

Fraternal orders struggling in modern-day world

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today are individuals who joined 20, 30 or 40 years ago. And the groups seldom are called upon to fulfill such traditional ceremonial functions as escorting first Communion classes or concluding 40 Hours devotions.

One reason for this decline is that the U.S. social climate has changed, noted Richard McMunn, editor of the *Knights of Columbus* magazine, *Columbia*.

The organizations were being established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when Catholics faced significant religious prejudice. "Anti-Catholic feelings were rampant," McMunn noted in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

Thus, one goal of the fraternal societies was to support Catholic men and women against anti-Catholic attitudes and action, McMunn said.

The groups also tried to show that Catholics were integral to the United States, remarked Christopher Kauffman, a professor of American Catholic history at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

"They were founded as a way of saying Catholics have a strong legitimacy in the American experience," Kauffman said, noting that Catholic fraternal groups often had strong patriotic overtones. The Knights of Columbus, for example, chose Columbus — a Catholic — as a patron to show that Catholics played a role in American history, he pointed out.

U.S. Catholics, meanwhile, were beginning to move up the economic ladder, Kauffman said.

"Late in the 19th century, there was a development in the Catholic community of a new middle class," Kauffman observed. "They were identifying with 'American' life rather than with Irish-American life or German-American life."

Part of American life included a growing middle class, whose members began to find time for leisure activities. This led Americans to found a number of secular fraternal organizations, including the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks (1868) and the Loyal Order of the Moose (1888).

The newly emerging Catholic middle class followed the example of society at large, and created church-oriented counterparts to these secular groups, Kauffman said.

The Knights of Columbus, founded in 1882 by Father Michael McGivney in New Haven, Conn., became the largest of these national organizations and the prototype for many others. From the Knights emerged the Daughters of Isabella (1897) and the Catholic Daughters (1903), both for women, and the Knights of St. Peter Claver (1909) for black men.

Rochester Catholics also founded a local group, the Knights of St. John, who were officially recognized by the New York state legislature in 1886.

Kauffman said such groups also fostered a growing sensitivity to the needs of the less fortunate, especially of poor Catholics. They undertook various forms of charity work — both through direct service and financial contributions.

Catholic fraternal groups helped to finance and support such efforts as orphanages and hospitals, Kauffman explained. In addition, they supported Catholic schools and colleges.

Such efforts continue to this day, McMunn noted, pointing out that the Knights of Columbus alone contributed \$94 million and more than 35 million man-hours of community service in 1990.



Knights of Columbus
The Founders of the Knights of Columbus are (clockwise from top): William M. Geary, John T. Kerrigan, Daniel L. Colwell, James J. McMahon, Cornelius T. Driscoll, Dr. Matthew C. O'Connor, Michael E. Tracy, James T. Mullen, William H. Sellwood and Father Michael J. McGivney (center).

At the same time, the fraternal organizations addressed many of the problems faced by all U.S. workers of the era, McMunn pointed out.

Few workers had any life or health insurance, McMunn explained, and such programs as welfare and Social Security did not yet exist. Thus, when a worker became sick or died, his family had no income.

In response, a number of the fraternal orders — both religious and secular — began to offer low-cost life insurance for their members. This became one of the chief selling points for membership in the Knights of Columbus, which currently has nearly \$20 billion in policies in force. Although the needs of men — and their dependents — were the first to be addressed by Catholic fraternal groups, women's needs soon received attention as well, observed Janet Hagen, office manager of the Daughters of Isabella.

Women also needed insurance, Hagen noted during a telephone interview from the group's headquarters in New Haven. But the Daughters of Isabella addressed a greater need as well, she added.

"It was more help on a personal basis, to support each other," Hagen said, adding that the Catholic sisterhoods attempted to assist ailing members with their household tasks and with child care.

Founding women's groups separate from the male orders also offered an added benefit, observed Lorraine McMahon, executive secretary for the Catholic Daughters.

"I think it's important for women's voices to be heard independent of men's organizations," McMahon said during a telephone interview from her



Catholic Daughters of the Americas
The first National Office of the Daughters of Isabella was located in Utica, N.Y.

group's New York City headquarters. "I think women have a role to play in the church. Why should they not have their own organization?"

Although some secular single-sex groups — such as Rotary International — have gone co-ed in recent decades, Catholic men's and women's organizations have chosen to remain separate. Yet McMahon emphasized that the groups do work together closely.

That opinion was echoed by McMunn, who pointed out that many of the Knights' wives belong to women's orders and auxiliaries.

"The wives of members don't just bake cookies and serve the men," McMunn said. "They work side by side with the men in all our projects. They are fully equal partners."

Partnership and family involvement was a hallmark of Catholic fraternal groups from their early days, Kauffman said, adding that the organiza-

tions consciously tried to include spouses and children in social and service activities.

Although the fraternal groups have grown in terms of family involvement and activities, most of the groups themselves are shrinking in terms of membership today.

Waning anti-Catholicism eliminated one impetus for joining a religious fraternal group, Kauffman acknowledged. Catholics also have moved into the economic mainstream, where insurance, unemployment benefits, Social Security and public assistance now can be found.

The church, meanwhile, has become better organized, and provides some of the services once offered only by the fraternal organizations, he said.

All of these factors have contributed to a decline in the men's and women's groups, Kauffman observed.

But the women's groups face a greater challenge posed by the economic reality of women working outside the home, Hagen pointed out. Most women today must juggle home, work and family, leaving little time for social and group activities, she said.

And modern culture offers numerous alternatives for social activities and entertainment, Kauffman said, citing movies, television and videotapes as just a few of the pastimes competing against group activities.

The Knights of Columbus is the lone group experiencing continued growth overall, Kauffman said. He attributed part of the Knights' ongoing success to their large membership base upon which to build. In addition, the organization's structure has provided the flexibility for councils to take initiatives and respond to local needs.

Still, McMunn pointed out, even the K of C is experiencing decline in some areas — including New York state, where membership has fallen from 127,000 in 1970 to approximately 115,000 today.

McMunn said maintaining or increasing membership is difficult for many fraternal groups in the Northeast — where the population is decreasing and becoming increasingly older. Local groups in this region, he explained, are older, more established and more likely to be set in their ways.

"There are organizations that don't do much, that sit back on their laurels and have a monthly social. Those ones are not growing," McMunn said. "Those councils that are movers and shakers in the community are growing."

Yet, a question arises: Have Catholic fraternal organizations outlived their usefulness?

"I think there is a strong hunger in a lot of people for this kind of community for Christian families," McMunn responded.

"It's a different need they fill now," Kauffman suggested. Whereas in years past, fraternal groups provided support for workers and a way to combat anti-Catholicism, they now offer support for families, he said. Many of the groups are taking on such issues as abortion, morality in media and medical ethics.

McMunn said fraternal organizations still play a role in the church, and will continue to do so in the future.

"I think it's an outlet of a kind that's very hard to find any more," he said, noting that fraternal groups offer a combination of spiritual development, charitable work and social activities.

"I think there's a strong hunger in a lot of people for the kind of community for Catholic families that (fraternal organizations) offer," McMunn said.