

‘Spiritual Lifeboats’ on the *Titanic*

The three Catholic priests on the doomed ship heroically brought comfort and absolution to its passengers

By K.V. Turley

On the night of April 14, 1912, as RMS *Titanic* plowed through the Atlantic, all appeared to be in order. It was to prove a tragic illusion.

The ocean liner had set sail with much fanfare from Southampton, England, on April 10, 1912. The ship made first for the French port of Cherbourg to pick up passengers, crew and supplies, and then to Queenstown, Ireland. From there, the *Titanic* was bound for its final destination — New York City — due to arrive on the morning of April 17.

But the ship never did arrive: The *Titanic* struck an iceberg at 11:40 p.m. on Sunday, April 14, and sank at 2:20 a.m. on Monday, April 15, with the loss of 1,516 lives.

Over a century later, the ship deemed “unsinkable” still haunts the public imagination. It has become a symbol of many things: luxury, innovation, social and class divisions, technological hubris. Yet, it endures as a sign of something else besides: the heroism of the priestly vocation. For as that Second Sunday of Easter drew to a close — a day that later became synonymous with Divine Mercy — three ordinary Catholic priests were called to become extraordinary martyrs to charity.

Of the 2,224 passengers on board the *Titanic*, three were priests: Father Thomas Byles, 42, from England; Father Juozas Montvila, 27, from Lithuania; and Father Josef Benedikt Peruschitz, 41, from Germany.

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Minutes of the March Business Meeting

The meeting was called to order at 7:04 PM on March 12, 2024 by Grand Knight Machovec. Guest DD Morris was present at the meeting. The Advocate, Inside Guard, Outside Guard, Warden and Trustee three year were excused. Roll call followed our Chaplain leading us in prayer. The Warden led us in the Pledge of Allegiance. Minutes from February were approved as written.

Membership Report

There is one transfer in process.

Grand Knight Report

The Grand Knight mentioned he missed attending the last couple of meetings and welcomed those present.

Chaplain’s Report

In recognition of woman’s month The Chaplain challenges us to lead the charge of reciting the Rosary. In addition, he read a brief history of our patron saint Katharine Drexel.

Treasurer Report

Checking account balance - \$ 9,407.85

Financial Secretary Report

Income – \$ 88 dinner and sale of frozen fish
Bills -Brother Simpson - \$118.37, Hospitality Sunday donuts

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March Meeting Minutes**Continued from page 1:****Communications**

No communication

Programs Director Report

Wine and cheese first Saturday after the 5PM Mass. First Tuesday night of the month 5:30 Rosary. April host TBD. Every second Sunday the Council sponsors donuts after the 10:00 mass. Volunteers are needed to help set up, serve and clean up. The new Chair is Brother Sean. Thank you Brother for filling this need. The March family potluck is cancelled. See you all during Holy Week Services. Wheel Chair support weekend – Brother DeBenedet will speak with Father to set up a weekend. Family fishing day – July 6, Caples Lake is being considered as the destination. Rib dinner – April 20, 250 tickets will be distributed. Raffle items are always needed. Please track sales by adult, child, take out, and provide information to Brother Ragusano. Holt Thursday – two volunteers signed up to assist during the service. Brother Tony and Brother George will help. Stations of the Cross on 3/15 – one more soup is needed.

Unfinished Business

Foodbank help is needed – 8AM – 12PM on the third Monday of the month to fill in for Deacon Jaime. Contact Deacon Jaime.

New Business

It was M/S/A to pay the bills. Brother Campoy urges all families to pray a 9 month Novena beginning on March 12, ending on December 12, The feast of Our Lady Of Guadalupe. Look up Novena Cardinal Burke for more information and to join the Novena. On May 18 YLI is having a retreat and financial support was asked of the Council for the speaker and lunch. It was M/S/A to donate \$300 at this time.

Advocate Report

A video was played on the Woman of the Church

Chancellor Report

No report

Insurance Agent Report

No Report

Vocations Report

No report

Fourth Degree Assembly

On Memorial Day May 27, the Fourth Degree team will be at St. Pats cemetery in Jackson. SK Maher challenges all Sir Knights to attend at least one meeting per quarter. During the next business meeting at SKD, SK Maher plans to present information about the Fourth Degree.

District Deputy Report

DD Morris reported there is a Chapter meeting this week. Continue working on Safe Haven for youth and the FS is encouraged to fill out the awards forms and send them in soon.

Good of the Order

Please pray for the repose of the souls of Gill Carboy, Eleanor Strazzo and Steven Routt.

Pray also for Mike Strazzo, John Sanders, Deacon Jaime, Nancy Koenig, Tom Mathers, Barbara Outland, Shirley Blanchet, Frank Osorio, Jack and Martha Quinn, Barbara Edmonds, Jane Ragusano, Fr. Arlon and Steve Oneto.

Lecturer Report

No report

Chaplain's Summation

The meeting was closed in prayer.

