

Greeting the Season

By Patrick Scalisi

Knights of Columbus Christmas card program helps to keep Christ in Christmas

In many ways, the celebration of Christmas has become a paradox: It is, of course, a time to celebrate the birth of Christ, to give generously to charity and to spend time with family. At the same time, Christmas is often a time of heightened frustration as people overspend on lavish gifts and suffer bouts of consumerist rage in the malls, in the supermarkets and on the roadways. Communicating the fundamental meaning of Christmas is hard enough without having to search in vain for greeting cards that don't compromise the holiday's Christian meaning.

This motivation led Robert E. Canfield of Roanoke (Va.) Council 562 and a group of like-minded Virginia Knights to launch a "Keep Christ in Christmas" greeting card program in 1989. Frustrated with the lack of religious Christmas cards that he remembered so fondly from his youth, Canfield set out to rectify the problem and provide a service to Christians that he felt was missing. The Knights of Columbus Christmas card program that he started more than 20 years ago has since expanded from an award-winning state program to an international initiative.

SERVING A NEED

The Christmas card program, Canfield argues, involves more than just a holiday greeting signed and folded inside of an envelope. On the contrary, Canfield sees the initiative as both a way to evangelize and to promote unity among Christians.

"The biggest thing that I became aware of was that there were many other Catholics and Christians across the whole United States who felt the same way," Canfield explained. "So, in essence, the Knights of Columbus served a need that wasn't readily available from the secular world."

The idea of selling religious Christmas cards came about when Canfield realized that faith-filled greeting cards were becoming more and more scarce. Over time, traditional scenes of the nativity and the Holy Family were being replaced with Santa Claus, Christmas trees and other images that minimized or displaced the real meaning of the season.

"I realized it wasn't so easy to go into a department store ... and get a Christmas card that might have a meaningful image or message in it," Canfield said.

After thinking on the problem for some time, Canfield partnered with then-State Deputy William L. Howard (1989-90), who is also a member of Council 562, and then State Chaplain _Father Edward Richardson to start their own Christmas card program. But finding a card manufacturer proved to be a major obstacle.

After being turned down by Hallmark and American Greetings -both companies felt the initiative was too small to warrant mass production - the Knights secured a card manufacturer with help from the Sacred Heart League in Mississippi.

Response to the program was tremendous. Just eight months after launching, the initiative won second place in the "Church" category for the International Service Awards at the 1990 Supreme Convention in San Antonio. Within two years, the program had raised more than \$56,000 for charitable causes in Virginia.

Expansion was inevitable. With help from Canfield's daughter, Mary, and his late wife, Virginia, the program launched an Internet presence with the website christischristmas.com. And Christmas cards aren't the only offering any more: Visitors can now order "Keep Christ in Christmas" pins, mail seals, bumper stickers, ornaments, banners and even billboard templates.

"We've actually seen quite a demand for the cards," said Karl D. Kleinhenz, a member of Council 562 who co-chairs the program in Virginia with Canfield. "People ask for them. Whereas if it was a dying, passé thing, I think we would see demand waning. But it hasn't waned; it has actually grown."

THE MISSION CONTINUES

Today, at least one council in every U.S. state participates in the Christmas card program, along with several councils in Canada. The cards are also popular among Knights of Columbus Insurance agents and are available in seven languages - including French, Spanish, Tagalog and Polish- to reach the broadest audience possible.

One state that has seen remarkable success with the program is Delaware, where Knights began selling the cards in 1994.

"To me, it's personal," said Past State Deputy Edward J. Lichman (2008,09), who currently serves as the state's "Keep Christ in Christmas" chairman. "We're Catholics. We should be proud of our faith, proud of who we are, and not be afraid to say things like 'Merry Christmas.'"

Lichman has overseen the program since 2004. Over the past 16 years, he said, Christmas card sales have raised more than \$254,000 for charity in Delaware - an impressive sum since the state has only about 4,000 K of C members.

"Remembering all the cards we used to get as a kid growing up, especially the religious cards, - the different scenes of Bethlehem and angels and seeing cards with 'Silent Night' that just inspired me. And once I got involved with the Knights, this program came along, and it was just natural for me," Lichman said.

Each state runs the program separately - there is no national chairman ~ but anyone can order materials through the 'Christ is Christmas' website. Proceeds from the sales are typically

donated to charity. In Virginia, for instance, the funds are split between the local and state councils. The state council, in turn, uses the money to promote vocations, while local councils can use the profits for charitable causes at their discretion.

More than the program's charitable component, though, Canfield still sees the cards in terms of a mission.

"It's evolved into a great brotherhood," he said, "and a satisfying effort to evangelize through the simplest form that I can think of, which is just a message once a year from one family to another: the religious Christmas card."

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