

# MANY PARTS, ONE BODY

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*“But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”*

(1 Corinthians 12:20, NABR)

When I began drafting this article, it was the pontificate of Pope Francis. *Sede vacante*, “vacant chair” or the period without a pope, was only in the film *Conclave*. At that time, I had been thinking about a commentary on the diversity of chapels, oratories, and Marian devotions in the National Shrine. I began my first draft based solely on the first letter from Paul to the Corinthians, chapter twelve. I had no idea that within a few weeks, the theme of this article and the architectural aspects of the National Shrine, would also be reflective of the motto of Pope Leo XIV, the first Augustinian pope, the first North-American-born pope (Dolton, Chicago, Illinois), and the second pope from South America (missionary priest and 4th Bishop of Chiclayo, Peru). Truly, an “American” pope.



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Augustine of Hippo, East Façade, National Shrine

His papal motto, *In Illo uno unum* (In the One, we are one), which was also his episcopal motto, is from the *Exposition on Psalm 128*, by Augustine of Hippo: “When I speak of Christians in the plural, I understand one in the One Christ” (§2). Consequently, this article concerning the National Shrine will also serve as a salutation to a new pontificate.

## Barque of Peter

One of the oldest and most ubiquitous symbols of the Church, the people of God, is a “barque,” a masted sailing vessel. The image shown here is known as the *Barque of Peter*, a sailing vessel with an unfurled sail



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Barque of Peter, South Façade

emblazoned with a cross, sculpted in bas-relief on the south façade of the National Shrine near the main entrance. This image is a “ship” not a “boat.” The main difference between the two is size. By definition, a “boat” is a *small* vessel, and a “ship” is a *large seagoing* vessel. While a ship can carry several boats (e.g., lifeboats), a boat cannot carry a ship. At the stern of this ship,

perched on the raised quarterdeck, the position of authority from where the captain or master commands his vessel, is a dove: the Holy Spirit, guiding the captain, guiding the vessel. Peter or any of his 266 successors would be the captain.

Although the Barque of Peter is tossed about on the secular seas of persecution, disbelief, and conflict, it is never shipwrecked. Hippolytus of Rome (second-third century bishop and theologian) wrote, “The Church is like a ship on the high seas; it is standing in wuthering wind and waves but does not sink.” We, who are secure within the Barque of Peter, do not fear the tempest around us. We weather the stormy seas in this mystical Ark of the Church in anticipation of reaching the shores of the New Jerusalem.

The genesis of this ecclesiastical symbol is uncertain, though in ancient pagan religions, the boat ferried the souls of the dead to the hereafter. The Greek myth of Charon and the River Styx is one that immediately comes to mind. For our purposes, however, let us turn to Scripture, particularly the gospels, where the story of the Church and its symbolism as the “little ship of Peter” (*Navicula Petrus*) have their beginning.

After Jesus was forced out of Nazareth (Luke 4:16, 28-30), he “went down to Capernaum,” a fishing village on the northern shore of the freshwater Sea of Galilee (Matt 4:18-19), also known as Lake Gennesaret [Genezareth] and Lake Tiberias, in the region of Galilee and Judea, where fishing was the main industry. There, Jesus met Peter and his brother Andrew, who were fishermen. Peter owned his own fishing boat, a sign of success in the trade, and something that was helpful to Jesus and his ministry. One might say that it was helpful not only for fishermen but also “fishers of men” (cf. Matt 4:19).

*The Relic Master*, an adventuresome tale by Christopher Buckley, recounts the escapades of a sixteenth-century relic hunter named Dismas and his best friend, Albrecht Dürer (yes, the renowned painter). This tale begins with Dismas considering the purchase of “an entire boat avouched to have belonged to

Saint Peter in his pre-apostolic Galilean fishing days.” After careful inspection, Dismas deems it a fake. Centuries later, in real time, 1986 to be exact, an “Ancient Galilee Boat” or “Jesus Boat,” a fishing boat of the first century, was discovered on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee. The remnants of this boat, buried deep in the mud, became visible during a period of drought. This artifact was in remarkable condition because the mud had impeded the decomposition of the wood. Of course, there is neither written nor physical evidence linking this boat to either Peter or Jesus. There is, however, the mention in the gospels, approximately fifty times, of a boat such as this. The discovery is important because it shows the size (27 ft x 7.5 ft) and the raw material (wood) of a small boat used on the Sea of Galilee, the type that Peter might have used and in which Jesus might have sailed. The size of the boat, also speaks of the stature of people at that time.



