

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE  
GREAT AMERICAL CATHOLICS: PART V  
THE ENTRAPENURIAL SPIRIT AND THE GATHERING OF THE NATIONS:  
FATHER MICHAEL MCGIVNEY AND ST. FRANCIS XAVIER CABRINI

I Fr. Michael McGivney, the founder of the Knights of Columbus, exemplified American creativity and the entrepreneurial spirit in a way that helped the Church grow in this land and make business and finance noble and charitable endeavors.

A. Born in 1852, Michael McGivney was the first child of Patrick and Mary McGivney, devoutly Catholic immigrants from Ireland.

1. The McGivney family lived in Waterbury, Connecticut. There were 13 children, but six of them died young. His father was a molder in a local mill and the family has a stable, modest home with a strong Catholic faith.

2. At first, Michael attended the local schools, where teachers noticed his initiative and intelligence even then.

3. Starting at age 13, he began working in spoon manufacturing of a company that sold brass products. The fumes from the manufacturing were both unpleasant and damaging to his health. It was also not an easy time to grow up Catholic because anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant prejudice was quite common; the rise of the Know Nothing Party was a noteworthy example of this prejudice.

4. Michael did not resume schooling until age 16 when the opportunity opened up to attend the seminary college of St. Hyacinthe in Quebec.

B. Michael McGivney studied in Quebec, then in New York State, Montreal and finally Baltimore.

1. Michael's progress in seminary was solid. But in 1873, his father died, giving Michael McGivney very direct experience of a family in which the breadwinner has died. He briefly left seminary and returned to his hometown partially to ensure the family finances. Fortunately, he was soon able to return to his studies at St. Mary Seminary in Baltimore.

2. Michael McGivney was then ordained a priest by Archbishop (later Cardinal) James Gibbons on December 22, 1877 for the Diocese of Hartford, which covered all of Connecticut and Rhode Island.

C. Fr. McGivney began his service as an associate pastor in St. Mary Church in New Haven, the only Catholic parish in that city, on Christmas day 1877.

1. The church was expanding, but it was also facing more and more opposition from the world. For example in 1879, the New York Times ran a story with the headline, "How An Aristocratic Avenue Was Blemished By A Roman Church Edifice."

2. Fr. McGivney was very busy with teaching, visiting the sick, and even prison ministry, even as he also acted in the full role of a parish priest. He also promoted abstinence from alcohol to reduce alcoholism in the community.

- His ministry to prisoners was also compassionate. One young man about to be executed for murder wrote to him, "Father, your saintly ministrations have enabled me to meet death without a tremor. Do not fear for me, I must not break down now."

3. To make the Church more attractive to youth, he organized sports games, music and theater for the youth throughout the diocese.

D. In 1881, he began thinking about a Catholic fraternal benefit society for the support of widows, orphans, and the disabled.

1. In the 1870s and 1880s, it was becoming more popular to join clubs and societies based upon some common interest or heritage. Many such groups were acceptable, but the Church forbade joining secret societies or any society that would be opposed to the church. The secret societies had the attraction of providing mutual support and companionship and giving a sense of pageantry and adventure.

2. Despite the prohibition on joining secret societies, one such group called the Ancient Order of Forrester's seemed to be acceptable to most Catholics, and so many joined. Among other times, this group provided companionship and support when a member died or was disabled. When a well-known Catholic member named John Bernhardt died, the group wanted to have a role in the funeral. Fr. McGivney, while not opposed to the group, forbade the group from participating in the funeral, a move that caused some controversy.

3. This event was an example of a pastoral question of how to provide for Catholics who wanted a mutual support society. Fr. McGivney wanted the Catholics to have the option to join a Catholic group, both to provide for their legitimate interest and to counteract the influence of such groups as the Masons, whose views opposed those of the Church.

