

Blessed Michael McGivney Themes for Preaching

Father Michael J. McGivney, a humble parish priest and founder of the Knights of Columbus, was beatified on Oct. 31, 2020, in his home Archdiocese of Hartford, Conn. In the apostolic letter read at the Mass, Pope Francis noted that the “zeal for the proclamation of the Gospel and generous concern for the needs of his brothers and sisters made him an outstanding witness of Christian solidarity and fraternal assistance.” Entering into eternal life two days past his 38th birthday, in the midst of a flu pandemic, he is the third-youngest American saint or blessed. A priest for 13 years, he was only the third born in the United States to be beatified, and could become the first US-born male to be canonized as a saint. Today, Father McGivney stands as a model for both priests and laypeople, having lived a life of heroic virtue devoted to the people of God, and as the founder of a lay organization that has grown to more than 2 million members worldwide.

The following is an outline of themes that may be used to inform the faithful about the life, virtues and continuing intercession of Father McGivney.

THE GRANDEUR OF HIS LIFE

Michael McGivney was born the oldest of 13 children of immigrant Irish parents and grew up in a poor Irish neighborhood in Waterbury, Conn. When he was old enough, he worked in a factory as his father did.

- He understood the experience of poor, working-class immigrant Catholic families and experienced some of the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant bigotry that existed in the U.S. during the 19th century.
- Catholics then were very vulnerable. Many employers had a policy of “Irish Need Not Apply.” Immigrants often had to take the most dangerous mining, railroad and factory positions. Accidents, disease and overwork often led to the family’s breadwinner suffering an early death, leaving his wife and children destitute, with no social safety net.

With openness to God’s will, Michael McGivney discerned the call to the priesthood early and went away for his studies, but his formation was cut short for a time after his father died.

- He faced the very real prospect of having to give up his vocation in order to work as a laborer to support his mother and younger siblings. He understood firsthand how devastating it can be to a struggling family when the main breadwinner dies. The state sometimes would send a minor to a secular orphanage if his mother was unable to provide for him financially.
- Many men were tempted to join the anti-Catholic secret societies of the day, which offered financial security and social advancement at the cost of faith.

“In the tragic early death of his father, McGivney walked for a terrible summer in the uncertain steps of those poor and troubled people he so boldly sought to assist through his vocation.” — *Douglas Brinkley and Julie M. Fenster, “Parish Priest: Father McGivney and American Catholicism,” p. 56*

Courageously responding to God’s call and his desire to be “a man for others,” Father McGivney was ordained a priest at a time when overworked priests had a life expectancy of under 40 years. His first assignment was to St. Mary’s Church in New Haven, Conn., where he dedicated himself to his pastoral service characterized by a ministry to the marginalized, demonstrating perseverance in the face of adversity and trials.

- Father McGivney did not confine himself to the sacristy or rectory. The needs of his people took him far from the church doors. With a priestly heart, he accompanied those of all ages and walks of life in their suffering and uncertainty, and found practical ways to address their needs. In his tireless priestly service, he was a man of the poor, a man involved in his community and a man conformed to Christ crucified.
- He was confronted with the specter of anti-Catholic sentiment among his Protestant neighbors and the daily newspapers from the very beginning of his priestly ministry. When a new St. Mary's Church was dedicated in 1874, the New York Times wrote of "How an Aristocratic Avenue Was Blemished by a Roman Church Edifice."
- Intent on building a dynamic parish for his hardworking and largely poor flock, he staged parish plays, outings and fairs, and he revitalized a group dedicated to overcoming alcoholism.
- He stood up in court to sponsor a boy from a local family who was in danger of being sent to an institution after his father had died, leaving the family with insufficient means of support.
- He won converts from among young adults, including Alida Harwood, the daughter of a prominent Episcopal minister.
- While his first concern was always the faith of his flock, he was attuned to familial, social, financial, civic and societal issues as well. His strong, serene demeanor spoke both of God's law and mercy, and people were naturally drawn to his reserved yet welcoming manner.

