

Columbus took 33 days to reach the Caribbean from the Canary Islands. His second trip took just 22 days using 17 ships. By the end of his fourth trip he was still sure that he had discovered the southern tip of Asia. Unfortunately, he still underestimated the size of the earth immensely. When people study history, they usually only acquaint themselves with dates, places, names, and sometimes a sequence of events. Too often the “Why” is not known or revealed.

I wish to explore some of the history of the Icon of our fraternal order, Christopher Columbus, and why Fr. McGivney in 1881, was drawn to choose this man to be a symbol of our Christianity. I wish to also address a few definitions along with the “why” our Order was founded. Teaching suggests that the order was created as support by Catholic men to assist widowed ladies in the church and to assist the clergy, and create a social, non-secretive men’s organization. It seemed logical that since Christopher was a Catholic who discovered the Americas, he was the obvious choice. Perhaps there is more to this selection than recent history teaches.

The first definition to address is what is a Knight? According to Webster’s first edition of his dictionary published in 1828, one hundred years prior to the first full multi-volume Oxford-English Dictionary, a KNIGHT was originally a youth being employed as a servant. But among our warlike ancestors, the word was particularly applied to a young man after he was admitted to the privilege of bearing arms. The admission to this privilege was a ceremony of great importance, and was the origin of the institution of knighthood. Hence in feudal times, a knight was a man admitted to military rank by a certain ceremony. This privilege was conferred on youths of family and fortune, and hence sprung the honorable title of knight in modern usage. A knight has the title of SIR.

The second definition is that of KNIGHTHOOD. This is a military order, honor, or degree of ancient nobility, conferred as a reward of valor or merit. It is of four kinds, military, regular, honorary, and social.

The third definition I wish to highlight is TRUTH. One common definition is: Fidelity to an original. This definition is important to note since Webster’s 1st edition of 1828 is an “original”. It has been altered several times on some level, especially in 1961, as has been the Oxford English Dictionary. Using this definition of truth, we may reason since Webster is an “original” any subsequent changes to a definition are therefore a lie. Furthermore, this would have been the original reference for Fr. McGivney in 1881 when using the term “Knight”.

Before I suggest the relevance of these definitions, I wish to explore the “WHY” of choosing Columbus as our Icon. History tells us that Cristoforo Colombo (his Italian name) or Christobal Colon (Spanish) or Christovado Colombo (Portuguese) did some un-Christian things. On his second voyage to the new world, he enslaved many indigenous people and used them to pan streams and search for gold. Many of these people even died or were killed. They were a very non-hostile group of people, having no knowledge of a simple knife as a weapon. He even returned a few to Spain which offended the Queen and nearly cost him his titles, and claim to territories. So then why would the world hold such high regard for this man who strayed from some of his Christian beliefs?

Many countries celebrate Columbus Day including Spain, Latin America, Belize, Uruguay, and Argentina. Colorado made it an official holiday in 1906. It became a US federal holiday in 1937. Hawaii, Alaska, Oregon, and South Dakota, do not recognize Columbus Day. Many of these countries simply call this “Discovers Day”.

The first positive observation about Columbus that often escapes students today is the result of his discoveries. A book titled, “The Food We Eat” by Burt Wolf, points out how Columbus changed the world. This book about food was a short TV series and is an in-house publication of Con Agra. We so forget about the things that did not exist in Europe and the things that did not exist in the Americas before the Spanish voyages. For instance there were only about 7 domesticated animals in the Americas before Columbus. These were the Muscovy duck, dog, turkey, Llama, Alpaca, and the rain deer. The Europeans brought cattle, horse, asses, pigs, cats, sheep, chickens and goats to the new world.

The foods unknown to Europeans were chocolate, tomatoes, potatoes, peppers corn and many spices. Coffee came from Ethiopia once illegally smuggled out by a Franciscan priest. Peanuts, bananas, sugar cane, watermelon, rice, yams, okra, many which originated in Africa, and brought to America by way of the slaves.