- He had helped improved a group at St. Mary called St. Joseph's Total Abstinence and Literary Society. This society was mostly run by laity and

organized Catholic events, such as plays and the St. Patrick's Day celebrations. It also provided some help to Catholics in need. Fr. McGivney welcomed them into a more active role at St. Mary, and this group did so. But it had a more narrow focus, and insisted (as the name implies) on total abstinence from alcohol.

4. Ben Franklin had formed the first life insurance company in America. And, but the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were also many life insurance and disability insurance companies. However, they were mostly considered for wealthier people and businesses. In addition, financial scandals deterred most people from trusting in them.

5. And so Fr. McGivney began thinking about a fraternal society for men that would gather them together for Catholic activities and provide for sick members and for the family and burial of members who died. For, at the time, diseases were often disabling, and early deaths from both disease and workplace accidents were common.

5. He went to his pastor Fr. Patrick Lawlor and the local bishop, Charles McMahan; and they approved of the idea. Fr. McGivney then consulted with people in other charities to see how to get such a group started. For example, he spoke with members of the Foresters and the Catholic Benevolent Legion in New York City, which provided life insurance, disability assistance and programs for intellectual improvement

E. The new society got started in 1882, with the name now the Knights of Columbus.

1. Over 80 men gathered for an organizational meeting in October, 1881. There was a great deal of interest in general, but the group needed a strong organization. And Fr. McGivney showed his talents by combining his vision with an attention to detail. As Douglas Brinkley and Julie Fenster said in their book Parish Priest: Father McGivney and American Catholicism, "Father McGivney went at the challenge of organizing just such a society with an entrepreneurial zeal. No chore was too much trouble, no reading too dull – and no acquaintance immune from his enthusiasm for the idea."

2. The first official meeting of the group was on February 6, 1882 and joined together 24 members, who were highly confident of its success.

a. Fr. McGivney had initially wanted to call the society the Sons of Columbus. However, the name was changed to Knights because many members, and particularly Civil War veterans, wanted more of a sense of ceremony and adventure. In both cases, the reference to Columbus was

designed to reflect the patriotism of the members, and stand against the beliefs of some people who said that Catholics cannot be completely loyal their faith and this country at the same time. The name reminded people that Christopher Columbus, who had opened the New World to the Europeans, was Catholic

- Fr. McGivney was not particularly interested in extensive ceremonies, but the men joining did want them; and so Fr. McGivney adopted more fine ceremonies.

b. The initial themes were charity and unity. The Knights later adopted fraternity and patriotism as themes for the Third Degree and Fourth Degree respectively.

3. Fr. McGivney drafted the provision of the insurance, which provided about two thirds of average salary for disability and \$1500 (four years of average wages) for death.

4. The Knights of Columbus thus became a nonprofit corporation chartered in Connecticut later that year.

F. After initial frustrations, the group began to take off.

1. Due to Fr. McGivney's own illnesses and some injuries and illnesses among the founders, the group still had only 27 members at the end of 1882. The fact that the church had a large debt (\$135,000) meant that it could not provide much help. And some other clergy thought that he was too idealistic.

2. Some people in other churches wanted instead to form specifically Catholic councils of Forresters. However, the Forresters themselves refused to have a court sponsored by a church. In response, those churches turned to the Knights. In early 1883, Catholics in the nearby town of Meridian were turned down by the Forresters and then decided to go with the Knights

4. Fr. McGivney wrote to all of the pastors of the diocese, asking them to promote the Knights of Columbus. And the response was very positive, with 30 more councils being formed in Connecticut by 1885; the local Bishop McMahan was the chaplain to one of them. By 1888, the order had over 4000 members.

5. Others eventually took over the business side of the order. But as Supreme Chaplain, Fr. McGivney was still involved in arranging matters.

G. In order to help retire the parish's debt, the Bishop of Hartford brought in Dominicans to run St. Mary. And so, in 1884, Fr. McGivney was appointed as the pastor for St.

Thomas Church in Thomastown, Connecticut. He also was the chaplain to another nearby church that did not have a priest any longer. The parish was poorer and had few financial resources than St. Mary parish, but the people were apparently very faith filled. In this parish, Fr. McGivney had to contend with major financial problems, even as he continued his role as the Supreme Chaplain of the Knights.