"As a young pastor, Father McGivney had to oversee two parishes.... He was, like most priests today, tremendously overworked. Nine months into his assignment at St. Mary's Church in New Haven, he wrote, 'I have been alone all Summer with the whole work of a parish on my shoulders. I have not had time for even one day's vacation since I left [seminary].' And he would not have a vacation for the next four years." — *Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson, "Father McGivney's Vision," Columbia, July 2013*

"The young curate was not the kind of priest who believed his ministry ended with the Mass. He walked fast but spoke slowly, with perfect diction and the authority of faith, in a voice so clear and pleasant that an old blind man, not even Catholic himself, came to Mass each Sunday just to hear it." — *Kevin Coyne, "The McGivney Letters," Columbia, August 2018*

"Non-Catholics found in Father McGivney a soul of immense sympathy, which invited them strongly toward investigating the religious truths his lips proclaimed." — *Father Joseph G. Daley, June 1900 issue of Columbiad, reprinted as "The Personality of Father McGivney," Columbia, August 2017*

When a troubled 21-year-old man named James "Chip" Smith was sentenced to death for the fatal shooting of a police officer, Father McGivney ministered to him and helped bring about a profound change in the young man.

- Father McGivney visited Smith often over many months to offer guidance, prayer and Mass in the jail.
- The young man's change of heart was so marked that newspapers hailed Father McGivney's ministry.
- After Mass on execution day, attended by some 150 people, Smith comforted the grief-stricken Father McGivney, saying, "Father, your saintly ministrations have enabled me to meet death without a tremor. Do not fear for me, I must not break down now."
- Father McGivney walked with him to the end, leading him in prayer and blessing him at the scaffold.

"To me this duty comes with almost a crushing weight.... If we receive your prayers, Mr. Smith and I shall be sustained by the supreme power in the hour of our great trial. I once again ask forgiveness for all the wrongdoing of which he has been guilty. He forgives all from the bottom of his heart, and I ask you for the aid of

your prayers that he may be fully prepared for a happy death.” — *Father Michael McGivney, homily at Mass celebrated in jail prior to Chip Smith’s execution, quoted in Douglas Brinkley and Julie M. Fenster, “Parish Priest: Father McGivney and American Catholicism,” p. 136*

When he was transferred from St. Mary’s Parish after several years, Father McGivney gave an emotional farewell homily to his appreciative congregation at his final Mass.

“Wherever I go, the memory of the people of St. Mary’s and their great kindness to me will always be uppermost in my heart.” — *Father Michael McGivney, farewell homily to members of St. Mary’s Parish, quoted in Douglas Brinkley and Julie M. Fenster, “Parish Priest: Father McGivney and American Catholicism,” p. 174*

While pastor of St. Thomas Church in Thomaston, Conn., Father McGivney served his parish amid the pandemic of 1890. He fell ill and died later the same year due to pneumonia, just two days after his 38th birthday. His funeral made front-page news.

- Father McGivney’s funeral, attended by the Hartford bishop and over 70 priests, was one the largest ever seen in Waterbury, Conn. Delegations were present from almost every one of the 57 Knights of Columbus councils that had developed in the Order’s first eight years. Many civic leaders paid their respects too. It was an indication of the love and respect the people felt for this holy parish priest.

HIS HOLY LIFE OF HEROIC VIRTUE

Father McGivney was a man of immense personal virtue. His reputation, from his contemporaries’ time through today, is one of humility, service, holiness and piety.

“Father McGivney, though a man of unassuming character, was possessed of an indomitable will, by which, aided by the grace of God, he was able to face unkind and unjust criticism from all directions in his great effort to found a society for the benefit of young men and the glory of the church.” — *Father W.J. Slocum, address at first annual pilgrimage to Father McGivney’s grave, June 10, 1900*

“He was not a man of imposing appearance. He was unaffected in his character, yet he possessed the power of drawing men, especially young men, toward him, of holding them together and directing their actions. He was almost childlike in his manner, yet capable when the occasion required of great strength of purpose.” — *Father W.J. Slocum, address at first annual pilgrimage to Father McGivney’s grave, June 10, 1900*

“Father McGivney’s influence over men was something extraordinary. Young men particularly were attracted to him and hung upon his words with an eagerness which he himself often wondered at; hundreds petitioned for the light of his counseling and sent others too, to share his advice.” — *Father Joseph G. Daley, June 1900 issue of Columbiad, reprinted as “The Personality of Father McGivney,” Columbia, August 2017*

