

**April 29, 2012**

Myrrh-Bearers' Sunday

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

This is an excerpt from the Paschal sermon at All Saints' Orthodox Church, this year, during the night April 14-15:

On this night much of the world remembers what took place in the North Atlantic exactly 100 years ago: the sinking of the *Titanic*.

A great deal has been written about that tragic event, and it has been the subject of several film productions. I have made it a point to see them all. They were mostly pretty good, I suppose, at least until 1997.

The event of the *Titanic*, like nearly all tragedies, was a test of the human spirit; it took the measure of everyone involved in it, especially the crew and passengers aboard that doomed vessel. Indeed, for many years it continued, over the years, to take the measure of those who survived that night. Of the *Titanic*'s 705 survivors, eight later committed suicide. That was the phenomenon which gave modern psychiatry the expression, "survivors' syndrome."

Of course, there were many examples of heroism on the night the *Titanic* sank, especially among those who perished in the sea.

Tonight, on this 100th anniversary of the sinking of *Titanic*---in the context of the Resurrection of Jesus---I take the liberty to mention one of those who perished. His name was Thomas Byles, a parish priest from Essex, who was traveling to conduct the wedding of his brother in Brooklyn. Having studied at the Beda College in Roman, he had been a Roman Catholic priest for just ten years.

That morning before the tragedy, Father Byles celebrated the Holy Eucharist and preached a sermon for the poorer passengers, those in 2nd and 3rd class. It was St. Thomas Sunday. That very morning he had proclaimed the Gospel story we Orthodox Christians will hear next Sunday---the story of his own patron saint, St. Thomas the Apostle. That very morning Father Thomas Byles had read, to the poorer passengers on the *Titanic*, the account of the Apostle Thomas encountering the risen Christ.

Indeed, after taking the Holy Eucharist into his hands that morning, Father Byle

had recited the Communion antiphon prescribed for Saint Thomas Sunday in the Roman Rite: *Mitte manum tuam et cognosce loca clavorum. Et noli esse incredulus, sed fidelis*---"Put forth your hand and know the places of the nails, and be not unbelieving, but faithful."

Father Byle's sermon to his international congregation that morning was built around the image of a spiritual lifebelt, which the preacher took as a metaphor for prayer and the sacraments for believers amidst the danger of spiritual shipwreck in times of temptation. Obviously, it was a timely sermon. Most of his congregation were receiving their last Holy Communion, the Sacred Viaticum.

When the ship struck the iceberg during the night, Father Byles was pacing the upper deck, using the sparse light from the portholes to recite Matins for Monday.

Then, as the ship began to sink, he assisted many third-class passengers to the Boat Deck to board the lifeboats. Twice he declined to take a place on a lifeboat. A faithful shepherd to the end, he was determined to stay with those in danger. He was no hireling, who would run when the wolf came calling. Father Byles spent his last hours of life hearing the Confessions of those---chiefly men---who chose to stay aboard.

After all the life boats had been launched, he went to the stern of the vessel and gave sacramental absolution to more than a hundred passengers who were trapped there. Father Thomas Byles was last seen kneeling on the deck of the ship, praying the Holy Rosary with the Lord's flock, as the vessel went down.

I find it difficult---pretty much impossible, really---to think of Father Byles that night, without recalling that just one week earlier he had taken the Paschal Candle into his darkened church in Essex and announced to his British congregation, "Christ is Risen!"

The death of Thomas Byles was a testimony, not just to the strength of the human spirit, but also to the presence of the Holy Spirit in a man whose life---and, therefore, whose death---had been placed in the hands of the victorious Christ.

Thomas Byles died with courage, because he knew that death no longer had the final word. He knew we belong to the One who died for our sins and rose again for our justification. In him, who trampled down death by death, we place all

our trust-in life and in death.

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