

*The Knights of
Saint Columbanus*



Canon James K O'Neill
The 'Beating Heart' of the Order

The Order of the Knights of St. Columbanus was set up by Canon James O'Neill in 1915 with the aim of bringing all Catholic men together in spiritual and intellectual harmony and to assist clergy in the promotion of intelligent communication among Christians

The four objectives of the Order are: -

- To promote by personal and group action the extension of practical Christianity in all aspects of life.**
- To maintain a fraternal order of Catholic lay leadership.**
- To honour the Faith.**
- To prepare its members for the apostolate.**



**St. Columbanus, stained glass window,
Bobbio Abbey crypt**

Knights of St Columbanus Area 2 Mass
Sacred Heart Parish, 24th January 2015
Homily by Fr Edward McGee

I extend a warm welcome to all who gather here today in the parish of Sacred Heart, Belfast on this historic occasion, during the centenary year of the foundation of the Order of the Knights of St Columbanus, when we celebrate one of its founders, Canon James K (JK) O'Neill who served in this parish. In particular, I welcome the Bishop of Down and Connor, Bishop Noel Treanor. Your presence with us today recognises the contribution of the Order to the life of the local Church and illustrates the integration of the Order of the Knights of St Columbanus within the broader mission of the Diocese of Down and Connor. I also welcome today the Deputy Supreme Knight, Knights of Provincial Area 2 along with their family members, invited guests and the wider parish community of Sacred Heart.

It is most appropriate on this occasion to reflect on the life of Canon James O'Neill, the 'beating heart' of the Order, and explore what it was that motivated him to establish the Knights of St Columbanus.

Canon James K (JK) O'Neill - The 'Beating Heart' of the Order

Canon James K O'Neill was born in Ballypatrick near Ballycastle, Co Antrim, on 25th October 1857. Following his primary education at the Classical School, Downpatrick, the young James O'Neill entered St Malachys College, Belfast in February 1872 before commencing theological studies in St Patrick's College Maynooth in September 1875. Having finished his theological studies before the canonical age for ordination, he was sent to teach Classics in St Malachys College from June 1879 - July 1880. On 6th May 1880 he was ordained in Randalstown Church by Bishop Dorrian, Bishop of Down and Connor. His first appointment as a priest was to his native Rathlin Island on 1st August 1880 followed by a short curacy in Glenravel (August 1881 –

November 1881). But his time in the Glens was to quickly come to an end.

In November 1881, Fr James O'Neill returned to Belfast as a curate in the parish of Derriagh. Four years later, in July 1885, he became curate in St Patrick's parish, Donegal Street. On 1st June 1891, Fr James O'Neill ministered in the nearby St Joseph's Church, Sailor Town. These years as a curate were formative in the life of this young priest. His pastoral experiences of working in the industrialised city of Belfast and in the docklands would certainly have made him sensitive to the needs of the people at this time. Long and dangerous working conditions, little care for health and safety and a time of great austerity and deprivation within the family, the young curate would have been motivated by the pastoral needs of the people he served. Poor sanitation and health care, the lack of social welfare and poor education resulted in many families experiencing hardship. These were very difficult times and many turned to the Church for assistance and support. The young Fr James O'Neill was deeply moved by these experiences and they cultivated his pastoral charity as he reached out to those in need. In many respects, he was visionary and identified ways to restore the dignity of his parishioners.

On 1st June 1894, Fr James O'Neill left the city of Belfast having been appointed as a curate in the parish of Upper Mourne (Kilkeel). But before long, he returned to Belfast in St Mary's Parish, Chapel Lane. In January 1899, Fr O'Neill returned once again to St Patrick's Parish, this time as its Administrator. In August 1906, he was appointed as Parish Priest of Sacred Heart, Belfast where he remained until his death on Sunday 19th March 1922, dying within the Sacred Heart Presbytery shortly after returning home from a sick call. He is buried in the parish cemetery in Ballyvoy, Culfeightrin where the Order annually celebrates Founders Day.