DGK Waverly closed the meeting at 8:03 .

Respectfully submitted by David Sanders

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However glamorously the sea crossing may have been portrayed by the shipping company, for the priests, as for many passengers, it was simply a means to an end. Father Byles, a convert to Catholicism, was traveling to New York City to officiate at his brother's wedding. Father Montvila was to begin life in that same city at a parish for Lithuanian immigrants. Father Peruschitz, a Benedictine monk and teacher, was heading to Minnesota to help start a school.

What linked the men was that which defined them: their priesthood. However, they also shared another quality, and that was their very ordinariness. None of them was considered remarkable by their superiors.

The main reason Father Peruschitz was chosen to go to the United States was because he was deemed young enough to adapt to the challenge. His brother monks at Scheyern Abbey in Bavaria had known a good priest and monk, but a man who in no way stood out. In fact, after his death the monastery struggled to say anything about him other than he had met his end as any monk would be expected to do.

Ordained in 1902, Father Byles had struggled for years with his health. He started his ministry in London but soon was sent to the countryside of Essex to escape the strain of city life. A small rural parish was thought about right for his gifts and aptitude.

Father Montvila, serving as a vicar in what is today northeastern Poland, had attended to the spiritual needs of the Unitates, Eastern-rite Catholics whose presence was unwelcome in czarist Russia. As a result, he was denied permission by the authorities to

minister in his homeland. So that he could once again openly serve as a priest, his superiors dispatched him to America, where his brother, who lived in Brooklyn and helped cover his fare on the *Titanic*, was waiting to greet him.

Reading their biographies, one can imagine the largely uneventful lives — at least in the eyes of the world — that might have followed their ocean journey. Yet, on the *Titanic*, all three men received a call within a call, as their vocation to priestly service took an unforeseen turn.

Survivors would later describe Father Byles and Father Peruschitz celebrating holy Mass each day for passengers in steerage and spending time with passengers in the ship's library. Lawrence Beesley, an English schoolteacher who later wrote a book about his *Titanic* experience, recounted: "In the middle of the room are two Catholic priests, one quietly reading — either English or Irish, and probably the latter — the other, dark, bearded, with a broad-brimmed hat, talking earnestly to a friend in German and evidently explaining some verse in the open Bible before him."

On Saturday, April 13, Father Byles heard confessions for hours in preparation for the following day: the Second Sunday of Easter, then known as Low Sunday and today as Divine Mercy Sunday. On April 14, he delivered a homily, in English and French, on the theme "Our prayers and the sacraments of the Church are spiritual lifeboats taking us back to God"; Father Peruschitz delivered the homily in German and Hungarian. Both priests preached on the necessity to have a "lifeboat in the shape of religious consolation at hand in case of spiritual shipwreck."

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Later that night, as word spread that the ship had struck an iceberg, Father Byles and Father Peruschitz descended below decks to steerage, where fear was descending into suffocating panic. The priests quickly realized that saving souls was even more important than saving lives. Perhaps, too, they sensed that God had been preparing them for this moment.

Compared to the other priests, little is known of Father Montvila's movements that night. Reports simply state that "the young Lithuanian priest, Juozas Montvila, served his calling to the very end." There are witness accounts of Father Byles and Father Peruschitz, though, and the picture that emerges is remarkable.

An eyewitness later told *America* magazine: "When all the excitement became fearful, all the Catholics on board desired the assistance of priests with the greatest fervor. Both priests aroused those condemned to die to say acts of contrition and prepare themselves to meet the face of God."

Then the priests began to organize the evacuation of women and children, escorting them upward through the various decks while leading the rosary and giving general absolution. Witnesses later reported that the dominant characteristic of Father Byles was his presence of mind.

Bertha Moran, an Irish garment worker traveling third-class, would tell *The Evening World*: "Continuing the prayers, he led us to where the boats were being lowered. Helping the women and children in, he whispered to them words of comfort and encouragement." Seeing the first batch of women and children safely aboard lifeboats, he de-

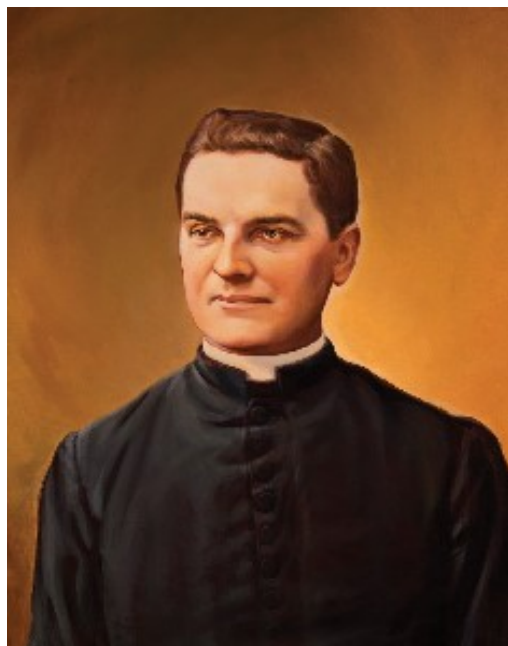
clined an offer to join them.

