

August 10, 2008

Two weeks ago, the Knights of Columbus St. Thomas Council celebrated its 100th anniversary. The Knights used this occasion to give thanks to God at Holy Mass and then to recall their founding fathers, especially their first chaplain, Father Thomas Jensen. Through his gallant efforts, 90 men were present at the initial meeting in 1908.

The St. Thomas Council had been based at the 10-story building at Fifth and Madison in Gary, but is now located on Liverpool Road in Hobart.

During this past week, I represented the Indiana bishops at the 126th Supreme K of C Convention in Quebec. This site was chosen as 2008 marks the 400th anniversary of the founding of Quebec, the cradle of Catholicism in Canada. The Knights of Columbus expanded into Canada in 1897.

These two events prompt me to offer some reflections on the Knights of Columbus, founded 126 years ago by the Venerable Servant of God, Father Michael J. McGivney, about whom Pope Benedict XVI spoke during his visit to the United States in April. It is very likely that Father McGivney will one day become the first canonized American priest.

In the latter part of the 1800s, the plight of American Catholics was extremely challenging. We were discriminated against on a very broad scale. Catholics were more often than not forced to labor in the most degrading jobs under deplorable working conditions often resulting in injury or death. Families often suffered destitution, sometimes suffering deprivation of their meager homes and even starvation.

The young and energetic Father Michael J. McGivney established the Knights of Columbus in 1882 to provide indigent Catholic families with tangible

assistance and a vehicle to express a meaningful voice as loyal and God-centered citizens. By the time of Father McGivney's premature death at age 38 in 1890, eight years after establishing the K of C, membership had grown to 6,000.

Today, the K of C numbers 1,700,000 members, still dedicated to the care of Catholic families in spiritual and practical ways. In the past five years, the K of C has paid more than \$740 million in death claims to families.

The first principle of the K of C is charity and the Knights take that obligation very seriously. Immediately after 9/11, the K of C established a \$1 million Heroes Fund. After Katrina and Rita, the Order donated \$10 million in hurricane relief while individual Knights and local Councils throughout North America collected and drove countless truckloads of relief supplies to the hardest-hit areas.

The K of C has given staunch support to the construction of the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, to major renovations at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, and ongoing support for The Catholic University in Washington. The K of C also strongly supports the charities of the Holy Father and the work of bishops in the United States, especially promoting pro-life issues and vocation work.

In several ways, the vision of the Servant of God, Father Michael J. McGivney, was prophetic in anticipating the call of the Second Vatican Council for the laity to assume their proper role within the mission of the Church. Father McGivney saw the Knights of Columbus as a practical way for laymen to enter more fully into the life of their parish and to move forward the mission of Jesus in building a renewed and just society.

Pope John Paul II, in one of his last documents, "The Church in America," no. 44, spoke to what Father McGivney attempted: "The renewal of the Church in

America will not be possible without the active presence of the laity. Therefore, they are largely responsible for the future of the Church.”

The Knights of Columbus devote great effort in addressing the challenges of the pervasive secularism of our time. They have been very articulate in addressing dimensions of public policy that pertain to the dignity of every human life and the sanctity of the family.

I am most grateful to the members of the Knights of Columbus in our diocese for expressing their love for God and their love for the Church through concrete involvement in the various dimensions of parish life and in their combined effort to promote human life, family life, and vocations.