Berthold Werner, Public Domain

Galilee Boat, Yigal Allon Centre, Kibbutz Ginnosar, Israel

The average height of a Jewish man was five feet and between 1 to 5 inches; women were smaller, hovering at 5 feet or less. Scripturally, Isaiah (53:2) tells us the “Servant of the Lord” was no different in physical appearance than other men of his day. In the gospel story of the storm at sea, at least three people are in the boat: “[Jesus] got into a boat with his disciples.” Artistic depictions usually show three disciples and Jesus.

In 2023, a true reproduction of this “Galilee Boat” became part of the collections of the Vatican Museums and it was blessed by Pope Francis.

### At Sea

In the ceiling of the west apse of the Crypt Church, there is a Pewabic panel of a monstrous sea creature and the prophet, Jonah.



Jonah and the Great Fish, West Apse, Crypt Church

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Scripture does not identify the species and neither does this ceramic. In Jewish tradition, the terrifying primordial sea monster was the Leviathan. The creature in this image is odd-looking, but then too, so was the Leviathan.

Within Judaism there was a belief that the sea was the only part of Creation that God had not tamed; great monstrous creatures and demons inhabited the waters, but God still had authority over the waters and the creatures therein. In the book of Jonah, we read of a “great fish,” swallowing the prophet, but at the command of the LORD. Without a doubt, it took great courage and trust in God to sail on the waters, particularly in a small wooden boat. If we follow this maritime theme further, we arrive at the gospel story of the Calming of the Storm (Mark 4:35-41; Matt 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25).

The Sea of Galilee is a small freshwater body of water surrounded by sloping hills, which cause atmospheric changes, which cause sudden storms. It is thirteen miles long and eight miles wide and fed mainly by the Jordan River, which flows through it north to south. Notably, the three gospels describe this storm quite differently. In Luke, what is a “squall” or a sudden strong gust of wind, heavy rain, and hail, is recorded by Mark as a major “whirlwind,” a tornado over the water. In Matthew, it is a “violent storm,” though scholars say a literal translation is an underwater “earthquake.” What is important in all three gospels is the fierce event of nature and the authority and power of Jesus over the forces of nature. In each version Jesus “rebukes” the wind and the waves. This is a verb usually associated with the expulsion of demons. As previously stated, the untamed sea or waters were obedient only to God. That Jesus can “rebuke” these forces of nature cause the disciples to ask, “who then is this,” “what sort of man is this” who has authority over that which is obedient only to God? This is the question that the entire gospel passage tries to answer, and a revelation that Jesus is giving to his disciples, “Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?” Do you not yet know who I am?

During the years of persecution of the Church, when the ship of faith was severely battered and tormented, the miracle story of the tempest and the authority and saving presence of Jesus was often recounted. Tertullian, an apologist of the second century, when writing on Baptism, offered this insight: “That little boat represented



Jesus Teaching by the Seaside, Crypt Church, National Shrine

the figure of the Church, which is troubled ‘in the sea,’ that is, in the world, ‘by waves,’ that is, persecutions and temptations, while the Lord, through patience, sleeping as it were, until, awakened by the prayers of the saints, he restrains the world and restores tranquility to his people” (*De Baptismo*, 12).

As the navigation of the high seas grew, so did the use of celestial navigation. Depictions of the Barque of Peter now included the North Star, *Polaris*, the brightest star in the constellation of the “Little Dipper” (*Ursa Minor*) in the northern sky. The North Star became the symbol for Mary, the “Star of the Sea,” helping to guide the voyage of the Barque of Peter. Bonaventure, a 13th-century Franciscan theologian and bishop, when speaking of Mary as the *Maris Stella*, he emphasized her role “as a star above the sea,” for she “guides to a landfall in Heaven those who navigate the sea of this world in the ship of innocence or penance.”



