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“Burn the Boats”

In the year 334 BC Alexander the Great landed on the shores of Persia greatly outnumbered. Alexander turned to his men and made a decision that changed the fate of history on that day: “Burn the boats.” He wanted a “zero option” outcome – victory or death! He knew that if his men (and he himself!) had the possibility of retreat in the face of a difficult battle, their odds of victory would be greatly reduced. When asked how they would return to Greece after the battle he replied: “We go home in Persian ships, or we die.” With failure not an option, their chances of survival rose dramatically. In addition, Persia had the most formidable navy in the world. Even if they tried to retreat, they would be blockaded and face defeat. Thus, it was not simply a fatalistic command that he gave with “burn the boats”, it was the only option they had. He knew at that moment, that each man had to be “all in”!

Ordination Season is upon us, and it serves as a reminder that the decisions made on that day are for the whole of our lives. Laying down on the marble floor of our cathedrals is our “all in” as we “burn the boats” of the past. There should be no looking back. As we enter into this new covenantal relationship with God, He promises to be with us always and gives us the grace to joyfully live the vocation to which we have been called. However, if we keep looking back we will never experience the freedom and joy God desires for us, and we leave ourselves wide open for failure and defeat. As our Lord Jesus tells us, “No one who sets a hand to

the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

This binding of our will actually sets us free and ensures victory! “Burning the boats” is about three things: fearlessness, unwavering commitment, and using your heads at all times.

1) “Be not afraid!” How many times have we heard these words of Christ often repeated by St. John Paul II: “Fear is useless, what is needed is trust” (Luke 8: 50; Mark 5: 36)? There are many unknowns ahead of us, but God is already there, and so we invite Him into those moments when fear begins to raise its ugly head and affect our judgement. Rest in the Heart of Christ, and there our fears are placed in perspective. Be fearless in serving the Lord. The people of God need leaders who are not afraid of the battle that lies ahead! Put on the armor of God – you are headed into a warzone! (cf. Chapter 5 of [*Gaudete et Exsultate*](#)). Burn the boats!

2) Burning the boats is not a one-time thing for us, but something we must do over and over as “things” creep into our lives, as sinful habits manifest, as people and/or relationships cloud our vision, or if we begin to see priesthood as a career instead of a life of service, or even failing to let go of past injuries inflicted on us (real or perceived) by family, friends, clergy, etc. Burn the Boats! We must keep renouncing everything but Christ! We are to have an unwavering commitment to Christ and the vocation that He has placed in our hearts. Whatever takes our focus off of Him and our priestly ministry we must avoid like the plague. We must smash the idols (Dt. 12:3) that keep us from God. Burning the boats really is a great analogy – do I want an escape hatch, or a way to run away, or surrender when the going gets tough? Sometimes we wish we could run away (as do many married men!), but then we recognize the lie and renounce that somehow life would be better or that the grass is greener if we were not priests – burn the boats!

3) We must “stay awake for the devil is like a prowling like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour, resist him solid in your faith” (1 Pt. 5:8). As my dear mom used to say, “use your God given gift – think!” Brothers keep your wits about you as you go into your summer assignments. Protect your vocation. Don’t do foolish things or place yourselves in imprudent situations – or you are placing your vocation in jeopardy. Alexander the Great was using his head by burning the boats – his men would have surely died had that tried to retreat by their ships since they were now surrounded by the Persian navy – he knew the only way to survival was by moving forward and staying focused on the task at hand. Thus victory was achieved. Stay focused and pay attention to the daily tasks before you: prayer, ministry, and giving and receiving love from Christ and His holy people.

The idea of “burning the boats” reminds me of St. Junipero Serra’s life motto we are familiar with: “Siempre adelante, nunca atras.” Brothers, always forward, never back! Burn the boats!!!