TRADITION ADRIFT:
THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLESSING OF THE FLEET IN
STONINGTON, CONNECTICUT, 1950-2007

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ABSTRACT

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The following study is a narrative account of the history and development of the
annual Blessing of the Fleet held in Stonington, Connecticut from its earliest celebrations in
the 1950s to its most recent in 2007. Particular attention is devoted to the ethnic Portuguese
community of Stonington, their historical organization and shaping of the local fishing fleet,
and their creative development of the annual Blessing. By attending to the history and
development of the annual Blessing, this account primarily seeks to describe the event in
terms of the people who simply and affectionately referred to it as the “Blessing.”

As a historical-theological account, this study proceeds according to a lex orandi, lex
credendi approach. As a consequence, special attention is given to the content and mode of
prayers that have been offered over the course of the annual Blessing’s history and
celebration. These prayers are not only primary sites for reflection on the origin and destiny
of this community’s historical and anticipated life in Christ, but are departure points for
analysis concerning how various dimensions of the local fleet’s life have been formally shaped through the celebration of the annual Blessing. In short, this study is a particular reflection on the integration of labor in liturgy in the U.S.

An important focus of this study centers on how the history and development of the annual Blessing has been informed by other popular liturgies in the ethnic Portuguese community of Stonington, American Protestant piety in the mid-twentieth century, economic and regulatory issues concerning the local fishing fleet, and the pressures fishing exerted on local family life. And no figure at the annual Blessing drew together these various influences more than St. Peter. Because the life this community celebrated and anticipated was publically displayed at the annual Blessing in terms of the life of the communion of saints, this study describes in detail how the community addressed St. Peter, where they variously placed and processed him over the course of the event, how devotion to him was integrally related to the vocation of fishing in the local fleet.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This is a story about the “Blessing.” Specifically, it is a narrative account of the history and development of the annual Blessing of the Fleet held in Stonington, Connecticut from its earliest celebrations in the 1950s to its most recent in 2007. While this is primarily the story of an event, it is also a story about the Portuguese immigrants and their children who resided in and fished out of Stonington. These otherwise ordinary people who raised nets, families and prayers together cooperated to create a remarkably exceptional event uniting their shared way of life in a novel celebration of their present and anticipated life. The renewal of this life was a thematic concern of the Blessing’s annual celebration, and took shape in the community’s activities of praying and parading, revelry and remembrance, and feasting and fellowship. By attending to these activities and their development, the following account attempts to describe this event in terms of the people who simply and affectionately referred to it as the “Blessing.”

In short, this is a narrative about a people who prayed and worked, and who distinctively prayed about their work. While distinctive is an appropriate word to describe both the history and development of the annual Blessing, complexity is another. The written records of this event and the oral testimony of its participants and chroniclers provide at least four different dates for the “first” celebration of the “Blessing of the Fleet”—1950, 1954, 1955 and 1956 to be exact. The written sources, in particular, indicate that the event’s
established origin was variously dated from 1954, 1955 and 1956. The transition among the three dates was largely fluid and unremarked in these different sources.
Oral sources, however, are even more complex and contentious. Disagreements about the Blessing’s “first” celebration continue even today to animate disputes among older members of the Portuguese community in Stonington. However, amidst these competing claims, the annual Blessing held in 1955 has eventually emerged in most of the source material over the past three decades as the popularly recognized “original” Blessing of the Fleet.

This development inevitably raises a number of important questions about interpretive privilege and criteria. The annual Blessing held in 1955 did not come to be privileged as the “first” because it was the earliest. Nor was it privileged because it fixed the earliest system for dating subsequent annual celebrations—the 1956 Blessing was, in fact, originally used to do this. And as far as the historical record indicates, the Blessing held in 1955 did not achieve its privileged status as the result of some debate that ultimately adjudicated competing claims to the title of “first.”

Searching for criteria external to the Blessing held in 1955 to help determine the reasons for its privilege may indeed be the wrong interpretive approach. This is not to diminish the importance of critical analysis and research. Rather, it is to note that close attention to the history of the Blessing and its development indicates that these approaches did not principally guide decisions about privileging one celebration as the unambiguous “original” over another. These decisions, if the term can be permitted, were more subtle, more affective, and more related to the total involvement of the gathered community in the annual Blessing. In short, they were not fundamentally logical or individual. The Blessing held in 1955 creatively introduced many of the aspects that constitute the contemporary practices of the annual Blessing, including the celebration of the “Fishermen’s Mass,” the procession of St. Peter, the street parade in Stonington Borough, the boat parade at the
Stonington Town Dock, and the offering of prayers for each Stonington fisherman who has died at sea. If the privilege of this particular Blessing was not immediately recognized at first, it was not due to the absence of its form and content in subsequent celebrations.

The following account of the multiple popular “histories” of the annual Blessing, and their relative resolution into a single coherent narrative claims that the formal development of this resolution cannot be understood apart from the local celebration of the Eucharist in Stonington. As a creative and formal prompt, the living recollection of the paschal mystery in sacrament has been integral to the annual Blessing and its development. Over the course of this celebration, the activities of blessing and commemoration drew together the anticipation of abundant life and the inheritance of a tradition of sacrifice and commitment to work in and through the performance of the annual Blessing.

Long before the earliest celebration of the annual Blessing, the Eucharist had served to organize the history of St. Mary’s Parish in Stonington. Even though the parish had been formally organized in 1850, the standard history of the parish has instead used the date of the parish’s dedication and first public mass in October of 1851 as the founding date of the parish. Like the history of this parish, the account of the history of annual Blessing gestures toward a similar founding in and through the celebration of Eucharist. Establishing the founding of the annual Blessing’s history apparently was not simply a matter of comparing competing accounts, judging their merits, and selecting the most “authentic” narrative. These accounts were never put on trial, and arbitrated once and for all outside of the celebration of the annual Blessing. Instead, the tradition of the Blessing and the history which unfolded from its celebration were more related to fleet members who, over the course of the Blessing’s annual celebration, cast about for this history in and with the Eucharist they annually shared, the blessing they annually received, and commemoration
they annually performed. Their settled sense of this history was not only drawn from, but inseparably related to, these activities.

The ordinary work of fleet members was linked to and integrated within the work of their organization and transmission of the annual Blessing’s history. Like the ordinary grounds of their work, the liturgical ground of the annual Blessing implicated them in a labor that interwove excitement, hope, surprise, vulnerability, suffering, and commitment to preserve the integrity of creation and the dignity others. At this annual celebration, labor was integrated and given meaning within liturgy. For fleet members, the ordinary experience of the life-giving waters at sea was not only informed, but, in a way, reformed through the formal blessing’s life-giving waters and the Eucharist’s life-giving bread. Attention to the ordinary practices of these fleet members and their integration and intensification at the annual Blessing is not given so as to advance a theory of sacramental reception or a theory of local constructions of history. Rather, this attention is principally directed toward examining the novelty and catholicity of Eucharistic celebration in its shaping of labor, history, and culture. The account of the history of the annual Blessing and its development is intended to illuminate part of the larger and more profound story of this living tradition.

The story of the annual Blessing, however, would be incomplete if it did not say something about the social life and history of the Portuguese community in Stonington. The Portuguese immigrants who first arrived in Stonington in the mid-nineteenth century came from mainland Portugal as well as the Azores and the Madeira islands in the Atlantic. They found jobs in fishing, textiles, and the railroads. They built homes in Stonington, and they even built a church. From the beginning, the bond which drew the Stonington Portuguese

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1 In reference to the latter, see, for example, Robert Schreiter, Con
together was not so much the shared space of an ancestral homeland as it was a shared commitment to a common language, common religious tradition, and common desire to provide a better material life for their children.

The term “Portuguese,” in many ways, took its meaning from the distinct encounter of Portuguese immigrants in Stonington with the larger popular, religious, and labor culture of the U.S. This encounter had a decisive influence in helping to define particular traditions, work, and even a politics that this community regarded as distinctly “Portuguese.” As members of this community navigated crises such as the gentrification of their neighborhoods, federal regulatory overhauls in fishing quotas, and the impact of new technologies in fishing, they periodically rallied around a shared “Portuguese” way of life that had been developed over the course of several decades. In the wake of these controversies in the last decade of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first, the term “Portuguese” was at times offered as a challenge to the absence of meaningful intermediate institutions between the American State and the “free hand” of the market in regulating economic activity. As a term of protest, it was, moreover, advanced as a rhetorical contrast to the peculiarly “American” differentiation of economics, politics, family life, and religion into seemingly autonomous spheres of activity. The Portuguese of Stonington saw these areas, for the most part, as considerably more porous, and more organically united. And nowhere was this organic vision more fully exhibited than in the community’s annual celebration of the Blessing of the Fleet.

While distinct, the terms “American” and “Portuguese” were more regularly understood by the Stonington Portuguese as relatively congruent rather than conflicting. Because these terms were not given, they took on meaning in their practical and creative interchange seen in the ordinary life of this community. The embodied synthesis was, in
many ways, a novel fusion of distinct aspects of American and Portuguese culture. Some of these streams were distinctively integrated at the annual Blessing of the Fleet. An example of this can be found in the repeated reference to Saint Peter—the patron saint of the Stonington Fishing Fleet—as the “Big Fisherman” in prayers at the annual celebrations in the late 1950s. The phrase was not one that was specific to Catholic culture in the U.S. or in Europe, but instead had its origins in popular Protestant piety in the U.S.

The phrase in fact was first introduced in the bestselling book *The Robe* (1942) written by Lutheran pastor and devotional author Lloyd C. Douglas. It would later become the title of a similarly popular book of his first published in 1948. As popular as these books were though, the phrase did not come to enjoy a strong purchase in American popular culture until the following decade. When the screenplay adaptations of each book were released as films in the 1950s, the “Big Fisherman” quickly became a common way of referring to Saint Peter in the popular and religious culture of the U.S. As an appropriation of this larger phenomenon, the prayerful appeals for the intercession of the “Big Fisherman” at the annual Blessing suggested a certain creative integration of American Protestant piety within the postwar devotional and liturgical life of Catholics in the U.S.

The convergence of streams in American Protestant piety and American Catholic devotional life in the original celebrations of the annual Blessing is not insignificant in the reappraisal of accounts of the formal grounds of the dignity of the human person and work in the U.S. During the postwar period in the U.S., most Catholic theologians articulated these ground in terms of the natural law, and most secular philosophers and liberal Protestant theologians, in terms of liberal-humanist accounts. Drawing instead upon both the resources of Catholic devotional life and American Protestant piety as displayed in popular film, Catholics in Stonington indicated rooting the grounds of the dignity of work
and the human person in terms of the communion of saints. Close attention to the early history and development of the annual Blessing intends to indicate that American ideals like equality had an implicit theological grounding for these people.

While the convergence of certain devotional stream like the abovementioned inspired creative developments, others seemed to produce conflict. In particular, the Blessing commend a view of human equality, grounded in the dignity of human persons as created in the image of likeness of God, that stood in tension with prevailing theories of human dignity in the U.S. As fleet members confronted various economic and social crises over the year, they periodically invoked the authority of the American constitution and the ideal of equality outlined in it in defense of their labor interests. But positive law was not the sole interpreter of equality. Variously appealing to the American tradition of the “outlaw,” to American revolutionaries, and to civil rights activists, some of these men reached for the novelty of American heroic figures, myths, and movements to exhibit the ideal of equality. The annual Blessing helped to integrate these revolutionary and positive law accounts of equality and shape them according to theological content and proclamation of the equality shared and received in the communion of saints. As understood and interpreted by Catholics in Stonington, the ideal of equality was not simply or even principally grounded in American constitutional law. And nor could such a source claim be the sole shaper or interpreter of this ideal in American culture. The American ideal of equality had fuller and more vivifying grounds according to some who developed and celebrated the annual Blessing. The story of their lives, their struggles, and their most privileged celebration suggest that the American ideal of equality has not only been integrated within a theological account of communion and its meaning, but remains impoverished so long as it claims autonomy from it.
Broadly, the following account can be considered a study of popular Catholicism. However, due to the contested character of this phrase, some preliminary qualifications are needed. Within this account, the phrase popular Catholicism is not used in a correlative sense. Its use therefore does not imply phrases like “official Catholicism” or “institutionalism Catholicism.” Moreover, the phrase’s use does not intend to indicate a shared set of practices or characteristics common to most U.S. Catholic communities in the immediate postwar period to the present. While many aspects of the parish and devotional life of the Stonington Portuguese were undoubtedly similar to other U.S. Catholic communities, they are not treated as the primary subject matter of popular Catholicism in this study. The phrase, thus, is not principally considered in a systematic or sociological sense in the account of the annual Blessing.

Instead, this account elaborates popular Catholicism in a more explicitly anthropological sense. Specifically, it considers popular Catholicism as the attempt to answer questions about extraordinary human experience in terms of the public synthesis of Catholic devotional and liturgical resources and the ordinary life of particular communities. As generally indicated in the history of Catholic devotion and ritual, this attempt has been both integrative and creative. And the development of the annual Blessing of the Fleet has been no exception to this dual dynamic. The people who gathered each year at this event told the stories of their struggles on land and sea by telling the story of Saint Peter. Their

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2 This account, for example, does not primarily attempt to consider popular Catholicism in particular or popular religion in general in terms of “epistemology of suffering” like that found Orlando Espin’s book The Faith of the People, Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997.) Nor does this account treat popular Catholicism primarily a dialectical outworking of various convergences and syntheses in a World Church context. See, for example, Lamin Sanneh’s essay “Popular Catholicism in the Emerging Global Church” in Thomas Bamat and Jean-Paul Wiest eds. Popular Catholicism in a World Church: Seven Case Studies in Inculturation (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999).

3 See, for example, Joseph P. Chinnici and Angelyn Dries eds. Prayer and Practice in the American Catholic Community (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000).
intimate meditation on questions of life and death, and love and suffering, was inseparably united to their procession of Saint Peter through the streets of the Stonington Borough, to the prayers they offered for fleet members who died at sea, and to the hope that these departed members would intercede for all who continued to work at sea. At the annual Blessing, the felt union between the communion of saints in heaven and on earth was exhibited in the timely fellowship offered by Stonington fleet members at festival meals and in the exceedingly timely fellowship offered for them at one sacred meal.

In addition to its integrative dynamic, the annual Blessing had a creative one too. Unlike other popular Catholic celebrations held in the U.S., the Blessing was not some religious event that was simply imported to the U.S. and consequently reconstructed on American shores by immigrant Catholics. While it borrowed from aspects of other popular religious celebrations that took place in the Stonington Portuguese community like Espírito Santo, the Feast of the Holy Ghost, its origins and form were both almost entirely creative. For the most part, the establishment of the annual Blessing was, in fact, a development wholly internal to this community.

The particularity of the annual Blessing’s history and development points to the difficulty of subsuming it under some broad, formal phrase like popular Catholicism. When fishermen and their families gathered annually in Stonington on boats and on piers, they did not come to participate in popular Catholicism. Rather, they came to celebrate the “Blessing.” The popular shorthand name for the event was both descriptive and evocative. While the term served to designate a seasonal event, its popular use was more complex and varied, suggesting as it did the smells of drawn butter drizzled over fresh-caught lobsters, the

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sounds of parade crowds cheering on town streets and piers, and the cool touch of droplets of holy water sprinkled by the local bishop in the warm air of late July. Giving privileged attention to the “Blessing” as a popular term is not simply a matter of making the speech of event participants normative. Nor is it simply a suspicious reaction to the formal categories that are the stock and trade of religion’s academic study. Rather, such attention is principally a matter of respecting the excessiveness and complexities of the term and its primary situation in liturgy.

The appropriation of this term has been an intimate affair for the Stonington Portuguese. For them, the Blessing has represented a complex intersection of theological, scriptural, and sociological dimensions. They came to understand these dimensions, though, in more affective rather than cognitive manner. This is not to say they did not possess some knowledge of the Blessing’s meaning, for they did. Their knowledge, however, was more related to their total and cumulative celebration of this event rather than to their analysis of it. And as this community grew in their lived understanding of the Blessing, they similarly grew in their understanding that they had ever more to learn of its dynamic character. The annual performance of the Blessing was, in a certain way, a reflection of the term’s transcendental character, at once intelligible and inexhaustible.

The story of the annual Blessing’s history and development can be considered of some consequence to anyone interested in U.S. Catholic historiography as well popular Catholicism in the U.S. Specifically, it is offered as a contribution to ongoing efforts to reevaluate the historiography of U.S. Catholicism in the years immediately prior the opening of the Second Vatican Council. The following account of the annual Blessing intends to indicate that, in the immediate postwar period, immigrant U.S. Catholic communities were

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not simply isolated subcultures, impervious to the influence of broader currents in American popular and religious culture. Moreover, it suggests that the devotional life of these communities was neither sterile nor unconnected to their liturgical life. Prevailing descriptions of this kind in U.S. Catholic historiography are partly challenged by the example of the Stonington Portuguese, and the popular religious celebration that they helped to originate. The devotional life of this people was, in many ways, inseparably related to the development of the annual Blessing.

