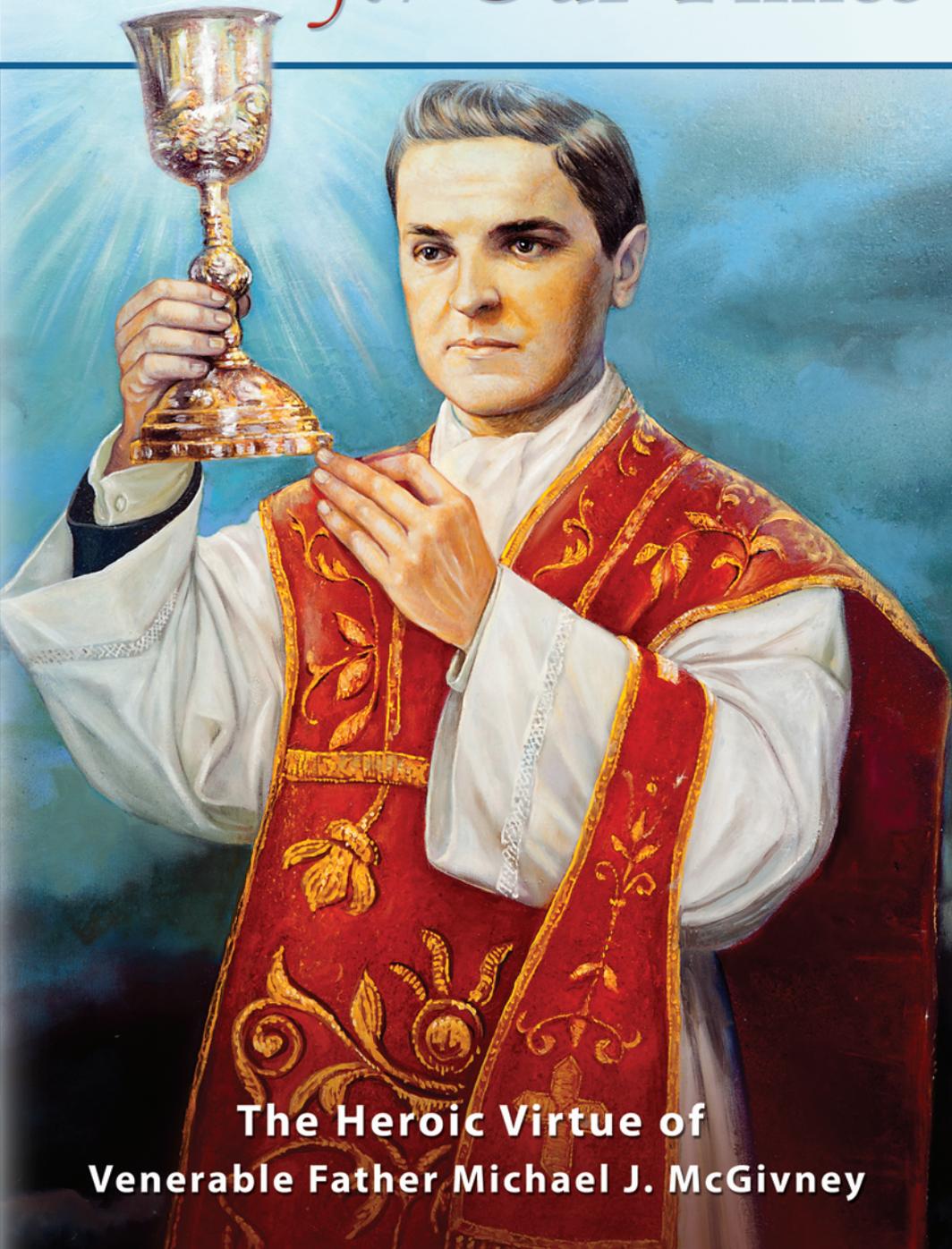


A Model *for Our Times*



**The Heroic Virtue of
Venerable Father Michael J. McGivney**



and J. McGraw





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The Heroic Virtue of Venerable Father Michael J. McGivney

Many people think of a saint as one set apart from the trials of daily life, or “too good for this world.” Yet the truth is that every saint engaged the culture of the day in a way that led people – by prayer, works or example – closer to Christ.

