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NUMBER 1

Facing an arduous day (p. 4).



Building a bridge of peace (p. 14).



Captured by a cult (p. 34).



ALSO: Taking the pay out of crime (p. 3). The story of a true religious (p. 29). Does the Roman collar make one priestly? (p. 33). How to ease the pain of dying (p. 38). A talented supreme knight who lost a power struggle (p. 39). Readers' views on registering for the draft (p. 48).

	ARTICLES
4	A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE SUPREME KNIGHT By Priscilla Hart
14	BUILDING A BRIDGE OF PEACE By Eileen Silva Kindig
39	FRANCIS P. MATTHEWS By Christopher J. Kauffman
	FICTION
24	ASYLUM By Anthony deFrance
	DEPARTMENTS
	COMMENT
3	
29	BOOKS By James M. Shea
33	VATICAN By Robert A. Graham, S.J.
34	SCREEN By William J. Knittle Jr.
37	WASHINGTON By Russell Shaw
38	FAMILY By Valerie Vance Dillon
42	K of C REPORT
48	MAIL
	COVER
	Painting by Hal Gerhardt

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SUPREME KNIGHT FRANCIS P. MATTHEWS

By Christopher J. Kauffman

A talented leader who failed to make the commitment demanded by an ardent friend and supporter



FRANCIS P. Matthews was elected supreme knight at the 1939 Supreme Council meeting held in Seattle, Wash. As deputy supreme knight since 1933, Matthews had earned the respect of both the order's leadership and rank-and-file membership. He was an effective orator and a skilled attorney with insurance experience.

Born in Omaha, Neb., in 1887, Matthews was, like his predecessor Martin Carmody, a dedicated fraternalist. However leaders such as Luke E. Hart, supreme advocate from St. Louis, and Supreme Treasurer Daniel Callahan of Washington, D.C., supported Matthews' candidacy because he appeared to be a strong administrator, one who would make frequent visits to the Supreme Office in New Haven. Since Hart, Callahan and others planned to make significant improvements in the order's insurance program, several visits to New Haven were considered essential to the success of these changes.

The K of C insurance program became an extremely controversial issue at the 1939 convention. The only contested election was for deputy supreme knight. The administration candidate, John Swift of Massachusetts, was opposed by Patrick J. Moynihan, also of the Bay State.

Moynihan, who made a dramatic entrance on the first day of the convention, had the support of many anti-administration delegates. At the conclusion of the supreme secretary's report, Moynihan moved that a special committee be formed to investigate the supreme officers' and directors' management of the

mortuary reserve, with particular scrutiny of the practice of drawing funds from the earnings of the mortuary reserve to pay for the fees for investment of that fund.

He contended that all such fees should be paid from the general fund rather than decrease the solvency of the insurance members' mortuary reserve. Had Moynihan limited his dissent to criticism, the issue would have been resolved easily. However, in support of his motion to establish the investigating committee, he lashed out at the general leadership of the order, referring to the officers' and directors' "mass negligence . . . incompetence . . . selfishness." He charged them with violating "the ethical and moral obligations of their trusteeship."

At a lengthy caucus that evening, Hart responded to Moynihan's charges. Though such caucuses were not recorded, Hart's later comments indicate that his defense rested on four major positions; The order's principles and practices of managing its mortuary reserve were the same as those of other fraternal insurance societies. The insurance commissioners of Connecticut and of several other states had approved such practices. To pay for the administration of the mortuary reserve from the general fund, to which noninsurance members contributed, would be unfair to the associate members. Finally, the officers' salaries were commensurate with and, in some cases, lower than salaries paid to officers of other fraternalists.

Hart convinced the membership. Realizing that his motion would not carry, Moynihan withdrew it.

Nevertheless, he came within 20 votes (139 to 119) of defeating Swift for the post of deputy supreme knight.

The 1939 convention was just the first phase of the Moynihan affair. Shortly afterward, Moynihan renewed his attacks upon the administration. On behalf of the insurance members of Massachusetts, he lodged a complaint with the Massachusetts state insurance commissioner's office on the grounds that the management of the Knights of Columbus mortuary reserve fund violated laws regulating fraternal and commercial insurance companies. Before he had received word of Moynihan's complaint, Supreme Knight Matthews suspended him for breaking the order's rules on public slander. After Moynihan was found guilty by a committee of the Board of Directors in early 1940, he brought suit against the order in Massachusetts superior court on the grounds that the order followed illegal processes in expelling him. Hart won the case. He cited precedent cases in which fraternal organizations successfully defended their authority to initiate extraordinary committee hearings comparable to that established by the Knights in the Moynihan affair.

In 1940, Moynihan was the state commissioner of administration and finance and was close to his brother Knight, State Commissioner of Insurance Charles F. J. Harrington. From January 1940 to May 1948, Commissioner Harrington and representatives of the order held numerous meetings on the legality of the order's administration of the mortuary fund.

