

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Annual Pilgrimage for the Sea Services

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Annual Pilgrimage for the Sea Services

Seton Shrine; Emmitsburg, MD

October 1, 2017

I must confess that I travel by sea rarely, if ever. But when I do travel, whether on a domestic or an international flight, my mother – now in her late 90's – is pretty worried. Mom is, of course, always interested in the reasons for my trips but she is even more interested in knowing when I'm leaving and returning, what airline I'm flying, and when I've landed safely. And while I am in transit, you can be sure Mom is storming heaven with prayer. Once safely on the ground, I give her a call and she is relieved. But Mom also asks, "So where else are you planning on going?"

In her concern for my safety as a traveler, my Mom is not too different from St. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton – who, until the end of her life, remained concerned about the whereabouts and safety of her two seafaring sons, William and Richard, both of whom served in the United States Navy. Sometimes Elizabeth gently chided them for not writing her often enough or for not keeping her fully apprised of their travels. In fact, Elizabeth had good reason to be concerned as also good reason to be proud! Her son, William, spent 34 years as a commissioned officer of the Navy. His service brought him to Cape Horne, the Mediterranean Sea, costal Africa, and the West Indies. Her son Richard was a captain's clerk on the first USS Cyane, that, among other places, brought him to the coast of Liberia where he was involved in fighting off pirates and preventing slave trade. While on duty, he contracted a severe fever and died.

Elizabeth stormed heaven for her two sons, often asking the intercession of Mary, Star of the Sea. For that reason, Elizabeth is also the ideal heavenly patron for all seafaring people, but especially for those who, like her sons, either serve in or are affiliated with the Navy, Marine Corps, the Coast Guard, the Merchant Marine, Public Health Service, and, of course, the Apostleship of the Sea. Today, during this

our 40th annual pilgrimage, we again ask St. Elizabeth Ann Seton to pray for the officers and the service men and woman of the Sea Services, together with their families and loved ones and their dedicated chaplains.

Now, I have already mentioned how seldom I travel the high seas but I also have to make another confession to make and it's this: I've never served in any branch of the military services. Even though my father served in the Navy during World War II in the Pacific theatre, I am about as much a civilian as a civilian can be. If I tried to do what you do every day, you'd probably throw me overboard. Nonetheless, like many land-loving civilians, I've tried to imagine what life is like aboard a ship and like others who do this, I'm probably wide of the mark.

Nonetheless, I should imagine that life aboard a ship is highly regulated. The Captain has command of the ship, and the officers and crew, under their commanding officer, adhere to strict protocols, following closely the chain of command, a hierarchical structure, if you will. In this structure, I should further imagine that obedience is highly prized. Those who fail to obey orders, rules, and regulations, pay the consequences. And the point of orders, rules, and regulations is not just to make life tough. No, the real point of all this is to ensure the safety of all and the success of the mission, whatever it might be.

In a best-case scenario, not only are the protocols and rules carefully followed but there also emerges a spirit of teamwork and camaraderie – qualities that serve well officers and crew alike. Everyone does their job well, with competence and integrity, and each one looks out for everyone else. However, when teamwork breaks down and there are factions, the discipline of the ship is undermined, along with its morale and thus its mission. In a true worst-case scenario, there is mutiny on the high seas.

Well friends, I don't know if I even came close to describing what the code of ethics and conduct is like aboard the ships that you sail. I hope so, because today's Scripture readings give us some idea of what life should be like aboard the barque of Peter, the ship that we call the Church, as it sails the high seas of history, often encountering headwinds, storms, and dangerous waves.

Aboard this ship, there is only one Captain, namely, the Christ. Just as the Captain

occupies a unique role on the ship, even so Christ is utterly unique and irreplaceable in the Church and in human history. For he is the only Son of God, sent by the Father into the world to take upon himself our humanity, so as to save us from our sins. Son though he was, our Captain, the Christ, is himself a man of obedience, for he carried out his mission in accord with the saving will of God the Father. St. Paul says of Jesus that "...he emptied himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross." In taking upon himself the sins of the world and in dying and rising from dead, our Captain was the first to make the voyage that leads from death to life. Thus, at the Easter Vigil, we exultantly sing of Jesus: "Life's Captain died, now he lives no more to die." Thus was Jesus exalted as Lord and given the Name above every other name.

Now, our Captain who went ahead of us - by dying on the Cross, rising from the dead, ascending into heaven - our Captain and Lord promised nonetheless never to leave us. So it is that the Lord remains with his Church and by sending the Holy Spirit, the Lord guides the Church through history. If we might think of the Holy Spirit as a sort of divine navigation system, we could say that the barque of Peter does not avoid threatening waves— as it is tossed to and fro by persecution, sin, misunderstanding, and mischance— Still, the Church sails onward, indefectibly, enroute to the shores of heaven.

Aboard this ship, all of us have different functions - that is to say, "gifts that differ", differing vocations, some specific work to do, but we are part of a single crew under the command of our Captain. And every one of us, no matter what our station, must strive to emulate the obedience of Jesus to the Father's saving will. At the heart of our code of ethics and conduct are the words, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Further, on the barque of Peter, each of us is responsible for our own conduct. In today's first reading, the prophet Ezekiel points out the fate of those who turn from virtue and virtuous deeds to iniquity. That fate is worse than going to the brig. Conversely Ezekiel holds out hope for anyone who turns away from mutiny against God's law; such a one might hope to live for another day. In the Gospel Jesus gives us a variation on this theme. If we tell God the Father that we'll obey him but then fail to do so, we risk plunging into the abyss and we risk as well the salvation of

others. If we are at first reluctant but then see the error of our ways, then the Lord gives us every opportunity not only to follow his Son and our Captain, but also to be a part of his mission, praying and working hard every day to arrive at the safe harbor of heaven.

So, it turns out, then, that all of us are seafarers. Just as you who are members of the Sea Services know how long and perilous an ocean voyage can be, so all of us who are followers of Christ must realize how urgently we need to rely on the strength and wisdom of Christ, our Captain, and on the utterly reliable guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let us also count on the prayers of our patroness, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, and on the prayers of Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother also. For it is Mary, the Star of the Sea, who always leads us to Jesus and prays with us and for us as we journey homeward across the expanses of time and eternity, to our true destiny, our heavenly home, the New and Eternal Jerusalem.

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!