

PERSEVERANCE BEYOND MEASURE: LESSONS FROM THE *ENDURANCE*

Better late than never! Last week, the exploration world rejoiced when a ship was discovered a whopping **9869 feet** below the surface of the Weddell Sea– and incredibly well-preserved. It was the **Endurance!** ([click here](#)) Not ringing a bell? That’s okay– it’s been **107 years** since anyone saw it! The triple-mast ship was substantial, stretching 144 feet, its hull reinforced to resist crumpling in the floating ice. Even before serving as a chaplain aboard a cruise to **Antarctica** in 1999, I was captivated by the example of the intrepid **explorers** who risked everything in the name of adventure, science and a burning desire to know what lies beyond the known world. Long before **Google Earth** made it possible to “drop in” on practically any city in the world, experienced sailors set out on uncharted waters! Still, one account stands out, that of the Imperial **Trans-Arctic Expedition of 1914** and the incredible struggle for survival endured by the crew, heroically led by **Sir Ernest Shackleton**.

The *Endurance* was beset and eventually crushed by ice floes leaving the **28 men stranded** on the pack ice in the Weddell Sea. All in all, the crew drifted on the sheets of pack ice for just **over a year**. What do you think went through their minds? Call AAA? Think again! Onstar? No dice! In reality, they saw their very lives flash before their eyes– they were **never going home**. They escaped in lifeboats to Elephant Island, a foggy (or snowy) mass of ice and rock 350 miles away. It was the nearest “land” in sight, so it would have to do. It wasn’t exactly an island paradise. Think rock, ice, snow – and wind. Here they regrouped, hunted for seals and turned their lifeboats into a shack. As Shackleton recounted, “The semi-starvation during the drift on the icefloe, added to the exposure in the boats, and the inclemencies (sic) of the weather encountered after our landing on Elephant Island, had left its mark on a good many of them.”



The *Endurance* being
swallowed by pack ice

The men needed **shelter** more than anything! The boats were no longer seaworthy. Once the relief of reaching land set in and they could get their bearings, the obvious question became– what now? Shackleton was as wise as he was realistic, knowing that **no search party** was forthcoming– searchers would have no way to even know where to look for them. So, he did something unusual for a skipper– he **set off** apart from the bulk of his crew, and in an open lifeboat, no less. He and five others set sail for **South Georgia**, a windswept island some **820 miles** away. But it had a whaling station– and people! Today, it is a British territory with no permanent inhabitants, save a small scientific staff and two museum workers who welcome infrequent visiting vessels ashore. That is unless you count the penguins! The island’s **penguin population** is the size of **Chicago**– 3,000,000 live there! But South Georgia Island was their only hope.

After seventeen grueling days at sea, the small crew spotted land and crossed the island **twenty-two miles on foot!** On the afternoon of 20 May 1916, the six men reached the outskirts of Stromness Whaling Station, encountering two small boys. The boys **ran in fright**– can you blame them? When Shackleton knocked on the wharf manager’s door, the man opened and simply stated, “Well?” Shackleton’s reply: “Don’t you know me? My name is Shackleton.” Can you imagine the sight! Meanwhile, back at Elephant Island, the remaining crew members did their best to survive and wait. And wait. Shackleton gathered needed supplies and planned for the rescue. Procuring a boat from the whaling station, they headed to the Falkland Islands. With the Chilean government’s

assistance, they procured a suitable vessel back to Elephant Island. But were the men even alive? Shackleton received his answer on August 30, 1916. As the borrowed vessel approached Elephant Island, a man on shore spotted it. He furiously tried to grab a tin of fuel to light something—anything—on fire to serve as a flare. When the boat was close enough to shore, Shackleton shouted, “Are you all well?” The reply came—“All safe, all well.” Not a single man was lost; they **survived for 128 days**. How many of us would have given up hope? So, it is no surprise that historians have persisted in looking for the original ship! Who, might you say, could dive so deep in Antarctic waters? Or should I say, “What could dive so deep?” The answer is an amazing robot called **Sabertooth**. The photos it took ([see here](#)) clearly reveal the **ship’s name** splayed across the stern, one of the broken masts, and even the wheel.

The ship (barque) as a symbol of the Church recalls the account of Jesus asleep in the back of the boat, and yet still guiding the Church through troubled waters. In his treatise on Baptism (*De Baptismo*), **Tertullian** established a connection between the Church and Noah, positing that “the Church is the type of the ark.” If in the first shipwreck of faith salvation came by means of the wood of the Ark, so in the second it came through the **wood of the Cross**. He writes that a small ship (*navicula*) “presented a type of the Church, because on the sea, which means this present world, it is being tossed about by the waves, which means persecutions and temptations...” The finding of *Endurance* closes a chapter of an amazing story of perseverance against all reasonable odds. During Lent, may we glean lessons from their courage, persevere in our resolutions and never lose hope.

- **In need of Lenten almsgiving** ideas? I am investigating ways to help our Ukrainian brothers and sisters through viable channels. Stay tuned. I will also suggest a local option to support.
- Our Catholic Schools have done an **outstanding job** with in-person learning for two years! Last year, I auctioned off my baseball cards to support scholarships for these students. I’ve invited the **Aim Higher Foundation** to provide information about their scholarship program at an upcoming coffee and donuts next month.
- March “Catholic” Madness? The NCAA Basketball tournament includes **eleven Catholic** schools this year—surely a record! The teams with the best chance include **Gonzaga** (Jesuit) and **Villanova** (Augustinian). Since St. Augustine is my favorite theologian, I’m partial to Villanova!
- “**Sundays** don’t count!” When a thoughtful parishioner presented me with a lemon meringue pie, I was tongue-tied, sharing that I have sworn off all sweets during Lent. But she’s correct—Sundays are **never** a day of fast. So if you choose, enjoy your favorite treats on Lenten Sundays. Of course, that delicious slice of pie also made Monday feel like Ash Wednesday—**starting** all over again!
- The jury is out on the recent **Minnesota Twins** trades. Tough to trade a #1 draft pick from 2021 who throws **100-mph fastball**, along with some established veterans! But as they say, the future is now. Acquiring not one, but two New York Yankees starters— not bad! Time will tell, but the Twins cannot afford another horrible season.

Sincerely in Christ,
Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



Photo Credit: Falklands Maritime Heritage Trust and National Geographic



The crew waving to Ernest Shackleton as he sails for help to South Georgia Island.