“To meet him was at once to trust him; children actually loved him; and the very old people of the neighborhood, whom he hunted up and who got part of his time even on busiest days, called him a positive saint and meant it.” — *Father Joseph G. Daley, June 1900 issue of Columbiad, reprinted as “The Personality of Father McGivney,” Columbia, August 2017*

“[T]he influences that radiated from his active, energetic and zealous personality, brought many a poor wanderer to the house of God, back to the faith of his childhood, and to the sacred tribunal of penance, where

with faith, contrition and humility, he became reconciled to his Heavenly Father.” — *Father J.H. O’Donnell, address at first annual pilgrimage to Father McGivney’s grave, June 10, 1900*

“Father McGivney possessed a keen sensitivity to the world around him; he recognized what was needed and how to respond.” — *Father Peter Cameron, O.P., “In Service to One, in Service to All,” Columbia, August 2009*

For all his renown for what he accomplished, Father McGivney was a simple parish priest at heart — and quite beloved by all who knew him.

“His short life of 38 years, closing in the summer of 1890, was yet rich in every priestly virtue — the love for souls of the true *alter Christus*, the childlike piety of the Curé d’Ars, the zeal of Vincent de Paul for works of mercy, the unfatigued optimism of the associates of Ozanam — these traits, so precious in the sight of man and heaven, were clearly mirrored in the soul of that good, simple, honest priest of Connecticut.” — *Father Joseph G. Daley, June 1900 issue of Columbiad, reprinted as “The Personality of Father McGivney,” Columbia, August 2017*

“He died without leaving any pecuniary debts; but he died also without owning a dollar: and the reason of it was that in his heart of charity he had given his last dollar away.” — *Father Joseph G. Daley, June 1900 issue of Columbiad, reprinted as “The Personality of Father McGivney,” Columbia, August 2017*

HIS LEGACY OF LOVE: THE KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

In response to threats to the faith, and to protect families both spiritually and materially, Father McGivney — then only 29 years of age — founded the Knights of Columbus as a Catholic fraternal society and to offer a financial safety net. He taught that Knights should be known for their faithfulness to Christ, fidelity to our Holy Mother Church, personal integrity, courageous service and opposition to injustice.

- The Order’s financial safety net would help keep Catholic families together when a breadwinner died; this would also help prevent a loss of faith among widows and orphans, who without financial help may have been forced to live in state institutions or with non-Catholic relatives or adoptive families.
- The Knights would serve as an antidote to those secret societies that lured Catholic men away from their faith by offering financial benefits.

“Our primary object is to prevent people from entering Secret Societies, by offering the same, if not better, advantages to our members. Secondly, to unite the men of our Faith throughout the diocese of Hartford, that we may thereby gain strength 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 Michael McGivney, letter to Connecticut parish priests, April 1882*

Father McGivney’s life experiences led him to establish Unity and Charity as the first two core principles of the Knights of Columbus. Fraternity soon was added as a third principle, while Patriotism was added after his death.

- Father McGivney’s spiritual genius was in creating an organization that makes friends into brothers. Knights have leveraged their fraternal strength in public witness throughout the years, lending their voice to uphold the dignity and rights of the most vulnerable and defending those facing discrimination in the U.S. and around the world.

- Patriotism, added as the fourth principle of the Order after Father McGivney's death, is fully consistent with his vision that men can be both faithful Catholics and loyal Americans.

“Unity and Charity’ is our motto. Unity in order to gain strength to be charitable to each other in benevolence whilst we live and in bestowing financial aid to those whom we have to mourn our loss.” — *Father Michael McGivney, letter to The Connecticut Catholic, Aug. 25, 1883*

“It is precisely in *fraternal* charity and *fraternal* unity that the Knights of Columbus transcends other charitable organizations. Seeing our neighbor as a brother makes all the difference.” — *Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson, Father McGivney’s Spiritual Genius, Columbia, July/August 2020*

Father McGivney founded the Knights of Columbus in part to strengthen and stabilize family life, particularly when financial stresses occur after the breadwinner in the family suffers sickness, injury or death. This concern led to the development of the Order’s insurance program.