From the very beginnings of this celebration, this life was publicly and even proudly displayed through their devotion to the communion of saints. And no devotion was more visibly prominent at this celebration than their one to Saint Peter. This saint was unmistakably present in many of the places where people gathered during the event weekend. When people offered prayers together at the Fishermen’s Mass on Sunday morning, Saint Peter watched over them from his side altar perch at St. Mary’s Church. When they were sent forth from the church, he was taken with them and processed through the village streets. And when they gathered at the Fishermen’s Memorial, he stood solemnly with them as the local bishop led all in prayer for local fleet members who died at sea. At the annual Blessing, the integration of popular devotion in liturgical celebration was intimate and visible. And, as indicated in the lives of event participants, it seemed to spur them towards fuller and more active participation in worship.

There is still one further consideration that the story of the annual Blessing intends to address. Generally, this story is concerned with the appropriation of theological truth in its lived concreteness. However, it is specifically concerned with the distinct role that popular Catholic celebrations play in both the appropriation of this truth, and its integration into ordinary lives of particular communities. The Blessing, in its total celebration, was, for
some, as much as, if not more a way of knowing theological truth as it was an object of theological truth. Upon returning home from this event, certain participants did not simply think about Blessing and its meaning. Rather, they thought *with* the Blessing. This latter activity, and the vision that it commended and formed, has been keenly captured in the reflective comments of one Stonington fisherman. Asked about the celebration of the annual Blessing and its connection to the local community’s practice of fishing, this fisherman remarked that it was “part of our life, part of the family life and tradition of fishing.” While acknowledging that the Blessing “would just fizzle away” for him if he were to give up fishing, he openly wondered about the reverse possibility. “Maybe,” he reflected, “if the Blessing of the Fleet went away, maybe the fishing would go away too.”

While brief, the fisherman’s comments gesture toward something of the intimate and inseparable connection between the practice of fishing and the performance of the Blessing which many Stonington fleet members deeply felt and affirmed. This way of seeing the integral relation of labor and liturgy is what this account intends to describe and what it seeks to better understand. The discussion of this way of seeing, however, is not presented here in some systematic fashion, but instead takes shape in the account of the annual Blessing’s development and organization into a coherent popular history.

The narrative account of the annual Blessing is organized into three chapters. The first chapter describes the Blessing in terms of its lived celebration. Special attention, thus, is given to what people ate at the event, where they danced, who they talked to, and what they prayed for. The second chapter, and by far the longest, presents the history and development of the annual Blessing of the Fleet held in Stonington. While this chapter

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primarily focuses on the people who helped to organize the first celebrations of this event, and subsequent ones as well, it begins with the lives of some of the organizers’ immigrant ancestors who first arrived in Stonington in the mid-nineteenth century. The final chapter provides an extended exegesis of the annual Blessing. It treats some of the meanings that the Blessing took on in the personal, familial, communal and political lives of the people who annually celebrated this event.

Before proceeding, however, something needs to be said about sources. Local newspaper reports of the annual Blessing from 1956 to the present were a highly important primary source of information for thinking about the Blessing’s development. These reports helped to situate the Blessing’s annual celebration in the context of the periodic crises that the local fishing fleet faced in the second half of the twentieth century. The archive materials of the Stonington Fishing Oral History Project housed in G.W. Blunt Library at the Mystic Seaport were another important source of information. The published and unpublished materials of this project were invaluable in considering the personal impressions and meditations of Stonington fishermen regarding the annual Blessing. Finally, personal interviews with several organizers of this celebration and others who regularly participated in it helped to supplement written primary sources and archive materials.
Chapter 2: Days and Nights of the Annual Blessing

In the early evening of a Saturday in late July, the normally calm atmosphere of the Stonington Borough was punctuated by the sound of music playing over loudspeakers at the Town Dock. The sound carried through regularly empty side streets now lined with cars unloading passengers from southeastern Connecticut and nearby Rhode Island. Welcoming local families now traveling over the viaduct and foot bridge, it similarly invited curious newcomers and interested tourists.

The sound soon intensified as recent arrivals turned off Water Street and onto the now crowded side streets leading toward the festival. Descending on the Town Dock, travelers finally reached the source of the sound where they were greeted by the clamor of crowds, the sight of garlanded boats, and the smell of fried foods. On the festival grounds and nearby piers people reunited with family members and friends, traded stories, and discussed local news. The Stonington Borough was alive this evening, gathering people together to reflect on and celebrate the beginning of the Blessing.

Preparations for this weekend celebration had taken place days and weeks in advance. Fishermen on the Blessing of the Fleet Committee had formally invited the local bishop, coordinated permits for festival vendors, and organized an array of local religious societies and civic groups for Sunday’s parade. Wives and sisters of these men had made altar decorations for the Fishermen’s Mass on Sunday, and had “dressed up” St. Peter for his Sunday appearance and procession through
town. One fishermen’s mother and sister had even baked and sold Portuguese Sweet Bread over the past year in support of the event, donating all proceeds to the annual Blessing of the Fleet fund. When this mother was asked in an interview why she went to all the trouble of baking year-round for the Blessing of the Fleet, she affirmed in reply, “It’s in our blood.”¹ No further follow-up question was needed.

The weekend of the Blessing was a hallowed time, underscoring the community’s debt to its past, gratitude for its present life, and hope for future blessings. It was a “happy event” and a “solemn event,” a time for family and feasting, parading and praying, and renewal and remembrance. During this weekend event, people “came home” to see family and friends they only saw once a year, to celebrate “tradition,” and to remember the dead. For participants, the Blessing was a time for “major fun,” and a time that “made you feel your mortality.”² In the Borough this evening in the midst of the celebrating crowd, the Blessing’s sanctifying work had just begun.

The Saturday evening festival was celebrated on the South Pier of the Stonington Town Dock and included portions of the dock’s parking lot and a grassy island fronting the pier. A temporary plastic orange fence extending from the South pier where the lobster boats were docked to the edge of the grassy island and around to the chain-link fence of the Borough playground marked the official boundaries of the festival area. At the entrance gate festival organizers and volunteers collected a five dollar per person admission fee and distributed paper drinking bracelets to the over-twenty one crowd. Nearby, several children of local fishermen handled incoming crowds, making change for festival attendees, and storing gate fees in an aluminum money box.

Upon entering the festival grounds attention was largely focused on greeting and eating. The two goals often overlapped as people chatted with old friends and family in between mouthfuls of clam fritters or Portuguese sweet bread. Throughout the evening, the sweet and savory smells of

Rhode Island clam chowder, Portuguese soup, and casuila sandwiches wafting through the festival grounds aroused appetites and delight. People traveled from one food vendor tent to the next, indulging in meals like Lobster bakes and Portuguese stuffed clams and tempting treats like sweet bread and fried dough.

In the main food tent families huddled together on benches, slurping soup, devouring hot dogs, dipping lobster meat into drawn butter, and sipping soda or beer. Parents taught kids how to crack lobster claws, and laughed at each other as food dropped on their bibs. There families and friends feasted on the food and the company of each other.

The food and fun of this evening was made possible through the efforts and contributions of various local religious and civic societies like the Knights of Columbus, the Ladies Auxiliary of the Holy Ghost Society, the Westerly Elks Club, the local Veterans of Foreign Wars Chapter, and the Blessing of the Fleet Committee. Each club or society sponsored a vending booth and was responsible for cooking and serving the food and drinks consumed throughout the evening. Husbands, wives, and children crowded together in the small booths as they rotated responsibilities for preparing foods, served meals, and collected food tickets. The atmosphere of the vending booths was busy, but not frenzied. Cooks and servers took time to exchange greetings with locals who passed by, and chatted with friends or family at counters in between stirring soup or turning sausages on skillets.

While most continued to eat and drink, other walked the festival grounds. Kids crowded onto the playground, playing on swings, slides, and jungle gyms as their mothers kept a watchful eye on them from the fence perimeter. Teenagers with cell phones clutched to their ears darted from one area to next to meet friends who had recently arrived. Meanwhile, tourists sorted through commemorative t-shirts, sweatshirts, and hats at one merchandise booth. On the lawn in front of the main stage, a live band played cover songs to a crowd of relatively interested people. As they
played popular songs like “Some Kind of Wonderful” a few couples were moved to dance on the lawn, while kids twisted and twirled in front of clapping parents.

On the South pier a distinctive type of celebrating was taking place. Many of the fleet’s draggers and lobster boats now lining the pier were specially decorated with streamers, pennants, and garlands. Portuguese and American flags were prominently displayed on many of them. Small party tents, folding tables, and deck chairs stood in front of some boats where fishermen welcomed family and friends. On the boats, they crowded together to eat, drink, and talk under the colored lights twined around the rigging for this special occasion.

In past years, almost anyone who came to festival had been permitted to step onto and tour the boats, but fears of accidents, and consequent litigation limited access to only family members and friends. As one fishermen stated, “I used to have the boat open…But you smarten up after when you realized it all takes one person with a good lawyer.”

Even at this celebration, a time of rest and revelry for many, fears of unexpected problems intruded upon the lives of fishermen who knew all too well the dangers of the unknown. On the boats where they regularly labored, working on and working out hopes and fears, and joys and anxieties, fishermen gathered together with loved ones on this evening.

While sweet and savory aromas primarily coursed through the night air, those who strolled along the South pier this evening confronted the less appetizing aspects of the fleet’s life. With stacks of lobster pots, heaps of fishing nets, wooden pallets, fishing totes and briny and foul-smelling bait barrels crowding one side of the dock, people were reminded that the space of tonight’s celebration was primarily a working place.

As the celebrating continued into the evening, families with small children gradually began to leave the festival grounds while younger adults remained. Boats, vending booths, and cooking

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equipment were cleaned in preparation for a second round of hosting and feasting beginning again tomorrow afternoon. When the festival came to an official close at eleven o’clock, the remaining festival-goers finished drinks said goodbyes to friends. Some made a final stop at the ice cream booth before heading home. Others, however, traveled on foot to parties being held in Borough homes and backyards that extended the celebration late into the evening.

On Sunday morning, the center of the Blessing shifted from the Town Dock to St. Mary’s Parish. This shift was made visible in the steady stream of parishioners and visitors that stepped into the church for the annual Fishermen’s Mass. The atmosphere was colorful and animated both inside and outside of the church. A local chapter of the Knights of Columbus regaled in formal attire welcomed people on the landing outside of the church. Some parishioners greeted members of this group with handshakes and backslaps while curious children sized up the strange men dressed in tuxedos, capes, white gloves, and funny looking hats.

Inside the church, a special display had been arranged in front of the altar, including clam shells, plastic sea creatures, and miniature replicas of fishermen, lobster traps and fishing boats. The entire scene was set against a painted cardboard triptych depicting the Stonington Town Dock and harbor. Fishermen and their families sat close to this scene as they crowded together in the pews throughout the sanctuary. Some people made a point to travel to the front of the church and exchange greetings with these families before finding a place to sit for mass. As start of mass neared, the church slowly began to fill with the noise and bodies of excited people.

The Fishermen’s Mass began with a dramatic flare that was characteristic of many events held on this weekend. During the opening hymn, several Knights of Columbus processed in two by two with swords drawn. They were followed by the co-chairmen of the Blessing of the Fleet Committee, lectors, altar servers carrying lighted candles and incense, and the parish priest.
The mass soon formally opened with prayers offered for the protection of fishermen and the preservation of the fleet. Saint Peter was frequently petitioned to intercede for the local fleet, and to “open the gates of heaven for those who...finished life’s journey.” The gathered community later heard a Gospel reading that announced Christ’s link to fishermen, and his power to calm the sea.

One of the more anticipated and important prayers offered at mass this morning occurred when the name of each local fisherman who had died at sea was read during the Prayers of the Faithful. It was a solemn and painful moment for many here who had lost friends or family members at sea. This solemn respect for the dead was then paralleled by the subsequent offertory of gifts that were presented by two fishermen to the parish priest. When this presentation had finished, two Knights of Columbus walked to opposite sides of the altar, and stood before it with swords drawn as a demonstration of respect for the Eucharist. Communion was then distributed, and final prayers were offered.

The mass finally concluded when the groups that had participated in the earlier procession filed out of the church. The co-chairmen of the Blessing smiled, waved to friends, and shook hands with people at the end of pews as they headed for the church foyer.

The conclusion of mass subsequently occasioned a new wave of activity in the Borough as people prepared for the parade and procession of St. Peter. At the Town Dock, parade organizers welcomed incoming groups, and helped to coordinate the order of each group in the parade line. Featuring an eclectic mix of local businesses, religious societies, social fraternities, firefighting and ambulance companies, police and military groups, and elected officials, the parade line was a richly colorful and lively scene. Marching bands tested drums and brass instruments, navel cadets practiced parade drills, and firefighters cleaned and buffed fire engines with hand towels. On one end of the parade line, several wives, mothers, and sisters of local fishermen could be seen near the float bearing

the statue of St. Peter. Careful adjustments were made to the floral decorations and display on it that had been arranged the previous evening. Many of these same women also helped load young children onto the float holding the Children’s Dory— an eight foot long replica of a fishing trawler that seated about a half-dozen kids.

As the official start of the parade neared, people hurried to find spots along the parade route. Many of the preferred viewing spots—Cannon Square, the awnings shading sidewalks on Water Street, and the tree-filled park area of Wadawanuck Square—had already been claimed. Folding lawn chairs, strollers, and bicycles crowded together with people in the now congested spaces lining the parade route. Street vendors walked up and down the main streets with shopping carts loaded with balloons, glow sticks, pennants, inflatable sea creatures, and sticks of cotton candy. Eager and excited children with fistfuls of coins or crumpled dollars bills chased them down the street.

Over at St. Mary’s Church, a tent had been set up on the sidewalk in front of the parish to host the local bishop. Underneath this tent, the local bishop sat with the pastor of St. Mary’s, members of the Knights of Columbus, and several parishioners. Nearby, on the corner of Broad Street and Water Street, a police officer received word that the Borough entrance had been sealed, and that all car traffic had been cleared from the parade route. As children fidgeted on streets and sidewalks, they were suddenly startled by the wail of police sirens and blast of fire engine horns. This piercing sound echoed through the entire town, and confirmed what all had been eagerly waiting to see: the parade and procession of St. Peter.

The street parade subsequently wound through central avenues and side streets in a somewhat dizzying and labyrinth manner. Though the parade began and ended at the Town Dock, the simplicity of this circuitous route betrayed a much more complex design. The parade moved back and forth between the two main avenues that ran parallel to each other as it spilled onto side
streets and narrow lanes. At the northernmost point of the route, the two avenues actually curved into each other. During the course of the parade, certain intersections were crossed and then re-crossed.

One of the more interesting aspects about the parade route was the fact that it never traveled through the ‘Portuguese’ section of the Stonington Borough. The parade traveled no farther south than Cannon Square, a landmark that had traditionally demarcated the working-class Portuguese area of town from its wealthier “Yankee” neighbor to the north. The reason for this abrupt shift in direction, however, seemed to be more practical than symbolic. Cannon Square marked a boundary where the main avenues narrowed and ceased to run parallel shortly thereafter- a problem for parade flow.

Winding its way through the Borough’s streets, the parade was led by the co-chairmen of the Blessing of the Fleet Committee, members of the Knights of Columbus, and a crowd of elected officials. This latter group included the Borough Warden, local selectmen, and State senators and representatives. This lead group was followed by various color guards, marching bands, and drum corps. Portuguese dance troupes and folk musicians similarly danced and played. When finances permitted, the organizers of the Blessing would sponsor the cost of transporting these groups from traditional Portuguese-American enclaves located just north in New Bedford, Massachusetts. On this day, the rhythms of snare drummers and naval drill teams marching in lock-step delighted crowds of clapping children and adults as each group cascaded through main avenues and side streets of the Borough.

A number of civic and religious societies walked behind the forward spectacle of baton twirlers, costumed folk dancers, and uniformed marching bands. Military veterans donning military berets or naval caps waved to crowds as they marched with their respective V.F.W. or American

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Legion posts. These groups were followed by members of the Our Lady of Fatima Society. This group had been established in Stonington in the tense Cold War years of the 1960’s, and continued to hold an annual procession in the Borough on the feast of Our Lady of Fatima in May. The Ladies Auxiliary of the Holy Ghost Society- popularly known in the Stonington Portuguese community as the ‘Ninas’- trailed not far behind. As the ‘Ninas’ passed by the Portuguese Holy Ghost Society building on Main Street, a resounding chorus of cheers was issued by club members standing on the steps and balcony of this building. In the earliest years of the Blessing, before it increased in size and popularity, the Holy Ghost club was the primary site of the Saturday evening festival and Sunday afternoon open house.