Another young Irish woman, Ellen Mockler, would later say: "After I got in the boat, which was the last one to leave, and we were slowly going further away from the ship, I could hear distinctly the voice of the priest and the response to his prayers. Then they became fainter and fainter, until I could only hear the strains of [the hymn] 'Nearer, My God, to Thee' and the screams of the people left behind. We were told by the men who rowed our boat that we were mistaken as to the screams and that it was the people singing, but we knew otherwise."

The ship finally sank at about 2:20 a.m., its stern rising high in the air before plunging into the freezing waters of the North Atlantic. None of the three priests was seen again. All had been offered places on lifeboats; all had declined.

Reading accounts of these events, it is easy to assume — or hope — that one would also act with such integrity. Yet, it is important to recall that in the ship's last hour, the mood on board the *Titanic* became one of sheer terror. It is in this context that the witness of Fathers Byles, Peruschitz and Montvila needs to be pondered. The moment it became clear that the ship was doomed and there were not enough lifeboats for all the passengers called for more than the courage of a hero; it called for the courage of a martyr.

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee! E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me; Still all my song shall be nearer, my God, to Thee...



Prayer for the Canonization of Blessed Michael McGivney Founder of the Knights of Columbus God, our Father, protector of the poor and defender of the widow and orphan, you called your priest, Blessed Michael McGivney, to be an apostle of Christian family life and to lead the young to the generous service of their neighbor. Through the example of his life and virtue, may we follow your Son, Jesus Christ, more closely, fulfilling his commandment of charity and building up his Body which is the Church. Let the inspiration of your servant prompt us to greater confidence in your love so that we may continue his work of caring for the needy and the outcast. We humbly ask that you glorify Blessed Michael McGivney on earth according to the design of your holy will. Through his intercession, grant the favor I now present (here make your request). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Dinner Hosts

Mark Koenig April 9

TBD May 14

David Sanders June 11

The Officers of Council

1849

Grand Knight Justin Machovec

Spiritual Advisor Deacon Jaime Garcia

Deputy G.K. Matthew Waverly

Chancellor Phil Gonzalez

Warden Jacob Schmidt

Treasurer Bob Strazzo

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All Council Officers (except Br. Charlie Esola) can be reached by email. Use the first letter of their first name, the entire last name, followed by: @kofc-1849.org

Sample: mkoenig@kofc-1849.org

Knights of Columbus Council 1849

Events Calendar 2023—2024

Planning meetings at Saint Patrick's Hall, first Wednesday at 6:00 PM of every month, starting July 2023 until June 2024.

Monthly Business meetings at Saint Katharine Drexel (St. Teresa of Calcutta Room) on 2nd Tuesday at 7:00 PM, starting July 2023 until June 2024. Dinner at 6:00 PM.

Family Fishing Day, Silver Lake, July 1st, 2023

Installation Mass and Picnic, SKD 10 AM August 20, 2023 (3rd Sunday)

Summer Dinner (Tri-tip), at SKD after 5PM Mass September 30, 2023 (5th Saturday)

Clergy Appreciation Dinner, Mark and Nancy Koenig Residence 5:00 PM September 17, 2023

Tootsie Roll Drive, weekend of October 13, 14, 15, 2023

Mass for Departed Knights, SKD 10 AM November 12, 2023 (2nd Sunday)

Christmas Party, SKD 6 PM, December 15, 2023 (3rd Friday)

Winter Dinner (Fish), SKD 6:30 PM February 3, 2024 (1st Saturday)

Family Potluck, SKD 6:00 PM March 26, 2024 (4th Tuesday)

Spring Dinner (Ribs), SKD 6:30 PM April 20, 2024 (3rd Saturday)

Family Potluck, SKD 6:00 PM May 18, 2024 (3rd Saturday)

Hospitality Donuts every 2nd Sunday at SKD

Hospitality Wine and Cheese every 1st weekend Vigil Mass at SKD

Rosary before 10 AM Mass, SKD every 5th Sunday of months with 5 Sunday

KVGC Rosary Tuesday before the first Wednesday of each month at 5:30 at SKD – St. Maximillian Kolbe Room

April Calendar of Events

Tuesday, April 2: Knights KVGC Rosary at Saint Katharine Drexel after the 6:00 PM Mass.

Wednesday, April 3: Planning Meeting at Saint Patrick's Hall at 6:00 PM.

Saturday, April 6: Wine and Cheese Hospitality at Saint Katharine Drexel after the 5:00 PM Mass.

Sunday, April 14: Knights Donut Sunday at Saint Katharine Drexel after the 10:00 AM Mass.

Saturday, April 20: Spring (Rib) Dinner at Saint Katharine Drexel. Dinner after Vigil Mass.

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