

Lent091

Very often in the history of church art the image of a curved boat surrounded by huge waves has been depicted to remind the viewer of this story from Genesis 9 about a universal flood and God's command to Noah to build a boat to save his family and seven pairs of animals, both clean and unclean, and seven pairs of birds. But a new meaning was then attached to this image. The boat or ark of Noah became the church, indeed, the bark of Peter the fisherman, and the people inside it came to represent the members of the church, the baptized, who were saved from the storm of sin and destruction, saved for new life in Jesus in the comfort of the church, the new ark or boat. Indeed, our second reading today from the First Letter of Peter states that explicitly. Speaking of the safety which Noah's ark provided it says: "This prefigured baptism which saves you now."

But I wonder how much of the reality of his image is alive today. Do people today feel threatened by a huge storm of sin? Do people today still feel that membership in the Church saves them from this huge storm of sin? More conservative believers are always harping on the fact that there is no sense of sin today. Personally, I don't like their harping upon this fact. Yet I have to admit that I

think that they are right to some extent. When belief in God grows faint, and that is the situation today in the developed world, there is less reason to believe in the reality of sin, for sin implies the recognition of a right and a wrong, and when there is no God there is no built-in right or wrong. Right and wrong are moveable goal posts. People can adjust them to the playing field on which they play out their lives, and ordinarily they will do so to their own advantage, no matter what the cost to other people. For it is presumed that everyone is doing the same thing. Each one seeks his or her own good, even to the exclusion of the good of the neighbor.

In this context, and it is the context to some extent of the society in which we live, what do people feel who bother to live in the church and bother to have their children baptized and attempt to live their lives, and to guide the lives of their children, according to the church's beliefs? Do they feel that life in the church is really protection from the storm of sin outside the boat, outside the church? I think they do. I think we do, for we are such people. We live in the boat which is the church. We recognize the fact that there is a storm of sin surrounding us. We recognize that that storm can even enter our lives if we cease to rely on God's grace. We sense that we are sometimes almost leaning out of the side of the

boat and are almost in the water. Yes, we realize how fragile our remaining in the boat can be. But we have the other people in the boat to help us. Their lives, their prayers, their love keep us in. And the sacraments which the community offers us, the body and blood of the Lord and the possibility of forgiveness if we fall out, are there to help us, to strengthen us, to get us back inside and even help us grab an oar and help the whole boat to maintain an even keel.

Therefore, let us give thanks to God that we are in the boat, that we have the sacraments, that we have each other to support our efforts to lead a Christian life. Let us live our faith joyfully and let us explain to others the reason for our hope, for our positive attitude in life, even when things look hopeless. This is our way of imitating the Lord Jesus himself, of repeating his message: The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in this Good News.

If we do this, then perhaps those outside the boat will begin to recognize the darkness, the obscurity, the lost character of the situation in which they live and will look for a way out, for something that is still afloat in the storm. Then they may begin to approach the church.

So many today are in a kind of semi-darkness. They are good, and they try to be kind and good. But they see no need for a church. Indeed, they may not even believe in God, at least not in the way God has been presented to them. Without realizing it, they are living on the remnants of the faith of their forefathers. But if they continue on this way, either they or their children are going to run out of all these remnants, and then there will be nothing left but the jungle of self-love, the struggle for self-survival at any cost. Let us offer our help to those in this situation by our own lives from within the boat, by the witness of our faithful and love-filled lives. The rest is up to God, whose compassion is never-ending and who always offers us the strength to begin again.