

Knights of Columbus – 129 years of doing good works

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Staff writer

The Knights of Columbus have stood steadfast in their faith in God and service to their fellow man for the past 129 years, and are an active presence in the Catholic Church, as well as a mainstay of good works in the Diocese of Allentown.

According to the Knights website, on March 29, 1882 the Connecticut state legislature officially chartered the Knights of Columbus, a fraternal benefit society founded by Father Michael McGivney with a group of parishioners in the basement of St. Mary Church, New Haven. Father McGivney's cause for sainthood is being investigated by the Vatican.

Still true to its founding principles of charity, unity and fraternity 129 years later, the Knights has grown to the largest lay Catholic organization in the world with more than 1.7 million members.

Throughout its history, the Knights have been an effective advocate and defender of civil and religious rights for all. The organization has also contributed billions of dollars and millions of hours of volunteer service to charity.

The Knights was formed to render financial aid to members and their families (see article this page). Mutual aid and assistance are offered to the sick, disabled and needy members and their families. Social and intellectual fellowship is promoted among members and their families through educational, charitable, religious, social welfare, war relief and public relief works.

The history of the order shows how the foresight of Father McGivney brought about what has become the world's foremost Catholic fraternal benefit society. The order has helped families obtain economic security and stability through its life insurance, annuity and long-term care pro-



Sharing a moment at the recent Catholic Charities, Diocese of Allentown Fourth Annual Gala are, from left, Allentown Bishop Emeritus Edward Cullen; Msgr. J. Michael Beers, chaplain of the Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus; Michael O'Connor, supreme director of the Supreme Council and immediate past state deputy of the Pennsylvania Knights of Columbus; Allentown Bishop John Barres; Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky.; George Halcovage, grand knight of the Knights of Columbus Schuylkill Council No. 431, Pottsville; and Leonard Verrastro, former grand knight of the Knights of Columbus Trinity Council No. 313, Bethlehem. (Photo by John Simitz)

grams, and has contributed time and energy worldwide to service in communities.

Michael O'Connor is supreme director of the Supreme Council and past state deputy of the Pennsylvania Knights. O'Connor, of Frackville, is the first from the Allentown Diocese in 16 years to have been named Pennsylvania state deputy.

Father Philip Rodgers is Pennsylvania state chaplain. Apostles of Jesus Father

Paul Gaggawala is assistant state chaplain.

O'Connor said there are 39 Knights councils in the Allentown Diocese – seven in the east and 32 in the northeast.

The Knights are involved in the pro-life movement in many other ways, as well, such as the Knights' Ultrasound Initiative – paid for by the Knights' Culture of Life Fund – launched Jan. 22, 2009.

In less than two years, the Knights have approved funding for 70 3D and 4D ultrasound machines for qualified pregnancy help centers across the country; seeing the ultrasound has already propelled a change of heart in some considering abortion.

When a state or local Knights council is able to raise half the cost of purchasing a machine – more than \$1.8 million raised nationwide as of this past fall – the Supreme Council pays the other half.

O'Connor said a former Pottsville resident recently bequeathed an ultrasound machine to Schuylkill County.

"The stats show it's saving lives ... out of 100 people, 97 changed their minds and chose to keep their babies," O'Connor said.

The Knights co-sponsor the annual Stand Up for Life Essay Contest in conjunction with the diocesan Office of Pro-Life Activities, and sponsor buses that travel to the March for Life in Washington, D.C.

The pro-life movement holds great importance to the Knights, and many councils are involved at the local level, such as Knights Council No. 345, Easton, which paid tribute to the unborn with a monument at Gethsemane Cemetery, Easton, dedicated on Mother's Day 2008.

The Knights presented \$300,000 to the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference (PCC) in 2007 to help propel the Marriage Protection Amendment.

A sampling of the Knights' activities includes the Knights Free Throw Championship, an annual individual-skills athletic competition sponsored by councils throughout the order. The program provides opportunity for youth ages 10 to 14

to compete for prizes and recognition at local, regional, state and international levels.

Allentown Bishop John Barres – who played junior varsity basketball at Princeton University, N.J. under legendary coach Pete Carril, a Bethlehem native – shot a promotional DVD for the Knights International Free Throw Championship Oct. 26, 2010 at Bethlehem Catholic High School.

The Knights use these programs as an outreach to youth and families in their communities to foster physical fitness, determination, confidence, courtesy, respect and sportsmanship. The program also promotes Knights councils' cooperation and support for area parishes and civic communities.

