

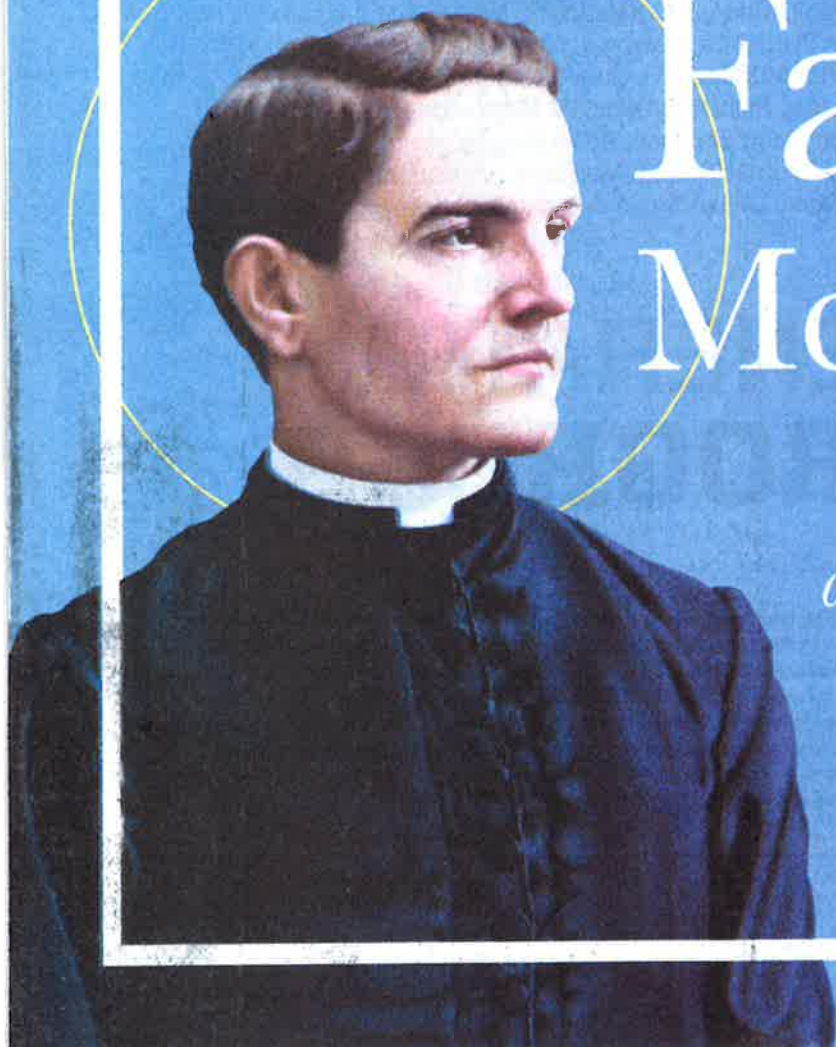
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THE REAL-LIFE Miracles of Father McGivney



*A New Haven
congregation must
prove miracles to
canonize its
beloved leader*



THE Making OF A Modern-Day Saint

A congregation
must prove miracles
to win sainthood for
a beloved leader

by Edward Columbia

At an evening Mass at Saint Mary's Church on Hillhouse Avenue, Father Joseph Allen stands at the pulpit and reads to his congregation from the Gospel of Matthew. He reads the story of a miracle: as Jesus departed from the city of Jericho, two blind men stopped him on the road. These men knew him and begged that he cure their blindness. Jesus asked them, "Do you believe that I can do this?" "Yes, Lord," they responded. Jesus touched their eyelids. "Let it be done according to your faith," he told them. The men opened their eyes and began to see.

Father Allen pauses to look around at the parishioners in the pews of New Haven's oldest Catholic church. He takes a deep breath. "These men are grasping for anything in their hope for a cure," he says. "They are at a point where nothing in their society can help. And so, it is their faith that saves them."