The float bearing St. Peter occupied the back end of the parade line. It was pulled through the Borough’s streets by local fishermen who had fastened ropes to cleats on the float’s platform. Two longer lines that extended from the front of the float provided the forward thrust. The longer lines were held by five to seven fishermen on each side of float. Two guides line that aided steering were carried by a single fisherman on the front and back ends of the float. Two demographics currents in the Stonington fishing fleet in the 1980s- a rising median age of fleet members coupled with a corresponding decrease in younger workers- conspired to end the tradition of fishermen guiding the float of St. Peter by hand. This practice was replaced by attaching the float to a pickup truck that hauled it through the streets of the Borough for the Sunday parade.

As the parade for the Blessing of the Fleet underwent certain changes in order and character over the years, one element remained a constant: the parade review in front of St. Mary’s Church. This review was regularly conducted by both the local bishop and guests seated with him. When the forward sections of the parade arched around Dodson’s Boatyard on the northern extreme of the route, hundreds of people who had watched the parade in other sections of town now began to migrate to Broad Street, the place where the parade review was held. By the time the first parade groups rounded the corner onto Broad Street, the entire length of this street had been packed with
people in anticipation of the various performances that were about to take place. Each marching band or drum corps that participated in the parade stopped in front of the parade review tent to play a short musical number. Other groups like the State Police Honor Guard and the Naval Cadets performed drills featuring parade rifles that were spun and twirled. Almost every group signaled the end of its performance by hand-saluting the bishop. As each performance concluded, certain group leaders stepped aside to greet and shake hands with the bishop. This practice was repeated by numerous local police officers and firefighters, military veterans, and elected officials on the State and federal levels.

The float that bore St. Peter made the final appearance before the parade review tent. When it came to a stop, the bishop approached the float with altar servers, members of the Knights of Columbus, and priests in attendance. The bishop blessed the statue of St. Peter with holy water, and then signaled for the procession to continue once he had filed behind the float. As the bishop walked west down Broad Street, he was joined by many people who had watched the parade on sidewalks and street corners. These people followed the bishop’s lead, and walked with him as all traveled in the direction of the Town Dock. The visible and fragrant mist that trailed behind gently swaying incense boats held by altar servers now signified the prayers and hopes of a people to the place where the parade had begun, and where the weekend celebration had been initiated.

When the procession spilled onto the festival grounds near the Town Dock, it continued in the direction of the harbor until it reached the Fishermen’s Monument and Memorial. The statue of St. Peter was hoisted off the float by fishermen and stood at attention near the Memorial stone. This formal part of Blessing’s Sunday program had been added in 1980 after the Fishermen’s monument had been established. Ten years later, the Fishermen’s Memorial stone had been unveiled at the 1990 Blessing near the existing monument, and included the names of each local fisherman who had

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6 See Fishing Out of Stonington, 195.
died at sea. At the monument area, one local politician regularly delivered an opening address that thanked the local fleet for its work. This address also provided a platform for the fleet to announce any important concerns or current labor issues they wanted others to know about. When the address concluded, the chairmen of the Blessing of the Fleet Committee each approached the monument with an anchored-shaped wreath adorned with flowers and laid them in front of the memorial stone. One wreath shaped in the form of full anchor symbolized all members of the local fleet who had died, whether on land or at sea. The other wreath shaped in the form of a broken anchor signified certain members of the fleet whose bodies had never been recovered at sea. Once the wreaths were placed, the local bishop subsequently offered prayers for continued healing, increased faith, and confident hope in the promise of resurrection.

At the conclusion of these prayers, people headed over to the nearby docks where the fleet’s boats were moored. Many of these boats had been decorated with specific thematic displays. The boats would later be judged, and awarded prizes for the creativity of their respective displays. Fishermen gathered together with families and friends on boats to eat and drink before the formal blessing of the fleet. Certain fishermen descended on the fish processing plant near the dock, and helped themselves to grilled meats and a variety of shellfish at the annual luncheon sponsored on this day by the plant’s owner. The local bishop and members of the Knights of Columbus also joined fishermen and families for lunch as they boarded the appointed fleet flagship. Meanwhile, numerous people took advantage of the food and drinks sold on the festival grounds before returning to the now crowded spaces of the Town Dock area.

The formal blessing commenced with an announcement over the sound system that welcomed all people gathered at the Town Dock. Boat engines thundered to a start. Spectators shifted in the now cramped spaces of both the north and south sides of the Town Dock. Some

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reached for cameras. Others nudged closer to the dock railings for a better view. The bishop recited a short prayer over the public address system that asked for divine protection. Each member of the Trinity was invoked and petitioned for the continued safety and success of the local fleet. The prayer concluded with a resounding chorus of cheers and clapping. As the boats loudly idled at the Town Dock, crewmen inspected mooring lines and prepared to cast them off at the appropriate signal. The signal came when the master of ceremonies announced the name of each boat. When this happened, each boat edged out their respective mooring and motored toward the fleet flagship that held the bishop.

The harbor parade featured boats draped with garlands, pennants, and national flags, and colorfully outfitted in thematic displays. The parade also featured multiple generations of fishing families gathered on board the boats. They waved to the crowds, and shouted to friends on shore. As boats neared the flagship, many on board headed to the starboard side of these ships in anticipation of the formal blessing administered by the bishop. People literally reached out toward the bishop as he snapped the aspergillum he held in the direction of each passing boat, sprinkling the boats and those on board with holy water. Some people traced the sign of the cross as the blessing was administered. Others held out open arms hoping to be touched by the holy water. One woman desiring to be more fully ‘blessed,’ once petitioned a local bishop: “Bless me twice. Bless me twice.”

When the final boat had been blessed by the bishop, the fleet flagship that carried him cast off its lines and headed out past the harbor breakwaters where the other boats were expected to gather. Once the fleet’s boats reached the appointed spot, they formed a circle in preparation for one the more solemn and somber parts of this weekend. The fleet flagship held some of the most important people and objects for this part of the Blessing’s formal program on Sunday. In addition to the local bishop, the flagship also held family members of the most recent local fisherman to die at sea. Sometimes multiple families would appear on board this ship. This was due to the fact that

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entire crews were often lost when boats overturned or broke apart at sea. Boat engines idled at a low hum at this point as the bishop prepared to offer prayers for local fishermen who had died at sea, especially for those that had never been recovered. As the bishop prayed for the “pardon and peace” of those who had not returned from the sea, family members of the most recent deceased fishermen picked up the wreath shaped in the form of broken anchor that had earlier been placed on board and walked toward the boat railing. Grieving widows or mothers often discharged this solemn ritual. The wreath was then delicately cast into the water. The bishop subsequently blessed the now the floating wreath with holy water. This was an especially moving moment for many in the fleet and was intensified in years that followed the deaths of local fishermen at sea. As the wreath gently bobbed on the water’s surface, boats broke the circular formation, filed behind each other, and motored back to the Town Dock.

Once the boats were moored, the celebration of the Blessing continued back on shore. This celebration took place at the Portuguese Holy Ghost Club in its earliest years. The statue of St. Peter was escorted to the club, and placed on display during the open house that was held. Later this celebration was relocated to the parking lot and park area near Town Dock. Brass bands played, and Portuguese folk dancers performed as the festival continued into the late afternoon and early evening. People consumed the sumptuous foods offered here, and continued to eat and drink until the festival came to a close. Food booths were eventually disassembled as pots, pans, and skillets were scrubbed clean. Trash cans were emptied, and the festival grounds were swept clean. Over at the dock, fishermen and family members untwined garlands and pennant on their boats’ rigging and railings in preparation for their return to work at sea. Finally, the statue of St. Peter stationed in front of the Fishermen’s Monument was transported back to where he first emerged at St. Mary’s Parish, and where he would continue his watch over the local Church.
Chapter 3: The History and Development of the Annual Blessing

On Sunday morning, October 5, 1851, several dozen parishioners from St. Mary’s Parish in Stonington, Connecticut huddled together in excited anticipation before their newly completed church on Broad Street in the Stonington Borough. The day of their parish church’s dedication had finally come. Bishop Bernard O’Reilly of the Diocese of Hartford, Connecticut had just arrived from Providence, Rhode Island in time to preside at the celebration. With Fr. Patrick Duffy, the pastor of St. Mary’s Parish, beside him, Bishop O’Reilly stood together with parishioners in front of the parish church’s doors. Appointed the first pastor of St. Mary’s only a year earlier, Fr. Duffy had settled in Stonington shortly after the parish’s formal organization in 1850.¹

Not long after all had been gathered, Bishop O’Reilly commenced the liturgical celebration invoking the protection and guidance of St. Mary, the parish’s patron saint. He sprinkled holy water on both the church building and parishioners before all entered into the church’s sanctuary. Further prayers were soon offered inside as Bishop O’Reilly anointed the altar with sacred chrism. Finally, with close of these prayers and the sweet aroma of

mchrism and burned incense intermingling together in the sanctuary, Bishop Reilly celebrated the opening mass together with all in attendance.

While the mass held on this day was not the first to be celebrated by parishioners of St. Mary’s Parish, it was by far the most significant. Prior to the dedication of this parish church, Catholics in Stonington had gathered in house churches known as “stations” to celebrate mass. These “stations” had been primarily established by local Irish Catholic immigrants who had begun settling in Stonington in the early 1840s. During their periodic visits to Stonington in the 1840s, circuit-rider priests rotated their celebration of mass among these different “stations.” Fr. Duffy would similarly continue this practice during the first year of his pastorate. When St. Mary’s Parish church was formally dedicated on October 5, 1851, it marked the first time that Catholics in Stonington had not celebrated mass in a private residence. The parish church was a visible sign that the presence and practice of these Catholics had, in a way, become public in their adopted land. This public character was important. Later accounts of the history of St. Mary’s Parish would, in fact, use the dedication date to establish the founding of the parish.¹

Building a Church and a Community

St. Mary’s Parish church was a visible sign of another new public presence in Stonington too. Francisco “Frank” Sylvia, the town’s first “Portuguese” resident, had been responsible for overseeing the church’s design and construction. Not long after emigrating to the U.S. from the Azores, Sylvia had made his way to Stonington in the early 1840s. He

¹ Saint Mary Church, Fr. Philip Geogan, interview in film.
arrived at a time of local growth in both jobs and immigrant population. Irish immigrants, in particular, had been attracted to Stonington due to the availability of local construction work on the nearby railroads. Sylvia eventually found work as a home builder and land broker, and over the next few decades he apparently excelled in both. By the late nineteenth century, Sylvia had in fact become one of the largest landholders in the area in and around the Stonington Borough.²

With the land he purchased over the years, Sylvia was able to support a growing family. Sometime after his arrival in Stonington, he married a fellow Azorean named Helen Decastro. The two settled on a coastal plot of land just outside of the Stonington Borough and eventually raised seven children together there. Drawing together the intimate association between family and place, this area later came to be locally known as “Sylvia’s Woods.” When Sylvia’s sons reached maturity, they followed him into the family construction and real estate business and eventually assumed control. His sons, however, were not the only ones to enjoy the benefits of their father work and prosperity in Stonington. Before he passed away, Frank Sylvia donated a large piece of land near his home overlooking Cardinal Cove to assist in the establishment of St. Mary’s first parish cemetery.

Frank Sylvia was the first of several dozen Portuguese immigrants to settle in Stonington over the next few decades. For the most part, these immigrants had travelled from the Azores as well as mainland Portugal and the Madeira Islands in the Atlantic. They came seeking new economic opportunities, but not necessarily new types of work. As a northeastern coastal community, Stonington possessed land features recognizably similar to

the islands and coastal villages that many Portuguese immigrants had formerly fished from and farmed. According to one of their chroniclers, these immigrants apparently found a “soil and climate” in Stonington that “could produce the same foods that they had grown in their native land.”

While many aspects of their adopted country no doubt remained foreign, the land they settled evoked at least some sense of familiarity. This sense of familiarity may help to account partly for the growth of the Portuguese community in Stonington from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth. A census conducted by the Connecticut Bible Society in 1907 reported that there were four hundred and twenty-six “Portuguese” individuals residing in Stonington at this time. According to the census, “Portuguese” residents were the fifth largest national group per capita in town, trailing only “Americans,” “Irish,” “English,” and “Germans.” The census authors did not specify whether nationality was based on citizenship, ethnic heritage, or some other factor.

Another category census authors had inquired about was religious affiliation. They reported that “Roman Catholics” were largest religious group in Stonington, totaling 3747 members. There were almost twice as many “Roman Catholics” in Stonington at this time as there were “Baptists,” the next largest religious group registering 1939 members. The data pointed to Catholicism’s significant growth in Connecticut over the previous half century. When Bishop William Tyler was installed as the first bishop of the Diocese of Hartford in 1843—a diocese at first spanning the States of Connecticut and Rhode Island—he was apparently surprised to find only a few hundred Catholics living in Hartford. Because the Catholic population of Providence, Rhode Island was considerably more

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3 Lewis, 6.
5 Ibid.
sizeable, he petitioned Rome for a change of residence, and later received approval. Bishop Bernard O’Reilly, the diocese’s subsequent bishop, would reside in Providence as well.

Sizeable increases in the Catholic population of both Connecticut and Rhode Island during the 1850s and 1860s, however, would eventually lead to the creation of a separate Diocese of Providence in 1872. Over the course of these two decades, Stonington saw a similarly large growth pattern in its Catholic population. By 1870, three parishes had, in fact, been organized to serve the increasing number of Catholic residents living in this town.⁶

Praying in the Spirit: Portuguese Tradition and Way of Life in Stonington

Catholicism’s local growth in Stonington from the 1840s to the early twentieth century was accompanied by a certain growing diversity in Catholic practice and devotion. The Stonington Portuguese of St. Mary’s Parish, in particular, exhibited this diversity. In 1914, members of this community formed the Holy Ghost Society. The society was, for the most part, dedicated to organizing the annual celebration of Espírito Santo, the feast of the Holy Ghost. As one of their first tasks, members requested that a symbolic crown used in the celebration be sent from the Azores. The crown apparently arrived sometime later in 1914. While the feast had possibly been celebrated in Stonington prior to this year, the most reliable accounts of its local origin are dated to the year of the crown’s arrival from the Azores.⁷

Certain characteristics of the feast’s local preparation and celebration were probably established soon after the crown arrived in 1914. One of these was the practice of the crown’s circulation among several local women known as domíngos prior to the feast’s

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celebration. Previously selected to care for the crown in their homes in the weeks leading up to the feast, *domingos* were tasked with both observing and honoring certain traditional responsibilities. When the crown was present in their homes, they were expected to provide hospitality to anyone who came to visit or to pray in the room where it was kept. Passing the crown from the home of one *domingo* to the next, they continued to do this until it finally reached the home of the *mordome*, the woman responsible for carrying the crown in the parades held on Saturday evening and Sunday morning of the festival weekend. At the conclusion of the Sunday parade, the *mordome* eventually laid the crown in a specially-designated room where gifts to be auctioned off had previously been left. With the completion of the Holy Ghost Society Club on Water Street several years later in 1929, this building would provide a larger and more regular resting place for the crown on Sunday of the festival weekend.8

One other important characteristic of the feast’s local celebration was the Sunday afternoon “Feeding of the Masses.” Commemorating the legendary charity and piety of the feast’s patron saint, Isabella of Aragon (1271-1336), fourteenth century Queen of Portugal, the event celebrated the miraculous end to one particularly devastating famine in Portugal. While accounts differ about whether the famine was materially ended through a rich harvest or through an unexpected shipment of grain, all similarly agree about the formal source of this end. In particular, they announce that in response to both Isabella’s fervent devotion to the Holy Spirit and the promise she made to give her crown to the Church in return for the famine’s end the people of Portugal were graciously restored to health and joy. Keeping her promise, she subsequently gave up her crown, and devoted the remainder of her life to

8 Ibid.
prayer and the relief of the poor in community with a local Franciscan order. Isabella was later canonized in 1625.

In imitation of her exemplary charity, members of the Holy Ghost Society continue to cook meals of slaughtered bull and other side dishes on Sunday afternoon of the annual feast and serve them free of charge to anyone who asks to be fed. Far from privately held and practiced, the Stonington Portuguese continue to unfold their faith in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit by annually providing food freely and graciously, and by continually passing rather than possessing the crown they received long ago. As at once traditional, animating and anticipatory, these practices help to indicate something of this people’s historical and felt connection to the Azorean homeland of some, to the adopted land where various Portuguese generations now live, and to the communion of saints they still call upon and seek to emulate.

The Fleet at Prayer Prior to the Annual Blessing

The celebration of the Feast of the Holy Ghost was certainly the most visible and distinctive Catholic practice of the Stonington Portuguese in the first half of the twentieth century, but it was not the only. Other devotional practices similarly aided in animating the life of this community, but, unlike the above celebration, they largely went unremarked and did not enjoy the same staying power over time. Yet even though these practices were, for the most part, unrecorded, accounts of their performance still exist. Casting a ray of light on the early devotional and liturgical practices of the Stonington Portuguese, these accounts serve not only to indicate something of the shaping of this community’s lived concerns and aspirations, but to gesture toward a certain locally-based integration of their ordinary life in the life of Christ in and through the Spirit.
The early relation between fishing and the devotional practices of the Stonington Portuguese has been partly described in the account of one Stonington fisherman’s harrowing journey at sea in March of 1917. The story recounts the drama that unfolded on sea and on shore in the time between Manuel Madeira’s stranding at sea and his eventual rescue and homecoming four days later. Mary Madeira, the niece of Manuel Madeira, is the story’s narrator. She primarily writes about her personal experience of the events that took place in Stonington in the interval between the initial reports of her uncle’s disappearance at sea and his celebrated homecoming. The narrative, however, is supplemented with her interpolation of Manuel’s own account of his survival at sea.

