

“Stay on Board and on Course”

On June 5<sup>th</sup> the Church marked the Feast Day of St. Boniface. Boniface lived in the eighth century and was known as the apostle to the Germans. He was an English Benedictine monk who gave up being elected abbot to devote his life to the conversion of the Germanic tribes. His was a life filled with great challenges because of uneducated, godless clergy whose faith was more akin to paganism than Catholicism. He also experienced the disregard for his episcopal office by ordained and lay members of the church alike. While challenged in many ways he was tireless in his pursuit of the conversion of the Germanic peoples’ to Jesus Christ to the point of martyrdom.

A letter of St Boniface has survived where he writes movingly about the challenges faced by Christians. I am going to now read the opening two sentences from this letter.

***In her voyage across the ocean of this world, the Church is like a great ship being pounded by the waves of life's different stresses. Our duty is not to abandon ship but to keep her on her course.<sup>1</sup>***

Today I want to use this image of the great ship as she is pounded by the waves of life’s different stresses to encourage us to stay on board and on course through the turbulent seas of this world.

Our readings today call us to keep watch for three dangers that have always tried to upset and even submerge Jesus’ Ship. They are alienation; affliction and apostasy. Genesis warns us of the danger of the waves of alienation; 2 Corinthians calls from the Ship’s Bridge to understand that affliction cannot be avoided as we sail the seas of this world. We then hear in the Gospel our Captain’s voice cautioning to be on the lookout for the mast high waves of apostasy.

Think of the word “alienation. What is an alien? Someone who is, at best foreign to us, or at worst the subject of horror movies wanting to overwhelm and rule the world.

Okay then there is ET for those here old enough to remember the Big Screen’s cutest extra-terrestrial. Not so scary.

When we experience alienation we become distant and fearful - not trusting God or others. This is what we see at play in today’s passage from Genesis. At the end of chapter 2 we read that the man and woman were naked and felt “no shame”. How different the picture in chapter 3. As a result of their disobedience and distrust of God they try to hide from him and blame each other. But here is what is most damaging about the experience of alienation. It separates us from ourselves and we are alien to “the me” with whom I always have to live. When God asks Adam the question:

***Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”***

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<sup>1</sup> [www.liturgies.net/saints/boniface/readings.htm](http://www.liturgies.net/saints/boniface/readings.htm)

Notice his answer does not include any acknowledgement of his own responsibility.

***<sup>12</sup> The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.”<sup>2</sup>***

Rather than admitting his culpability he ends up placing his sin back on God. You gave me this woman God and so accuses God, scapegoats Eve and closes his heart from knowing himself. It is telling I think that the Bible teaches us that sin’s first consequence is alienation, God’s desire for us is the deep communion of Genesis 2. Man’s fall results in blaming and shaming the other, be it God or neighbor. How important it is for us to therefore always be attentive to the discipline of self-examination so as to better know our motives and actions and so seek to be on the lookout for the waves of alienation.

If alienation is the wave intending capsize Christ’s ship from within, affliction is the exterior wave, intending to overwhelm Christ’s crew from without. Afflictions can be characterized as the various forms of suffering that cannot be avoided while on life’s journey. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians the word “affliction” is one St Paul uses repeatedly to help orientate our heaven bound journey. Listen to these verses:

From chapter 1 we read:

***We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.<sup>3</sup>***

Then over in chapter 6:

***but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, <sup>5</sup> beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger<sup>4</sup>***

The point I am making is this. In 2 Corinthians Paul gives us the most detailed account of how the waves of affliction almost drowned him for he said “we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.” Wow! I find it so comforting that Paul is able to be this honest with us. But let me now read to you the next verse:

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<sup>2</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#). (1993). (Ge 3:11–12). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>3</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#). (1993). (2 Co 1:8). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition\*](#). (1993). (2 Co 6:4–5). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

***Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.<sup>5</sup>***

With these verses in mind listen again to a section from today's reading:

***So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, <sup>18</sup> because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.<sup>6</sup>***

Can we avoid the waves of affliction in this life? No, we can't. But with Paul we can gain the perspective to view our suffering as Paul did his. Suffering for him brought Paul to a greater dependence upon Christ by relying on the virtues of faith and hope. This gained for him the point of view to compare the present suffering with the future glory. Did you hear his description of suffering? "A slight momentary affliction" when seen in relation to the eternal weight of glory. How when in affliction, its weight is like waves that overwhelm us and take our breath away. It is only when we can look beyond the visible trial to the eternal reward that suffering can be rightly understood, thus allowing us to navigate through these very troubled waters.

In the Gospel we have Jesus warn us of the greatest wave of all. What we call apostasy. Someone who is apostate has chosen to abandon ship by rejecting the faith they once knew. This is one of the most puzzling of Gospel passages where reference is made to Beelzebul and the unforgivable sin. So what is the connection?

Beelzebul was the derogatory name the Jewish people gave to Satan. His name means "Lord of the Dung". They were attributing Jesus' works of healing and mercy to be in league with the enemy of the good. Jesus says how can this be? My works actually show that I am defeating the adversary by tying up the strong man and yet you put me on the ship where he is captain?

Jesus then goes on to state that every sin is forgivable except for the sin against the Holy Spirit. Now how do we understand this? Listen to this explanation from the Catechism: :

***There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss.<sup>7</sup>***

This is why Apostasy is the most damaging and engulfing wave of them all. Through it the heart can become so intransigent that it refuses the mercy offered by Jesus. We have to be always on

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<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (2 Co 1:9). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (2 Co 4:16–18). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

<sup>7</sup> Catholic Church. (2000). [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) (2nd Ed., p. 456). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

our guard because the alienation and affliction that we experience in life can in turn lead to the kind of apostasy that can drown the soul.

As we live with a kind of vigilance that is alert to how the Church is like a great ship being pounded by the waves of life's different stresses we can spot the danger so as to navigate through these turbulent waters. Those who do so will be doing the will of Jesus and know what it is to belong to his crew, made up of brothers and sisters who with Paul can declare:

***We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.***