He closes the Bible and carries it down the pulpit steps, back to the altar, where he continues to celebrate the Mass. After Communion, the service concludes with a familiar prayer. Though the text is in

every parishioner's pew-box, no one reads from the paper: they know the words by heart. They pray to God for the canonization of Father Michael McGivney, the parish priest who, some 130 years ago, devoted his life to the widows, orphans, and indigents of this very church.

Father McGivney's spirit may dwell in heaven, but his body is in their midst. Father McGivney's remains lie at the back of the church, in a granite sarcophagus that glows under a row of lights. The congregants pray for Father McGivney's help in delivering miracles. They all speak the same prayer, but hope for different things: some pray for a cure for illness, others for a job to pay the bills or a loved one to return safely home.

"We pray that God will grant the favor through the intercession of Father McGivney on behalf of us," says Father Allen, a Dominican friar who has been a pastor of Saint Mary's Church since 2007. "And it is certainly a lot of prayers storming heaven. For three years now, we have said the prayer at the end of each

Mass, every day, and many of the parishioners say the prayer on their own."

At this point, Father McGivney's Cause for Sainthood—the process by which someone becomes a saint in the Roman Catholic Church—has been advancing for seventeen years. But it is a long and complicated road to sainthood. Now, Father McGivney's advocates need to show that he has helped make miracles happen by interceding with God on behalf of the faithful. Authentic miracles, it turns out, are hard to prove.



In the late 1800s, when Roman Catholics often endured prejudice in the largely Protestant Northeast, Father McGivney devoted himself to New Haven's Catholic community. In his time as a priest at Saint Mary's Church, from 1877 to 1884, he visited the sick, tended to the dead and dying, and helped those who could not help themselves. John Walshe, Father McGivney's grandnephew and a practicing lawyer in Bridgeport, says that stories of Father McGivney's selfless work have been passed down through his family.

"He wasn't the type to stay inside the church all day, and he wasn't all 'sackcloth and ashes,'" says Walshe. "When one of his parishioners was in need, Father Mike"—as the family affectionately calls Father McGivney—"wasn't afraid to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty."

Father McGivney was particularly concerned with New Haven's Probate Court. The Court routinely separated widowed mothers from their children if the mother was unable to demonstrate her ability to support each child. Father McGivney had seen this happen many times, and throughout his career, he intervened to assist widowed mothers in danger of losing their children. Once, he vowed to serve as a guardian for a young man about to be sent to an orphanage.

But he could neither attend to every such case nor change the system singlehandedly. So, in October 1881, Father McGivney gathered several of his parishioners in the basement of Saint Mary's Church, where he was then an assistant pastor. He explained to them his vision for a new organization of Catholic laymen, one that would provide insurance for Cath-

olic families. In the event of the death of a family's breadwinner, this insurance would give the remaining family members the financial support needed to stay together. This, Father McGivney hoped, would put an end to painful separations at the ruling of the Probate Court.

On March 29, 1882, he founded the Knights of Columbus to provide insurance to Catholic families. Within twenty years, the group's membership had swelled to over 10,000, and its mission had expanded beyond insurance to include charitable work. Today, more than 1.8 million men across the world belong to the organization. Over the last ten years, they have contributed a total of nearly 700 million hours of volunteer service.