On Wednesday, March 24, 1917, Manuel Madeira disappeared at sea as he was setting trawl lines in the midst of a snow squall. Upon hearing the news of his disappearance from two people who were fishing with him, Mary Madeira writes that her mother at first tried to comfort Manuel’s wife Connie who lived in the apartment below them. Soon after a search party had been formed, she reports that her mother “went upstairs and came down with the statue of the Blessed Virgin.” Once the statue had been retrieved and a “holy candle” had been lit near it, all who were gathered there knelt down and prayed for Manuel’s protection and safe return. As Connie’s children knelt in prayer beside them, they followed the lead of Mary’s mother by repeating the petitions she offered.

Over the course of the next few hours, Mary comments that “friends, merchants, storekeepers, and fishermen came to the house and offered to help in any way they could.” Many of these people remained for some time. When the search party later returned empty-

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10 Ibid., 10-11.
handed, some stayed long into the evening in order to support Connie in her time of distress.\textsuperscript{11}

The hope of finding Manuel alive dimmed considerably after a search conducted the following morning was similarly unsuccessful. Mary recounts that Connie was crestfallen in the wake of the latest news. At this point, Connie was basically resigned to the likelihood of her husband’s death at sea and requested clothing appropriate for mourning. Mary reports that she went to her mother’s closet and found Connie “a loose fitting black skirt and a black blouse and a black kerchief for her head.”\textsuperscript{12} At this point, it certainly seemed as if hope for Manuel’s safe return had been eclipsed by somber preparations for his funeral.

Yet hope remained. Mary recalls that her confidence in Manuel’s safe return was re- enkindled in the wake of one event later that evening. When she and her mother were once again praying to the “Virgin,” she relates that the candle flame near the statue grew in both brightness and height. She interpreted it as a sign that Manuel was still alive. Such hopes were further increased the following morning after Connie cheerfully related that she had a dream about Manuel’s safe homecoming. Like the previous two days, people would again gather at the Madeira house throughout the day to assist Connie and her family. Though unlike those two days, they all would soon receive considerably different news about the search for Manuel.

On Friday afternoon as Mary was brewing a pot of coffee for visitors at the Madeira house, she reports that a local man came bounding into the house with the news that Manuel had been found alive. He presented a telegram with the details of his location on Long Island about twenty miles south of Stonington. A further note was included requesting that

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 12.
he be picked up the following afternoon. The news apparently so overwhelmed Connie that she fainted and had to be subsequently revived with smelling salts. Within a short period of time, people came into house to celebrate the good news. In a probable reference to Armistice Day, Mary recalls that the sight of joyful people “laughing, singing, and dancing” was “a scene like the end of the war.”

The celebration apparently continued for two more days. On the morning of Manuel’s homecoming, Mary notes that Connie prepared her husband’s favorite dish, chicken rice soup. Fr. Lynch, the pastor of St. Mary’s Church, later added to the food by bringing over a “large bag of groceries” to the Madeira house. Around mid-afternoon, a welcoming party gathered at the dock in anticipation of Manuel’s arrival. When the boat carrying Manuel was eventually spotted, the news of his imminent arrival was relayed from the dock to the Madeira house. Preparations were cast aside as people ran excitedly from the house down to the dock. Manuel was greeted there by a rejoicing crowd roaring with applause and congratulations. Once he had been assisted off the boat, his overjoyed wife and children rushed excitedly toward him. The scene was intensely emotional. Mary writes that Connie “embraced him and both broke down hysterically.” Their children threw their arms around him as well and kissed him profusely. Connie was soon congratulated by many in the crowd who hugged and kissed her as well. The celebration of Manuel’s safe return would continue at the Madeira house where a reception was held that lasted well into the evening. Mary recounts that after the crowds had dispersed for the evening she and her family gathered together to say a prayer of thanksgiving to the “Blessed Virgin.”

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 13.
As Manuel recuperated in bed the following day, he was joined by friends who continued to celebrate his safe return. A band apparently gathered outside the house later in the day. “Beer, wine, and sweet bread,” Mary reports, “were served throughout the evening” as people sang songs and danced dances like the “Portuguese Chamarita.” The joy of the people who celebrated here was extended in their offering of charitable food and gifts to the Madeira family in the weeks following Manuel’s homecoming. Mary records that the local milkman “brought in 4 quarts of milk and fresh eggs daily for two weeks without charge.” Others gave generously as well. A local farmer “donated potatoes, turnips and vegetables,” while a nearby merchant “fitted the children with shoes and clothing.” And if this was not enough already, Mary notes that local fishermen and their wives organized a “seafood benefit supper” for Manuel two weeks after his return. All proceeds from the benefit supper were given to Manuel and his family.15

At some later point, Manuel told the story of his harrowing journey and eventual return to Mary. The account provides a dramatic rendering of the intimate connection between the early devotional life of the Stonington Portuguese and the ordinary life of fishing. Soon after the outboard engine on Manuel’s dory sputtered out in the snow squall, the boat went adrift. The situation was made all the more perilous because there was not a single oar on board. In light of this predicament, Manuel recounted that he “clutched the scapular” draped around his neck, kissed the crucifix imprinted on it, and prayed for the endurance needed to return home safely.

The description of his scapular indicates that he was probably wearing either a red or black scapular. Both scapulars explicitly encouraged devotion to the Passion of Jesus Christ and bore images of the crucified Christ on one side of the scapular patch, and a heart pierced

15 Ibid.
with the crucifix on the other. Both also originated in the 1840s and were normally distributed after a formal investment ceremony conducted by a priest. In the United States, scapulars of various colors were popularly worn by lay Catholics in the U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century. They were oftentimes distributed after the conclusion of parish missions. While the evidence is far from clear, it is possible that Manuel Madeira had received his scapular during an earlier investment ceremony conducted at St. Mary’s.

Because there was no oar in the dory, Manuel had to improvise and use the water bailer in the boat. He eventually reached a small island located between the north and south forks of Long Island and encamped there for the evening. When he awoke the following morning to relatively clear skies, he realized where he was, and soon made a plan to paddle toward Fort Pond Bay on the south fork of Long Island. The journey was at least eight miles, however, and he was thoroughly exhausted. For the previous twenty-four hours, snowballs had been his only source of food or water. Yet even in his weakened state, he stayed on his feet, and walked along the shore throughout the day and evening to keep his blood circulating. As a result, his strength was nearly depleted when day broke on Friday morning. Kissing the crucifix on his scapular once again, Manuel prayed to “Jesus” for strength and guidance. Not long after offering this prayer of his “heart,” he felt a sudden surge of vitality, inspiring within him the courage needed to continue. He later affirmed that this unexpected renewal of strength had been nothing other than a “miracle.”

Attention to Manuel’s explicit prayer to Jesus and his use of the term “heart” in this account further suggest that he was probably wearing a red or black scapular in light of their similar dual images of the crucified Christ and crucifix-pierced heart.

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16 Ibid., 14-15.
Even though Manuel was suffering from serious exhaustion at this point, he was able to jerry-rig a sail out a branch he had recovered, some twine from his nets, and the trunk of his oil coat. When he reached Ford Pond Bay later that day, he was able to find shelter and assistance at a local home. Convalescing there overnight, he rested soundly until his brother greeted him the following morning with a hearty embrace and a congratulatory “glass of whisky” from his crew. The story concludes with a silent prayer of thanksgiving he offered upon landing in Stonington later that day.¹⁷

The story of Manuel Madeira’s dramatic four day ordeal in March of 1917 provides an important indication of the integration of early twentieth century Catholic devotions in the ordinary lives of Stonington Portuguese fishermen. The wearing of scapulars, however, was not the only Catholic practice that intertwined their lives and labor in the first half of the twentieth century. When newly purchased fishing boats were first docked in Stonington, they apparently were commonly blessed by pastors of St. Mary’s Parish. In an interview, one local fisherman recounted watching his father’s newly-purchased boat formally blessed shortly after its arrival in Stonington in 1938.¹⁸ While only seven years old at the time, he vividly recalled the occasion as both a religious and family event. Standing with his immediate family on Bindloss’ Dock in the Stonington Borough, he remembered seeing the pastor of St. Mary’s Parish sprinkle holy water on his father’s new boat, the Carole and Dennis. Within two decades, he would again gather together with his family in Stonington for another blessing of boats and fishermen. But unlike this small gathering, the next event would be considerably larger, grander and more public.

A Portrait of the “American” Fisherman in Stonington

¹⁷ Ibid., 15-16.
Stonington fishermen, for the most part, enjoyed a relatively anonymous living in the first half of the twentieth century. This status, however, would be briefly modified in light of some unexpected national attention they received in the immediate postwar period. In January of 1947, *The New Yorker* ran a two-part article about the ordinary life of fishermen in Stonington.\(^9\) Describing the daily work of draggermen in Stonington, the article featured the life of forty-eight year old local captain Ellery Thompson. While covering many of the more routine aspects of Thompson’s life at sea, the article’s author added an element of drama by focusing on Thompson’s acquaintance with legendary rumrunner Bill McCoy. Coming to prominence in the Prohibition Era, McCoy had developed into something of local and even national legend for his shuttling of whisky along “Rum Row” between the eastern points of Long Island and Connecticut. Because the whisky McCoy bottled was not cut or diluted with water, it came to enjoy a distinguished reputation for both its quality and integrity. Originally associated with this prohibited drink’s reputation, “the Real McCoy” eventually became a much more popularly used phrase in American culture.\(^{20}\)

Thompson’s uniqueness, however, was not only confined to his passing association with Bill McCoy. Commenting on his literary talents, the article noted that Thompson was currently in the process of completing a biographical account of his life and adventures at sea. The article’s note apparently caught the attention of Henry Ballou, publisher of Viking Press in New York. In March of 1949, Ballou contacted Thompson, and offered him a

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contract to publish his memoirs. Thompson promptly accepted. Working together over the next few months, the two agreed to entitle the book *Draggerman’s Haul.*

With a healthy dose of editing from Ballou, the book was eventually released in 1950, and achieved some modest success. The Book of the Month Club named *Draggerman’s Haul* as its selection for June of 1950. A number of people even considered adapting the book into a feature-length film. The acclaimed Hollywood actor Henry Fonda at one point met with Thompson in New York City to discuss playing the lead role if the book were adapted to film. Fonda would later write to Thompson to inform him that he had mailed *Draggerman’s Haul* to the famed filmmaker John Ford along with an accompanying letter expressing his “enthusiasm” for the book. Whether Ford ever read the book is unclear. Because Fonda and Ford had previously worked together in the Academy Award winning film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath,* it seems reasonable to think that they would consider collaborating again on another similar project. They never did though. While the film option would be debated by others over the next few years, it was never picked up and advanced. Almost as quickly as they had entered into American popular culture in the postwar period, fishermen in Stonington subsequently faded from popular view.

**From Portuguese to Portuguese-American**

The brevity of their admission, however, overlapped with a more permanent entrance of some of their members into the postwar reconstruction of the American “mainstream.” The Stonington Portuguese were fast becoming more ‘American’ in the immediate postwar period. Ellery Thompson provides an indication of this transition in the final chapter of *Draggermen’s Haul.* Thompson comments there on the celebration of

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21 For an account of this, see Stephen Jones, “Publisher’s Afterword” in Ellery Thompson, *Draggerman’s Haul,* re-print (Mystic, Connecticut: Flat Hammock Press, 2007): 231-239.
22 Ibid., 240-244.
Stonington’s tri-centennial in August of 1949. Driving into the Stonington Borough on the
day of this celebration, he observes that people were “dressed in Colonial costume or Indian
regalia,” and boats were festooned with patriotic displays in the harbor. He further notes
that “every vessel was decorated with flags—American flags, Portuguese flags, pennants,
colored streamers, and everything else that could be dragged out of lazarettes and attic
closets.”

There was one boat in particular, though, that stood out from amongst the others.
The boat was a “Portuguese-American dragger,” and it was draped with at least “twenty star-
spangled banners” according to Thompson’s count. Thompson found the display to be
particularly moving. At a time when national confidence and optimism were soaring,
Thompson saw no finer example of patriotism than the one he saw on the boat before him.
He subsequently wrote that if people wanted to find a “really patriotic American,” they
needed only to “look into the heart of a good man who has learned, at first hand, what life
can be like on the continent of Europe, and has traded it for what he could find here.”

While the Stonington Portuguese had enjoyed over a hundred year history in Stonington,
their social status as “Americans” had not really been established until this point in time. As
Thompson’s comments indicated, by 1949, no longer were the fishermen in this community
simply identified as the “Portuguese” of the 1907 Connecticut Bible Association census.
They had now achieved a hyphenated social status. They were “Portuguese-American.”

When Thompson discussed preparations for the boat parade later that day, he drew
attention to one prominent “Portuguese-American” named Dennis Cidale. Thompson
asserted that Cidale was the “acknowledged leader among Portuguese-American fishermen

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23 Thompson, *Draggermen’s Haul*, 151.
24 Ibid.
of Stonington.” Cidale did not shirk this role on the day of the tri-centennial celebration. The task of organizing captains and crewmembers for the “sixty-vessel dragger parade” had apparently been given to him and accepted. Thompson noted that the “larger draggers” involved in the parade had been readied for the parade upon the “signal” Cidale sounded from his boat whistle.25 The boat parade that Cidale helped to coordinate on this day would not be his last. In fact, he would soon play a leading role in helping to organize another boat parade a few years later.

A Growing Community

As a community, the Stonington Portuguese had grown in both size and social respect by the middle of the twentieth century. Baptismal records from St. Mary’s Parish indicate that well over half of all infants baptized in 1949 and 1950 had Portuguese last names.26 The column listing the godparents of these baptized infants has a similarly large number of people bearing Portuguese last names as well. While the parish still had a sizeable Irish-American membership, it seems clear that the Stonington Portuguese had become a significant part of the parish’s life. This development would soon give rise to some important concerns about whether the pastoral needs of the Stonington Portuguese were being adequately met by the parish.

Some of these concerns were made public, though not vocal, in 1950. The immediate occasion spurring this development came with the arrival of Fr. John Avila in the summer of this year. Fr. Avila was a Portuguese priest who served in the Diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts. The diocese was home to the largest concentration of ethnic and immigrant Portuguese in the U.S. Fr. Avila had to come to Stonington to visit local

25 Ibid., 152.
26 St. Mary’s Parish Archives, Stonington, Connecticut.
fisherman Gino Rendeiro and his family. The two had grown up together in the coastal town of Murtosa on mainland Portugal, and had both later immigrated to the U.S. While the visit was intended as a weekend vacation, it did not turn out to be much of a break for Fr. Avila.  

Word of Fr. Avila’s arrival spread quickly throughout the close-knit Portuguese immigrant community in the Stonington Borough. A Portuguese priest was quite a rarity in this town. St. Mary’s Parish had been almost exclusively staffed by Irish and Irish-American priests over its hundred year history. Many in this community continued to speak Portuguese as their primary or sole language. As a consequence, many had gone infrequently to confession over the years, if at all. Because the practice of confession was a highly personal activity, it minimally required that a priest be able speak and understand some basic words of a penitent’s language. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the practice was all the more important in U.S. because it was one of only a few religious exercises primarily performed in the everyday language of lay people rather than in Latin. While some immigrant Catholic communities in the U.S. were able to resolve the language difficulty through the formation of ethnic parishes, this had not been the case for the Stonington Portuguese.  

Because many people in this community spoke Portuguese as their primary or sole language, they saw Fr. Avila’s arrival as opportune moment for to discuss religious concerns in their own tongue. Many of them, thus, sought out Fr. Avila to hear their confessions. The response was significant. According to one observer, Fr. Avila basically “took over the

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28 James O’Toole, “In the Court of Conscience,” in Habits of Devotion, 140.
parish.” Fr. Thomas Lawler, the pastor of St. Mary’s Parish, was apparently none too pleased by this development, but he did not intervene to curb it.

A Blessing Begun

Fr. Avila’s hearing of confession, however, was not only the religious development occasioned by his weekend visit. At some point on Saturday, the idea for a blessing of the boats worked by Stonington Portuguese fishermen was recommended. Joe Rendeiro, son of Gino Rendeiro, Sr., does not know whether the idea originated from his own father or from Fr. Avila. The idea just “happened” according to him. The elder Rendeiro and Fr. Avila subsequently managed to plan and organize a blessing of boats for the following day.