Often the difference between a holy person and the rest of us struggling along the Christian path is that the saintly one perseveres in love, usually without complaint, often with a smile that belies suffering, and always with a prayerful trust in God.

Think of two modern holy ones, Mother Teresa and John Paul II, who were recognized as “living saints” yet whose lives were marked by pain and loss. Small and strong, Mother Teresa began her service to the “poorest of the poor” in response to God’s call, picking up people dying in the streets

and taking in abandoned children. She was seen to be close to God, yet after her death it was revealed that during much of her life she experienced a “dark night” during which she received no illumination or consolation from God. John Paul lived his physical suffering on the world’s stage, growing older and weaker from Parkinson’s disease yet pushing himself to witness to the dignity of all human life, in whatever stage or physical condition.

Both of these modern models of sanctity had “something about them,” a character of inner strength that showed in their demeanor and behavior.

By all accounts, people who met Father Michael McGivney encountered a similar sort of inner strength and outward demeanor, a holiness that was manifested most of all in his pastoral action.

Parish Priest

Father McGivney's style was more than simply energetic. He was innovative and in some ways ingenious, so much so that Benedict XVI mentioned him as a key figure in the historic growth of the Church in 19th-century America. In a homily in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral in 2008, Pope Benedict noted "the remarkable accomplishment of that exemplary American priest, the Venerable Michael McGivney, whose vision and zeal led to the establishment of the Knights of Columbus."

Father McGivney's virtue was not of the cloister or the mountaintop. It was in the perpetual problems and struggles of his parishioners that Father McGivney lived out the virtues of faith, hope and charity in a truly heroic manner, as part of his deeply spiritual yet supremely practical vision. In late 19th-century Connecticut, Catholics were not welcome into the mainstream of society and often took the most difficult and dangerous jobs in factories, construction and railroads.



The result was that a family's breadwinner too often died young of overwork or accident, leaving behind a widow and children who had few means of financial support.

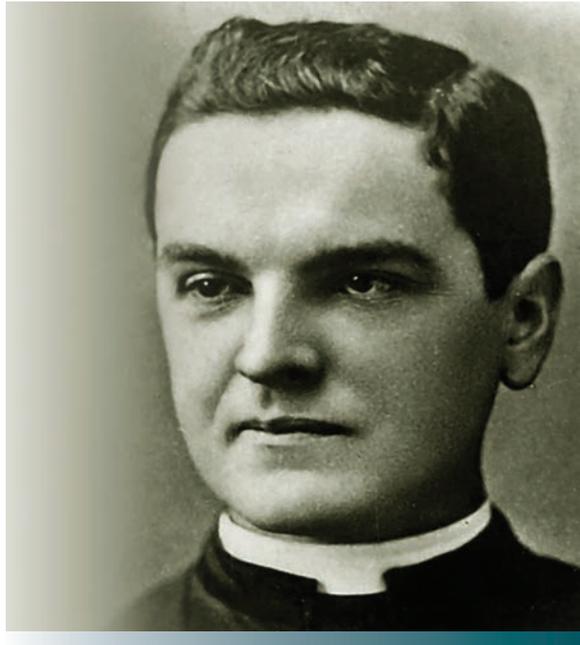
Father McGivney knew this world well; his own father had died when he was in seminary. So after priestly ordination in 1877, when he was assigned to St. Mary's Church in New Haven, Conn., he was able to give himself to his people with understanding, compassion and commitment.

As a parish priest, Father McGivney was immersed fully in the daily lives, difficult as they were, of his immigrant parishioners. Early in his priesthood, while the pastor was ill and the parish debt was crushing, he was unable to take a single day of vacation.



A friend who knew him from seminary days remarked, “There was never a more energetic or hard-working young priest stationed in New Haven than he.”

Father McGivney’s life and legacy can be summed up in the simple words “Parish Priest,” the title of his official biography. Rather than grand plans and gestures, he thrived on “the humility of moments,” preferring to draw others into his work than to take the credit himself. In this and other ways he anticipated by nearly a century the Second Vatican Council’s “universal call to holiness,” trusting and empowering lay people in leadership positions.