The order sponsors scholarships for college students and provides student loans to the children of its members. The Knights sponsor a writing award – Father Michael J. McGivney Award for Journalistic Excellence – to be presented at the Catholic Media Convention Awards Dinner in Pittsburgh in June.

In addition, the Knights make an annual, substantial donation to the Bishop of Allentown to benefit vocations and retired religious of the diocese.

The Columbian Squires is the official youth organization of the Knights, and the Bishop Thomas J. Welsh Assembly No. 931 is sponsoring the recently founded Squires Circle at Bethlehem Catholic.

According to the website <http://www.kofc.org/un/en/squires/>, "Founded on Aug. 4, 1925 with the institution of the Duluth Circle 1 in Duluth, Minn., the Columbian Squires program strives to provide 'the spiritual, cultural, civic, social and physical improvement of its members, and the development of their leadership qualities.'

"The Squires is an international fraternity of approximately 25,000 Catholic young men, ages 10 to 18, in over 1,400 circles worldwide. Circles exist, or have existed, throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Panama, Cuba, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Guam and on U.S. military bases abroad."

"We have a lot of community activity, help charitable organizations, sponsor Little League teams ... we have a range of activities," O'Connor said.

The Knights have donated \$1.4 million to benefit the families of law enforcement, firefighters and emergency personnel who died on 9/11. The Knights have also donated prosthesis and disability training for those who lost limbs in the earthquake in Haiti.

"We get involved with the church, helping pastors, bishops and the community."

Cumulative figures show that during the past decade, the Knights has donated nearly \$1.25 billion to charity, and provided in excess of 593 million hours of volunteer service in support of charitable causes.

For more information on the Knights, contact: John Fitzpatrick, New Council/Round Table chairman (Northeast), Allentown, 610-530-7728, jlfitzpatrick@verizon.net; Joseph Pascuzzi, Reading, 610-921-2481, jlpascuzzi@enter.net; George Halcovage, director of Education Foundation, Pottsville, 570-640-2013, georgejr@ptd.net; David Michael, District Deputy 41, Albrightsville, 570-722-1234; or Michael O'Connor, supreme director, Knights of Columbus, Frackville, 570-874-3300 (phone) or 570-874-4822 (fax).

Knights also offer insurance and financial products

Insurance and other financial products are available from the Knights of Columbus to its members and their families – the original reason the Knights were founded as a fraternal benefit society by Father Michael McGivney.

Based in the Harrisburg area, Jack Mitchell is the Knights' general agent for central and southeastern Pennsylvania.

Mitchell said the Knights offer financial products to brother knights, their spouses and dependent children. The products are distributed through 1,300 career agents in the United States and Canada.

"The Knights were originally chartered to serve and provide financial aid and assistance to members and their families," Mitchell said.

"Father McGivney saw the need to provide aid to families, many of whom suffered the early death of the breadwinner," Mitchell explained. It began as Father McGivney's "back door ministry." With the money left over after the collection, bills were paid and money was given to families in need.

Mitchell said the Knights have the top ratings few companies do: AAA for Standard and Poor, and for 34 consecutive years an A++ from A.M. Best and Company. "They are the two highest you can have," he said.

The Knights have more than \$75 billion of life insurance in force, and are ranked among the Fortune 1000 companies for total revenues. The Knights are financially strong, in the top 2 percent of all companies selling similar products.

The Knights, Mitchell said, offer products that are "the elite of the elite and extremely competitive." Products offered are life insurance, annuities, disability insurance and long-term care insurance.

"There are two sides to the Knights, and they drive each other," Mitchell said. The Knights' effort is two-pronged: to give an excellent rate of return, and use some of the proceeds for the order's charitable efforts, as the organization supports the church and various charities around the world.

"The Knights are operated by and for brother Knights. It's a wonderful program – look at the wonderful charitable works we do that come from the financial side," Mitchell said. "At the same time, we offer the best financial products out there – it's a win-win."

Mitchell said each member receives free accidental death coverage on joining the Knights, and other benefits as well, including a miscarriage benefit and orphan benefit. In addition, up to \$7,000 in college scholarships are also available.

"The Knights are a growing organization," Mitchell said, noting recent new councils formed in Allentown and Reading. "The Knights are really growing in the Lehigh Valley – it's one of our fastest growing areas."

