

Pilgrimage for the Sea Services Mass celebrated at Mother Seton's shrine

EMMITSBURG, Md. (CNS) – Bishop Neal J. Buckon told Massgoers at the National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Oct. 3 that “what seems impossible in our culture, Jesus makes possible through grace.”

“Lifelong fidelity is a grace from God. We have multiple relationships in our life such as lawyer and client, doctor and patient, employer and employee,” he said in his homily.

“Only one is traced by Genesis to the hand of God. Only one is marked by lifelong fidelity,” he said. “Only one is marked by loyalty to only one individual and that is marriage.”

Bishop Buckon, an auxiliary of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, was the main celebrant of the annual Pilgrimage for the Sea Services Mass at the shrine in Emmitsburg.

The day's Gospel reading was from St. Mark in which the Pharisees challenged Jesus with questions about the law of Moses.

“The Pharisees debated the limits of divorce under Jewish law, whether the grounds for divorce should be narrow or broad,” Bishop Buckon said. “They try to draw Jesus into that debate. The Lord refuses to enter that debate and reframes it.”

“Rather than discussing the grounds of divorce we should be discussing how to preserve marriage as God intended, one man and one woman for life,” the bishop said.

The special Mass brings together members of the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Merchant Marines and Public Health

Services with family and friends to join in prayer to thank St. Elizabeth Ann Seton for her protection and ask for her continued intercession for the country, the safety of all those at sea and for those who have fallen while serving their country.

Mother Seton is the patroness of the sea services of the United States. She had strong connections to those who spend their lives at sea and those devoted to public health.

Two of her sons, Richard and William, served in the Navy, and her father, Richard Bayley, was a prominent New York City physician in the 18th century and the city's first chief health officer.

The congregation also prayed for more Catholic priests to serve as military chaplains. During World War II, Catholic chaplains in the military numbered in the thousands.

Today, the Navy has only 41 active Catholic priests for its roughly 107,000 Catholic sailors and Marines, which means that one priest serves more than 2,000 men and women.

As he opened his homily, Bishop Buckon noted his own connections to the military – now and before he was ordained a priest in 1995 for the Diocese of Cleveland – and his family members' service.

He was on active duty as an Army officer from 1975 to 1983, when he resigned his commission. He traveled the world, visiting more than 100 countries, then entered the seminary.

As a seminarian, he served in the U.S. Army Reserve as a chaplain candidate and after his ordination entered the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps in 1996. After a distinguished career as a military chaplain, he retired from the Army Dec. 31, 2010, and was ordained a bishop for the military archdiocese Feb. 22, 2011.

"I may have been what you call a 'landlubber,'" he said, "but I live in a Catholic church on Coronado Island," off the coast of San Diego.

"On one end of the island are aircraft carriers, and on the other end are the Navy Seals. Across the bay is the Third Fleet," he noted, adding that members of his extended family "have proudly served in the Navy, the Marine Corps and the Merchant Marine."

In his homily, he said, there is "a larger issue" that "goes beyond marriage to all of the serious commitments we make in our life."

"We should be careful about the promises and commitments we make to God, to his Church and to others. Commitments, large and small, shape who we are," he said.

"Maturity is marked not by the number of options we leave open but by the commitments we make and keep," he added. "We will be remembered not by the number of options we leave open but by the commitments we make and keep."

He stressed the importance of people being able to trust one another's word – something that often seems to be in short supply.

"The media are filled with the stories of broken promises by builders, politicians, employers, pension fund managers and insurance companies," Bishop Buckon said. "The crisis of fidelity in marriage is a symptom of a pandemic infidelity in our time."

"Jesus says that with his grace we can be different," he continued. "People should be able to trust our promises. Our word should be as strong and reliable as the wood of pew in which we sit. That is one way we can be countercultural."

He added, "One grace for which we all need to pray is the

grace of fidelity in marriage and in our daily life,” and he pointed to a historic American naval battle he said “gives us four lessons in grace when applied to marriage and to our daily lives”— the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812.

Under “the leadership of the fearless” Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, who was just 27, the Americans defeated and captured the entire British fleet Sept. 10, 1813, the bishop said.

Before the battle, as the British watched, the Americans “frenetically built a fleet that had more ships, more sailors and more canons” than the enemy, he explained.

The British wished they could sail into the harbor to put an end to the building and “definitively maintain their control of Lake Erie,” but an invisible barrier, the bishop said, prevented them from reaching their goal – a sand bar 5 feet below the surface.

“One valuable lesson for us is to be mindful of the invisible barrier that exists as we work out our salvation,” Bishop Buckon said. “Yes, we want to sail into heaven and become the perfect Christian, and realize our goal of eternal glory, and experience for ourselves the beatific vision. But there is this sand bar, and it is called ‘sin.’”

“I think you will agree that when sin becomes habitual in marriage and in family life, it is like being grounded on a sand bar without a tugboat in sight,” he said. “This is when we need that grace that comes from the Lord.”

The second lesson, Bishop Buckon said, “is to believe that the grace that comes to us from Jesus can build upon our human nature and help us to be a better person. Grace that comes from the Lord can lead us from conflict to peace.”

The third lesson, he said, is found in Perry’s motto: “Don’t Give Up the Ship.”

This “captures the tenacity of the brave men and women that continue serve in the sea services of the United States,” he said.

“In the seminary we learned that the goods of marriage are: unity, indissolubility, fidelity and fruitfulness or children,” he continued. “These goods are worth fighting for and to every married couple I would say, ‘Don’t give up the ship! ... Your marriage and your family are worth fighting for.’”

“Fighting for your marriage may look like praying together, going on a married couples’ retreat, seeking the wise counsel of a holy priest or chaplain and taking steps to make your family a part of the family of God. ... (It) means to seek the ways and the means that open the floodgates of Jesus’ operational grace.”

The final lesson comes from Perry’s dispatch to Maj. Gen. William Henry Harrison at the end of the Battle of Lake Erie. It’s often quoted as: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

“We can be our own worst enemy,” Bishop Buckon said, so to avoid this, “the final lesson is to walk with Jesus each and every day.”

“The essence of the Christian life is to follow the example of love which Christ set for us,” he said. “It means loving God with all that we have and loving others as we love ourselves.”