H. On January 20, 1890, Fr. McGivney came down with pneumonia. His health never fully came back; and on August 14 of that year he died at the age of 38. He was succeeded as Supreme Chaplain by his brothers Msgr. Patrick McGivney and Fr. John McGivney. By this time there were 57 Knights Councils throughout the republic with over 6000 members. There are now over 14,000 councils with over 1.8 million members in fourteen countries around the world.

I. The Diocese of Hartford is sponsoring the cause for Fr. McGivney's canonization. The diocese concluded a report on his life in 2000 and sent it to Rome. In 2008, Pope Benedict issued a decree confirming that Fr. McGivney lived a life of heroic virtue and thus authorized that he be called Venerable. The Congregation of Saints is still investigating accounts of miracles granted through his intercession, which is a requisite for canonization.

J. In dedicated and creative parish ministry and the founding of the Knights of Columbus, Fr. McGivney combined a brilliant business skill, very capable administration, and a zeal for charity and the faith, and did great credit to the entrepreneurial spirit that makes this country great.

II. St. Frances Xavier Cabrini lived out the American determination to achieve success in the midst of difficulties and the ability to unify different communities with a striving for mutual benefit.

A. Maria Francesco was raised in a devout farming family of northern Italy.

1. She was born on July 15, 1850 and named Maria Francesca Cabrini, the youngest of 13 children Augustine and Stella Cabrini. Her parents were of a middle class farming family of Parvia, in Lombardy in northern Italy. At the time, the area was part of the Austrian Empire. However, the newly formed Italian government would eventually take over the area. Maria's immediate family was not involved in politics. However, a relative named Augustino Depretis was Prime Minister for most of the time between 1876 and 1887.
2. Stella Cabrini was 52 when Maria was born, and Maria was small in stature and had health problems.

3. The family was very devout and disciplined in their studies. Maria (nicknamed Cecchina) was largely raised by an older sister Rosa, who was herself a schoolteacher. Augustino regularly read aloud from church writings and especially from the lives of saints, including missionaries. One uncle was a priest.
  4. From an early age, Maria Francesco expressed a desire to become a religious sister and go on the missions, but the initial desire was to go to China. She even dressed dolls as nuns and sent them down streams to represent her future desire, and gave up candy on the grounds that she would have to do so as a religious.
  5. At the age of 13, her parents sent her to a boarding school run by the Daughters of the Sacred Heart that was designed to educate teachers. She did well and graduated cum laude at age 18.
  6. However, both of her parents died in 1870, the same year that the Papal States fell to the new Italian nation. At that time, she moved back in with Rosa and began teaching in a small town of Vodardo. Only four of her siblings survived into adulthood. She herself contracted smallpox, although she completely recovered
- B. At first, Maria Francesco had a great deal of difficulty entering religious orders because of her health. At first, she applied to the Daughters of the Sacred Heart after she graduated. But they would not take her, although they thought she would be a good teacher, and she was able to teach as a substitute in a local school. In addition, ever since falling into a river as a child, she had a fear of being on water.
- C. However, the door to religious life opened when Maria took over an orphanage and formed a community around the work and prayer involved.
1. There was an orphanage in a nearby town of Codogno called the House of Providence. It was being run by its foundress, who was generous but poor at management. Father Antonio Serrati, a priest who had employed Maria Francesco at the school, was now a local pastor. Knowing her talents and intelligence, he asked the local bishop to request that she take it over, which she did.
  2. As the leader of this orphanage, Maria persuaded some of the women working there to form a community that then became the beginning of a religious

community in which the women took temporary vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience. The bishop approved of the project and appointed her as the superior.

3. However, the foundress kept on opposing her and the local bishop had to order the orphanage to be closed in 1880. Nevertheless, he was impressed by her skills and her patience. And so he called for her to engage in other work for the Church.