“The Order of the Knights of Columbus is...composed of Catholics and instituted for the welfare of Catholic families.... Not only in sickness, but when death takes the support of the family away, the Knights of Columbus comes to the relief of the widow and the orphan in a very substantial manner.” — *Father Michael McGivney, letter in response to “Clericus” in The Connecticut Catholic, May 30, 1885*

“Michael McGivney had an understanding of them all: the fathers, the mothers, the children, an everyday trinity more fragile in modern life than anyone else seemed to realize.” — *Douglas Brinkley and Julie M. Fenster, Parish Priest: Father McGivney and American Catholicism, p. 12*

“This spirit animated Father McGivney to provide a financial safety net for widows and orphans, and to defend the religious liberty so necessary for Catholic institutions, including the Knights of Columbus, to flourish.” — *Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson, “Father McGivney’s Spiritual Genius, Columbia, July/August 2020*

Father McGivney believed Catholic men needed to be well formed in their faith so that they would be more able to live it and defend it when challenged. He was a man ahead of his time, anticipating by nearly a century the Second Vatican Council’s “universal call to holiness” for the laity as well as the clergy.

- Father McGivney understood the importance of the laity’s vocation to transform society according to the gospel and believed that in caring for others Catholics witness their faith to society.
- For Father McGivney and his Knights, faith was not simply knowing the catechism. It was putting into practice the Great Commandment: To love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.

“At a time when the Catholic identity of so many was being tested by the harsh economic, social and political realities of 19th-century America, he offered a way forward without compromising the faith. The newly organized Knights of Columbus would not withdraw into enclaves. Knights would engage society by living the Catholic principles of charity and unity.” — *Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson, “Father McGivney’s Spiritual Genius, Columbia, July/August 2020*

“In suggesting a plan by which he would work with laymen as equals, Michael McGivney was crossing into new territory. The fact that it was to be in a civic setting — and one in which the laymen would hold all of the power — made his project downright revolutionary.” — *Douglas Brinkley and Julie M. Fenster, “Parish Priest: Father McGivney and American Catholicism, p. 108*

The Knights of Columbus continues to live out the vision Father McGivney set forth for the Order.

- Today, there are more than 2 million members of the Knights of Columbus in some 15,000 local councils located in more than a dozen countries around the world. In 2019, these Knights together donated \$187 million to charity and provided 77 million hours of volunteer work.

“Waterbury is proud of her boy, who many years ago went to prepare himself for the priesthood and became not only a priest of God, but the beloved, honored and revered founder of the Knights of Columbus. In the light of subsequent events, we can truly say that if any man ever had a divine call to a great work Father McGivney surely had.” — *Father W.J. Slocum, address at first annual pilgrimage to Father McGivney’s grave, June 10, 1900*

HIS HEAVENLY INTERCESSION

Many favors have been reported through Father McGivney’s intercession.

- Most favors reported through Father McGivney’s intercession fall into four categories: employment and finances, substance abuse, family reconciliation, and return to the faith.
- In May of 2020, the Vatican confirmed that Mikey Schachle, an unborn child diagnosed with Down syndrome, was miraculously cured of a fatal case of fetal hydrops. This miracle was attributed to Father McGivney’s intercession and opened the way for his beatification.
- Father Michael McGivney was officially declared “blessed” on October 31, 2020, during a Mass in the Cathedral of Saint Joseph in Hartford, Conn.

“How fitting, given the Order’s longstanding commitment to the sanctity of life, that the miracle attributed to the intercession of Father McGivney was the healing *in utero* of an unborn child.” — *Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson, “Father McGivney’s Spiritual Genius,” Columbia, July/August 2020*

One more miracle is needed for canonization and sainthood.

- Now that he is “blessed,” one more miracle attributed to the intercession of Father McGivney is needed for him to be declared a saint.
- As things stand now, Father McGivney would be the first male born in the United States to be canonized.
- Those devoted to Blessed Michael McGivney are asked to invoke his aid in needs great and small and to report any favors received to the Father Michael J. McGivney Guild (www.fathermcgivney.org).
- Since the Vatican considers almost exclusively physical/medical healings that cannot be explained by modern science, it is especially important that those who are suffering from serious illnesses seek the aid of Father McGivney in trust and faith in God’s power and providence.
- Anyone can help promote the sainthood cause of Father McGivney by following a simple formula: Join. Pray. Report.
 1. Join the Father McGivney Guild – you will receive a regular newsletter and your intentions will be remembered in a weekly Mass offered for Guild members.
 2. Pray for Father McGivney’s intercession, especially in times of great medical needs.
 3. Report all favors to the Father McGivney Guild.