A fellow priest recalled the lasting impression Father McGivney made:

“I saw him but once, and yet I remember this pale, beautiful face as if I saw it only yesterday. It was a ‘priest’s face’ and that explains everything. It was a face of wonderful repose. There was nothing harsh in that countenance although there was everything that was strong.”



Protector of Catholic Family Life

For 19th-century Catholic immigrant families, it was difficult to survive – let alone thrive – in American society. It was a time of anti-Catholic bigotry, when “Irish Need Not Apply” was written in many hearts and job notices. Catholics settled together in neighborhoods for protection and support, and to preserve their religion.

If some were inclined to complain and engage in unruly behavior, Father McGivney knew a better way in faith and virtue. He set out to improve the plight of his people, instructing them from the pulpit; administering the sacraments; gathering them for lively parish activities; teaching catechism to the children; overseeing the morals of the young; and forming a temperance society against alcohol, the source of many wrecked marriages and broken families. He re-created the parish as a “family of families” where his people found strength for their

burdens, refreshment amid hardships, and hope for eternal life.

His concern for family life was summed up in one particular incident. After the father of a parish family died, a teenage child was to be placed in foster care unless his mother could show financial support for the boy. Breaking protocol of the day, when a Catholic priest was rarely involved beyond parish precincts, Father McGivney appeared in New Haven court to declare his guardianship based on the financial pledge of a local Catholic businessman. This was just one of the many ways that Father McGivney fought to keep families together.





Apostle *to the Young*

His concern for the welfare of the young came from his own experience in a devout Catholic family in Waterbury, Conn. The eldest of 13 children (six of whom died young), he began work in a local spoon factory at age 13, ending this rigorous routine only when entering seminary. In priestly formation, he was known for his seriousness and studiousness, but also for his sense of humor and baseball skills. When his father died, he came home from Montreal and considered returning to work to support the family until the Bishop of Hartford persuaded him to continue priestly studies closer to home in Baltimore.

Knowing that so many other young people faced difficult decisions and hard lives, Father McGivney planned recreation events for them, including comedic plays and musical events, picnics, coffee parties, poetry recitals, Sunday outings and boat rides, all of which also served the purpose of raising

money for the parish debt. He listened to their youthful hopes and dreams and counseled them in their doubts and defeats. Young people were drawn to him not simply as a mentor but as an understanding soul who knew their plight firsthand. As a parishioner observed, "He has been the best friend to the young since he came here."

Father McGivney's unique combination of compassion and determination was expressed in his pastoral care of a young man sentenced to death for killing a police officer during a drunken bout. He visited Chip Smith regularly in prison, brought him back to the sacraments, and was at his side at the execution, offering strength and consolation while reciting the prayers of the Church. Newspapers remarked on his amazing, personally draining ministry through which the condemned man died not only repentant and reconciled with God, but also seeking a holy death.



Founder *and Exemplar*

Father McGivney's concern for his parishioners and Catholic families led him to seek practical solutions. If the father of a family died, then he would find financial relief for the widow and children. If Catholic men were joining banned secret societies to get ahead in the world, then he would give these men a Catholic alternative providing solid fraternal support. Good and pious intentions were not enough for this good and pious priest. Prayer led him to action when human lives and future generations were at stake.

With this in mind, late in 1881, he called together a group of men in the basement of St. Mary's Church to form a fraternal benefit society called the Knights of Columbus. The purpose, he wrote, was "to prevent our people from entering secret societies by offering the same

if not better advantages to our members," and "to aid each other in time of sickness; to provide for decent burial, and to render pecuniary assistance to the families of deceased members."

Father McGivney's initial goal was to establish a Knights of Columbus council in each Connecticut parish. But soon the Order expanded to neighboring states, Canada, Mexico and as far away as the Philippines. Father McGivney died of tuberculosis two days past his 38th birthday in 1890, only eight years after he founded the Order. Today, his vision is carried forward by more than 1.8 million Knights in more than 14,000 local councils, and a top-rated insurance program that provides financial protection to members and their families.