While this short biography provides some insight into the life and ministry of Canon James O'Neill, it is clear that this visionary was not only motivated by pastoral care but also by his awareness of developments in the Church across Europe and through his study. While responding to the presenting needs of his parishioners, he not myopic but saw beyond to developments across Europe. A cursory analysis of papal encyclicals demonstrates that the young priest was very aware of the social teaching of the Church and how this could be applied to his life and ministry.

It is worthwhile examining some of these significant theological influences upon his life.

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*; what many consider to be the 'Magna Carta' of Catholic Social Teaching. For the first time in history, the Church challenged society to explore themes such as the dignity of the worker, the importance of family life, safe and appropriate working conditions and the need for social welfare. While we today recognise these concepts as the familiar bedrock of modern society and business, in a time of industrialisation, the Church's teaching was nothing less than revolutionary. This encyclical *Rerum Novarum* would have inspired the young curate Fr James O'Neill as he worked among the families in the docklands of St Joseph's, Belfast. This encyclical was more than just another papal statement. It became the framework for his whole pastoral ministry. Very quickly, Fr James O'Neill recognised that he could find ways to address these social issues and inspire others through a study of this revolutionary social teaching. With the support of Bishop John Tohill, he circulated copies of Pope Pius X's *Fundamental Regulations of the Lay Apostolate* for private study.

While Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* laid the foundations for his pastoral ministry, Fr James O'Neill was even more significantly influenced by Pope Pius X who continued this social doctrine of the Church. Pius X's

first encyclical entitled *E Supremi* sought the ‘restoration of all things in Christ’ (Eph. 1:10) so that ‘Christ may be all and in all’ (Col. 3:2). It is notable that the theme of this encyclical later became the motto of the Order of the Knights of St Columbanus.

Il Fermo Proposito, issued in 1905, examined the emergent ‘Catholic Action’ groups in Italy. In particular, this encyclical examined the many groups of lay Catholics in Italy who attempted to encourage a Catholic influence upon society, to bring the good news of salvation to the world of their everyday lives. These non-political lay groups were influential in countries such as Spain, Italy, France, Bavaria and Belgium. Undoubtedly, this encyclical would have inspired the newly appointed Administrator of St Patrick’s Parish, Belfast to recognise the need for and significant contribution of lay apostolates within the wider mission of the Church, especially in a world where there was an emergent divide between Church and State.

The encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* issued by Pope Pius X in 1907 detailed the doctrines of the ‘modernists’. In a time of great industrialisation and the increasingly threat of World War, many began to question traditional certainties. In contrast, this encyclical emphasised the importance of faith in Christ as a sure foundation in times of great uncertainty.

Finally, Pope Pius X issued in 1912 the encyclical *Singulari Quadam* concerning the German Labour Organisations. This text supported these associations as a means to achieving good working conditions and social welfare. It cautioned that alongside the material concerns, people should also focus on the spiritual welfare of individuals. It also encouraged people to consider the welfare of all persons, not only Catholics. Following the Death of Canon O’Neill in 1922, ‘Catholic Action’ and the ‘Young Christian Workers Movement’ continued to grow in France and throughout Europe.

This cursory analysis of papal teaching which emerged during the life of Canon James O'Neill illustrates clearly how he had a keen knowledge of these broader issues in the life of the Church and the vision to try to implement similar ideas in meeting the needs of the people he was called to serve.

Canon James O'Neill, a gifted charismatic individual, motivated by a pastoral heart and inspired by Catholic Social Teaching instituted many diocesan initiatives:

- Conscious of the need for education, he was instrumental in the purchase of 'Trench House', which in conjunction with St Mary's University College, provided teacher training for primary and secondary schools across Northern Ireland.
- To address the fiscal challenges faced by families, he established 'St Anthony's Bread for the Poor' and founded the 'Penny Bank' in St Patrick's Parish, a forerunner of the current Credit Union system.
- In the pursuit of better working conditions for mothers and children, he founded a Crèche for the children of working mothers under the care of the Bon Secours sisters.
- To encourage the spread of Catholic literature and intellectual development of the faith, he was responsible for the establishment of the Catholic Truth Society.
- In his capacity as Spiritual Director for SVP, he identified the need for the advancement of the lay apostolate which eventually grew into the foundation of the Order of the Knights of St Columbanus in 1915.
- He was a founder member of An Colaiste Chomhghaill where 'though not a fluent speaker of Irish himself, Canon O'Neill was an ardent supporter of the Irish language movement'.