With minimal advance notice, people from the Stonington Portuguese community gathered on Sunday for the earliest celebration of the “Blessing of the Fleet” in Stonington. Conducted at Bindloss’ Dock, the event was rather unassuming in character. The boats had been prepared for the celebration by being “rafted together”—a technique where one boat is fastened to another and, in turn, is secured by rope wrapped around dock pilings. They had not been decorated. The boats docked there apparently included the Portugal, the America, the Mary M., the St. Peter, the Klondike, the New England, the Allison Jenny, the Jane Dore, and the Betty Boop. After the crowd had been gathered, Fr. Avila proceeded to walk the down the dock and bless each boat with holy water. He offered prayers as he did this.

When he finished, there is no report of any subsequent festival meal celebration. A tradition had begun in the Stonington Portuguese community with little pomp or fanfare. While the brief event was the earliest “Blessing of the Fleet” to be held in Stonington, it would not be the only one to claim the title of “first.”

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30 Rendeiro, interviewed by author, transcription, 1 March 2007.
31 Ibid.
And Begun Again…

Four years would pass before another similar event would be celebrated in this town. The person who would take the lead in organizing this event in 1955 was Jim Henry, forty-one year old local fishermen. Henry had immigrated to Stonington from mainland Portugal as an eight year old boy. If his last name betrayed a Portuguese heritage, it was because the name had been adopted. Jim Henry had been born as Jim Arruda. At some earlier point, one of his uncle’s had apparently been nicknamed ‘Henry’ by fellow fishermen in Stonington. His uncle so liked the nickname that he convinced half of all Arruda family members in Stonington to adopt ‘Henry’ as their last name. This was how Jim Arruda became Jim Henry.

Fishing was a family affair for many Portuguese families in the Stonington Borough, and this was no different for Jim Henry. Henry worked for a number of years with his cousin Arthur Arruda aboard the Little Chief. Their working relationship, however, would come to a tragic end on September 10, 1950. As the two of them were fishing not far off of Nantucket, Arthur was suddenly swept overboard and drowned at sea.

In the wake of this devastating loss, Henry searched for a more enduring way of honoring and memorializing his cousin. At some point in 1955, Henry approached some fellow Stonington fishermen about holding a boat blessing and memorial service for all local fishermen who had died at sea later in the summer. Most veteran fishermen apparently balked at the idea. They were worried that it would put a halt on valuable summertime fishing. A few younger fishermen, however, were more agreeable to Henry’s idea, and proceeded to organize a planning committee. The committee included Manuel Arruda, Bud

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Jacobs, Gino Rendeiro, Sr., Alfred Rubello, and Bill Roderick. Unlike the others, Rendeiro already had some experience with organizing a blessing of boats.\footnote{Henry, interviewed by author, transcription.}

The committee eventually agreed to hold a two-day weekend event in early July of 1955. A festival dinner was planned for Saturday evening at the Holy Ghost Society Club, and was to be followed by a block party with music and dancing. The Sunday schedule was considerably longer. It included a Fishermen’s Mass held at St. Mary’s Parish in the morning and a street parade in the afternoon. These events, in turn, were to be followed by a boat parade and blessing of boats at Longo’s Dock in the Stonington Borough. Finally, all boats were supposed to proceed out past the harbor breakwaters where a wreath was to be laid in commemoration of all local fishermen who had died at sea. Further preparations included the construction of a float able to carry the statue of St. Peter housed in St. Mary’s Parish. Jim Henry and fellow fisherman Joe Kesseler would build the float out of scrap metal and recovered wood from a local boatyard.

While the planning committee was formally composed of men, preparations for the event were made by women as well. Virginia Henry, the wife of Jim Henry, was principally responsible for organizing the groups for Saturday’s street parade. It is likely that the mothers, wives, and sisters of Stonington fishermen were primarily responsible for preparing the Saturday evening festival meal. According to one informant who participated in the early celebrations of the Blessing, women “cooked and cooked” for the Saturday evening festival meal.\footnote{Pam Gentile, interviewed by author, transcription, Mystic, Connecticut, 13 March 2007.}

The second ‘original’ “Blessing of the Fleet” apparently went off as planned on a weekend in early July of 1955. The weekend event was likely held on July 3-4, 1955, the
weekend closest to the feast of St. Peter. While there is no written report of the event, photographs of it do survive. One in particular shows two priests in cassocks and white surplices—one was probably Fr. Thomas Londregan, the pastor of St. Mary’s Parish—on board a fishing boat decorated with signal flags. The two priests stand between a large floral cross erected on the boat’s deck. They both seem to be holding hymnals or a book of prayers. Off to the right of them, people watch from a pier nearby.36 Local bishops would be noticeably present in many photographs of the annual Blessing after the celebration held in 1955.

Like the celebration of the Blessing of the Fleet held in 1950, there is no written record of the celebration held in 1955. This would change, however, in the wake of this latter celebration. Unlike the previous two events, the Blessing held in 1956 was the first annual Blessing to be covered by local newspapers. Other ‘firsts’ this year also included the presence of the local bishop of the Diocese of Norwich as well as political dignitaries from state and federal governments. The 1956 celebration was, moreover, the first event to be explicitly documented as the “Blessing of the Fleet.”37

…And Begun Again

On Sunday, July 1, 1956, people gathered for the third “first” Blessing of the Fleet held in Stonington. A staff reporter from The New London Day covered the event. When the account of this event appeared the following day, its headline read “5,000 Attend First Annual Blessing of the Fleet.” No mention was made of any previous celebrations in Stonington that bore a resemblance to this event.

What was mentioned though included an extended description of the different parts of the celebration held on that Sunday. The first paragraph of the account summarized the celebration in terms of the prayers that were offered over the course of the day. “Prayers for the safety of boats and the men in the Stonington fishing fleet,” it reported, were said, “as well as a prayer for those men and ships in the fleet lost at sea.” It then went on to chronicle the various parts of the celebration.

While it is likely that a mass for local fishermen was held early on Sunday morning at St. Mary’s Parish, the account did not mention this. Rather, it noted that the celebration opened with a parade that coursed through the Stonington Borough’s narrow streets in the early afternoon. It was led by Jim Henry, chairman of the Blessing of the Fleet committee and honorary parade marshal. Parade groups included boy scouts, girl scouts, the Stonington Police Reserves, a color guard from the local American Legion post, and a firing squad. These groups were trailed by convertibles carrying the widows and children of local fishermen lost at sea. Finally, at the end of the parade line, a statue of St. Peter was borne on a float hauled by local fishermen. One of them guided the float from behind as the others pulled on the ropes attached to the front of it.

Before the statue was brought down to Longo’s Dock in the Stonington Borough, it stopped in front of St. Mary’s Parish church. There it was blessed by Bishop Bernard J. Flanagan, the first bishop of the Diocese of Norwich, Connecticut. He had been installed less than three years earlier shortly after the diocese had been formally created by Pope Pius XII in 1953. After the float continued on its way toward Longo’s Dock, Bishop Flanagan joined the procession along with members of two local councils of the Knights of Columbus and a coterie of “40 priests and altar boys.”

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Upon reaching the dock, the statue of St. Peter was set nearby the boats rafted at the pier. Bishop Flanagan began the formal blessing by offering prayers for all local fishermen and their families. He then walked down the length the dock with three priests who assisted in the ceremony. With crosier in one hand, and aspergillum in the other, he stopped beside each of the thirty boats along the dock and blessed every one of them with holy water. Onlookers standing on and around the dock watched as he did this.

A speakers’ program subsequently followed the formal blessing of the fleet. Nathan Culver, the first selectman of Stonington, opened the program by extending a welcome to all who were gathered at the dock. He then introduced the political dignitaries in attendance. These dignitaries included local U.S. representative Thomas Dodd, State comptroller Fred Zeller, State senate majority leader Joseph Longo, local State representative Edward Faulk, and Borough Warden Jose Faria among others. After the introductions had concluded, Sen. Longo read aloud a letter from Abraham Ribicoff, the governor of the State of Connecticut. He noted that the governor explicitly regretted missing “this history making event.” Longo further conveyed that the governor was a staunch supporter of the State’s fishing industry and was dedicated to making it “prosper.”

Material prosperity, however, was the not the subject of Bishop Flanagan’s subsequent remarks. As the program’s main speaker, Bishop Flanagan began by drawing attention to the primary intent of the formal blessing. “This ceremony,” he announced to all in attendance, “is an acknowledgment of the fact that we need God in everything pertaining to our daily living.” He indicated that fishermen had played a special role in communicating the total commitment that the blessing signified. Specifically, he noted that because fishermen had been chosen to establish the Church, they enjoyed a special closeness to Christ. The formal blessing reminded them of this relationship according to him.
Addressing local fishermen as a group, Bishop Flanagan stated that the “lesson” they had “learned today from this solemn and impressive ceremony” was “that without the help of the Lord you can do nothing.”

**Fishers of Men and the “Big Fishermen”**

Bishop Flanagan proceeded to suggest that such a lesson had been intimately learned by the saints. One saint, however, was particularly important to the both bishop and others gathered here on this day. As the designated “guardian saint” of Stonington fishermen, Saint Peter was invoked by name and by popular title. Calling Saint Peter the “Big Fisherman,” Bishop Flanagan championed the saint as an example for all to imitate. Local fishermen, however, were singled out for special attention. Gesturing toward the “Big Fisherman” in attendance, Bishop Flanagan explicitly encouraged these men to emulate St. Peter and mold their lives according to such an “exemplary model.”

St. Peter, the “Big Fisherman,” was the local fleet’s saint, but he was hardly local in admiration. By 1956, the “Big Fishermen” had, in a way, become America’s saint through his depiction and appropriation in popular film and literature. The “Big Fisherman” was not simply the hagiographical property of Catholics in the U.S. In fact, he had, in a way, been integrated into American popular culture through the piety of Protestant devotional reading and the American popular fascination with the heroic image writ large. Lutheran pastor and popular writer Lloyd C. Douglas had inspired renewed interest in St. Peter through the publication of his bestselling book *The Robe* in 1942. Calling St. Peter the “Big Fisherman,” Douglas held up Peter as a living and hopeful testimony to renewed dedication to Christ through repentance, conversion, and amendment of life. Douglas encouraged readers through his imaginative narrative of the conversion of Jesus’ Roman executioner that all, even the worst sinner, could be reconciled to Christ through repentance. Within Douglas’s
story, St. Peter both specifies and intensifies the reach and depth of this offer of reconciliation through his personal testimony to Jesus’ executioner of his personal reconciliation to and by Christ after his threefold denial of Christ. With this renewal in and through Christ, St. Peter inspires Jesus’ executioner that the gratuitous offer of reconciliation is both a task and challenge to be extended to others through Christ-formed acts of healing and reconciliation.

The example of the “Big Fisherman” soon took on epic significance in American popular culture with the 1953 film adaptation of The Robe. The first film to be shot in the wider CinemaScope format, The Robe excited audiences with the both the scale and grandeur of the images displayed before them. Viewers were now able to enjoy a film format that was commensurable to the intensity and immensity of biblical themes like repentance and reconciliation. Breaking opening-week box office records, The Robe was praised by critics for its technical prowess and bold scale of production. Commenting on the film’s impressive gross, one reviewer speculated, tongue-in-cheek, that it “might even outsell the Bible.” A reviewer for the Catholic popular magazine Commonweal was a bit more restrained in his estimate. Nonetheless, he reported that he was impressed by the film’s “panoramic pageantry” and “magnificent scenes in handsome Technicolor.” Two scenes, in particular, that he singled out for special attention both included the character of St. Peter, the “Big Fisherman.” In fact, he said that the scenes displaying Saint Peter’s disclosure of his denial of Christ to the Roman centurion, and his healing of a Greek slave tortured by Caligula were

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40 “Birthday of the Revolution,” quoted in McAlister, 58.
the “most moving scenes” within a film that, on the whole, lacked “dramatic intensity and emotion” according to him.41

By 1956, the “Big Fisherman” had distinctively shown his passion and compelling devotion to Christ to audiences across the U.S. On Sunday, July 1, 1956, fleet member in Stonington similarly exhibited this devotion in their commitment to exemplify the “Big Fisherman” and the larger communion of saints in both ordinary life and labor. The “Big Fisherman” was on hand to watch the next phase of the day’s program from his perch near the dock. There he stood by as local fishermen and their family members boarded the newly-blessed boats in preparation for the boat parade. Various assortments of national flags, signal flags, and pennants lined both rigging and railings of the boats. Bright colors and colorful people punctuated the festive scene at the dock. As the captain of the Jane Dore, the appointed flagship for the day, Bud Jacobs had been designated as the emcee for the boat parade. Standing with Fr. Oliver Cronan, pastor of St. Patrick Parish in nearby Mystic, Connecticut, among others aboard this boat, he eventually commenced the parade with a call over the public address system. Once announced by name over this system, each of the fleet’s boats paraded by the flagship. With flags flapping and people waving aboard them, the boats all motored out past the dock lined with cheering spectators and out toward the harbor breakwaters.

Festive gestures, however, would soon give way to more solemn postures. Upon reaching a spot just outside the breakwaters, the boats had circled round each other. Attention was directed there to the Jane Dore. Fr. Cronan stood aboard this boat alongside the widow of Erling Kristensen and four of her sons. A local fisherman, Erling Kristensen had tragically died at sea the previous November. The Blessing this year attempted to honor

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him in a special way. Fr. Cronan first offered prayers for him, and for all other fishermen who had died at sea. Once completed, Mrs. Kristensen then proceeded to pick up and carry a floral wreath shaped in the form of a broken anchor to the railing of the boat. She dropped it into the water and watched it bob along the surface. While commemorating all fishermen who lost their lives at sea, the wreath was specifically dedicated to those fishermen who had never been recovered at sea.

With the return of the boats of the boats to shore, the emphasis shifted from remembrance to revelry once again. Fishermen rejoined the “Big Fisherman” and carried him up to Holy Ghost Club. Like the Azorean crown exhibited annually at Espírito Santo, they set him inside the club and displayed him for all to see at the “open house” held there. He would later be carried back to St. Mary’s Parish church at the end of the evening. In the meanwhile, women from the ladies auxiliary to the Holy Ghost Society served dinner to all who attended the “open house.” While the women remained nameless, the article did call attention in its concluding paragraphs to the fishermen who sat on the organizing committee. They included Manuel Araujo, Dennis Cidade, Manuel Cruz, Jim Henry, Bud Jacobs, Gino Rendeiro, Antone Roderick, and George Roderick. With the exception of Jacobs, all others were members of the Stonington Portuguese community.

In Service to God and the Nation

Little was said about the Portuguese heritage of many Stonington fishermen in the early celebrations of the annual Blessing. However, much was said about the role these men played in Connecticut’s economy. Governor Abraham Ribicoff attended the “second” celebration of the Blessing of the Fleet on July 6, 1957.42 At the speakers’ program this day, the governor commended local fishermen for their daily labor and its impact on

Connecticut’s economy. Extolling their efforts, he stated that they “represent the best mankind has to offer in their daily pursuits as they make their contributions to their fellow men.”

American political and intellectual life in the 1950s and the early 1960s was permeated by the theme of contribution. Ribicoff’s extension of it into fishing seemed to indicate that postwar labor had important political dimensions. These dimensions would be further emphasized at the 1958 celebration of the Blessing of the Fleet. Gov. Ribicoff would once again address the idea of contribution this year. “It is an honor,” he declared to all in attendance there, “to come here and pay homage to the gallant fishermen and their families who have contributed so greatly to our Connecticut society.”

The labors of both fishing and the domestic home, it seemed, were both interpreted and encouraged as services to the nation.

Political themes and religious themes regularly converged at the annual Blessing over its history. In particular, the annual Blessing held in 1958 afforded Gov. Ribicoff the opportunity to reflect openly upon the intersection of labor and liturgy in the lives of Stonington fishermen. There he linked the novelty of Stonington to the novelty of the annual Blessing. The witness of Stonington fishermen concentrated the connection. Ribicoff stated that seeing these fishermen “pause and seek divine guidance in pursuit of their work” at the Blessing had allowed him to “realize the unique personality of Stonington.” In light of its annual performance, he added that it was “easy to see why the town is so justly famous.” The praise was generous in light of Stonington’s momentary significance in American popular culture earlier in the decade. However, it was an election

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year and rallying political support was important. For Ribicoff, the task was not an especially easy one in Stonington on this day. Fred Zeller, the Republican nominee for governor, had joined Ribicoff in attendance at the event. Considering the fact that Zeller was a Stonington resident, Ribicoff likely had to overcome not so much Zeller’s party affiliation as local affinities for the hometown politician.

While the Blessing could be an opportunity to politick, it was fundamentally and formally an opportunity to pray. The prayers offered at this event served to impress upon participants the relation of temporal duties to transcendent ends. Bishop Flanagan frequently called attention to this relation at celebrations held in the late 1950s. At the 1957 Blessing, he characterized the event as a “public manifestation of faith in the Lord as carried out by fishermen in pursuit of their everyday duties.” While ordinary, these duties were understood to participate in one extra-ordinary end. “Let a staunch faith and the provident love of the Almighty,” Bishop Flanagan counseled, “be with you and bring you all safely home to the Port of Eternal Blessing.”

