

Saints of Service



The saints and blesseds of the Knights of Columbus are models for the Columbian virtues of Charity, Unity, Fraternity and Patriotism

BY DOMINICAN FATHER JUAN-DIEGO BRUNETTA

The followers of Christ, called and justified in the Lord Jesus not according to their own works but according to His own purpose and grace, through baptism...truly become sons and daughters of God and sharers in the divine nature, and thus truly holy. In all times, God chooses from

these [sons and daughters] many who, following more closely the example of Christ, give outstanding testimony to the Kingdom of heaven by shedding their blood or by their heroic practice of virtues."

So wrote Pope John Paul II in *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* (*The Divine Teacher and Model of Perfection*), his 1983 apostolic constitution that reordered the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and the process of beatification and canonization. While it is certain that many unknown men and women suffered for the faith, lived heroic lives and are now included in the "great cloud of the witnesses" (Heb 12:1) which comprises the heavenly communion, the Church also makes declarations about the particular

sanctity of some of her sons and daughters. These are the saints and blesseds of the Church.

The Knights of Columbus is privileged to count among its ranks 11 such holy men: seven saints and four blesseds — laymen and priests, martyrs and untiring witnesses to our Catholic faith and Columbianism. They are: Sts. Pedro de Jesús Maldonado Lucero, Rodrigo Aguilar Alemán, Luis Batiz Sainz, Mateo Correa Magallanes, Miguel de la Mora de la Mora, José María Robles Hurtado and Rafael Guízar Valencia; and Blesseds Carlos Manuel Rodríguez, José Rangel Montaño, Andrés Sola Molist and Leonardo Pérez Larios. Their heroic lives of virtue were shaped by their promotion of the faith during times of persecution, physical suffering and, in some cases, martyrdom. Despite

these hardships, they continued to hold a deep devotion to Our Lady, the Eucharist and the liturgy.

But how do the lives of these Knights shine forth the Order's "virtues" of Charity, Unity, Fraternity and Patriotism? What does their sanctity say about our unique call to live out the Columbian virtues?

Pope Benedict XVI reminded the Church that charity is the very life of the Blessed Trinity in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (*God is Love*). When the Servant of God Father Michael J. McGivney founded the Knights of Columbus 125 years ago, it was this very same charity that drove him to instill in the first Knights how their love of God led to a love of neighbor. Each Knight since then has benefited in innumerable ways from the love of his brothers. It is this foundational virtue of the Order and of the Christian life that grounds all other virtues.

ABOVE: Silver reliquary containing bone chips of six Mexican saints, presented to the Supreme Council by Mexico Knights in 2002.

Authentic unity can only flourish when charity is practiced. Fraternity, or true brotherhood among Knights, has meaning only when members see each other worthy of the love of God and brother. Patriotism, or love of country, flows from the same font of divine love that fills the Knights and charges them to love all humanity, and emboldens them to protect their homelands.

To be a Knight of Columbus is to be a man for others, a man of communion and service. Since this is the case, we can learn much about a Knight by looking at the people around him: those he loves, those he serves, those he supports and those he aids. In the saints and blesseds of the Order, we have a unique window to the Columbian virtues.

CHARITY

Although he felt drawn by the Lord to be a priest, upon the death of his father Leonardo Pérez Larios (1883-1927) of Lagos de Moreno, Mexico, took on the responsibility of caring for and supporting his two sisters. He abandoned his own will for the good of those he loved. He took upon himself the burden of his sisters' welfare. In these ways, Blessed Leonardo closely imitated the heroic charity of Father McGivney.

As recounted in the biography *Parish Priest*, Father McGivney took it upon himself to guarantee Edward Downes Jr. to the courts of New Haven, so the Downes family would not be torn apart when the young man's father died. Similarly, Blessed Leonardo's sisters knew the sacrifice he made on their behalf. They knew also his deep devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Eucharist. There can be no doubt that his dedication to his sisters and his life of piety inspired and strengthened them in their own lives of faith. Despite the persecution of the Church in Mexico, Blessed Leonardo regularly served at Masses held in private homes in order that he

might have the privilege of worshiping at the eucharistic liturgy. It was at one such Mass that he was mistaken for a priest and arrested, along with Father Sola Molist. He was shot the next day because he readily and openly declared his Catholic faith.

UNITY

Blessed Carlos Manuel Rodríguez (1919-63) of Caguas, Puerto Rico, was a Knight of deep spiritual insight, although he was largely self-taught in matters of the faith. At the University of Puerto Rico's Catholic

Christian culture in Puerto Rico and beyond, and foster liturgical renewal. Blessed Carlos Manuel also sponsored "Christian Living Days" among the university students. These were days of fellowship and prayer at which he would teach about various aspects of the faith.

One participant said: "We would get together in some place outside of the city and we would each bring our own snacks to share with everybody else. Charlie would give two or three talks during the day... The praying of the Divine Office...was an important part of the agenda. We

SAINTS, BLESSEDS, KNIGHTS



(From top left): Sts. Batiz Sainz, Correa Magallanes, De la Mora de la Mora, Robles Hurtado, Maldonado Lucero, Aguilar Alemán, Guízar Valencia; Blesseds Manuel Rodríguez, Rangel Montaño, Sola Molist and Pérez Larios (Right) Members of Maria, Trono de la Sabiduria (Mary, Seat of Wisdom) Council 13582

in Puebla, Mexico South, process with the reliquary at their university.



