Knights of Columbus

On October 2, 1881, a small group of men met in the basement of St. Mary's Church on Hillhouse Avenue in New Haven, CT, to discuss the formation of a fraternal benefit society. Convened at the request of Father Michael J. McGivney, a 29-year-old priest, this meeting marked the foundation of what has become the world's largest Catholic family fraternal service organization.

Four months after this meeting, the group adopted the name "Knights of Columbus." Shortly after the turn of the century, Knights could be found in every state in the country, in most of the provinces of Canada, in Mexico and the Philippines, and were prepared to enter Puerto Rico and Cuba.

Why Columbus? In choosing Christopher Columbus as their patron, the first Knights demonstrated their pride in America's Catholic heritage. To the Irish-American Catholics who incorporated the organization, the name "Knights of Columbus" evoked allegiance to the Church and affirmed the discovery of America as a Catholic event.

The state of Connecticut granted the Knights of Columbus status as a legal corporation on March 29, 1882. The anniversary is observed each year by the Knights as Founder's Day. Currently, there are nearly 11,000 Knights of Columbus councils, most of which are based in a given Catholic parish.

This category doesn't come close in numbers to rivaling the really big Fraternal categories, such as the Elks, but of the "smaller" Fraternal categories in the hobby, the Knights of Columbus is probably one of the two biggest (the other being the Lions). The largest collection I know of is that of Toby Messmer, KY, who reported that he had some 1,367 as of November 1997.