One “Blessing” anticipated another. In 1958, Bishop Flanagan reiterated the significance of the Blessing as a call to faith. At a time when the U.S. and other Western countries were enmeshed in the politics of the Cold War, Bishop Flanagan explicitly lamented a “world” frequently forgetful of “its dependence on God.” There were signs of hope though. Calling attention to the annual celebration of the Blessing of the Fleet, Bishop Flanagan declared that it was “refreshing and inspiring to know that in this small corner of the world there are those who seek His blessing and divine guidance in their lives and in their work.”

Abraham Ribicoff, the first Jewish governor of the State of Connecticut, basically reiterated Bishop Flanagan’s point in a subsequent remark at the speakers’ program this year.
There he told all listening that the event “shows clearly that without the belief in and worship of God we have nothing.” At the end of the 1950s, Catholic and Jew shared not only common stage in Stonington, but a common call for communal reliance on God.

**A Time of Testing**

The postwar optimism that the Blessing’s celebrants displayed in the 1950s gave way to a more guarded sense of hope at the beginning of the 1960s. Dwindling fishing stocks in the North Atlantic had led some Stonington fishermen to relocate their boats to other ports down South between 1958 and 1960. As a result, the Stonington fishing fleet had been reduced to only fourteen boats by 1960. The reduction was significant. Twenty-five boats had worked out of Stonington only four years earlier.

Reductions in the size of the fleet were reflected in reductions to the event program at annual Blessing held in 1960. Bishop Vincent J. Hines, the second bishop of the Diocese of Norwich, was the only person to deliver an address at the speakers’ program. Noticeably absent from the Day’s coverage of the event was a listing of the political dignitaries in attendance. While previous celebrations had hosted U.S. representatives, governors, and lieutenant governors, there is no mention of any elected politician at the event this year. However, the article did note that a newly-introduced award celebration for the “most attractively decorated draggers in the boat parade” had occurred. First place had gone to the *Lt. Thomas Miner*, and second place to the *Luann*. Honorable mentions were awarded to the *America*, the *Mary*, and the *Gloria*.

If presence was an indication of commitment and support for this community on this day, the witness of state politicians was hardly commendable. However, in contrast to

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46 Ibid.
the flagging support of these figures, Bishop Hines’ commitment was publically extended even further than before. Unlike previous years, Bishop Hines participated in the wreath laying ceremony in addition to the formal blessing of boats. On land, he prayed for the protection of fishermen and their boats. At sea, he prayed for all fishermen who had lost their lives there. Over the course of the day, Bishop Hines talked about the nearness of the formal blessing to the Feast of St. Peter, and the nearness of the living and the dead. He prayed for these people in their places of labor and rest, and remained close to them in their moments of gratitude and grief. He was a pastor.

Bishop Hines joined Stonington fishermen and their families again at the annual Blessing the following year.\footnote{Mitchell, “Fleet Blessing Is Observed; Bishop Urges Continuance,” The New London Day, 3 July 1961, p. 15.} He had almost missed the celebration though. Plans had originally called for the Blessing’s cancellation this year. Dennis Cidale, however, would not permit this. With little time to spare, and with the help of ten other fishermen, he helped to lead the Blessing’s organization this year. Bishop Hines agreed to postpone the start of a trip to Europe to attend the event. Even though Cidale had helped to organize the event on “such short notice,” it did not seem to suffer as a result. Like usual, the weekend celebration included a “block party” on Saturday evening at the Holy Ghost Club, and a Fishermen’s Mass on Sunday morning followed by a street parade, formal blessing, boat parade, and wreath-laying ceremony. On Sunday afternoon just before the formal blessing, Bishop Hines called on all local fishermen to remember the Blessing’s “deep religious significance,” and encouraged them to make “every effort” in the future to celebrate the Blessing annually.

**Hope on the Horizon**
The community obeyed his counsel. Over the next few years, the number of boats participating in the celebration fluctuated between fifteen and eighteen.\textsuperscript{48} The numbers were modest, but still far from the fleet’s size in the previous decade. The promise of future growth, however, was on the horizon. Rumors had been circulating that the State of Connecticut might purchase and invest in capital improvements for Longo’s Dock, the larger of the two remaining docks in town.\textsuperscript{49} The hope that a more secure and prosperous future might lie ahead for Stonington fishermen was expressed by Bishop Hines at the annual Blessing held in 1964. Before he spoke to this hope there, he told local fishermen about his recent trip to the Holy Land earlier in the year. He drew attention to the felt significance of this land “where Christ spent so much of his life, performed miracles, and chose His apostles.” He noted that these apostles were fishermen and commented that “they were strong, practical, hardworking and God-fearing men as are the men of the Stonington fishing fleet.” One comparison led to another in his relation of Stonington harbor to the Sea of Galilee. When he had stood in this latter place, he remarked that he thought of “you people in Stonington especially the captains and men of the fishing fleet.”\textsuperscript{50}

On this day, familiar places and people were apparently being re-imagined in terms of biblical places and people at the Blessing. Stonington fishermen had a history and mission that seemed to extend far beyond their corner of southeastern Connecticut. Bishop Hines reminded them of this by integrating the story of their labor, and the story of their town, in his announcement of the story of salvation.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Fishing Out of Stonington}, 29.
\textsuperscript{50} Mitchell, “Men and Ships of the Sea Blessed in Port Memorial,” 6 July 1964.
For Bishop Hines, the Holy Land had apparently been evocative in other ways as well. He shared with the crowd that he had not only thought about Stonington fishermen as he stood by the Sea of Galilee, but had prayed for them too. In particular, he told them that he had prayed that the fleet would “regain its former prominence” and would receive “Divine help in restoring its former prosperity.” When he finished this story, he proceeded to offer similar prayers on this day.

Clarence Maxson, the master of ceremonies for the event, built on Bishop Hines’ remarks at the speakers’ program. Maxson stated that he was confident that the State of Connecticut would soon help restore Longo’s Dock in the Stonington Borough. Such a confidence was not simply framed in economic terms though. Declaring that the restoration was imperative because it would “allow fishermen and their boats to return home where they belong,” Maxson indicated that certain Stonington fishermen were currently in exile. Aside from its local economic implications, the push to repair the Longo’s dock seemed to be primarily directed towards repairing bonds obtaining between people and place. The material remedy of the pier’s overhaul seemed to presuppose a deeper and more profound bond, uniting local fishermen to the land they called home, and to the people they called friends and family.

Maxson raised the issue of the pier’s overhaul again at the Blessing held the following year. There he reported on the progress of lobbying efforts since last year, and said that the results were encouraging. A plan to restore the pier was apparently underway. Unlike the previous year, Maxson primarily appealed to participants’ sense of pride rather than their sense of justice. He claimed that Stonington could become one of the most important ports in the U.S. if improvements to the pier went forward as planned. These

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improvements, however, were not only intended to improve the Stonington’s profile in the fishing industry. Maxson’s vision was instead much grander. Citing the significance of current sea exploration efforts, Maxson declared that Stonington could become a leader in this venture as it was carried out “both on and below the surface.”

**For and Against Local Job Growth**

Maxson’s remarks were bold, if not strange. While the region was home to the U.S. Naval Submarine Base in the adjacent town of Groton, Connecticut, there is nothing to suggest that improvements to Longo’s Dock were ever seriously considered with any industry in mind other than fishing. The task of rallying local support for the fishing industry was difficult enough as it was. Concerns about the scope of improvements to Longo’s Dock had arisen shortly after Anthony Longo, the owner of Longo’s Dock, had proposed selling the facility and some adjoining land to the town in the early 1960s. Longo noted that the property’s purchase could help serve both the local fleet and the town. A water treatment facility had been needed for some time in Stonington. Recent federal regulation regarding pollution controls only added to the urgency. For some, the property seemed like an ideal site to build the facility. However, for others who lived near the dock, the site was anything but ideal. The additional possibility of a fish-processing plant being built on this land only served to exacerbate already existing anxieties. And if this were not enough, recent rises in real estate values complicated matters even further, stoking tensions between the Stonington Portuguese working class and the local gentry, both new and old.52

The rise in real estate prices was largely linked to the influx of people from New York City who had benefited from the economic boom of the postwar period. With the completion of Interstate 95 in the early 1960s, many of these individuals were able to enjoy

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52 *Fishing Out of Stonington*, 29-30.
easier access to the Stonington Borough and its coastal charm and quaintness. The borough’s seaside sights were inviting, but the possibility of new smells there apparently were not. Some of the wealthier residents in town talked about the dock’s proposed sale in terms of its possible impact on their quality of life. Local fishermen, on other hand, talked about it in terms of its possible impact on their livelihood. While the former group hoped to secure the prices of their home by opposing the plan, the latter hoped to secure the survival of their labor by supporting it. The two were bound to conflict.

At a town meeting held later in 1965, the conflict between opponents and supporters of the plan eventually came to a head. The debate held there was heated, if not hostile. A reporter of the event noted that certain local fishermen at the meeting claimed that opposition to the plan was based on class and ethnic prejudices. They angrily declared that opponents were “anti-fishermen” and “anti-Portuguese.” One even suggested that wealthier newcomers were actively conspiring against local fishermen and working-class residents. He asserted that they “wanted to buy up all the remaining water and turn it into their selfish ends.”

Some of these wealthier residents returned fire with their own charges. They decried the “acrid stink” likely to emerge from “fish factories” near their homes. They implied that passage of the plan would basically reduce their quality of life. Others were critical of the plan too. John Dodson Sr., owner of a Dodson’s boatyard in the Stonington Borough, maintained that the plan would produce unfair competition for his business. He openly worried that it would allow yachts and other boats to be stowed for the winter at the public dock rather than private businesses like his. Even though Dodson employed “many

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54 Bailey, 132-135.
Portuguese” according to one observer at the meeting, some of the people in attendance
 greeted his suggestion with skepticism, if not outright indignation. Before Dodson could his
 finish his remarks, he was apparently drowned out by a chorus of jeers. Amidst these jeers,
 one woman turned to Dodson and shouted, “Sit down, you old bastard.” The taunt was
 especially bruising since it came from John Dodson’s housekeeper, Mrs. Rita. While the
 remark apparently ended Dodson’s public comments, it did not end Mrs. Rita’s employment.
 In fact, the observer at the meeting later reported in a tongue-in-cheek comment that Mrs.
 Rita “was back at work, feeding the Dodson’s dogs and dusting the downstairs” the day
 immediately after the meeting.55 While the content of Mrs. Rita’s words was questionable,
 the integrity of her work apparently was not. The former allowed her to challenge. The
 latter earned her respect.

 Members from the Stonington Portuguese community had spoken boldly, if not
 boldly at the town meeting. They had pleaded their cause and positioned their opponents.
 They had supported the plans of their government, and attacked the pushback of the
 propertied. They had been civic and, at times, uncivil. In defense of their labor interests, the
 Stonington Portuguese had used the long-established American political tradition of populist
 rhetoric. By 1965, it certainly seemed like they had become more “American” in thought,
 speech, and manners.

 From Portuguese-American to American

 A chronicler of the Stonington Portuguese had reached a similar judgment around
 the time of the town meeting. Writing for the bulletin of the Stonington historical society in
 August of 1965, Donald Lewis detailed several distinct characteristics of this community’s
 history of political, religious, and labor activity in the town of Stonington. After claiming

 55 Ibid., 135-137.
that the Stonington Portuguese had “contributed much to what Stonington is today,” Lewis stated that they had “assumed the responsibilities of their country, state, town, and village” and had “become solid, respected citizens.” The appropriation, however, was not without a similar local exchange. Drawing attention to the “native mores and folkways” of the Stonington Portuguese, Lewis commented that they had enriched the town of Stonington by “bringing just a bit of their Portugal to our shore.”

It was “just a bit” though. Lewis affirmed that what was most important about the results of this cultural exchange was that the Stonington Portuguese had become “first and foremost, good American citizens.” Such remarks indicated important shifts in the status and perception of this community. Hyphens had been dispensed. The Stonington Portuguese were now regarded as “Americans” instead of Portuguese-Americans. And while particular practices and ways of life continued to distinguish them as a community, these characteristics no longer served as the primary markers of their identity according to Lewis. Service to their adopted nation rather than to their ethnic heritage or culture had now come to define them as a community. To emphasize the “American” status that the Stonington Portuguese had achieved, Lewis embellished a classic American phrase with his own twist. Gesturing toward the local baking and selling of Portuguese sweetbread, affectionately termed massa de cevada or massa sovada in Portuguese, Lewis enlisted the dessert to make his final point. Declaring that the Stonington Portuguese were “as American as apple pie, pizza, chop suey and massa de cevada,” Lewis removed particular foods from their particular ethnic histories and reset them in a generic “American” key subsuming any and all

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cultural difference. Neither foods nor ethnic groups were apparently immune from the politics of consensus in this period.

**A Changing Community and a Changing Church**

Lewis was not the only one at the time to appeal to Portuguese sweetbread to comment on changes in the life of the Stonington Portuguese. Anthony Bailey, a travel writer and part-time resident of the Stonington Borough, observed that the cultural significance of Portuguese sweet bread had somewhat recently undergone a notable shift. Normally reserved for special religious occasions like Easter or Espírito Santo, Bailey noted that Portuguese sweetbread had now become “an elite delicatessen item, replaced by Wonder-bread and Mr. Big in the diets of Portuguese families.” While Bailey’s suggestion about the previous, everyday use of Portuguese sweetbread is questionable, if not misleading, his remarks do indicate that the dessert was being redefined by the process of its commodification and consumer use in Stonington.

This was not the only change Bailey drew attention to. In 1965 shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council, a decision was made to raze St. Mary’s Parish church and rebuild on the same spot of land. The older parish church was demolished later that year following the decision. As parishioners awaited the completion of their newer and larger parish church, they celebrated Sunday mass at the Stonington Town Hall. When the parish was able to move back into the newly finished parish church in 1966, Bailey made

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57 Ibid.  
59 Bailey, 128.  
60 For a summary account of this decision, see relevant discussion in the film *Saint Mary Church: 150 Years of History and Memories*.  

67
clear that he was not pleased with the new building. In fact, he disparagingly referred to the new church as “sprawling” and “barnlike.”

Aesthetics, however, was not the sole basis of his critique. In a subsequent remark, he openly speculated about the social motives behind the construction of the new parish church. “If the Gothic cathedrals expressed medieval man’s soaring aspirations to worship God, this new St. Mary’s,” Bailey caustically noted, “seems to express the worldly desire of its parishioners to show that they’ve made in here on earth.” He followed his biting remarks by questioning whether the new parish church indicated an attempt to exhibit a level of prosperity similar to the Baptist-Congregationalist and Episcopal church buildings nearby in the Stonington Borough.

Apparently the sentiment was shared by others. Bailey noted that certain members of St. Mary’s Parish had raised similar concerns to the building committee during the planning phase, but had ultimately not been heeded. If these concerns were any indication of intra-Catholic tensions related to social developments occasioned by postwar prosperity, it seemed that such a development was not regarded as an unambiguous good. Material growth appeared to pose new challenges to growth in the spirit. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the dual task of liturgical reform and social reform only added to the challenges at hand for many American Catholics in the mid-1960s.

By 1966, plans to redevelop St. Mary’s Parish had moved forward. Unfortunately, redevelopment plans for Longo’s Dock had not. The uncertain status of these plans, however, did not deter several Stonington fishermen from making preparations for the annual Blessing of the Fleet. On July 5, 1966, the formal blessing of boats and fishermen

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61 Ibid., 129.
62 Ibid.
was once again celebrated at Longo’s Dock. \(^63\) Like previous years, the Sunday program of events included the Fishermen’s Mass, formal blessing, and wreath laying ceremony. However, unlike previous years, the usual street parade and boat procession had been cancelled. As a result, the symbolic wreath was tossed into the water at the end of the dock rather than its usual spot past the harbor breakwaters. Whatever the reasons were for limiting the Sunday program, Dennis Cidale, one of the annual Blessing committee organizers, made clear that this year’s cancellations were to be considered an exception. In fact, he noted that plans were already underway to resume the full schedule of events for next year’s celebration.

The announcement was significant. In the midst of uncertain times for Stonington fishermen, Cidale’s words indicated that their commitment to the Blessing’s continued celebration remained firm. While these fishermen and their local supporters could not predict the ultimate outcome of negotiations regarding improvements to Longo’s Dock, they could prepare for the Blessing. The Stonington fleet’s survival was seriously at stake in the summer of 1966. With the promise of the Blessing, Stonington fishermen moved forward with the work of preparing to celebrate the event once again.

A Rebuilt Home and Future

Stonington fishermen were soon to receive the happy news that the Town of Stonington had agreed to purchase and make improvements to Longo’s Dock. Work on the dock commenced shortly thereafter. By the time the annual Blessing was celebrated on July 3, 1967, improvements to the dock had been completed. \(^64\) There was much to be celebrated on this day. The newspaper account of the Blessing reported that the event “was one of the


largest in recent years.” At the speakers’ ceremony held in the afternoon, Clarence Maxson, the master of ceremonies, drew attention to the fortunate series of events that had unfolded since the previous celebration of the Blessing. “Last year this new dock was only a dream,” he recalled to the crowd. “This year it is a reality.” Buoyed by recent improvements to the dock, Maxson grandly predicted once again that Stonington would become one of top commercial fishing ports in the U.S.

