

On a frigid February night in 1943, the U.S. troop ship Dorchester surged through rough North Atlantic seas about 150 miles off the coast of Greenland.

Down in the old converted cruise ship's stifling hold, four U.S. Army chaplains circulated among the frightened young men, some lying wide-eyed in their bunks, others nervously playing cards or shooting dice.

Chatting with the troops, the chaplains eased tensions, calmed fears and passed out soda crackers to alleviate seasickness.

The troops anxiously looked forward to reaching Greenland the next day. They knew that U-boats prowled their ship's course.

They did not know that by morning nearly three fourths of them would be dead, and that the rest would have their lives changed forever. Nor did they know the magnificent way in which these four chaplains would minister to them.

Father John Washington was from a big Irish Catholic immigrant family in New Jersey. At age 12, near death from a throat infection, he was given last rites. Miraculously he recovered. He told his sister: "God must have something special for me to do."

Alexander Goode came from a long line of rabbis. He remembered standing in Arlington National Cemetery at age 10 watching through tear-filled eyes the Unknown Soldier being laid to rest. After Pearl Harbor he left his temple in York, Pennsylvania, requesting overseas duty.

Clark Poling, a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, had turned down a law career to carry on his family's seven-generation heritage of religious service. "Don't pray for my safe return," he told his father before embarking on the Dorchester. "Pray that I do my duty."

"Old man" of the four was George Fox, who had received the Silver Star, Purple Heart and France's Croix de Guerre in World War I. On returning home, he entered seminary. Ordained a Methodist minister, he served a circuit of small Vermont churches until December 7, 1941.

"I must go," he told his wife. "I know what these boys are facing."

Empathy with the troops came naturally to the four chaplains. They became highly popular, mixing easily with all faiths, counseling, organizing entertainment and praying.

On February 3 the chaplains were still up at 12:55 a.m. when the torpedo struck. The tremendous explosion threw soldiers from bunks; the lights went out and the stricken ship listed to starboard, sinking fast.

Those not trapped below rushed topside. Amid the shriek of escaping steam and frantic blasts of the ship's whistle, dazed men stumbled about the dark, crowded decks. Some gripped the rails, too horror-struck to head toward the lifeboats.

The four chaplains quickly moved among the bewildered men, calming them, directing them to life rafts, urging them to escape the doomed ship.

Many had forgotten their life jackets. The chaplains located a supply in a deck locker and passed them out. When the bin was empty, they pulled off their own and made others put them on.

Only two of the 14 lifeboats were successfully used in abandoning ship. Soldiers leaped into the icy sea. They clutched the gunwales of the two overloaded lifeboats, clung to doughnut-like rafts or floated alone.

The four chaplains remained on the ship's slanted aft deck, standing together, arms linked, heads bowed in prayer, as the *Dorchester* slipped beneath the waves.

Of the 902 men aboard, 230 were rescued by two Coast Guard cutters. A British report had stated that survival would be impossible after one-half hour in such cold waters, but some men, insulated by the ship's thick fuel-oil which coated them, had floated in life jackets for eight hours.

The heroic Four Chaplains have become legend. Memorials to their "Three Faiths, One God" sprang up around the nation to promote brotherhood, fight bigotry and encourage interfaith and interracial unity. And it's done that in the stories that were shared by the survivors.

No one has been able to find any of the four men to whom the chaplains gave their own life jackets. In the mass confusion, those receiving them might not have realized theirs came off a chaplain's back.

We do know that when John Mahoney started to rush below for his gloves, Rabbi Goode stopped him and gave him his own. Those gloves helped save Mahoney's life, enabling him to cling to a lifeboat through the night.

In an interview with the survivors that was done back in 1993, all said they'll never forget the Four Chaplains. Some saw them going down with the ship. Others learned of their heroic acts after being rescued.

"Not really," was the usual answer at first when asked if the chaplains had impacted the rest of their lives, but, as Richard Schneider, the interviewer, continued talking, he began to see that this initial response was one of modesty. For as they discussed their lives, evidence emerged that the men had been affected significantly: In one way or another they had been giving of themselves to help others.

Henry Arnett, of Newport, Arkansas, visits local hospital patients every day. Despite bad legs, he often drives the 180-mile round-trip to Little Rock to cheer patients there.

Thanks to Charles Macli, who now lives in Peekskill, New York, a lot of youngsters in the Bronx, New York, have learned to box in a wholesome gym atmosphere, with some advancing to the Golden Gloves.

In helping keep the Four Chaplains' memory alive, Walter Miller of Bristol, Connecticut, has written widely distributed poems that honor all those lost in our country's wars.