As a side note, and to his credit, Columbus was noted to be a great navigator. He had several years’ experience navigating around the Mediterranean and even to Ireland prior to 1492. Given that the sextant was not invented until 1735, he had only a magnetic compass and an astrolabe to navigate by while going somewhere he was not sure of. I have discovered that this attribute is deserving because of my own experiences in Southeast Asia. I appreciated the ease of navigation there due to zero magnetic variation. This would have also been the experience of the early navigators of

Europe. When Columbus began sailing west, he noted that his compass began to veer off of the North Star. He had no concept of the North Pole, nor the magnetic north of the globe. Applying his notes, he was able to accurately navigate accurately back to the Azores.

But all this recognition we give to Columbus does not fully explain why this man should be so honored and so selected by Queen Isabella. Columbus was as much as responsible for his voyage as was the Queen. He had approached several heads of state to finance his personal desire to journey to the East Indies. His secondary objective was to promote Christianity to new lands. To fully comprehend the place in history that Columbus must be afforded we should begin about 300 A.D.

The Muslims always hindered Christians their desire to travel from Europe to the Holy Land. Then about 630 A.D. a man named Mohamed became popular in his counter to Christianity. 500 years later Pope Urban II had enough of the harassment and began the Crusades about 1100 A.D. As we jump another 400 years Christians experienced more reactions to the Muslim presence. 1492 was noteworthy because the Queen had just kicked the Muslims out of Northern Spain the same year. She even had an attempt on her life by a Muslim. Related to this act and the "why" was the devastation the Muslims wreaked upon the Christians just 40 years prior in 1453. That was the year the Muslims captured the world Christian capital of Constantinople and renamed it Istanbul. The precursor to Queen Isabel choosing Christopher to search for new trade routes was her understandable expulsion of the Granada Muslims from Northern Spain earlier that year.

If a person studies a globe of the earth, it becomes apparent the meaning of this disaster for Europe and Christianity. Turkey lies in the middle of all roads which lead from Europe to Jerusalem Africa, and all of Asia. This conquest provided not just a road block to worship by way of pilgrimages to Jerusalem, but to the wealth and trade with the Orient that was rising among wealthy class was emerging in Europe. Furthermore, Europe was beginning to recover from the Black Death and the population was growing.

To me this all explains Columbus' desire to find a new route and to counter the Muslim conflict with Christians which has been ongoing for over 1000 years. Columbus pledged a portion of his profits toward the fight against the Muslims before his voyages. This makes Columbus a warrior for Christ as much as a desire to be an entrepreneur. When we apply such a concept to the mind of Fr. McGivney we see how there was a need to promote Catholic Christianity not only to many Catholics of the new world, but to counter the on-going conflict with the Muslims. Don't dismiss Jefferson's war with the Muslims of Tripoli at the end of the 1700's as adding to the mind-set of Fr. McGivney.

Columbus who died just after Queen Isabel in 1506, had been stripped from his titles and honors of Admiralty, but was actually quite wealthy as was his son. Because of the things that he pioneered, Columbus should be identified as the Father of International Commerce because of all the new commodities introduced to the new world and in return to the old world. His discoveries resulted in the rise of banking in Europe for investors willing to finance follow-on explorers returning goods. There can be no denying that the Spanish colonization created a clash of the new world cultures with the old world cultures. This clash has resulted in new found wealth not just gold and silver but for all the other commodities. The establishment of Christianity in the new world was perhaps the largest contribution to mankind.

All though, Fr. McGivney was never quoted as using the Christian vs. Muslim conflict to be the reason that he chose Columbus as his preferred warrior, the life of Western Civilization over one thousand years ago was very much aware of the conflict. Fr. McGivney wanted to help catholic widows and the Clergy, but he was cognizant of the age old problem of the Catholics' and the Christian faith under attack. The events of 2001, the Boston Marathon, and other attacks only affirmed to us modern Christians his previous fears. Therefore, we must know that our membership as a Knight of Columbus is not only a social objective, but to be a servant to God and as a warrior Knight for Christianity, ever mindful that the world is facing many evils.

Lecturer, Council 11730

Theodore Hanchett

Sources: The Worlds of Christopher Columbus William & Carla Rahn Phillips, Cambridge Univ. Press

The Food We Eat Edited by Burt Wolf Con Agra Tehabi Books, Korea