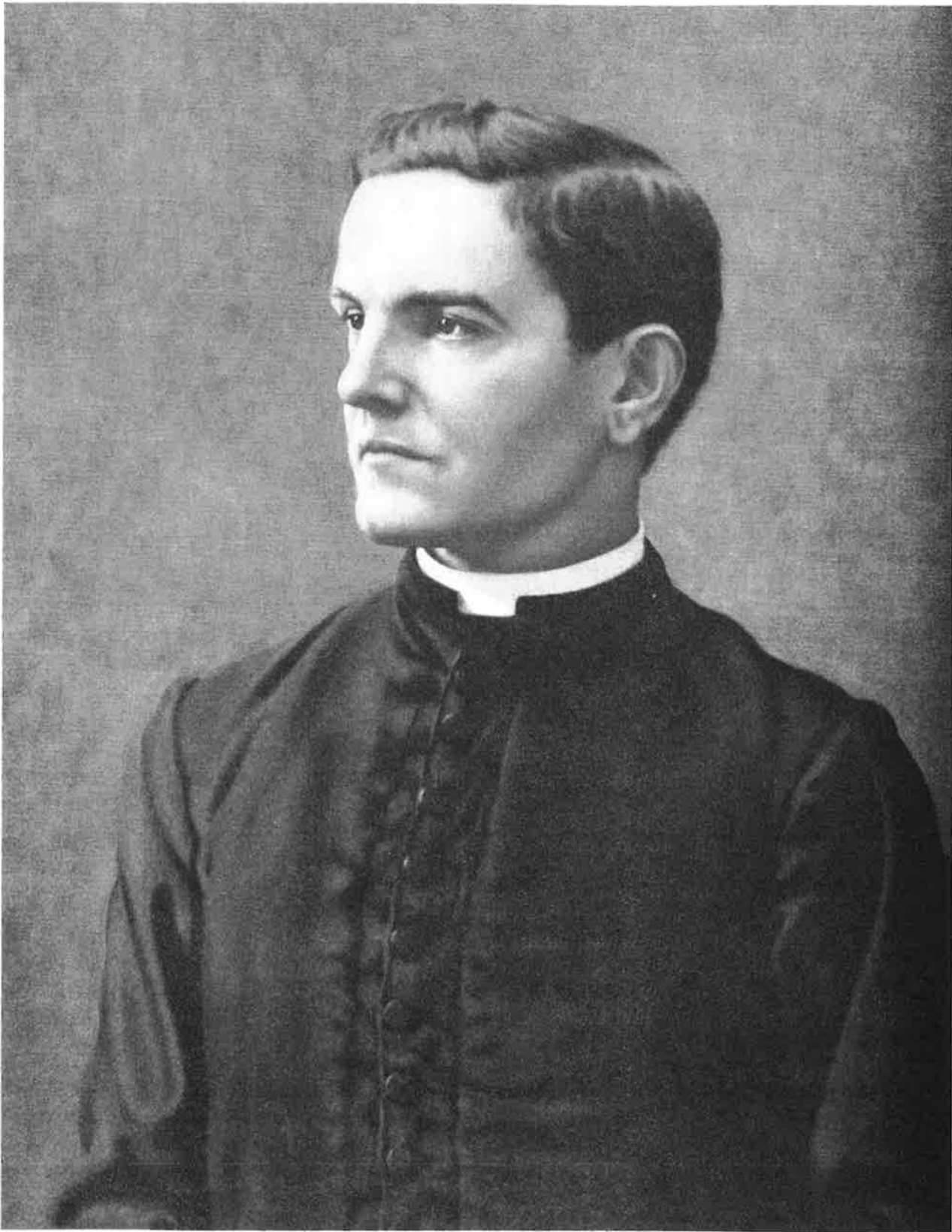
The organization has remained devoted to Father McGivney and his founding principles of charity and altruism. In 1997 the Knights of Columbus Supreme Council, headquartered in New Haven, petitioned the Hartford Archdiocese to start the process of canonization for Father McGivney. They asked then-Archbishop of Hartford Daniel Cronin to initiate the first stages of Father McGivney's case. He named Father McGivney a Servant of God, formally beginning the Cause for Sainthood.

Only three people born in the United States have ever been made saints in the Roman Catholic Church. Two, Saints Elizabeth Seton and Katharine Drexel, founded religious orders dedicated to educating the poor. They were canonized in 1975 and 2000, respectively. The third, Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, was canonized in 2012, becoming the only Native American saint. Were Father McGivney to be elevated to sainthood, he would become the first American-born man ever canonized.