And Anthony Naydyhor of Hellertown, Pennsylvania, has devoted the past 12 years to caring for his wife, who is on kidney dialysis. When Richard suggested that he was showing real selflessness, he shrugged it off. "No," he said, "it's a privilege."

Compassion for others, Richard observed, was a a guiding factor in these men's lives.

Edward Dionne of Lake Placid, Florida, volunteers to help blind and needy children.

And there's Daniel O'Keeffe of Sebring, Florida, who helped found a local YMCA; he is a March of Dimes chairman, works with disenfranchised youngsters, and speaks on Judeo-Christian ethics.

The survivors' spirituality was deepened in different ways too. James Ward of Cincinnati says he had little interest in religion before the sinking, but the memory of the chaplains drew him to the church in which he's active today.

The same goes for Robert Blakely of Alpine, California, who is a lector for his Catholic church and, as a Eucharistic minister, serves Communion to housebound parishioners.

But probably what all of the survivors remember most is the example of brotherhood demonstrated by the Four Chaplains. Because of this, Benjamin Epstein of Delray Beach, Florida, lectures on building bridges of understanding between people of all faiths. James McAtamney of Newport News, Virginia, backs him up. In his words:

"I was raised in a neighborhood where Jews didn't speak to Catholics and neither Catholics nor Jews spoke to Baptists. I was amazed to see that these chaplains had so much in common. To see them enjoying one another's company was a lesson to me in ecumenism long before that word became popular."

"Mac" in his senior years gave his time to Civitan International, a worldwide community-service club aimed at helping the mentally retarded.

The stories go on and on, but all reflect two things learned from the chaplains: that of love and sacrifice that knows no limits.

Today, we celebrate Corpus Christi Sunday or the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. And while there is so much to say about the Eucharist, really when I read that story of the chaplains and of the survivors interviewed years later, it illustrates what the Eucharist is meant to do.

For starters, the Eucharist is a sacrifice. A sacrifice is a return to God to show gratitude for the gifts we are given. God doesn't need a sacrifice from us to go on being God, but it pleases Him because it's an expression of love. While sin makes our sacrifice alone unholy, Jesus changes this by being the innocent victim for our sins. And in His sacrifice for us, which we celebrate at each Mass, we as humans are made righteous or made holy. That's why Mass is so important. It brings us closer to God. We are given that food for the journey, as the bread and wine with the prayers of the priest and the power of the Holy Spirit make our Lord present. When I hold the bread and wine up as God's unworthy servant, we gaze once again upon how much God loves us.

Not everyone on the *Dorchester* was Catholic, but surely those men in the lifeboats saw the same thing when they gazed upon the chaplains linked together on that sinking boat. And they were changed. And that's the thing with the Eucharist too. It's meant to change us as people. God's grace is always there, but we have to cooperate with it. We have to open up our hearts to it. That's exactly what happened in the men who experienced that act of selflessness on the boat as the years went by, it changed them forever. So, as we prepare to receive Communion today, it's worth asking ourselves, how is the Eucharist changing us, or is it? How are we moving away from sin, and becoming better people, and becoming more aware of God's love for us? The Eucharist is a sign of love but also a means to become a better person, which we do when we open ourselves up to grace.

Lastly, what I emphasize so much with the Eucharist is how much it reflects unity. In the Gospel Jesus feeds the 5000 but the apostles want to break things up and tell them to fend for themselves. A good king though unites his people. That's what Jesus does. And as you heard in the reflection by "Mac" what he saw in those chaplains in a time of intense division of people between religion was unity, and it inspired him too. We live in polarizing times in our society, and I see this in parishes too; you sometimes see it between people who have different liturgical styles, people who like or don't like the current pope, or call themselves conservative or liberal, or in parishes between a staff of different cliques. Division isn't new. And there's nothing wrong with being opinionated - I sure am - but the danger is this can also tear us apart. We can become silos separated from one another each trying to outdo one another. Remember though Jesus doesn't say this is my Body given up for some of you - rather this is my Body given up for you. So it's worth asking ourselves how do we work to be an agent of unity in the world, in our churches, in our homes. Do we try to listen to one another or just shout? Do we pray for those with whom we disagree? Do we try to see the things that link us together or just the division? And above all do we recognize that God loves us all the same without exception?

For many of us we've been to so many Masses over the years, and while there's familiarity, my hope is we never take for granted how wonderful Mass is. What an amazing God we have who loves us more than we can ever imagine - hopefully it's something we never take for granted but something that we respond to each and every day as we grow closer to God and truly, like the men who saw the selfless actions of love by the four chaplains, become what it is we receive.