In summary, Canon James O'Neill had a tremendous capacity and gift to be able to discern the needs of the Church in his day, which he discerned through his pastoral engagement with the people he served, his nurturing of faith through prayer and study, and his ability to empower others to meet these discerned needs of the local church.

The Order of the Knights of St Columbanus

Having briefly examined the life and ministry of Canon James O'Neill, we can recognise why the Order of the Knights of St Columbanus is relevant to our present society and how it can continue to contribute to the mission of the Church.

The Order seeks to 'bring all Catholic men together in spiritual and intellectual harmony and to assist clergy in the promotion of intelligent communication among Christians'. This mission statement brings together the pastoral charity that motivated Canon O'Neill along with a determined study of the social teaching of the Church responding to the needs of the local Church.

The Order has four declared aims:

- (i) To honour the faith.
- (ii) To promote by personal and group action the extension of practical Christianity in all phases of life.
- (iii) To maintain a fraternal Order of Catholic lay leadership.
- (iv) To prepare its members for the lay apostolate.

In many ways, the Order is the living embodiment of *Rerum Novarum* and the lay apostolate advocated by Pope Pius X. We could well ask ourselves what we could learn from recent Church teaching as we continue in this mission of responding to the needs of the local Church.

If I may take one such example.

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, issued in 1988 by Pope John Paul II, once again takes up the theme of the lay apostolate and the role of the laity. It desires “the *lay faithful's* hearkening to the call of Christ the Lord to work in his vineyard, to take an active, conscientious and responsible part in the mission of the Church in this great moment in history.”(CL3)

Christifideles Laici goes on to affirm that the “Holy Spirit, while bestowing diverse ministries in Church communion, enriches it still further with particular gifts or promptings of grace, called *charisms*. These can take a great variety of forms, both as a manifestation of the absolute freedom of the Spirit who abundantly supplies them, and as a response to the varied needs of the Church in history. Whether they be exceptional and great or simple and ordinary, the charisms are *graces of the Holy Spirit that have, directly or indirectly, a usefulness for the ecclesial community*, ordered as they are to the building up of the Church, to the well-being of humanity and to the needs of the world.” (CL24)

Consequently, one of the tasks of our time is to discern the charisms of the Order. Indeed, there is a symbiotic relationship between such charisms within the Order (gifts in service of the local community) and the needs of the local Church. They feed off each other. On one hand, individuals need to be empowered to use their gifts in service. On the other hand, we need to discern how these gifts can build up the Church, to the well-being of humanity and to the needs of the world. On one hand, the Church discerns the needs and on the other the spirit provides for these needs through the enabled charisms. Just as Canon James O’Neill discerned the needs of the people he was called to serve and explored ways to empower others, similarly the Order today is called to examine the needs of our present Church and society and find ways to address these needs empowering others to employ their gifts in the

