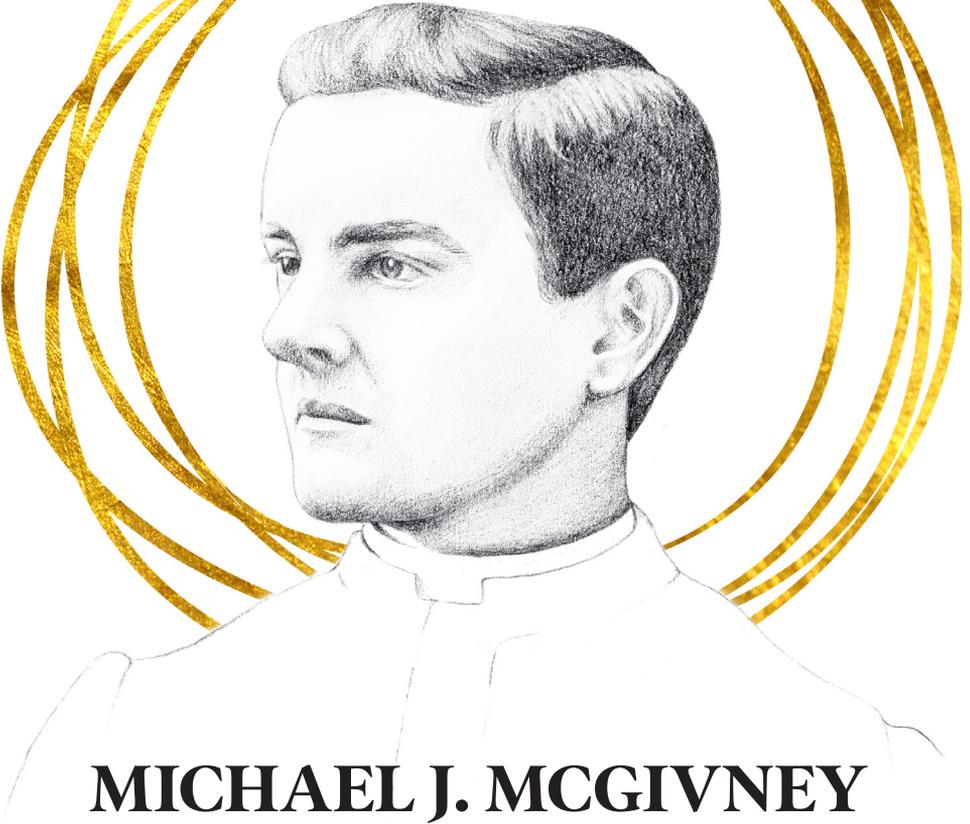


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LeVerbe

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1852-1890

“**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.

– *Letter to The Connecticut Catholic, Aug. 25, 1883*

# McGIVNEY

## SUPPORTING THE WIDOW AND THE ORPHAN

By Sarah-Christine Bourihane

**Hardships sometimes have the effect of closing us in on ourselves... or they can be a springboard to helping others who are also going through hardships. All the difficulties experienced by Michael McGivney (1842-1890) taught him to better love his neighbor and led him to a life holiness. Beatified on October 31 by Pope Francis, his example of faith in action still shines through the work of the Knights of Columbus and through the graces received by those who pray to him. So what was it that led him to give his life for others?**

**A parish priest, Michael McGivney died as he lived.**

Since he preached everywhere, fearlessly, especially in poor environments where living conditions were difficult, he contracted pneumonia during the Russian flu pandemic, the first coronavirus pandemic in history (could this be a wink from Heaven assuring us of the intercession of a new Blessed in the situation we are living through?). Although he died at only 38 years of age, he had already put into practice his deep conviction about the importance of living charity, fraternity and unity.

His family, too, had experienced the vagaries of poverty. The potato famine forced his parents to leave Ireland for the New World. The United States was not exactly wel-

coming and the Irish were often perceived as uneducated and unskilled.