D. Over the next nine years, Mother Cabrini built up a new congregation called the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

1. In 1880, she and the seven other sisters who had taken initial vows moved into an old friary in Codogno and began religious life there as the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. The small group established a school for girls and an orphanage. Among other things, they also sold linen and clothes they made to support the order. She herself took the name Francis Xavier after St. Francis Xavier, the great Jesuit missionary, with an emphasis also on the master of evangelization and consecration of the world, St. Francis de Sales.
2. Mother Cabrini drew up the rules, and the bishop of Lodi approved. Two more houses were soon opened in Grumello and Milan, in Northern Italy. In Milan, they established their first boarding school. Soon the order began attracting many new sisters, and at first they build additions to the houses themselves to accommodate the rapid growth.
3. In 1887, Mother Cabrini went to Rome for papal approval of the rule as a full congregation and for permission to open a house in Rome. At first Cardinal Parochhi, who was the Prefect of Religious Life thought that there had been too little time to test the project. But eventually, he and Pope Leo XIII agreed to provisional approval, and the congregation opened two houses in Rome. Both papal approval and a house in Rome would help the expansion of the order; she intended the house in Rome to be the mother house for the order.

E. Despite all of this success Mother Cabrini still wished to be a missionary. And so started planning again for missionary work, eventually settling on ministering to America.

1. Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York wrote her a letter asking her to help with the missions in this country, and especially in New York. Bishop Giovanni Scalabrini of Piacenza also encouraged her to send sisters here.

- a. At the time, immigrants were coming in large numbers from southern and eastern Europe, as well as the continuing immigration from Ireland.
  - b. Among the other immigrants, there were about 50,000 Italians in or around New York alone.
  - c. The local church was being overwhelmed by the immigrants with the language barrier as a particular problem. There were few priests from southern or eastern Europe arriving to minister to the immigrant people.
  - d. Immigrants often faced discrimination both from Protestants and also from more longstanding communities of Irish, French and Germans.
  - e. There was also the danger of criminal organizations (eventually dominated by the Mafia) that provided benefits, but at the price of joining in their criminal activities.
2. At first, Mother Cabrini resisted the idea of coming to America, thinking that China was still the rightful destination. But when she consulted Pope Leo XIII himself, he confirmed the request that she come to America. He famously told her, “Not to the east, but to the West.”
  3. And so she agreed to a request that she and some other sisters would found an orphanage and an elementary school for immigrants, and especially Italians in New York City.
- E. Once Mother Cabrini and the sisters arrived here, they had to overcome great difficulties even to get the project off the ground.
1. She and six other sisters left on March 31, 1889. However, while they were on the way over to America, Countess Cenola, the benefactress of the proposed orphanage withdrew support because she and Archbishop Carrigan could not agree on the terms. Furthermore, the diocese had not been able to obtain a school for the children.
  2. When they arrived, the sisters spent the first night in a run-down place of lodging that was so filled with vermin that they did not sleep the first night. They spent the night in prayer, asking God to bless the project to help the immigrant faithful in this land.
  3. On the next day, Archbishop Carrigan still told them that they may as well return to Italy because he could not get the needed support for their projects. She responded, “The Pope sent me, and I must stay.” Although he was

skeptical about the prospects of success, Archbishop Carrigan did arrange for the Sisters of Charity to take them in.

4. Mother Cabrini then visited Countess Cenola, and got her to agree to support the orphanage after all. Then they begged for donations from store to store and house to house.