While agreeing that the Blessing this year was indeed a special occasion, Bishop Hines cited reasons other than the possible future role of Stonington fishermen in the U.S. economy. In particular, Bishop Hines spoke about the significance of this year’s celebration in terms of the nineteenth hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Peter. “It is appropriate,” he told the crowd, “that you observe the anniversary of his martyrdom today.” When Bishop finished these comments, the newspaper account of the event noted that he then turned to local fishermen and described them, “especially those of Portuguese descent, as men of faith.” Bishop Hines’ comments indicated that what it meant to be Portuguese had not simply been subsumed under some larger American identity. Moreover, these comments seemed to suggest that particular ethnic traditions actually intensified lived religious conviction. Being “Portuguese” mattered.

Bishop Hines soon proceeded to commend the ordinary work of Stonington fishermen and its extraordinary significance. “You put yourselves in the hands of your God every day as you go about your daily tasks,” he told them. “It is fitting that you publicly show your faith by asking his help through this observance.” In contrast to the earlier remarks of Maxson, Bishop Hines specified that the ordinary work of Stonington fishermen was a service rendered formally and primarily to God rather than to the nation. Before the celebration ended, Bishop Hines boarded the fleet flagship, the Carole and Dennis, captained
by Dennis Cidale, and sailed out past the harbor breakwaters for the wreath-laying ceremony. Cidale had made good on his promise the previous year. With the street parade held earlier in the day, and the wreath-laying ceremony about to take place, the full schedule of events at the Blessing had been resumed.

Reconciling America

The Carole and Dennis, however, would not resume its responsibilities as the fleet flagship after this year because of its impending retirement. The boat that followed the Carole and Dennis as the honorary flagship at the Blessing held in 1968 was the America, captained by Joseph DeBragga. While the America was a steady and stable vessel, the country it had been named for was anything but in the summer of 1968. Msgr. Paul St. Onge, the principal presider at the annual Blessing held on July 8, 1968, indicated as much in his comments at the speakers’ ceremony on this day. After formally blessing the boats moored at the dock, Msgr. St. Onge made clear that he was consoled by the witness of the participants gathered for this celebration. “It is gratifying,” he asserted, “to come to Stonington and witness a demonstration of faith such as this which is in sharp contrast to demonstrations of other natures which are becoming too common in this country.”

What these “other natures” were Msgr. St. Onge left unspecified. But if the startling and jarring national events of 1968 prior to the Blessing’s celebration were any indication, it seemed likely that he was referring to the revolutionary, and even anarchic currents gripping the nation at the time. Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy had been shot and killed only a month earlier, and many were still in mourning. At the time of his death, less than three months had passed since he had attempted to console the nation after the devastating murder of famed civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr. in March of 1968.

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Racial tensions had boiled over into violent clashes in a number of American cities earlier this year. The outbreak of racial hostilities had overlapped with mounting protests against the Vietnam War taking place on university campuses and city centers across the nation. The national optimism of postwar prosperity had been upended. Cultural assumptions of this period about the relative goodness of the U.S. and its national leaders had similarly been seriously questioned and challenged. Uncertainty rather than optimism, and upheaval rather than order seemed to prevail in the summer of 1968.

Msgr. St. Onge closed his address by encouraging participants at the Blessing to preserve the tradition of this celebration. “I hope and pray you will continue this observance for many years to come,” he declared. Such remarks had followed immediately upon his earlier admonishment of “other natures” that he saw prevailing in the U.S. Msgr. St. Onge seemed to suggest that the saving and conserving role of the Blessing had a mission to the nation as well as to the local community. While this role was not specified at the event, the Blessing did explicitly integrate particular, national concerns.

At the speakers’ ceremony, James M. Spellman, the First Selectman of the Town of Stonington, read a proclamation from Governor John Dempsey, designating July 8, 1968 as a day of appreciation for all American personnel serving in Vietnam. The proclamation included a call for a moment of silent prayer for these men and women, and was promptly observed. Upon the conclusion of the proclamation and prayer, Msgr. St. Onge boarded the America, and motored off toward the harbor breakwaters for the wreath-laying ceremony. The image was poignant. At a time of social crisis in the U.S., the fleet carried forward its hopes for new life aboard a boat named for a country whose sense of a way forward was apparently seriously in question.
While the *America* had dutifully served as the fleet’s flagship in 1968, its time in this role proved to be temporary. The following year the honor was given to one of the fleet’s newest additions, the *Rosemary R*. Dennis Cidale captained the new boat.\(^{66}\) Even though twenty years had passed since Cidale had been given the responsibility of organizing Stonington fishermen during the town’s tri-centennial celebration, he remained at the helm, leading them into a new decade of their life.

**Changing the Tune of the Blessing**

At the beginning of the 1970s, members of the Blessing’s organizing committee discovered that their treasury funds had been seriously depleted. While the committee had been able to survive on a shoe-string budget in past years, the situation this year was apparently much graver. Committee members questioned whether they could afford to pay parade groups and bands like they had in the past. In a search for answers, they sought to reappraise the adequacy of the cost-revenue formula used in past years at the annual Blessing. Food sales from the Saturday night block party and Sunday open house at the Holy Ghost Club had formerly been the primary source of revenue for funding the Sunday parade. The income from these events, though meager, had always been able to sustain the subsequent year’s Sunday parade up to this point. But this year was different. While rainfall at last year’s annual Blessing had curbed Sunday attendance and food sales, committee members surmised that available treasury funds were still lower than they should have been. One member of this committee, recalling the assessment years later, speculated that the diminished funds had possibly been the result of someone with “sticky fingers” sorting through the committee’s treasury.\(^{67}\) Whether this was the case was never proven though.

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In response to this financial problem, Donald Crawford, the committee chairman, proposed that the Saturday night block party and Sunday open house be moved from the Holy Ghost Club to a grassy area in front of the town dock. Arguing that more space was available on this lot, he said that this relocation could possibly help improve food sales. Other recommendations were added to Crawford’s proposal such as a gate fee and beer sales for the Saturday night dinner and dance.⁶⁸

Apparently these latter two proposals were especially contentious. Suggesting that the possible fee was a breach in hospitality, certain committee members made clear that they were uncomfortable with the proposal. However, on the issue of beer sales, almost everyone was in agreement that the current drink sales arrangement designating the Holy Ghost Society as the sole financial beneficiary was inadequate. Yet even though they found this arrangement problematic, they still were left with the question of how they were going to obtain a liquor license for the event. As a possible solution to this dilemma, someone proposed that the local VFW post run the beer sales at the event so long as the organization agreed to a revenue-sharing deal. Because the post already had an existing liquor license, it could secure the necessary permit from the town to serve beer at the event. Agreeing that the idea was workable, committee members soon approved the move to the town dock along with the gate fee and the beer-sales arrangement.⁶⁹

Not everyone was pleased with the changes though. One local fisherman in his recollection of the change lamented that the move had occasioned the loss of “family music” at the Saturday evening block party.⁷⁰ During previous celebration of this event, friends and family members of local fishermen had watched Portuguese folk bands perform at the Holy

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⁶⁸ Ibid.
⁶⁹ Ibid.
⁷⁰ Rendeiro, interview by author, transcript, 1 March 2007.
Ghost Club. These bands had been the evening’s exclusive musical entertainment, and certain people like it this way. However, with the Saturday block party now opened to the general public at the town dock, there were new concerns about whether the event’s “family” character would be preserved. Such concerns were probably not eased by Crawford’s selection of a rock-n-roll cover band called the “Soul Burners” to replace the “family music” featured at previous events.71 The times were certainly a’ changing.

**History on the Move**

Changes to annual Blessing’s weekend program coincided with changes to the narration of the Blessing’s history. While the correlation between these two changes is far from clear, what is clear is that on July 12, 1970 the “16th annual Blessing of Fleet” was celebrated in Stonington. The dating of the Blessing’s anniversary is curious. Previous celebrations had dated anniversary celebrations of the Blessing to 1956. Following the logic of this popular dating, the event held this year should have been considered the 15th rather than “16th annual” celebration of the Blessing. While the shift could possibly be attributed to a minor reporting error, other sources indicate that this was probably not the case.

One week prior to the celebration, *The Day* reported on recently-approved changes to the Blessing of the Fleet’s program after interviewing Donald Crawford, the chairman of the organizing committee. “For the first time in the 16-year history of the Blessing of the Fleet,” it announced, “all activities of the two-day affair will be conducted at the Town Dock area.”72 If the organizers of the Blessing did indeed consider the Blessing held in 1970 as the “16th annual” celebration of the event, they unfortunately did not supply any answers for the apparent shift of the Blessing’s first celebration from 1956 to 1955. The history of the

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Blessing had been noticeably, if unwittingly re-narrated. The unexplained shift would be a sign of narrative inconsistencies to come. In the years ahead, differences in the dating of anniversary celebrations of the Blessing, and in accounts of its “first” celebration would appear again and again with greater regularity.

While concerns about the character of changes to the weekend program remained for some, few could argue that these changes had not brought new interest. At the annual Blessing held in 1970, over eight-thousand people were reported to be in attendance. The estimate was impressive. The event had not previously drawn more than five-thousand people. At the speakers’ ceremony on this day, James Spellman, the first selectmen, called the event the “most successful of any to date.” Pointing to the town dock and its recent improvements, Spellman predicted that it would “make for even better observances such as this in the future.”

A Leader’s Passing Commemorated

If, by better, he meant larger, then the annual Blessing held the following year certainly confirmed his prediction. Over ten thousand people gathered at the town dock on July 12, 1971 for the annual Blessing. “Veteran observers,” the newspaper account reported, “said it was one of the largest crowds in the 17-year history of the event.” While the increasing popularity of the Blessing was reason for cheer, the event this year was marked by a somber character. Dennis Cidale, the “acknowledged leader of the Portuguese-American fishermen of Stonington,” had passed away earlier in the year from natural causes.

The significance of Cidale’s passing did not go unnoticed at the annual Blessing. At the speakers’ program, Clarence Maxson remarked that this year’s Blessing was “a particular

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one in the history of the observance.” The reason for its particularity was directly related to
the community’s continued mourning of Cidale. “This year Dennie isn’t with us,” Maxson
eulogized, “and we miss him. It’s not every day that a man of his stature comes along.” This
was true. Cidale had been the de facto leader of fishermen from the Stonington Portuguese
community for over a quarter of a century, and a revered figure to fleet members as a whole.
He had led the earliest recorded parade of Stonington draggers in 1949, and had led the most
previous one as well at last year’s Blessing. In the interval between these two events, Cidale
had served on almost all of the organizing committees for the annual Blessing. His absence
this year was therefore deeply felt. And at no time was this absence more intensely felt than
at wreath-laying ceremony later in the afternoon.

Virginia Cidale, Dennis Cidale’s widow, had been asked to toss the anchor-shaped
floral wreath into the waters during the afternoon ceremony. As the appointed fleet
flagship, her late husband’s former boat the Rosmary R. carried her out to the designated spot
past the harbor breakwaters. There Msgr. St. Onge offered prayers for deceased local
fishermen. Once he had finished, Virginia Cidale carried the wreath to the boat railing, held
it out over the water, and then let it drop into the waves below. The task of this
commemoration, this letting go, would not be a one-time act. Virginia Cidale would carry
out the same task at the Blessing held the following year and in years to come.

Cod War Politics

At the annual Blessing held in 1971, Msgr. St. Onge had offered three explicit
intentions for Stonington fishermen. He had prayed that God “bless the fishermen as they
go about their daily tasks,” “bring them back safely to port,” and grant that “all their
business transactions be successful.” Unfortunately, not all of their “business transactions”
were succeeding a year later.
Clarence Maxson made this clear at the annual Blessing held in 1972. Like previous years, Maxson delivered some remarks at the speakers’ ceremony. But unlike previous years, his remarks were not charged with enthusiastic predictions about the fleet’s future. In fact, his predictions were downright bleak. Maxson attempted to convey the seriousness of the fleet’s current economic situation by intertwining the future of the fleet with the future of the Blessing. At the speakers’ ceremony, Maxson ominously remarked, “I hope you people here today are enjoying your lobsters because you may not be doing it for too much longer.” The rhetorical appeal was far from abstract. Like the taste and aroma of boiled lobster meat drizzled in warm, drawn butter, the Blessing was an occasion of intense delight and joy. With the Maxson’s prediction of the Blessing’s end, such a specter meant not only the loss of foods to savor, but a privileged time to savor too.

Maxson proceeded to clarify the reason for his ominous prediction by referring to the activities of Russian fishing trawlers near U.S. waters. “The Russians,” Maxson announced, “are beating our brains out offshore and the crop is not too plentiful inshore. It may be that we will be eating caviar soon.” Apparently caviar was not something to look forward to according to him. As Maxson suggested in his following line, if people were eating only fish eggs, it was a sign that Russian fishing vessels had seriously overfished traditional fishing grounds and stocks.

By 1972, these fishing vessels were apparently a significant contributing factor to the alarming depletion of such grounds and stocks. Described by one critic as “world’s most efficient fish catchers,” Soviet fishing trawlers had been accused of overfishing the traditionally fertile grounds of Georges Bank in the North Atlantic. Using boats that were

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76 *Fishing Out of Stonington,*
two to three times the size of average American fishing trawlers, and fishing lines that trailed for several miles behind these boats, Russian fishermen had allegedly undermined previously stable stocks of haddock. In addition, they were accused of being chiefly responsible for similarly negative impacts on stocks of mackerel, herring, cod, and yellowtail flounder.77

Existing international treaties on fishing did not help the cause of American fishermen who were protesting the activity of Russian fishing vessels. These treaties specified that national governments could only protect and restrict fishing within twelve miles of their shores. Any fishing activity beyond these borders, however, was not subject to their regulation. Organizations like International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries (I.C.N.A.F.) were responsible for managing and conserving fishing stocks in particular areas of the world. These organizations primarily assessed and set catch limits on specific types of fish under their management. In light of steep decreases in mackerel stocks, American fishermen in the North Atlantic region had lobbied the I.C.N.A.F. in the early 1970s for a drastic reduction in catch limits. Backed by scientific data from National Marine Fisheries Service (N.M.F.S.) in the U.S., American fishermen argued that the seriousness of the depletion merited a temporary moratorium on the harvesting of mackerel. The I.C.N.A.F. rejected their argument. A compromise agreement between I.C.N.A.F. and N.M.F.C. later permitting a fifty-five thousand pound catch limit was later worked out to the chagrin of American fishermen. Not long after this compromise had been reached, the I.C.N.A.F. formally rescinded the agreement and approved a catch limit of one-hundred and five thousand pounds, nearly doubling the size of the earlier compromise agreement.

Infuriated American fishermen in turn called for the U.S. government to withdraw formally from the I.C.N.A.F.\textsuperscript{78}

Their request, however, was initially opposed by the U.S. State Department. The reasons for the State Department’s opposition were partly related to their historical support and defense of American tuna fishermen shipping out of ports on the Pacific coast. When tuna stock in U.S. waters began to dwindle in the early 1950s, these fishermen responded by re-locating their commercial work further south off the shores of Chile, Peru, and Ecuador. In response, these three countries each passed laws in 1952 that established new limits of federally protected and regulated regions for commercial fishing extending two-hundred miles off their shores. Unsurprisingly, American tuna fishermen protested these new limits, which were in excess of previous international agreements by one-hundred and eighty-eight miles. Perceiving the new limits as a threat to American economic interests, the U.S. State Department affirmed the international authorization of the twelve-mile limit in support of these fishermen.\textsuperscript{79} Such an affirmation, however, would later prove to be a stumbling block for Stonington fishermen, and other fishermen in nearby American ports.

Prior to the early 1970s, Stonington fishermen had never directly called upon the federal government to intervene on behalf of their interests. They had fished out of an American port, flown American flags, and several of them had even served in the military during wartime. But until now the politics of their everyday work had remained, in a way, separate from the politics of the federal government.


\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
Island introduced legislation supporting the creation of two-hundred mile federal jurisdiction of commercial fishing activity off American shores. While the bill did not pass into law this year, similar pieces of legislation would be reintroduced in Congress over the next few years. In the meanwhile, Stonington fishermen worked and prayed, bringing their deepest and most immediate concerns to annual Blessing each year.

The anti-Russian rhetoric at the Blessing held in 1972 was certainly new in terms of the Blessing’s history, but it was not the only new aspect integrated into the annual celebration around this time. The history of the Blessing, in fact, appeared to be undergoing a subtle reassessment. Commenting on attendance at the Blessing held in 1972, The Day reported that the “turnout was one of the largest since the ceremonies were started in the 1950s.” While prior reports of the annual Blessing had not explicitly appealed to the origins of the celebration, they had somewhat regularly used a system dating anniversaries of the event back to 1956. However, this year the report’s use of the term “1950s” seemed to indicate a certain hesitancy or even disagreement about fixing the Blessing’s beginnings. Whether there were ongoing disagreements about the origins of the Blessing’s history among fishermen or other community members the paper did not say.