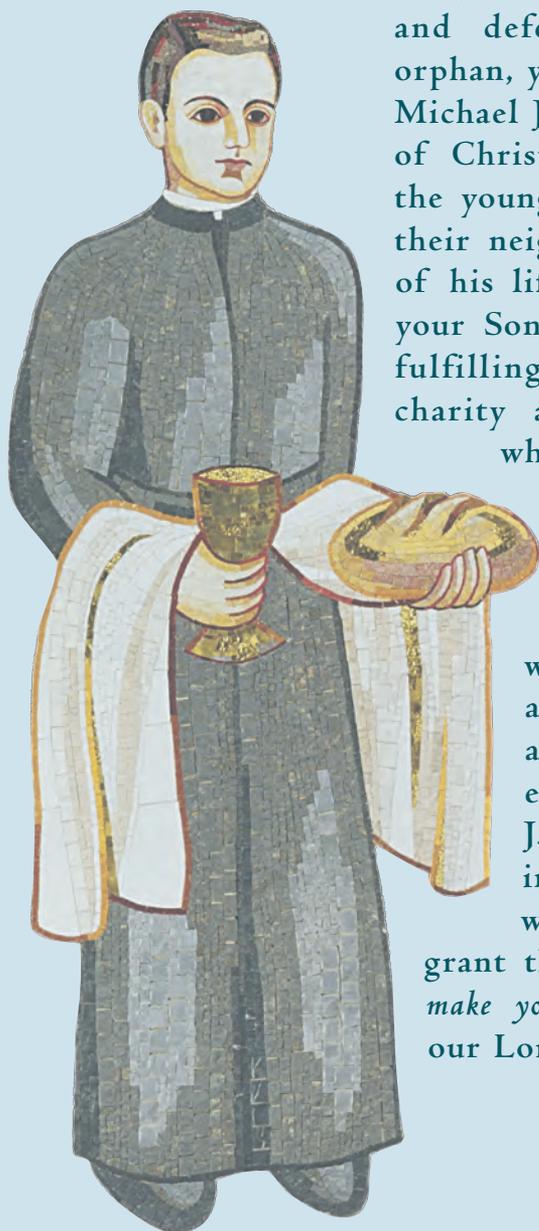
In the first memorial service after his death, this tribute was given by his Knights:

“**H**e was a man of the people. He was zealous of his people’s welfare, and all the kindness of his priestly soul asserted itself more strongly in his unceasing efforts for the betterment of their condition ... Oh, Reverend Founder ... that act alone which gave life to the Knights of Columbus has surely secured for thee everlasting joy and eternal peace.”

FATHER MCGIVNEY FACTS

- Born: Aug. 12, 1852, Waterbury, Conn. • Ordained: Dec. 22, 1877, Baltimore, Md.
- Died: Aug. 14, 1890, Thomaston, Conn. • Named Servant of God: September 1997
- Named Venerable: March 15, 2008

Prayer for the Canonization of Father Michael J. McGivney



God, our Father, protector of the poor and defender of the widow and orphan, you called your priest, Father Michael J. McGivney, to be an apostle of Christian family life and to lead the young to the generous service of their neighbor. Through the example of his life and virtue may we follow your Son, Jesus Christ, more closely, fulfilling his commandment of charity and building up his Body which is the Church. Let the inspiration of your servant prompt us to greater confidence in your love so that we may continue his work of caring for the needy and the outcast. We humbly ask that you glorify your venerable servant Father Michael J. McGivney on earth according to the design of your holy will. Through his intercession, grant the favor I now present (*here make your request*). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.



Front Cover: "Parish Priest" painting by Antonella Cappuccio; Inside cover: photos of McGivney Gallery in Knights of Columbus Museum, New Haven, Conn., by Thomas Serafin; Pages 2, 3: Knights of Columbus Archive photos; Page 4: Photo courtesy of Luzon State Council; Page 7: "Founding Vision" painting by Antonella Cappuccio; Page 8: detail from mosaic artwork by Father Marko Rupnik, S.J., in Holy Family Chapel at the Supreme Council headquarters, New Haven, Conn., showing Father McGivney.



“Concerning the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Love both toward God and neighbor, as well as the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude, and those others joined to them, they existed to a heroic degree in the Servant of God Michael McGivney, Diocesan Priest and founder of the Fraternal Order the Knights of Columbus.”

Congregation for the Causes of Saints “Decree Concerning His Virtues” upon the declaration of Father Michael McGivney as Venerable by Pope Benedict XVI

March 15, 2008

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