Today, Father Allen says, the Church is looking for contemporary Catholics who could be canonized. "People we can align ourselves with, instead of somebody who died in, say, 476, in which case you lose the connection with this place and time." He explains that, by 1997, the Knights of Columbus were thinking, "We've put this off long enough. It's time to begin the Cause for Father McGivney."

Every Cause needs an advocate, called a postulator, who builds the case for sainthood. The Knights chose Father Gabriel O'Donnell, a thoughtful, white-haired

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PORTRAIT OF FATHER MCGIVNEY

Dominican friar fluent in Italian. He holds a doctorate from the Teresianum, an institute for the study of spirituality and theology in Rome. After his appointment, Father O'Donnell was required to attend classes at the Augustinianum, near the Vatican, with many other postulants. He was the only American in the program.

After a year of rigorous study at the Augustinianum, Father O'Donnell received his certification from the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the Vatican body that oversees the canonization process. He returned to the United States prepared to take the reins of the Cause for the Sainthood of Father McGivney. Father O'Donnell's first responsibility as postulator was compiling the Acts: extensive historical records and documentation of Father McGivney's life, as well as the priest's own writings.

To compile the Acts, Father O'Donnell worked with the Knights of Columbus archivist. "We spent the better part of a year going to the state archives in Hartford and going through all the microfiches of newspapers and journals to find all the references to Father McGivney we could," he says. "We were able to piece together a lot of information about him, a whole chronology." Father O'Donnell tracked down Father McGivney's living relatives to find out more about their ancestor. He even traveled to County Cavan, Ireland, where Father McGivney's parents had lived before they immigrated to America, to learn about the McGivney clan's history.

O'Donnell's work was academic, but he says it also affected him personally. "Over the course of my work," says Father O'Donnell, "I came to know Father McGivney first as a historical figure and then, gradually, as a spiritual 'friend' whom I came to admire and with whom I developed a personal connection. I sensed a kinship with Father McGivney that inspired me in my own life as a man and as a priest."

After two years of research, Father O'Donnell had compiled 700 pages on Father McGivney's life and work. In March of 2000, he presented these to Archbishop Cronin at the Hartford Seminary in front of a huge audience made up mostly of members of the Knights of Columbus. With great ceremony, Archbishop Cronin tied the pages of the Acts with red string and sealed them with hot wax. This marked his Decree of Closure. The local diocesan process was over. The Roman process was about to begin.



What seems like a normal suitcase could, in the hands of a priest, contain the fate of a possible saint. It was now Father O'Donnell's job to carry the Acts safely to the Vatican and deliver them to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. He packed the documents into two suitcases and boarded his flight to Rome, wheeling his luggage onto the plane, unwilling to check his precious cargo.

A driver met Father O'Donnell at the airport outside of Rome and drove him to the Congregation. After arriving at the Palazzo delle Congregazioni, Father O'Donnell lugged the suitcases into the building. "Thank God for the elevator," he thought, "I don't know if I could drag these up the stairs." He presented the Acts to members of the Congregation, who broke the seals, verified that all was in order, and gave the Roman process the go-ahead.

Father O'Donnell spent most of the next two years in Rome, as per Congregation rules, writing the Positio, a volume of biographical information from the Acts as well as an examination of Father McGivney's virtue and spirituality. He submitted the completed Positio, which was over one thousand pages long, to the Congregation in 2002.

