

FAITH

Sainthood Sought for Revered New Haven Priest

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EVERY morning, 443 elementary school students in Waterbury pray for a miracle.

If one occurs, the Rev. Michael J. McGivney, who died in 1890, will become the first [Connecticut](#) resident and American-born priest to be named a saint by the [Roman Catholic Church](#). First, however, Vatican physicians and scientists need to be convinced that the late Father McGivney can make miracles happen.

“God listens to the prayers of children,” said the principal of St. Mary School, Joseph M. Kenny, 58. “So they’re praying for Father McGivney to get the miracle and sainthood he deserves.”

The case for the canonization of Father McGivney, the founder of the Knights of Columbus, took a huge step forward earlier this month, when [Pope Benedict XVI](#) recognized his “heroic virtues.” The Rev. Gabriel O’Donnell, a Dominican friar hired by the Knights in 1977 to present and defend Father McGivney’s case to the Vatican, said he was “ecstatic” to hear the declaration. Only now can the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome begin to consider beatification — the final step before canonization.

The entire process toward sainthood is long, requiring the patience of, well, a saint. Or that of a postulator — a specially trained official in the Catholic Church who pleads, or postulates, for a person’s sainthood. That is what Father O’Donnell is.

“I couldn’t begin to guess how long the process will take, but some postulators don’t live to see the progress we’ve made,” he said. “Imagine getting into a deli line, getting a number and realizing there are over 1,000 people ahead of you.”

For beatification, a miracle credited to Father McGivney’s intercession after death must be verified by Vatican doctors, lawyers, scientists and other church officials.

Evidence of Father McGivney performing a “spontaneous, complete and unexplainable healing miracle” is included in the 700-page spiritual biography Father O’Donnell wrote and hand-

delivered to the Vatican in 2000, he said, though he will not say more for fear of compromising the investigation.

Following Vatican rules, the biography also contains an almost daily accounting of Father McGivney's activities, from his start in 1877 as assistant pastor at St. Mary's Church to his death from pneumonia and tuberculosis while caring for poor families in Thomaston.

He was a 29-year-old assistant pastor at St. Mary's Church on Hillside Avenue when he founded the Knights of Columbus in 1882 as a way for Catholic men to support each other and provide death benefits for their families. Today the organization is one of the world's largest Catholic lay groups, with 1.7 million members worldwide.

"How do you prove a miracle? First, you have to believe in them, so it can only be discussed in the context of faith," said Father O'Donnell. "But practically, what you do is go through a process of elimination. You eliminate any possible natural or scientific explanations for what occurred, except that it was a miracle."

After beatification, a process that can take many years, a second miracle must be proven for sainthood. But Father O'Donnell, 64, is hopeful the cause will move ahead quickly.

"It's not uncommon for sainthood to take hundreds of years, but the fact that Father McGivney is a modern cause works in our favor," he said. "There's a lot more documentation on him than someone who lived during the Middle Ages, which makes the process move quicker. I also think there's pastoral importance to the case. To have an ordinary priest recognized as someone extraordinary would be wonderful for the church."

Father O'Donnell's work as postulator is now focused on spreading the word about Father McGivney and documenting claims of favors reported through the 83,000-member Father McGivney Guild, an offshoot of the Knights of Columbus. His duties include writing a bimonthly newsletter featuring people like Rosemary Romanauskas, who believes Father McGivney "reaches from heaven."

A 52-year-old social worker from Watertown, Ms. Romanauskas credits Father McGivney with giving her the strength she needs to cope with debilitating back pain: "Sometimes just sitting can bring me to tears, but I believe Father McGivney helps me stay strong, like he was."

A bronze statute of the priest marks the spot in St. Mary's basement where he organized the first 24 members of the Knights of Columbus. Knights driving through New Haven often stop by to visit the spot, said the Rev. Joseph P. Allen, the prior and pastor of St. Mary's.

It's also not uncommon for modern pilgrims to come to St. Mary's to pray beside Father McGivney's remains, which rest in a cross-shaped, serpentine black marble sarcophagus at the back of the church.

"People like having actual contact with something spiritual," said Father Allen, 70.

Because of Pope Benedict's declaration this month, Father McGivney can now be called a "venerable servant of God." It's a description that Carl Anderson, the leader of the international Knights of Columbus, believes has been apt from the start.

"Father McGivney lived a century ago, but what he worked for is perhaps even more relevant today," Mr. Anderson, who holds the title supreme knight, said from the group's international headquarters in downtown New Haven. "He devoted his life to justice; to helping the middle class and the poor. He worked to channel the energy and talents of laymen to help each other. That's something more people need to do today."

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