The Massachusetts uproar finally culminated in Harrington's directive of June 15, 1948, which revoked the order's license to sell insurance in the Bay State. From Harrington's point of view, he was not persecuting the order but rather protecting its policyholders from improper expenditures which he considered threats to the security of their insurance. However, since three previous Massachusetts commissioners and many other insurance commissioners in the United States and Canada had approved the K of C's investment practices and since Harrington did not question other fraternal benefit societies which employed the same practices, it is hard to rule out suspicion of invidious discrimination against the order. Less than a year later, the Massachusetts state legislature passed a bill which explicitly allowed fraternal benefit societies to allocate funds from their mortuary reserve to cover the costs of investment of the reserve. The then Massachusetts state deputy, John W. McDevitt, was responsible for the daily management of the order's lobbying efforts in the legislature. Luke Hart was so impressed with McDevitt's service that he later encouraged him to stand for election as a supreme director, urged his candidacy for deputy supreme knight and appears to have favored McDevitt to succeed him as supreme knight.

The Massachusetts insurance issue initiated by Moynihan lasted nearly 10 years. Not only did it entail a vast amount of time and effort on complex legal questions, it also involved the supreme officers and directors in an enormous public-relations task to repair the damage of Moynihan and Harrington's attack upon the legality of the Knights' insurance program.

While the Massachusetts insurance issue festered, Supreme Knight Francis Matthews led the order as it passed out of the Great Depression and into the most destructive war in history — World War II. War traditionally is the harbinger of profound change. The changes which have occurred in the Church and American society since 1939 were reflected in the history of the Knights of Columbus. Though its Catholic fraternalism was revived

during and after the war, symbolized by a growth in membership and the development of ambitious programs, the order's business, insurance and governance structures were strained as a result of the need for modernization.

The foreign-policy attitude of Knights in the U.S. reflected the general anti-interventionist sentiments of American society.

In response to Pope Pius XII's petition for prayers for peace, the order sponsored an international prayer-for-peace program on Armistice Day, 1939, and a radio prayer-for-peace broadcast on May 19, 1940. While the U.S. Knights fastened their hopes on U.S. neutrality, many of their brothers in Canada and Newfoundland were combatants. On Sept. 13, 1939, less than two weeks after war was declared in Europe, Dr. Claude Brown, a supreme director, wired all state deputies in Canada that he had formed an ad hoc committee to work with civic and Church leaders in the establishment of a welfare program comparable to the K of C huts program in World War I. By the end of October, the Canadian government had approved the order's welfare program and established a united organization composed of the K of C, the YMCA, the Salvation Army, and the Canadian Legion.

Dr. Brown, a dentist, who achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel in World War I, had been grand knight of his local council, district deputy, master of the fourth degree, and state deputy of Ontario before being elected supreme director in 1927. At his own expense he toured Canada to spur on the order's activity, and in early 1940 he went to England to direct the overseas welfare work. With its headquarters established in Ottawa, the nation's capital, the order's program was developed in close cooperation with government agencies. Between December 1939 and April 1940 the Knights raised almost \$230,000, an extraordinary amount considering there were relatively few members in Canada. In March 1941, all service organizations participated in a joint campaign which raised \$7 million, \$750,000 of which were allocated to the K of C huts program. From

1942 to the end of the war, the Canadian government assumed full responsibility for fund-raising.

With experience gained during World War I, the Canadian huts program was an extremely successful endeavor, one which was dependent upon the close cooperation of the Knights, the hierarchy and the government. Its success was also dependent upon the cooperation of French- and English-speaking Knights. The clearest manifestation of the success of the program was the order's growth during and after the war. Between 1939 and 1947, Canadian membership more than doubled.

The fall of France, in the words of one historian, "revolutionized American thinking about defense." Indeed, for the first time in the nation's history, Congress passed a selective service act authorizing a peacetime draft. Anticipating the passage of this act, Supreme Knight Matthews visited with the chairman of the board of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, Archbishop Samuel Stritch of Chicago. They discussed the possibility of the order representing the Church as the official Catholic welfare organization to serve the armed forces, as was the case in World War I.

After several meetings with representatives of the YMCA, the Salvation Army and Jewish Welfare organizations, Supreme Knight Matthews and Supreme Advocate Hart were assuming that the order would become the official Catholic social-service agency. However, on Nov. 5, 1940, the NCWC established the National Catholic Community Service (NCCS), an organization with broad authority "to formulate programs for the work of the Church in defense, industrial centers and areas adjacent to military camps (and) to provide for the setting up of social centers by Catholic agencies with the permission of the ordinary."

