

CHRISTMAS 2016

December 25—It is always the last act of the Captain of a ship. The one he fears most and always avoids. When all seems lost, when every attempt to keep his vessel afloat has failed, by Morse Code, by radio, or by flag, he gives the order and the SOS goes out. It is a universal call, a desperate plea for help!

A few weeks ago, off the coast of North Carolina, a foreign cruise ship and luxury liner, heading into port for some much needed repairs, became trapped in a sudden and violent storm at sea. On board, were 34 crew members and within minutes their lives were in peril. The ship was taking on water badly, the waves and the winds tossing it like a toy, rolling from side to side, as the Captain radioed and signaled for help. He knew—as everyone onboard did—that it was a perilous situation. The Captain said that all he could think was that their answer and their help, would have to come from above. Literally from the heavens, for the seas and the winds were just too rough for any vessel to reach them. And, even if they abandoned ship into the lifeboats provided they would surely all drown.

But, as their hope turned to fear, and their prayers fervently increased, the sound of rotor blades overheard was heard, as a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter hovered above them. Like an angel from heaven, a rope was

lowered with a corpsman from the chopper sent to the deck of the ship, to assist the frightened and shivering crew. And one by one they were hoisted to safety. The helicopter, built to carry 12, would be put to its limit and 17 would pile aboard as another chopper raced to the scene. The ship tossed in the fury of the storm and with each wave seemed to be ready to roll over.

With painstaking care and precision, the Coast Guard crew calmly and swiftly did their job, and what could have been a tragic ending turned into a rescue mission without parallel. Just as the ship's Captain had predicted, the answer had come from above—some say from heaven—as all 34 members of the ship's crew were flown safely to the Coast Guard station. There, finally safe on solid ground, one by one they stumbled from the helicopter to the tarmac and kissed the earth. Then they kissed and embraced their rescuers with tearful gratitude. The Coast Guard Helicopter Captain would later say, *“It was an early Christmas gift for us to be able to help them and to save their lives.”*

My friends, since the very beginning of humanity and from the parents we know as Adam and Eve, with a sin that punctured us all and cost us the Grace of our friendship with the Almighty, just like that cruise ship faltering on a stormy and dangerous sea so, too, has been the story of our human race. Like those giant waves and powerful gusts, men and women of ancient time

found themselves almost beyond hope: tossed by sin, weakened by the human condition, and finally hunted down by death that ended with the grave. Old Testament prophets spoke, men and women of Biblical fame prayed, and all clung to a slim hope that, somehow, from the storehouse of God's mercy, He would see fit to answer their constant prayers and send a rescuer from heaven. Just like that ship's crew in peril, they knew that this mission was like no other, for mercy must come from above, for there was no way to regain that Grace from earth upward, the only answer must come down to us.

And so, in the fullness of time, on a still and silent night while the world was at peace, as nations and kings slept, a tiny child from a Virgin mother's womb crept into life. Guarded by a foster father named Joseph and held by a mother named Mary, this most humble of births was proclaimed in song by the angels. The brightest of stars would lead shepherds and magi to honor the infant king as divinity was wrapped in the swaddling bands of humanity. A tiny cry came forth from those eternal lungs and the Son of God, helpless and homeless, laid his tiny head in a manger bed of straw. The RESCUER was finally here and a ladder of Grace had been lowered FROM heaven to earth.

But, my friends, how humbling it is, from that moment to this one, that the Eternal love would know NO bounds for the Child sent was no ordinary

boy. He was a messenger like no other, for this Child was the Lord of Lords, and the rescuer was the Master Himself, here to personally show us the way to holiness and peace and to embrace us with His love so that one day He could take us home to be with Him.

How grateful we are this night. How joyful this celebration of the solemnity of the Lord's birth is, for just like that stranded and hopeless crew on a tossing ship, we can kiss the one who saved us and can feel His embrace every moment of every day, because we know that He is still with us in the Church that He left us. Each Christmas, as familiar hymns warm our hearts and our homes, as troubles seem to fade even just for an hour or a day, we know WHY: that a tiny Child enters in splendor to dwell in the stable of our lives, and to bring us HIS peace forever. Today, and every day, we must never forget that He came DOWN from heaven to speak to us, to walk with us and, in the end, to rescue us all.

My friends, this Christmas, may we know the Peace that only He can bring and may we NEVER forget the Spirit of Love that He brought us, for it gives us the privilege and the joy to say those two words that really say it all, and that always mean so much:

Joyeux Noel, Bon Natale, Feliz Navidad ... MERRY CHRISTMAS!