Our Lady Star of the Sea, Southeast Narthex

Among the Christian armadas, secured on the quarterdeck along with the national and religious colors or flags, was a crucifix, and a shrine, very often in honor of the Virgin Mary. As a sign of respect, it was customary when boarding a vessel, to render a salute – a genuflection, a doffing of a cap or hat, or a hand salute – towards the quarterdeck, a custom still

in practice today, though its intent and method has changed.

Maritime symbols can be found throughout the National Shrine: from the Pewabic cross-anchor with fish (Hope in Christ) in the Crypt Church, to the marble Hope in Christ, Crypt Church



Hope in Christ, Crypt Church  
rondel of *Maris Stella* (Our Lady, Star of the Sea) in the Great Upper Church.

## The Nave

The largest maritime symbol in the National Shrine is the “*nave*,” the main part of the church where the people of God gather. It extends lengthwise from the main entrance to the chancel area. The word *nave*, common to church architecture, is used in several ancient languages, suggesting both a Christian and non-Christian appreciation. In Latin, *navis* means “ship,” not a boat. The diminutive *navicula* means “boat,” or, quite literally, the “lesser ship.” Also worth noting is the ecclesiastical use of the word *navicula* for the boat-shaped



Navicula or Incense Boat

incense-holder, commonly called the “incense boat.” The shift in symbols from a boat to a ship was the result

of a growing faith. No longer could the Church fit within the small ranks of a fishing boat.

*The Apostolic Constitutions*, a fourth-century



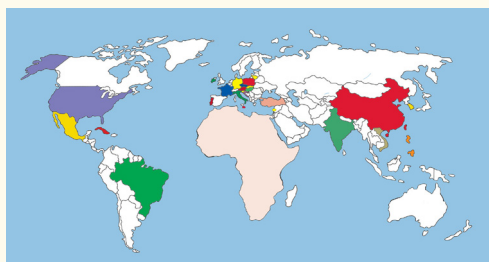
collection of eight books on the procedures of the Church, presents this change in practical, nautical terms. When the bishop, “as one that is the *commander of a great ship*,” calls an assembly of the Church, he is “charging the *deacons as mariners* to prepare places for the brethren *as for passengers*” (Book II, Section 7, “On Assembling in the Church”). In terms of a “boat,” remember that Jesus slept on a cushion or the helmsman’s seat, reserved for the person guiding the boat.

At one time, the nave had assigned seating. The section immediately inside the entrance and farthest from the altar was reserved for the *catechumens*, those studying the faith in preparation for baptism, who were required to leave after the sermon. The “nave proper,” the area nearest to the altar, was for “those who receive Holy Communion.” Today, of course, the “ship of faith” offers open seating.

Shipbuilders were also church builders. We see this in the oldest wooden churches in Christianity, the Norwegian “stave churches,” which presented ceilings like the frame of a Viking ship. In the American Colonies, shipbuilders were also active as church builders. The Mother of Africa Chapel of the National Shrine is an excellent example, with its rich mahogany vaulted ceiling and waterline with fish emblems etched into the marble wainscoting.



Mother of Africa Chapel



Nations of the National Shrine

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## Many Parts, One Body

So, what does all this have to do with the first letter from Paul to the Corinthians? It is quite simple. The nave, the ship, is the Church, “the one body.” The lateral chapels, the “lesser ships” or boats, are “the many.” They may serve as lifeboats, rescuing those caught adrift at sea or they may be a vehicle of evangelization or respite.

Gathered within the ship of faith, we are a “collective,” we are one body of believers. It is here where our strength lies. As Jesus taught his followers, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20; cf. 1 Cor 5:4).



Easter Sunday 2025

During the celebration of Eucharist at the National Shrine, we, the “one body,” standing in the nave, are flanked by a diversity of people, of nations, and of devotions; we, the “one body” are flanked by “the many.”

Paul writes:

“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves, or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body” (1 Cor 12:13, 20).

As Pope Leo XIV reminds us, “In the One, we are one.” Whether we stand in the nave of the National Shrine, our diocesan cathedral, or our home parish, we stand in the mystical Ark of the Church and are strengthened by the “one Spirit” because we are “one body.” 🙏

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