In World War I, James Cardinal Gibbons and other prelates had relied upon the order as the only national body of laity organized to meet the tasks of raising funds and initiating programs to serve the Church. Now, the NCWC viewed the Knights as just one of many lay

organizations which, if they desired to maintain the support of the bishops, had to acknowledge the authority of the Administrative Board of the NCWC and defer to its wishes. Supreme Knight Matthews, though disappointed that the order was not recognized as the official welfare agency, seems to have sensed that the administrative structure of the Church had evolved to such an extent as to preclude independent lay initiatives. Matthews was appointed chairman of the Executive Committee of the NCCS and its representative in the United Service Organizations. Hart also accepted positions on various committees in both organizations.

The role of the order's Supreme Office in the NCCS included staff support on budget and administrative problems and the release of staff to be field supervisors. The NCCS, along with all other agencies incorporated into the USO, established social centers throughout the United States and in rest and recuperation areas behind the lines of battle. Many Knights served on local NCCS committees, while local K of C councils contributed to the support of the centers, frequently opening their clubhouses for NCCS-sponsored events. Where there was no center, a local council tended to fill the vacuum.

Matthews and Hart were extremely busy with committee assignments on the NCCS and the USO. As chairman of the Executive Committee of the NCCS, Matthews was far more active in the manifold responsibilities of his office than was Hart. The supreme knight was chosen to represent the NCCS abroad and frequently was unable to attend meetings of the officers and board. His absence at such meetings was understood as an unavoidable necessity. However, even before Matthews became so deeply immersed in NCCS work, Hart and other leaders were troubled by the supreme knight's infrequent visits to the home office in New Haven. Because Hart had supported Matthews for supreme knight on the basis that he would tend more closely to affairs in New Haven, differences developed between the two leaders, which proved irreconcilable.

The Matthews-Hart dissension began in 1940, smoldered for more than a year, and reached its peak in 1943-45. Hart unsuccessfully ran against Matthews in the election for supreme knight in 1943 and Matthews was compelled by an overwhelming opposition not to seek re-election in 1945. The conflict was exacerbated by disagreement on the role of the order in World War II, when Hart wished to see a K of C huts program independent of the NCWC.

Expansion of the insurance program and the subsequent growth of the home office engendered the need for enlarging the authority of the supreme knight and for reshaping the executive structure of the Board of Directors. The Supreme Council of 1940 established the Executive and Finance Committee of the Board of Directors, composed of the supreme officers and one other member of the board. This committee was authorized to act on behalf of the board between meetings but was required to have all its decisions ratified by the board.

As mentioned earlier, Hart had promoted Matthews' candidacy for supreme knight in 1939 after Matthews promised that he would make frequent visits to the home office to administer the implementation of the proposed insurance reforms. When Matthews failed to live up to Hart's expectations, he lost the Missouri lawyer's support. On June 11, 1941, Hart wrote: "I am not able to deviate from the attitude which I have assumed for years and with which every member of the board, including Frank (Matthews) was in complete agreement, to the effect that the duties of the supreme knight must be performed at the Supreme Office. Apparently, Frank has changed his mind about this, and I refuse to go along with him in that regard."

Over the next four years the relations between the two leaders, who had been very good friends, became extremely tense. At the 1943 convention in Cleveland, Matthews was on the offensive against the charges that he had

abused his authority. He was re-elected supreme knight. However, by 1945 Hart had marshaled such a strong anti-Matthews force that the supreme knight decided not to stand for re-election at the delayed convention in Plattsburg, N.Y.

There is no doubt that both Hart and Matthews were dedicated to the good of the order. Hart held so strongly to his view that the supreme knight should be virtually a resident administrator in New Haven that he was willing to break his long friendship with Matthews over this issue. Since Hart held himself responsible for Matthews' election in 1939, he considered it a parallel duty to remove him from the vital post. As shown in his voluminous correspondence and in interviews with those who worked with him, Hart was a powerful personality with an overwhelming sense of identity with the Knights. Because Hart jealously guarded the order's autonomy, he considered Matthews' support of the NCCS as a betrayal of his office as supreme knight. Hart intimated that Matthews' fatal flaw was his pursuit of personal ambitions, symbolized by his willing association with the hierarchy during World War II. On the other hand, Hart's major weakness was his self-righteous intolerance of any one who did not rise to his own rigidly high standards of loyalty, dedication and zeal.

Matthews was a gifted leader, but once he lost Hart's trust he gradually lost the basis of his power in the order. Matthews' achievements after his retirement illustrate his many qualities. In 1946 he was appointed to President Harry S. Truman's Civil Rights Committee, and in 1948 he headed the Nebraska delegation at the Democratic National Convention. In May 1949, Truman appointed him secretary of the Navy. During his 26 months in that post he was engaged in such significant issues as the developing arms race and the Korean War. On June 27, 1951, Truman appointed him U.S. ambassador to Ireland, where he died Oct. 18, 1952. ■

Author of "Faith and Fraternalism," a new history of the Knights of Columbus, Kauffman continues a monthly series on the order's leaders.