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Nun's diary of uncharted waters an inspiration for women today

Nicole Sotelo | Jul. 19, 2012 Young Voices

After three months at sea, four Carmelite sisters stepped onto shore in Maryland 222 years ago this month, prepared to establish the first order of nuns in the 13 colonies. Clare Joseph Dickinson was one of those first foremothers of faith. A woman of the word, she left us a detailed diary of her journey.

Her journal chronicles the daily lives of the sisters as they traverse not only an ocean, but unchartered waters for women religious at the time. They carried a few trunks, 1,300 books, and their faith, leaving everything else behind.

Clear in mission, they came to be a spiritual presence among the small but growing number of Catholics in Maryland, to give witness to a faithful way of life.

On a ship called the Brothers, the women began their journey from Belgium in April of 1790. The following three months, they suffered from illness, malnutrition and an unexpected detour by the captain that took them 2,000 miles off their planned route.

Clare's May 3 entry notes the sickness from which they suffered regularly, but also notes the healthy attitude they brought to their circumstances:

> "... all the Sick a little better but not well ... the dog & the goat fell down into the dining room upon the table, & almost fright-en'd mrs Matthews miss nelly & Mr plunked out of their wits, thinking perhaps it was the devil. Bob the cabin boy being there by good luck hoisted the animals up to the Captain again. mr neale laugh'd almost to kill himself."

Later, on June 21, Clare spoke of the sisters' prayer life on the ship, in the midst of rather desperate conditions: "Our Devotions in the morning as usual. Matches & candles like all other provisions almost out. made a devotion to St Aloysius to obtain a Safe & Speedy arrival."

She also noted the conditions that barred them from devotions altogether. On June 27, she wrote:

> "the weather So rough & Stormy th[a]t we were deprived of the comfort of performing our de-votion, the waves very high th[a]t they broke over the main deck & pour'd down upon us in our little room very plentifully. the Ship Creen'd down So low th[a]t the top of the main mast touch'd the water the Ship rowled So th[a]t we could not possibly keep footing Mrs Matthews & myself fell down but did not hurt ourselves. a while after I fell again & bruised my-self very much."

Hunger was also a torment, but Clare drank in wry humor to quell the emptiness. A late June entry mentioned "last night we had Some hogs feet and pullet to our Supper. & a bit of hard Salt Bief in the usual Elegant Manner one plate one knife & fork among 4".

Finally, the sisters arrived in Maryland on July 11 and made a home for themselves in what is now Port Tobacco. Later, Clare was named the second prioress of the community -- a community that continues to the present in Baltimore and still treasures her diary in their archives.

Today, Catholic women find themselves again in unchartered waters. When I begin to falter in my faith for our future, I think of my sisters who braved the Brothers ship and those rough seas more than 200 years ago. I remember why they journeyed. Most of all, I remember that we are not sailing alone.

Excerpts are copied with the syntax, punctuation and spelling of the original manuscript. The text was published in a bicentennial edition in The Carmelite Adventure *(Carmelite Sisters of Baltimore, 1990).*

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