

LESSONS IN ORNITHOLOGY

Carissimi,

Fortitude is the cardinal virtue by which one exhibits patient courage in the face of adversity and danger. It is akin to steadfastness – remaining strong and in place despite the odds. Both are essential to success in life and in fact give great encouragement to those who lack in these areas.

I learned about Fortitude during Hurricane Irene. I do not say I acquired it but I observed it. Fr. Edlefsen, my good friend who is also the brilliant priest heading up the Catholic chaplaincy at Mary Washington University and who beckons from hurricane ridden Louisiana, informed me in quite authoritative and eloquent words that my decision to remain in Colonial Beach was more evidence of stupidity than fortitude.

Someone along the way suggested that I should be noble and stick it out, “to go down with the ship.” Which is exactly what Fr. Edlefsen said I would end up doing, saying, *“If a hurricane really hits Colonial Beach, you won’t be able to save anyone! You won’t even be able to save yourself! You should stay if there’s a persecution, not a hurricane!”* And that is a point I quickly came to appreciate, especially as the electricity went out.

I explained to the good Father that I was prepared. I had readied my new rainsuit, flashlight, cigars and even a life vest, just in case. *“In case what? You’ll drown! A life vest won’t save you in a hurricane!”*

My decision had been made however. On Friday afternoon I tried vainly to coax another priest into staying the weekend. I figured it would be less traumatic going down with the ship if I had a first mate. At least we’d be able to absolve each other. But he politely declined, citing concerns over the complexities of trying to run a sleep apnea machine without electricity.

And then there were the unnerving phone calls and text messages from concerned friends and loved ones, coming at a steady pace to make sure my anxiety level didn’t slip. Calls came from NYC, New England, Georgia, even King George. They tried to sound a cheery note but it was as if beneath the jittery conversation they were bidding me *good-bye*. By the middle of the night I was about to write out my will.

At about 2:00 AM a text came in from a friend “out there” in the wild hurricane zone who lives in a modernistic glass house, which would be fine except that it’s in the middle of a forest. He sent me a photo of an impromptu shrine he’d erected on his mantel, replete with candles and a statue of St Joseph, Terror of Demons. And I had just managed to doze off.

So I got up and carried my candle through the darkness to the picture window. It cast weird, flickering shadows on the walls which was really good for the spookiness factor. I opened the front door, was almost sucked outside but held on tight, and watched the world swirl around in the howling darkness. There was lightning here and there, and with each flash I got to behold something I will never forget.

On the windswept beach stood a flock of seagulls, squared off directly against the maelstrom, stolid and stoic. They neither budged nor showed even the slightest sign of being whisked away like every other mortal thing that dared to step onto that forbidden landscape. Their wingy shoulders were hunched over and they had solemn, grim looks on their beaky faces. They had determined expressions of fearlessness that will forever leave me with a renewed respect for the pesky Triscuit snatching varmints. They could have been wearing t-shirts that said, “No Fear.” These scrawny, two pound runts with their twiggy toothpick legs and pencil toes stood down Hysterical Irene. They mocked her rage and fury even as men cowered and women wept.

Although virtue is proper to men and not beasts, in that natural display of steadfastness I saw God’s confounding might. The very word is etymologically derived from “power.”

And those birds had it. An object lesson, I mused, as I retreated back into the darkness of the quaking rectory to wait out the night, felt around one last time for the life vest, and said my prayers to Our Lady Help of Christians for the preservation of the parish...

-Don Francesco