F. Gradually, the congregation spread in the United States, Italy, and then Latin America.

1. Mother Cabrini went back to Italy later in 1889 with the first two recruits from America. She returned in March of 1890 with more sisters; and they moved into a much larger building in West Point, New York in that the Jesuits provided. The order established its mother house and novitiate there. The rural setting was also helpful for the students from the cities who had never see the countryside.
2. Mother Cabrini constantly travelled back and forth between Italy and America, recruiting sisters and raising funds for the projects.
3. A short time later, Mother Cabrini established a school in Nicaragua for the girls of more well off parents. (That school had to move to Panama later due to political instability in Nicaragua.) On their way back from Nicaragua, the sisters came to New Orleans, where many Catholics likewise lacked education. And so a group of the sisters went down there the next year to establish a new school and a center for assistance to the Italian community.
4. In 1892, the country was celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' voyage. And in the year, the congregation established its first hospital, Columbus Hospital in New York. It began with savings of \$250, but got off the ground with the dedication of the sisters and free services from many doctors. Columbus Hospital was later merged with Italian Hospital (also founded by the order) into what is now called the Cabrini Medical Center. In 1895, Mother Cabrini also established Columbus Extension Hospital In Chicago.
5. Mother Cabrini continued her travels, returning to Italy and starting new homes for students in Rome and Genoa. In 1895, she established a high school in Buenos Aires, Argentina. At the time, the country was increasing in

prosperity and becoming a popular destination for Italian immigrants. The congregation also spread to Costa Rica, Panama, Chili and Brazil and then to England, Spain and France across the Atlantic.

6. In 1907, the Vatican gave final approval for the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. By this time, 20 years after receiving provisional approval from Pope Leo XIII, the congregation had grown to over a thousand members, with 50 establishments (schools, hospitals, orphanages) in eight countries. In the United States, the congregation had houses in Chicago, Seattle, Denver, Newark, Scranton and New Orleans. In the latter city, Mother Cabrini and her sisters in particular were active in treating patients of yellow fever, where the last major outbreak of that disease in the United States occurred in 1905.

G. Mother Cabrini did have to make some efforts to get used to the new countries she lived in. However, her perseverance and prayer made her efforts successful

1. Learning English was a struggle, and she always spoke with a heavy accent. In addition, the congregation also eventually ministered to Slavic and Chinese immigrants, who spoke very different languages.
2. At first, she did not understand how to deal with non-Catholics, given that she had encountered very few in Italy.
3. She also could be rather strict, but she was also very self-sacrificing. She was always determined to carry out projects and apparently was very good at administration, which led to the rapid growth of the order.
4. Mother Cabrini showed her love of this country by becoming an American citizen in 1909.

H. Mother Cabrini continued on despite failing health.

1. In 1911, Mother Cabrini was 61 and her health started faltering. However, she continued travelling and governing the congregation.
2. She died suddenly in the congregation's convent in Chicago on Dec. 22, 1917, shortly after America entered World War I. At the time, she was preparing candy to give to children at Christmas. At the time, the congregation has 67 institutions and 1500 sisters.

I. Shortly after Mother Cabrini's death, there were calls for her canonization, which were fulfilled in 1946.

1. In 1939, Pope Pius XII declared her to be blessed. He then canonized her in 1946.
  2. At the canonization Mass, Pope Pius XII said, “She extended a friendly and helping hand especially to immigrants, and offered them necessary shelter and relief, for having left their homeland behind, they were wandering about in a foreign land with no place to turn for help. Because of their condition, she saw that they were in danger of deserting the practice of Christian virtues and their Catholic faith. Undoubtedly she accomplished all this through the faith which was always so vibrant and alive in her heart; through the divine love which burned within her; and finally, through constant prayer by which she was so closely united with God from whom she humbly asked and obtained whatever her human weakness could not obtain. Although her constitution was very frail, her spirit was endowed with such singular strength that, knowing the will of God in her regard, she permitted nothing to impede her from accomplishing what seemed beyond her strength. Mother Cabrini lived deeply the mission of the Church to bring Christ’s compassion and care to all people. My we find through prayer and Sacrament and Mother Cabrini’s intercession, that same inexhaustible energy for serving God’s kingdom and for His glory and the salvation of souls.”
- J. St. Francis Xavier Cabrini thus demonstrated a hard work, administrative abilities, fierce determination, and a fundamental optimism that good projects would succeed. She thus brought the daring and charitable spirit of this nation to a most high level.