Father

Center, he set ablaze the campus community with his vibrant witness and commitment to young people. Not satisfied merely with studying sacred Scripture, Blessed Carlos Manuel (known as "Charlie" to his friends and family) was driven to share the depths of faith that he plumbed. On fire with the liturgical life of the Church, especially the Easter Vigil, and the relationship between the liturgy and the world, between faith and life, Blessed Carlos Manuel formed the "Circle of Christian Culture" at the university's Catholic Center. The aim of this association was to gather together students and professors to ensure that they became authentic and apostolic Catholic intellectuals. He wanted to advance a truly

would also sing hymns...that [Charlie] would teach us." Another testified to the effect of Charlie's efforts: "Those days gave us a profound sense of unity, of great enjoyment, spiritual satisfaction and tremendous love, which transcended the moment and carried on into our daily life."

FRATERNITY

History has not recorded the works of brotherly fraternity shared by the saints and blesseds of the Knights of Columbus. We have no accounts of their council meetings or programs; however, we are not left totally without insights to the manner in which they embodied this virtue. St. Luis Batiz Sainz was one of the priest-martyrs of the Mexican

Church in the 1920s. Along with three laymen, he was led before a firing squad for refusing to yield to the government's anti-religious laws. Even at his death, he showed care for others, beseeching the executioners to release one of the captives, Manuel Morales, a father with several young children. When these efforts failed, St. Luis imparted absolution to the other captives and, with his usual wit and gusto proclaimed "he would see them in heaven." Confident in God's love for them, and in their brotherhood with the Lord, St. Luis did not despair a death suffered for the faith.

St. Mateo Correa Magallanes was also executed for refusing to yield to his persecutors. While in prison, he was ordered to hear the confessions of other captives; after-

Men for others, men of communion and men of service

ward, the commanding officer demanded that St. José María reveal what he had learned. Conscious of his obligations to God and to his brothers, he refused and was executed. St. Rodrigo Aguilar Alemán risked capture by staying behind at a seminary to destroy student records so that those studying for the priesthood would be protected from anti-Catholic authorities. St. Rodrigo was later hanged for this great act of foresight and bravery that surely saved the lives of many seminary students and helped to ensure the

future sacramental life of the Church in Mexico.

PATRIOTISM

Virtuous patriotism abounds in the lives and deaths of the Mexican saints and blessed of the Knights of Columbus. It was not only for their faith, but for the very foundations of their homeland, that they resisted their persecutors. Each of the martyrs understood that the life of Mexico was intimately tied to the life of the Church, and that the loss of the faith would be the ultimate loss of their country. The very name of the persecuted rebels, *Cristeros*, which comes from their famed death cry *¡Viva Cristo Rey!* (Long live Christ the King!), is a sure indication of their understanding of Christ as king, not only of their hearts, but of all of Mexico.

St. Pedro de Jesús Maldonado Lucero is a special example of the virtue of patriotism. Ordained a priest in the United States and later exiled there by the Mexican government, St. Pedro could have stayed in El Paso, Texas, ministering to the Church there. Yet nothing could prevent him from returning to the persecuted Church of Mexico. He was arrested on Ash Wednesday in 1937 while distributing ashes, brutally beaten, shot in the head, and left for dead in the town square. Greatly loved by the people to whom he was so devoted, the faithful risked attack and gathered in great numbers for his funeral and burial.

These are just some of the ways that the saints and blessed of the Knights of Columbus demonstrated the Columbian virtues of Charity, Unity, Fraternity and Patriotism. Their lives of holiness affected the men and women around them. By their example, and through their heavenly intercession, we can clearly see what we are called to be in the Knights of Columbus: men for others, men of communion and men of service. ■

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A CROSS-BORDER CELEBRATION OF SERVICE

■ Texas bishop and Knights return St. Rafael Guízar's episcopal ring to his home

Amid cries of joy and excitement, the people of the Diocese of Jalapa, Mexico, welcomed back to the cathedral the episcopal ring once worn by their beloved St. Rafael Guízar y Valencia on the saint's feast day, last June 6. St. Guízar (1878-1938) is the first bishop born in the Americas to be declared a saint. He was also a member of the Knights of Columbus.

When Archbishop Emeritus Patrick F. Flores of San Antonio discovered that the original owner of the ring was indeed St. Rafael, he promised to return the ring to the people of Jalapa to be included in St. Rafael's museum. The ring was given to the archbishop almost 30 years ago by the children of a Houston businessman who had acquired it from Oklahoma City Bishop Francis Kelly in the late 1920s.

Accompanying Archbishop Flores on the pilgrimage were San Antonio Knights Agustín Mora, a great-nephew of the saint, and Rudy Escamilla, president of the San Antonio Chapter of the Knights of Columbus.

During their time in Jalapa, Mora and Escamilla were the special guests of Father Rafael González, the postulator for St. Rafael's cause for sainthood. Father González took the men to a centuries-old convent to show them where more relics are kept safely until a new,

larger museum is built for St. Rafael. Inside the convent is a glass case that holds the heart of the saint, found uncorrupted with the saint's body when it was exhumed 12 years after his burial in 1938.

Archbishop Flores presented the ring to Archbishop Sergio Obeso Rivera. As the Texas prelate offered the ring to his Mexican counterpart, the ring moved onto Archbishop Rivera's finger and a thunderous standing ovation erupted from those in attendance.



Archbishop Flores presents the ring to Mexican Archbishop Sergio Obeso Rivera.

Archbishop Rivera presented Archbishop Flores with a replica of the pectoral cross worn by St. Rivera. In its center is a bone fragment of the saint. — This story was originally reported by Patsy Pelton for the July 6, 2007, edition of *Today's Catholic*, official newspaper of the Archdiocese of San Antonio.