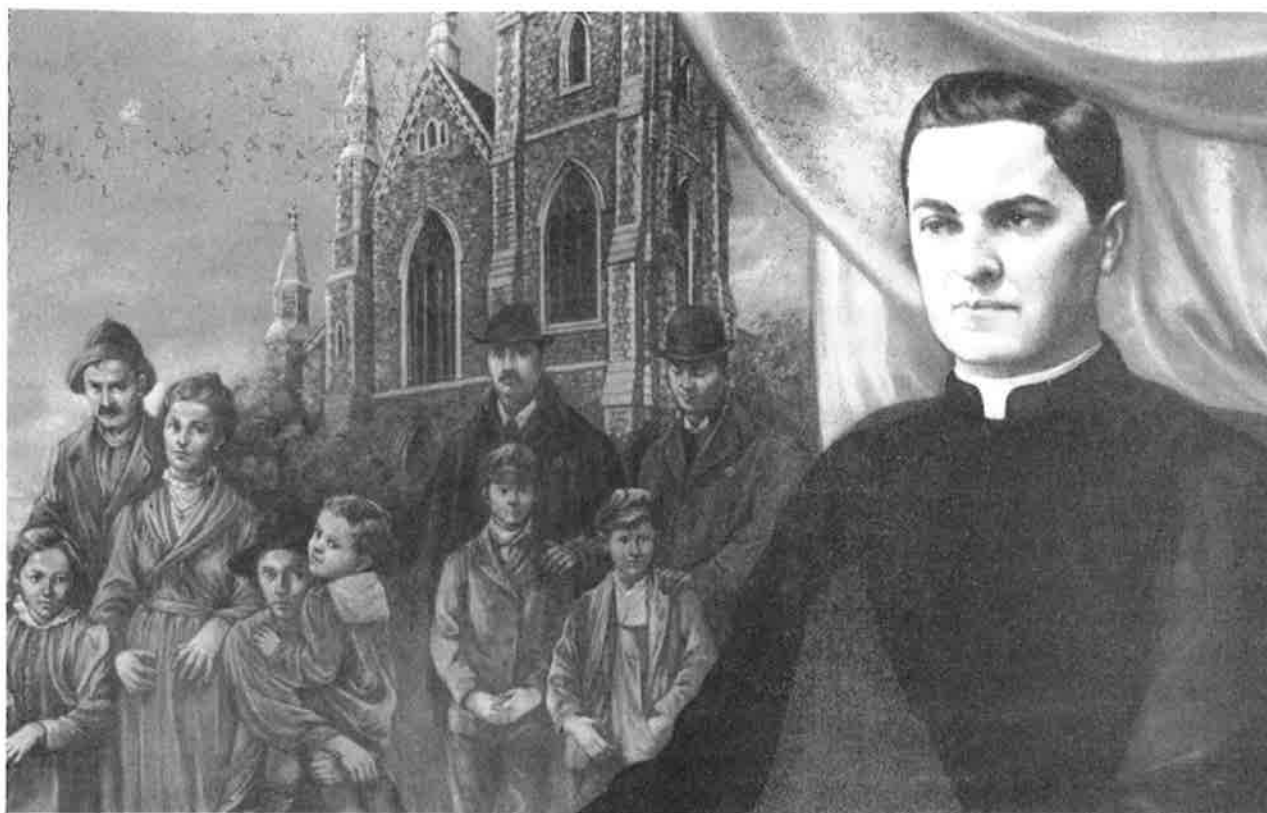


Six years later, Father O'Donnell's efforts on behalf of the Cause finally bore fruit: in 2008, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints approved the Positio and recommended that Pope Benedict XVI declare Father McGivney Venerable, a decree that officially recognizes a candidate's heroic virtue. On March 16, 2008 Pope Benedict XVI declared Father McGivney Venerable. There are currently only forty-nine 'Venerables' awaiting the next steps toward full sainthood.

Because the Pope issued his decree from the Vatican while most of America slept, Father Allen in New Haven had not yet heard the news when he awoke that morning. It was Palm Sunday, the day that begins the Western Christian holy week leading up to Easter. He was in the sacristy—a small chamber where the priest prepares for a service—at Saint Mary's, getting ready to celebrate the Palm Sunday Mass, when the parish secretary told him that a group of journalists had gathered outside the church.

"I asked if they could come back after the Mass," Father Allen recalls, "but they said it couldn't wait."