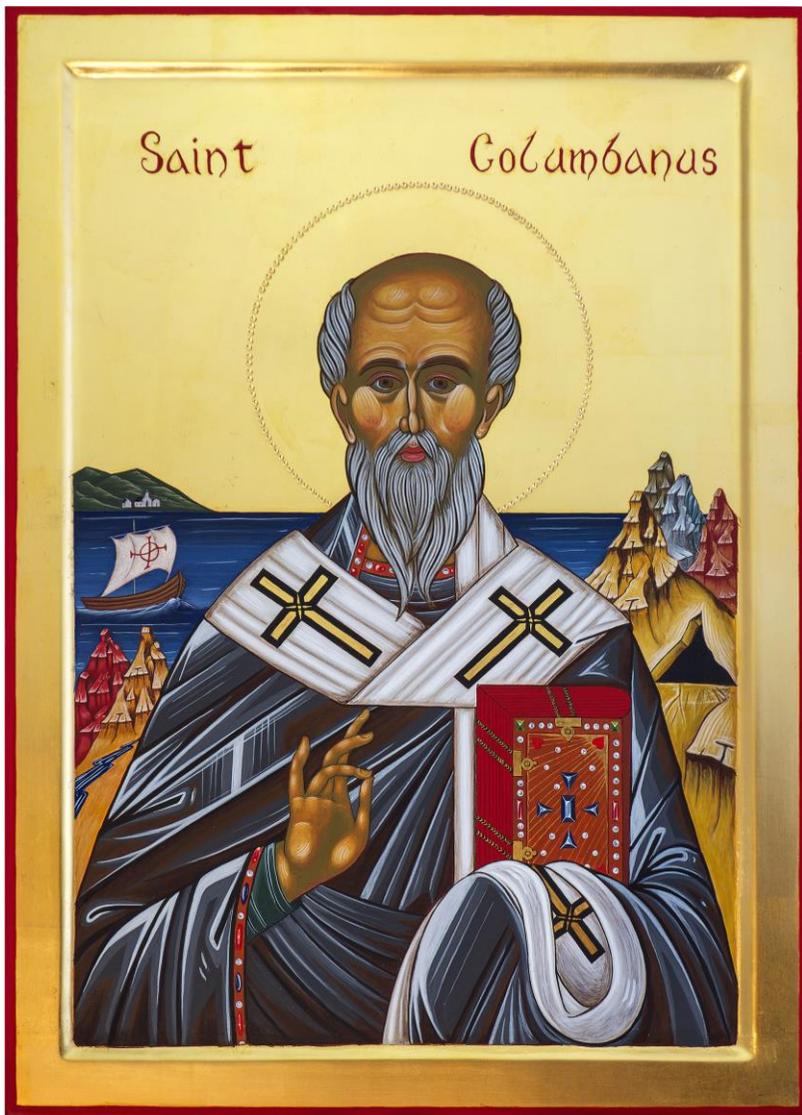
service of the local community. This is the true legacy of Canon O'Neill and this is why the Order continues to be relevant for our modern society. While the issues of industrialisation, education, health, worker conditions and social welfare resonated particularly in the time of Canon O'Neill, there are indeed new challenges that we must face. In this centenary year of the foundation of the Order of the Knights of St Columbanus, inspired by the life and ministry of Canon James O'Neill, we ask God's blessing upon us all as we take up with renewed vision the mission to restore all things in Christ and to bring the good news of salvation into the world of our everyday lives.

(This homily has been reprinted with the kind permission of Fr. Edward. McGee, Area 2 Chaplin.)

The Icon of St. Columbanus

This holy icon was written to commemorate the 1400th anniversary of the death of Saint Columbanus on November 21st in the year 615 AD, and also to celebrate the Centenary of the formation of The Order of the Knights of Saint Columbanus in June 1915 by Canon James O'Neill.

The icon depicts the Saint as an elderly man holding the book of the Gospels reverently with his left hand and arm covered by his robes and stole, the Saint being both abbot and priest. His right hand is raised in blessing, his fingers forming the letters IC XC, the Greek abbreviated form of the Holy Name Jesus Christ. The Saint is therefore blessing in and with the name of Jesus. The Gospel book is heavily adorned with jewels and pearls, not to suggest earthly wealth, but to symbolise the precious nature of the contents of the book. In a similar manner, the jewels on the sleeve and collar of his robe suggest not earthly riches, but spiritual wealth. The icon portrays the Saint at the end of his journey, which began when he received permission from his abbot at Bangor Abbey in County Down to travel with twelve companions (reflecting Christ and His apostles) to Europe which had fallen into the Dark Ages with the decline of the Roman Empire.



This icon was written by Brother Philip Brennan, of CK29, on the occasion of the Centenary of the foundation of the Order of the Knights of St. Columbanus