Like so many other Catholic immigrants who had to resign themselves to working in factories and mines, Michael's father had to toil in the noxious fumes and intense heat of a copper smelter. But harder still, the family of 13 children experienced the loss of 6 small children.

### A DETOUR TO SAINT-HYACINTHE

Growing up with the unshakeable faith of his parents and in spite of adversity, McGivney felt the call to the priesthood at the age of 13.

At 16, the bishop deemed him ready. Michael was part of a young cohort sent to the seminary in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, a crossroads of intellectual and spiritual life at the time. There he would learn the language of the growing number of French-Canadians working in Connecticut's factories, who also worshiped as Catholics.

However, another hardship called McGivney back into the fold: the death of his father. He would have to support his family until his bishop helped him continue his education. This experience of losing his father as the family's main breadwinner prepared him to empathize with those who shared a similar fate.

## A PRIEST FOR ALL

Ordained a priest in 1877, McGivney was sent to St. Mary's Church in Connecticut.

There, he performed the works of charity that were dear to his heart. He became a priest for all: baseball games with the men of the parish, an abstinence group for alcoholics, outings and catechesis for the youth. He even visited a prisoner every day, James (Chip) Smith, a young man sentenced to hang for the murder of a police officer whom he had shot in a

moment of drunkenness. The young prisoner is transformed by these encounters and serenely accepts death.

With a group of a dozen men, he discerns the possibility of founding a Catholic charitable society. In a modest church basement was born the major work that became the Knights of Columbus, whose name makes reference both to the Catholic faith and to the audacity of the discoverer of a new continent. A fortunate patronage to strengthen the identity of Catholics in the midst of a nation with a Protestant majority.

## A FAITH IN SERVICE

The mission so dear to the Knights of Columbus, which is to «support the widow and the orphan,» is part of McGivney's own experience, touched by the death of his own father and the fathers of the families around him. Work accidents, overwork, and illness threaten working-class families with precariousness. And when widows cannot prove that they are able to support the household, the state places their children in an institution or an adoptive family.

Struck by this undignified and cruel fate of widows and their children, McGivney went so far as to defend

some of them in court. He once even took a child under his guardianship. For this parish priest, it was important that faith go beyond the doors of the church. He desired to serve the poorest, starting with widows and orphans and he did his utmost to protect them materially through the mutual aid society he founded.

## STILL AT WORK

«He was a formidably serene figure. There was nothing stern about his demeanor, even though his expression was one of strength and determination,» say those who knew McGivney. Even two centuries later, his figure still marks the millions of families who are members of the Knights of Columbus and the needy they help. Such is the case with the Schachle family, an American family from Tennessee.

Since the father of the family had become an insurance agent for the Knights of Columbus, the Schachle family had developed a special devotion to Father Michael. When the mother learned she was pregnant with a child with Down's syndrome, their piety increased; even more so when, during an ultrasound, they were told that their fetus was not viable.

«Father McGivney, if you save our son, I'll name him Michael,» the father pleaded earnestly.

Shortly after the ultrasound, the parents were scheduled to travel to Fatima as part of a pilgrimage organized by the Knights of Columbus. Before leaving, they entrusted their prayer intention to the Knights community, in turn waiting for a miracle, needed for the beatification of their founder. Michelle Schachle had only one prayer, «Please, Father McGivney, let our son be the miracle.» During the trip, a powerful word from the Bible, proclaimed during a Mass, touched their hearts and gave them hope: «Go, your son will live.»

When Michelle got back home from the pilgrimage, she went to the hospital for another scan. The doctors in charge of the case had never seen anything like it before: the excess fluid that threatened the baby's life had subsided.

Michael Schachle was born on May 15, 2015, to the great astonishment of everyone. He has become the ray of sunshine for his family and a real hope that charity can work miracles, real ones. The intercession of the eldest of a family of 13 children has healed the youngest and most vulnerable child of another family of thirteen. Yet another sign that God transfigures our human histories to make them bear fruit for others.

And who knows? Maybe this new Blessed will give other signs to those who invoke him.