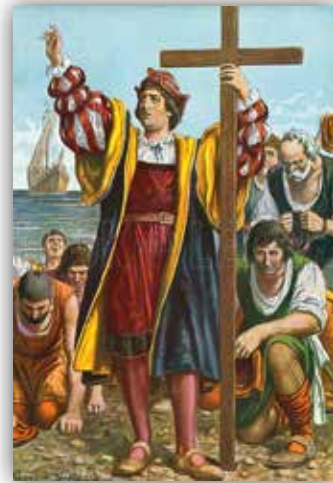


## The K of C and Columbus Day – a brief history

In the 1920s, a resurgent Ku Klux Klan tried to create a lily-white country by attacking African Americans, of course, but also immigrants, Jews, and *Catholics*. This was an easy sell in the 1920's, since government leaders during the First World War had emphasized Americanism and demanded that immigrants reject all ties to their countries of origin. From



there, it was a short step for native-born white American Protestants to see anyone different from themselves as a threat to the country.

The Knights of Columbus ran afoul of the Klan. Klan members spread the rumor that one became a leader of the Knights of Columbus by vowing to exterminate Protestants, and to torture and kill anyone upon orders of Catholic leaders. To combat the growing animosity toward Catholics and other American minorities, the Knights of Columbus began to emphasize the roles minority groups had played in American history. In the early 1920s, they published three books in a “Knights of Columbus Racial Contributions” series, including *The Gift of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois. The Knights of Columbus were determined to reinforce the idea that America should not be a land in which white Protestant people attacked minorities, but rather should include everyone equally. The desire of the Knights of Columbus to honor minorities made them turn to an old American holiday. Since the late 1860s, Italian Americans in New York City had celebrated a Columbus Day to honor the heritage they shared with the famous Italian explorer; in the 1930s, the Knights of Columbus added national weight to that celebration. The Knights of Columbus joined with Generoso Pope, an important Italian American politician in New York City, to rally behind the idea of a national Columbus Day. In 1937, President Franklin Delano

Roosevelt, aware of the need to solidify his new Democratic coalition by welcoming all Democratic voters, proclaimed October 12 a federal holiday: Columbus Day. In 1970, the day became unfixed from a date; it is now the second Monday in October. The Knights intended for Columbus Day to honor the important contributions of immigrants – and Catholics – to American society.

Today, Columbus Day is being questioned by some. Today's "woke" culture, which has held Columbus accountable for the chain of disasters that followed in his wake in the Caribbean and South America is not only unfair to him, but it overlooks the essence of the man. Not of Spanish culture, Columbus was at heart a simple but ambitious individualist—a seafaring explorer and evangelist. He had neither interest in founding colonies nor was he an effective leader and administrator of strong-headed hidalgos that undertook setting up colonial outposts at the behest of Isabella. If he had not been a man of character and determination with deep faith in God, self-confidence to ignore critics, and go against the crowd and remain steadfast in his vision and his calling, he never could have accomplished what he did, which was of course the discovery of the New World of the Western Hemisphere. Seen from the big picture, Columbus Day is worth keeping and honoring for the simple reason that it celebrates beliefs and qualities of character that are foundational to America, as well as to the Knights of Columbus. It could even be said that Columbus Day is the holiday that commemorates the human character, attitudes and choice of action that made the other American holidays possible. Christopher Columbus was above all else a man of deep Faith which helped him to accomplish his great voyage. Columbus Day is a day that should be celebrated by ALL CATHOLIC AMERICANS PROUDLY! We must make sure that we always stand up to defend him and his great achievements, and that we do not allow them to be marginalized. His brave actions, guided by his deep Faith, set off the course of events that eventually led to the founding of our Nation. So much so that the

following Resolution was passed in 2020 at Our 138<sup>th</sup> Supreme Convention:

**WHEREAS**, in 1492 Christopher Columbus obtained permission and financial support from the King and Queen of Spain to sail west across the Atlantic Ocean in search of new trade routes; and

**WHEREAS**, on October 12 of that year, Columbus' expedition landed in what is today the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, immediately erecting a cross and naming the island San Salvador, in honor of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World; and

**WHEREAS**, Columbus set forth a policy that his men were to treat the native people in the new world with respect and sentenced to death men who disobeyed this order, which resulted in his own arrest and return to Spain in chains; and

**WHEREAS**, the 16th century historian Bartolomé de las Casas, who exposed terrible abuses of native peoples, defended Columbus' motivations saying, "...I knew him well and I know his intentions are good;" and

**WHEREAS**, on the 400th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage to the Americas, Pope Leo XIII reflected on Columbus' strong Catholic faith writing, "it is fitting that we should confess and celebrate in an especial manner the will and designs of the Eternal Wisdom, under whose guidance the discoverer of the New World placed himself with a devotion so touching," and ordered the celebration of Solemn Mass of the Most Holy Trinity in honor of the occasion; and

**WHEREAS**, U.S. President Benjamin Harrison similarly commemorated the anniversary by declaring a national Columbus holiday that year to provide, "expressions of gratitude to Divine Providence for the devout faith of the discoverer, and for the divine care and guidance which has directed our history and so abundantly blessed our people;" and

**WHEREAS**, following this anniversary of Columbus' voyage, memorials and celebrations in honor of Columbus became popular in the United States as ways to celebrate the Catholic history of the Western Hemisphere and to speak out against anti-Catholicism in the United States; and

**WHEREAS**, at the height of the nativist and anti-Catholic sentiment of the late 19th century, Columbus was chosen as the Order's namesake because he was one of the few Catholics considered a hero of American history, and because the founding members of the Order believed the explorer symbolized that faithful Catholics can also be patriotic American citizens; and

**WHEREAS**, in 1906 the Knights of Columbus advocated for the construction of a monument in Washington, DC in honor of Columbus and, when it was completed in 1912, President William Howard Taft presided at the dedication ceremony which was attended by several foreign ambassadors, thousands of Knights of Columbus, and thousands more interested spectators leading to the observation that “every possible vantage point was filled;” and

**WHEREAS**, several states began establishing holidays in honor of Columbus and, following the strong urging of the Knights of Columbus and several civic organizations, the United States declared Columbus Day a federal holiday in 1937; and

**WHEREAS**, the strong Catholic identity associated with Columbus Day led the Ku Klux Klan to denounce the celebration of the holiday as a “papal fraud” and even burn a cross at a Knights of Columbus celebration of Columbus Day in Pennsylvania; and

**WHEREAS**, to further accomplish its anti-Catholic goals in the United States, the Klan, and other nativist forces, began the trend of disparaging Columbus suggesting he was not a hero of western history, but rather just another foreign conqueror who was guilty of genocide, slavery, and oppression; and

**WHEREAS**, in recent years, these claims have been repeated leading to the propagation of further misinformation about Columbus and actions to abolish references to Columbus and remove monuments and commemorations to Columbus’ life – many of which were first established by Catholic immigrants seeking to establish their place in American culture and fight discrimination.

**NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED**, that the Knights of Columbus remains steadfast in its support of Christopher Columbus as our namesake; state and federal holidays established in his honor; and, public monuments and commemorations dedicated to his life and historical contributions; and

**FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we call on state and local leaders to establish separate monuments, or other commemorations, that properly honor the contributions and centuries-long history of the native people of North America; and

**FURTHER RESOLVED**, that we commit our prayers for greater civility, peace, and understanding between all peoples to the intercession of our Blessed Mother, Patroness of the Americas, and namesake of Columbus’ lead ship on that historic 15th century journey.

*Happy Columbus Day!*