After that Palm Sunday, Father McGivney's Cause



PAINTING OF FATHER MCGIVNEY BY ANTONELLA CAPPUCCIO

faced its greatest challenge yet: proving that God had worked miracles through the late priest.

How do you prove a miracle? The Holy See defines a miracle as some event that has no scientific or non-divine explanation. They must agree that God has performed a miracle in response to Father McGivney's prayers. After one miracle has been authenticated, Father McGivney would be declared Blessed; the next, and final stage—canonization—would occur when a second miracle is confirmed. But, if miracles attributed to a candidate for sainthood cannot be proved authentic, the years of work and thousands of pages of writing devoted to his Cause could come to nothing.



Hundreds of people have written to the Knights of Columbus because they believe Father McGivney interceded in curing their illnesses. Many of the congregants at Saint Mary's have come to Father Allen reporting miracles they attribute to Father McGivney's aid. Yet few of these instances come close to qualifying as genuine miracles in the view of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

Take, for example, the case of John Walshe, Father McGivney's grandnephew. In 2009, Walshe went to Bridgeport Hospital for routine tests after a bout of pneumonia. The tests came back showing an exceptionally high white blood cell count. He was diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer and told he would need surgery.

Several weeks before the operation, Walshe took his 16-year-old son aside for a conversation about Father Mike. He told his son that he had been saying the intercessory prayer to Father McGivney and asked him to do the same on his behalf. From that point on, until the day of surgery, father and son prayed to Father McGivney for a cure. Following the five-hour prostatectomy, John Walshe awoke to find the surgeon at his bedside, grinning widely.

"We got it all," the doctor said.

Today, Walshe remains cancer-free. He believes that Father McGivney's intercession on his behalf was at least partly responsible for his cure. But, like many others with similar stories, his case does not officially qualify as a miracle. After all, who knows if it was Father McGivney's intercession or the surgeon's skill that saved Walshe's life?

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Father Allen, the pastor at Saint Mary's Church, is also a cancer survivor. He, too, believes that constant prayers to Father McGivney were responsible for his cure. But his melanoma did not vanish without explanation—a surgeon removed it in the operating room. Neither Father Allen nor Walshe challenge the Vatican's process for determining what is miraculous and what isn't, but both wish that the issue were not so black and white.

"I have given it a lot of thought each day, and I believe that my cancer did not go beyond what it was precisely because of my devotion to Father McGivney," says Father Allen. "A miracle must be instantaneous, inexplicable, no medical intervention, and so forth. Well, all that is true. But maybe the doctor's knowledge, and his hands, were part of the miracle."

However, Father Allen understands the Catholic Church's hesitancy in claiming divine intervention in cases where the "miracle" could be attributed to medical treatment. In as delicate a matter as miracles, which many treat with suspicion anyway, the Church's reputation is at stake.

"The Church could expose itself to ridicule by making statements that it must later retract," he says, "should the miracle be disproven [after sainthood is granted]."

In 2000, while working in Rome on the Positio for Father McGivney, Father O'Donnell identified an event from the 1990s that he thought fulfilled the Vatican's criteria. He helped to prepare a separate Positio for the event. (Due to confidentiality rules surrounding rejected miracles, he cannot give more details about the case.)

"The Positio for a reported miracle," says Father O'Donnell, "includes not only the account of the reported miracle but also all of the medical documents involved—every X-ray, every blood test, all of the doctors' and nurses' notes. All of that must go into the Positio to demonstrate that medical solutions were attempted, and failed." But he explains that "in the case of the reported miracle I submitted for Father

McGivney's Cause, science did everything it could but it didn't work. It was inexplicable what happened, and I felt there was clear evidence of the *Digitus Dei*, the Finger of God."

The reported miracle passed preliminary vetting by a committee of canon lawyers, who ensure that the Positio's account of the event is factual and in keeping with the protocols of the Catholic Church. The Positio then moved to the consideration of a board of physicians, called the *Consulta Medica* or the College of Doctors. At least nine doctors review each reported miracle. In order for a miracle to gain approval, they must rule out any medical explanation for the reported event.

