

The History of O'Connor General Assembly 48

O'Connor General Assembly # 048 (Fourth Degree) was chartered by the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus on April 8, 1923. The Assembly was named after Father William B. O'Connor (1841-1911). O'Connor General Assembly serves the greater San Joaquin County and City of Stockton. Ten Councils (Third Degree) form the base of our assembly. From 1944-46, Sir Knight Henry Jopp served as Northern California Master of the Fourth Degree. Two-hundred-fifty members form our base and roster. Here is a capsulated story of our name sake; a humble and holy priest, who established and defined Catholic health care in the City of Stockton.

The Archbishop of San Francisco, The Most Reverend Joseph Alemany, saw a unique and special ability in the young Irish-Immigrant priest. In 1872, Father was appointed as the fifth pastor of Saint Mary's Church in the City of Stockton (census figures show that 5,000 people lived in the city). This energetic priest would not let Bishop Alemany down. An early promoter and advocate of hospital care, Father O'Connor demonstrated compassion to all. In 1875, Saint Agnes Academy for wayward and orphan girls was established. The academy was staffed by Dominican Sisters, who were responsible not only for academic development, but also assisted Father in his priestly mission of faith formation. Although no longer in church possession, a one square city block (formerly Webber property) that contained the school and convent (rebuilt from the original structure in 1913) still stands on the corner of San Joaquin and Park Streets in downtown Stockton. In 1881, small pox broke out in the San Joaquin Valley. Placing himself in medical danger and possible death, Father O'Connor would travel from house to house to administer the Sacraments to the dying, offer comfort to the afflicted, and hope in a time of uncertainty. Next, came the establishment of an old men's Home in 1898. In its fifty-six-year period (1898-1954), this facility assisted downtrodden men.

The best was yet to come. It would be the establishment of "modern health care" that would become Father's legacy. Captain Charles Webber, one of the early founders of Stockton and Major J.D. Peters shared Father O'Connor's dream and vision. Webber property was, once again, deeded over to Father for the establishment of a Catholic Hospital. On March 19, 1899, the cornerstone for Saint Joseph's Hospital was laid. The "new" twenty-five bed hospital would be completed and dedicated by Bishop Alemany on December 21, 1899. As the City of Stockton grew, so did the hospital. By 1916, the hospital grew into a 100-bed facility. Between 1902-1938, a nursing program was established. However, as a result of the Great Depression, the nursing program came to an abrupt and sad end. Six years after Father O'Connor's passing, the deadly 1917 influenza epidemic spread across America. Death records indicate that thousands of local Stockton residence passed away from the deadly outbreak. A silent prayer of thanksgiving to God must have been said by families who were comforted by exemplary hospital care and the services provided by Saint Joseph's Nursing Program. Thus, Father O'Connor's vision and inspiration of "modern-day" medical care lived on well after his death.

A century-plus has elapsed and Father's vision continues. St Joseph's Hospital can proudly claim: a 500-bed capacity, a staff of 900 physicians, and an employee base of 2,300 people. St. Joseph's Medical Center, Behavioral Health Care, Cancer Institute, Cardio Exercise Center, and Dignity Health Medical Group continue to provide top quality medical care to the residence of Stockton and San Joaquin County.

Father O'Connor continues to inspire us. Those who have visited Father's outdoor crypt, San Joaquin Catholic Cemetery, have a deeper perspective and insight into a holy priest and a man of God. Etched in stone, are these words, "Pray for my soul." We should be asking Father O'Connor to inspire and pray us.

In Eighteenth Century America, New Englanders followed a strict and salient code of prejudice and bias called nativism. This philosophy advanced the idea that early English settlers were far superior to the newly arriving immigrants. As a result of this philosophy, Irish, Italian, or Polish immigrants were viewed as second-class or inferior citizens. However, the biggest negative these ethnic groups carried with them was the fact that they came from predominantly **CATHOLIC COUNTRIES**. Immigrants were only allowed to have low-paying and dangerous jobs. In the event of "the main bread winner" suddenly passing away from an industrial accident or happenstance, there was no family financial protection. The majority of the time, families were thrown out into streets to fend for

themselves. Thus, Father McGivney saw the immediate need for Catholic families to have financial protection and security. The creation of a Catholic fraternal organization would provide for the welfare and security of its members. In addition, this fraternal society could provide for social gathering. Catholic families could, for a brief time, escape the everyday bias that stemmed from Protestant New England. Father called several prominent Catholic men into the basement of Saint Mary's Church to discuss this issue (Saint Mary's Church sits directly across the street from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut). It was an uphill battle, but Father's determination continued, despite daily challenges from the Protestant newspapers and the citizens of New Haven. To demonstrate that immigrant-Catholic families were upright and wholesome American citizens, The Name Knights of Columbus became the official name of this Catholic beneficiary society. **Charity, unity, and fraternalism** became the principles of the Order; in 1900, a fourth principle, **patriotism**, was added. These four ideas continue formed the core belief of the Knights of Columbus. The Connecticut State Legislature granted a charter to the Knights of Columbus on March 29, 1882 (Founder's Day). In the Order's one-hundred-thirty-eight-year history, the Order still provides financial security for the membership. The Order has grown to 2,000,000 members, and slightly over 16000 subordinate councils in North America, the Philippines, and Eastern and Central Europe.

Father O'Connor and Father McGivney were contemporary priests who lived on opposite coasts. Yet, they both saw the immediate need to promoted Catholic social reform. Neither man knew of the other yet, their lives are uniquely intertwined. Both came from Irish ancestry. Both were appointed pastor of Saint. Mary's Church. Both must be considered Catholic social reformers because of their desire to care of widows, orphans and the downtrodden.

Are the parallels of these two holy priests' historical coincidence? Perhaps. Did Father McGivney and Father O'Connor's social reforms change and advance, the lives of the forgotten, the mistreated, or the lowly? Without a doubt. Were these priests inspired by the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Holy Mother Church? **UNDENIABLY YES!** The members of O'Connor General Assembly have a dual set of heroes-priests. The legacy of Father McGivney is an inspiration to every Catholic gentleman who wears the emblem of the Order, but the legacy of Father McGivney **AND** Father O'Connor can only be revered and appreciated by the membership of O'Connor General Assembly. What a special and unique gift God has given our Assembly!

Blessed Father Michael McGivney **AND** Father William O'Connor; pray for us!