

# 125th Anniversary Father McGivney's Death

## **Introduction**

A newspaper clipping survives that describes the sermon which a Dominican priest delivered at Father McGivney's funeral Mass. It says that "Father Higgins' remarks occupied about forty minutes, and many were moved to tears." If I were to speak for forty minutes this afternoon there would not be tears but desperation.

So, in the space of this homily, dear friends, I will not uncover any new historical facts or stories about Father McGivney; nor will I offer a sweeping overview of his life. Instead, in solidarity with Father Kalisch and my fellow chaplains, who are privileged to serve the Knights of Columbus, I'd like to speak about how his priestly life and example touches our hearts and helps to shape the way in which we strive to live the priesthood so as to encourage and build up our brother Knights and their families.

## **Formation for the Priesthood**

Every day every priest thinks about his formation for the priesthood. That is why Father McGivney's journey to the priesthood resonates. Michael McGivney came to the priesthood from an immigrant family that was made its way to these United States in hope of a better life. Life was not easy for such families. Many toiled in factories and most lived with at least a measure of social opprobrium. The future Fr. McGivney, not unlike St. John Paul II, learned on the way to priesthood what it is like to labor in difficult if not downright dangerous conditions, thus giving him firsthand experience of what his future parishioners had to endure. Yet immigrant families, such as the McGivney's, persevered, not for themselves but for those who would come after them. From such families new generations of priests were called. Indeed, I stand before you today as the grandson of an immigrant.

By most standards, Father McGivney's path to the priesthood was complicated. It was interrupted by the death of his father. It was carried out partially in Canada and partially in the United States. He was formed for the priesthood by seminary faculties drawn from the ranks of the diocesan priesthood, the Vincentians, the

Jesuits, and the Sulpicians. This alone must have broadened his vision of the Church and priestly ministry. He excelled in his studies but even more so he excelled in piety and friendship. When we read about his years in the seminary, we priests like to imagine that Michael McGivney would have been not only our classmate and our teammate, but indeed our friend.

He was ordained a priest just a few feet away from my residence, in the Basilica Cathedral of the Assumption, by then-Archbishop Gibbons, just days before Christmas in 1877, so I always feel close to Fr. McGivney. He was ordained into a growing Church that manifestly welcomed newcomers. Archbishop Gibbons believed that Divine Providence would see to it that the Church in America would experience even greater growth in years to come. He was right, of course, & Father McGivney proved to be an extraordinary instrument of Divine Providence in seeing to the growth of the Church in this country and beyond.

### **First Years as a Priest**

Almost every priest remembers his first assignment vividly; I am no exception. One's final year in the seminary and one's first year as a priest are vastly different. How true that must have been when Fr. McGivney arrived here at St. Mary's in 1878, where the pastor, Fr. Murphy, at the young age of 32, was seriously ill. He had built this beautiful church but it was buried in debt & that took its toll on him. Within six months of ordination, Fr. McGivney was, in effect, serving here as pastor.

Stories survive about his ability to relate to young people; he was skilled as a catechist for younger children and made a deep impression on teenagers and young adults. Today everyone talks a lot about the importance youth ministry. Fr. McGivney, as usual, didn't theorize. He simply did it and did it well. While the texts of his sermons cannot be found, we know he was a good homilist. A blind man, a beggar, who was not a Catholic, used to come here to St. Mary's every Sunday to hear "that voice" – by all accounts Fr. McGivney's was a soft-spoken voice with perfect diction. "That voice" filled this church with the living word of God. How humbled any preacher is to stand and preach where he stood and preached. And it even fell to Fr. McGivney as a young priest even to organize the parish picnic, which he did, replete with a baseball game and something for everyone, it seems. How priests could have done what he did in their first years?

I like to think that Fr. McGivney's priesthood models the teaching of recent Popes. St. John Paul II said that the priest's personality must be a bridge to Christ and indeed Fr. McGivney's unassuming, lighthearted, yet determined character attracted many to the Catholic faith and to St. Mary's Church. When Pope Francis tells priests to acquire "the smell of the sheep" and "to bring the Gospel to the margins of society" - I think of Fr. McGivney. He loved the priesthood deeply and lived it for others, including widows, orphans, and outcasts. As Edward Downes said of Fr. McGivney, "he was a man of the people." And in this age when we speak so much about evangelization, Fr. McGivney went out into the community and brought many to this church, transforming it from the smallest parish in New Haven to one of the largest. *Above all*, this young priest "read the signs of the times" in seeing the need for a fraternal organization of men, led by the men themselves, that would strengthen their faith & provide for the financial security of their families.

## **The Knights**

Last week, when I preached the Memorial Mass at Knights of Columbus Convention, I mentioned that Fr. McGivney did not invent the principles of the Order - charity, unity, and fraternity - rather, he drew them from the heart of the Gospel he knew so well. As I said this, I noticed that many of my fellow chaplains were nodding, not because they were sleeping (I hope), but because they were agreeing with my comment.

Today I'd like to take that observation a step further. Fr. McGivney did not merely have a knack for synthesizing the Gospel, that is, for reducing it to three or four principles. No, he lived the Order's principles before he taught them to the founding members of the Knights of Columbus. These men would not have committed to the principle of charity had they not seen in Fr. McGivney a man of tireless pastoral charity, who reflected God's love through acts of personal generosity and compassion. They would not have committed to the principle of unity had they not seen how Fr. McGivney unified St. Mary's Parish and how he served as a source of unity in the wider community of New Haven. Nor would they have committed to the principle of fraternity had they not seen how Fr. McGivney was not only the father but also the brother to his parishioners and indeed to anyone in need. What St. John Chrysostom said in the 5th century was true of Fr. McGivney in the 19th: "Martyrs, he said, "die only once for Jesus Christ while the pastor must die daily for his flock."

## **Conclusion**

The psalmist tells us that 70 is the sum of our years or 80 if we are strong. Fr. McGivney lived a mere 38 years and served as a priest for only 13. Yet what good and lasting fruit his priestly ministry has borne – the good and lasting fruit of discipleship so evident in the Knights of Columbus, nearly 2 million strong, united in a brotherhood of charity that evangelizes.

At the end of his life, in 1890, Fr. McGivney was deeply influencing the 5,000 Knights who belonged to some fifty-one councils in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Today, some 125 years later, his influence has grown exponentially. Not only does his example shape an Order of nearly 2 million men & their families, his prayers inspire us and drive the mission of the Order forward.

For my part, as chaplain, Fr. McGivney is my parish priest, the parish priest of my soul. Every morning I pray to him and I pray that he be canonized, as I know you do. Every day I load his plate with all kinds of intentions – some are personal, some pertain to the Order, and some to my ministry in Baltimore. How earnestly we should pray for him to be raised to the dignity of the altars. With what confidence should we make our own the sentiments of Knights of Columbus Board of Directors at the time of Father McGivney's death, and I quote: "For the seeds of Charity, Unity, and Brotherly Love by him sown among us let our thanksgiving rise; in our prosperity let us ask God to reward him with eternal happiness for his labors and his devotion to our cause..." *Vivat Jesus!*