In 2011, after years of deliberation, the medical committee rejected the reported miracle Father O'Donnell submitted for Father McGivney. Without revealing anything confidential, Father O'Donnell explained why he felt the miracle had not "passed muster." The College of Doctors found that the medical record for the subject of the reported miracle was incomplete, as the hospital where the patient had undergone treatment and testing had not retained all of the patient's X-rays from the relevant time period.

"Because of our advances in science and technology, the bar has been raised considerably for proving a miracle," say Father O'Donnell. "What two centuries ago you might have been able to 'prove' was miraculous healing, today would require a lot more scientific investigation and documentation. But this also means there is greater security that the authenticated event is actually miraculous. The Holy See will only accept as miraculous something that truly has no other explanation."



After the 2011 rejection of the first reported miracle, a new postulator, Andrea Ambrosi, prepared the Positio for a second. (Father O'Donnell had since stepped down from his role as postulator and now heads the Knight of Columbus organization's Father McGivney

Guild.) Vice-Postulator for the Cause Brian Caulfield, who works at the Knights of Columbus headquarters in New Haven, is hopeful that the reported miracle will soon move to the College of Doctors for medical review.

"If anything it gives me confidence in the integrity of the process that it is so strict," he says. "We would all like to see Father McGivney beatified as soon as possible, but there is a great amount of careful examination needed in these cases."

Father McGivney is a long way from official sainthood. Even if the Pope beatifies him, it will require another authenticated miracle to move from Blessed to Saint. Still, Father McGivney's supporters remain hopeful. The Catholic Church has struggled in recent decades to maintain its strength—especially in the United States. Sex-abuse scandals have called the Church's moral authority into question and tarnished much of America's view of the priesthood. Morale amongst priests has dwindled, along with their numbers. Every advancement of Father McGivney, a priest himself—"one of their own," as Father Allen says—toward sainthood is a source of pride and inspiration for the American clergy.

"The Cause," says Father O'Donnell, "is good instrument to give a more positive face to the priests and improve their perception in the world."



One afternoon, while sitting at his desk in the priory, Father Allen explains that "[Father McGivney] could be beatified very soon. It might even happen when Pope Francis visits the United States next September, but of course we don't know for sure. As for Father

McGivney's sainthood, well, when that happens we'll be more prepared than anyone."

He rises from his chair and walks to the shelves in the corner of his office. He pulls out several laminated blueprints, his architectural plans for the long-awaited day when Father McGivney may be canonized. Father Allen has plans to move Father McGivney's marble sarcophagus to the front of the church, where the altar now stands, so that the congregation that is devoted to their former parish priest can view their patron saint's memorial in full splendor.

Father Allen has the new lighting plan all figured out, down to the last bulb. He has even started to calculate how much it will cost to install more bathrooms—after all, he will need to accommodate the crowds he anticipates will flock to Saint Mary's to visit the resting place of Saint Michael McGivney.

Still, Father Allen says, there is no need to wait for an official decree of sainthood to honor Father McGivney's spiritual inspiration and legacy.

"Whether by divine providence Father McGivney is raised to Blessed or is canonized in itself is very important," says Father Allen, "but our work does not depend upon that."

As Father Allen told his congregation, Jesus alone could not grant sight to the two blind men of Jericho. It took their faith to bring the miracle. Father McGivney's greatest power, then, may not be miracles worked from the grave, but the fervor he inspires in the believers at Saint Mary's Church as they honor him in their daily prayers.

*Edward Columbia is a freshman
in Morse College.*

TODAY, FATHER ALLEN SAYS, THE CHURCH IS LOOKING FOR
CONTEMPORARY CATHOLICS WHO COULD BE CANONIZED.
"PEOPLE WE CAN ALIGN OURSELVES WITH."