At the annual Blessing held the following year, The Day similarly reported that the celebration had originated in the “1950s.” And like its previous report, it again did not offer any evidence that the history of the Blessing was being currently contested. However, even without such evidence, it seems quite possible that questions were at least being raised about the historical origins of the annual Blessing at this time. In the years ahead, inconsistencies

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80 Ibid.
in the dating of the Blessing’s anniversary would suggest that questions were indeed being asked, and different answers were being given.

In the meanwhile, the annual Blessing seemed to be enjoying record growth, even though the number of boats participating in the celebration was on the decline. Twenty-thousand people were reportedly in attendance at the annual Blessing held in 1973. This was a thirty-three percent increase from the previous high of fifteen-thousand people reportedly in attendance last year. Increases in attendance seemed to only be matched by increases in anti-Russian rhetoric. Once again, Clarence Maxson spoke at the speakers’ ceremony this year about the perils posed by Russian fishing vessels operating in the North Atlantic. “Here in Stonington,” he lamented, “we have seen our dragger fleet dwindle from some 35 boats to about 10, because the Russians are being allowed to rape the fishing grounds in the North Atlantic.” If people had been unsure about the domestic impact of Russian fishing activity, the analogy of rape indicated something of felt intensity and gravity of the Russian fishing fleet’s actions. The apparent crime of Russian fishermen was not simply one of theft or the misuse of resources according to Maxson. Rather, it was an act more akin to the violation of bodily integrity. Even though the analogy was inadequate in number of ways, it nonetheless conveyed something of the gravity of the local impact of Russian fishing activity.

Maxson proceeded to accuse Congress of apathy in the face of complaints from local fishermen. “I wonder,” he cynically speculated, “if they are going to let our fishing fleet just disappear.” Yet, even in light of apparent congressional inaction, Maxson took a certain solace in the hope-filled and integrative activity of the Blessing. He encouragingly remarked to the crowd that “although our fleet gets smaller, our fishermen are becoming even more closely knit and that is why they have this religious observance today.” Following these

83 Ibid.
remarks, Bishop Hines called attention to fishermen and their faith in God. Building on this theme, he unequivocally declared, “I have yet to hear of a man of the sea who is an atheist.”

While the comment could be interpreted as an analogue to the aphorism that “there are no atheists in foxhole,” its context seems to suggest other possible interpretations. Because Bishop Hines had made the remark shortly after Maxson’s blistering critique of Russian fishing activities in the North, he was not unaware of the Stonington’s fleet’s current economic and political challenges. Read in the immediate context of the celebration held this year, the remark seemed to carry a sharper rhetorical edge. In particular, when Bishop Hines declared that he had “yet to hear of a man of the sea who is an atheist,” he seemed to be implicitly rebuking Russian fishermen and their constitutionally-sanctioned atheist government under Soviet rule. Yet this was not all that Bishop Hines’ comment seemed to suggest. By rhetorically challenging the plausibility of being at once a “man of the sea” and an “atheist,” Bishop Hines seemed to invite hearers to question both the labor identity and manliness of Russian fishermen. Not only were these fishermen not true fishermen according to Bishop Hines’ suggestions, but they were even more dammingly not true men as well. If this indeed was the intent of Bishop Hines’ remarks, then Cod War politics had certainly shaded over into Cold War politics.

Whatever relation, if any, these remarks bore to current American politics Bishop Hines was quick to remind the gathered crowd about the primary politics of the Blessing—a politics at once transforming and transcending nations and time. Before invoking the “blessing of St. Peter,” Bishop Hines, once again, called attention to the faith and everyday religious practice of fishermen. “Wherever fishermen are at sea far from land,” he noted, “they pray for their own safety and that of their families back on shore.” Fishermen, however, were not only the agents of prayer. Appealing to distinctive action of the Blessing,
Bishop Hines told the crowd that the annual event “is our time to pray for these hardworking men and ask that they return safely from their daily duties at sea.”

**For the Departed**

Unfortunately, one of these fishermen and his son did not return safely to shore shortly before the annual Blessing held the following year. On July 4, 1974, eight days before the celebration of the annual Blessing, Roderick DeBragga and his son Rodney had died at sea as the two were setting lobster pots near Long Island. Roderick had apparently died in an attempt to rescue Rodney after he had fallen overboard. The body of the younger DeBragga would not be recovered until the afternoon of the Blessing.

The impact of the recent tragedy was reflected in the speeches given and the prayers offered on this day. Before the formal blessing of boats, Msgr. St. Onge paused to remember the lives of Roderick and Rodney DeBragga in his reflection on the consolation and significance of the Blessing. Calling these recent deaths a “double tragedy,” he affirmed to the gather crowd that such a profound loss made “even more meaningful our asking St. Peter, the patron saint of fishermen, to give his protection to the men and ships of the fleet as they pursue their livelihood.” As a final word of comfort and encouragement to this mourning community, Msgr. St. Onge said the fleet’s participation at the annual Blessing a “demonstration of the faith and courage of fishermen in the type of work they do.” With a final prayer of blessing, he invited these men to persevere in their trust that as they went to sea, they went not alone, but rather with the Blessing.

The work that local fishermen were committed to had certainly caused considerable pain and suffering in this community over the years. Like St. Peter (Mk 8:31-33), many in this community could indeed wonder about the mystery of the suffering and its meaning or

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apparent lack of meaning. Confronted with the intensity of this mystery, words often seemed insufficient. Even Clarence Maxson, a man who hardly ever lacked for words, reportedly kept his remarks brief at the speakers’ ceremony on this day. “More than ever, the deaths of Roderick and Rodney DeBragga demonstrate that the sea is so large and the boats are so small,” Maxson poignantly remarked.

For many in the Stonington community, fishing was a labor of love and joy as well as a labor of pain and suffering. While the sea was certainly the place where these virtues and lessons were learned and acquired, the annual Blessing had over the course of its development come to be understood as providing the context for their integration and transformation. Like St. Peter, participants at the annual Blessing learned that God was alone the one who could be trusted in the midst of confusion, pain, and suffering, even when human understanding of these experiences had been utterly strained to the limits and exhausted. The “blessing of St. Peter” was offered as an anticipation rather than completion of transformed life. This blessing was thus annually celebrated as both a task and a challenge.

**Shifts in History, Reform, and Pastoral Care**

Changes in the official dating of the Blessing’s history appeared again in *The Day’s* account of the event in 1974. The newspaper reported that “turnout compared favorably with those of the 18 previous observances conducted since the program was started in the early 1950s.”

If this celebration was considered the nineteenth in the history of the event, then the narrative of the Blessing’s history had again established 1956 as the year of the first celebration. Like previous events, there were not any accompanying reasons explaining the change.

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85 Ibid.
In the spring of 1976, Stonington fishermen received good news about local and regional efforts to expand the federally protected U.S. fisheries limit. On April 13, 1976, Pres. Gerald Ford signed into law the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The federal act extended the limit of U.S. government’s jurisdiction of coastal waters from twelve-miles to two-hundred miles effective March 1, 1977. Even though Pres. Ford had initially opposed the legislation, he had apparently changed his mind in light of the United Nation’s inaction in establishing a new international fisheries agreement. Officially Pres. Ford stated that he had signed the bill because of “the slow pace of the negotiations of the United Nations Law of the Sea Conference.” As further support for his recent change in mind, he cited the failure of three international efforts over the past four years to achieve a workable agreement. Whatever his exact reasons were, Senator Warren G. Magnuson (D-WA), the act’s principal sponsor, was simply pleased that he signed it. Shortly after the bill signing, Magnuson told reporters that he was confident that the new federal act would “put an end to the foreign fish pirates operating off of our shores.”

Unsurprisingly Russian fishermen were critical of the legislation. On May 5, 1976, the Soviet government communicated their formal disapproval of the legislation’s passage into law. Stating that “the adoption of the law establishing a 200-mile fishery zone for the U.S. goes directly counter to the efforts now being undertaken to achieve mutually acceptable decisions” at the U.N, they made clear that the Magnuson Act breached existing international agreements.

The Soviet government’s protest, however, proved to be more tactical than principled. Within a year of their formal protest, they had actually established their own

two-hundred mile fisheries limit. The move was not so much a rebuke to the U.S. in the ongoing gamesmanship of Cold War politics as it was a response to regional neighbors. Worried about the increased activity of Japanese fishermen off their shores, the Soviet government took legislative action to protect domestic economic interests.  

On July 11, 1976, Bishop Daniel P. Reilly presided for the first time at the annual Blessing. Installed the previous August, Bishop Reilly had succeeded Bishop Hines shortly after the latter’s retirement earlier in 1975. A notably gregarious and cordial pastor, Bishop Reilly would earn the respect and admiration of many over his eighteen years of service in the diocese. And Stonington fishermen were no exception in their high regard for Bishop Reilly. Presiding at every celebration of the annual Blessing from 1976 to 1994, Bishop Reilly would become one of the fleet’s most loyal friends and ardent advocates in his time as pastor of the diocese.

**Feasting and the Fellowship of the Living and Departed**

Unlike previous accounts of the annual Blessing, coverage of the celebration in the late 1970s and early 1980s gave more attention to the both the quantity and kinds of food and drink consumed over the course of the weekend event. “Over 40 barrels of beer were drained, along with uncountable quantities of hot dogs, hamburgers, seafood and clam chowder” according to the report of the annual Blessing held in 1977. At the event held the following year, the quantity of food that was cooked and consumed was apparently even more impressive. Calling the consumption of food and drink at the event “gargantuan,” The New London Day attempted to support its claim with several estimates it received in the wake of the celebration. Karen Arthur of Sandy’s Seafood, the vendor responsible for supplying lobster

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88 Ristori, “Long-Sought 200-Mile Limit Can Turn Tide.”
dinners at the 1978 event, reported that she had to request an emergency shipment of lobster from Long Island because “2,000 pounds of lobster” had not been sufficient to feed people on Saturday evening alone. The Knights of Columbus were apparently no less busy serving food this weekend. They reported sales of “200 pounds of hot dogs and hamburgers” as well as “16 bushels of steamed clams.” Beer sales were similarly brisk. Commenting on the “100 kegs of beer” consumed on Saturday night, one vendor wryly noted that participants were simply “thirsty.” In light of the mere “40 barrels” emptied the previous year, the comment was serious understatement.

By 1977, the dating of the annual Blessing underwent yet another change in the dating of its history. On July 10, 1977, The Day reported that they “23rd annual Blessing of the Fleet” had been held at the Stonington Town Dock under clear and sunny skies. People there had crowded together at the dock along with “10 dragers and 25 fishing boats, covered with Portuguese and American flags, multi-colored banners, flowers, and crepe paper in the shapes of turtles, seals, crosses, whales, and anchors.” The aesthetically rich, multi-textured, and eclectic scene was a good metaphor for the way the history of the Blessing had been variously narrated over the course of the past twenty-three, twenty-two, or even twenty-seven years, depending on the celebration one privileged. By referring to the celebration as the “23rd annual Blessing of the Fleet,” the annual Blessing held in 1955 was once again established as the original celebration. Over the next several years, it would retain this privilege in narrations of the event.

Before the decade closed, Stonington fishermen would establish an enduring reminder of the ultimate sacrifices many in the fleet had made over the years. At the annual

92 Noyd, “Bishop blesses fleet in Stonington.”

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Blessing on July 8, 1979, Bishop Reilly formally dedicated the Stonington Fishermen’s Memorial, set at the end of the dock’s north pier. After several years of fundraising, the Stonington Fishermen’s Association had finally been able to finance the memorial’s construction. With a single cast iron anchor mounted on two granite blocks, and another granite block etched with the dedication date and an image of a fisherman standing watch at a ship’s steering wheel, the memorial was both simple and durable, much like the fishermen to whom it was dedicated.

As a new decade of celebration opened, the hunger and the thirst of participants at the annual Blessing remained intact. In fact, if the annual Blessing held in 1980 was any indication, such appetites had only increased. At the celebration, the Stonington Borough Fire Department, the organization in charge of vending beer, reported that even though they had “ordered 125 kegs” they expected their taps to run dry in light of steady Saturday night sales. The local fire department, however, was not the only organization unable to keep up with demand. The Portuguese Holy Ghost Society stated that it had “ran out of chowder after selling 140 gallons and had sold more than 50 bushels of steamers.” Not to be outdone, the Stonington High School Athletic Boosters Club reported that it had sold “1,120 lobster dinners” on Saturday evening alone. As an indication of the impressive scale of such sales, one club member noted that by the end of the Saturday night feast they were only eighty shy of the “1,200 dinners” that had sold in total the previous year.

While the annual Blessing was certainly a time to anticipate being filled, it was also a time to mediate more deeply on unquenchable human longings and material limits. By 1981, the Fishermen’s Memorial had been formally integrated into the prayers and rituals of the

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annual Blessing. At the celebration this year, Bud Jacobs, one of the original members of the Blessing of the Fleet committee, was explicitly honored in the wake of his death earlier in the year from natural causes. Upon the completion of the speakers’ program, Ruth Jacobs, Bud Jacobs’ widow, walked over to the memorial stone and placed a floral wreath near it as prayers were offered for all local fishermen who died on land or at sea.

The following year Ruth Jacobs once again set a floral wreath near the memorial stone with the assistance of Jim Henry and festival chairman Arthur Medeiros. After she had set the wreath, Bishop Reilly placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and held it there as the two listened to a short presentation read by local fishermen Luther Cahoon along with the rest of the crowd. The weight of remembrance apparently made the presentation difficult. When Cahoon offered the prayer, “I ask for nothing because I believe the Lord knows what my needs are,” he was nearly overcome by emotion. Bishop Reilly followed Cahoon’s prayer by reminding the crowd of the sacrifices fishermen regularly made.

While the Stonington fleet had fortunately not suffered the loss of a single member for several years, two boats from the fleet, the Duchess and the Pocahontas, had been lost at sea over the past year. In light of these recent boat losses, Bishop Reilly’s comment that fishermen “constantly expose themselves to danger” was likely all the more poignant.

Before boarding the fleet flagship in preparation for the wreath laying ceremony at sea, Bishop Reilly called attention to the importance of placing trust in the surpassing power and guidance of God. Processed down to the dock earlier by local fishermen, the statue of St. Peter stood close to the Fishermen’s Memorial. “There’s no one who can harness the sea,” Bishop Reilly declared there, “except the Lord.” And no one knew this better than St. Peter

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who remained present amidst the gathered community praying around the memorial this day.

**History as Commemoration**

At the annual Blessing held in 1982, Jim Henry provided one of the first coherent narrative accounts of the Blessing. After the wreath-laying ceremony had been conducted this year, he reflected upon the history and meaning of the event in an interview with one reporter. With a certain measure of gratitude and affection borne from years of participation, Henry told the reporter that the annual Blessing “really is something.” But he was quick to note that, in reference to the annual celebration, his posture of gratitude was not the same as pleasure. “I don’t look at this for fun,” he commented. “We celebrate being alive. And at the same time we’re looking at our fellow men who were lost at sea.” Before Henry talked at greater length about some of these men who had been lost at sea, the newspaper account called attention to Henry’s years of service as a Stonington fisherman and as a member of Blessing of the Fleet committee. In regard to the latter, the report added that “since 1955, when the Southern New England Fishermen’s Association sponsored the first Blessing of the Fleet,” Henry had “poured his heart and soul into the event.”

Henry explained his passionate commitment to the annual Blessing in terms of the duty of remembrance. While Henry had known quite a few fleet members who had died at sea, he singled out the loss of his cousin Arthur P. Arruda at sea over thirty years ago as the two were fishing and noted that the tragic memory remained painful even to this day. “Ever since that happened,” he stated, “that’s been on my mind.” Commenting further on his cousin’s loss at sea, Henry indicated that the tragedy made the celebration of the annual Blessing all the more significant to him. In fact, he noted that the formal commemoration

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98 Lipkin, “Message from fleet blessing: ‘Proud to be a fisherman,’” p. 7.
of his cousin’s death at Fishermen’s Memorial earlier in the day had deeply moved him, consuming him in sorrow once again. Participation at the annual Blessing “is my way of appreciating what my cousin did for me,” Henry solemnly affirmed. “He gave his life for me.”

If Henry’s comments were in any way indicative of the reasons why other Stonington fishermen celebrated the annual Blessing, then it seemed like the event worked to both intensify and specify the lived conviction that there was no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friend. The recognition and honoring of such self-emptying love at the annual Blessing, however, was not without tears and sorrow. The annual celebration worked to elicit sorrow, but it was not the only felt response regularly enkindled at the event. Henry indicated as much in his comments about “joy” as a constitutive characteristic of the annual Blessing. In particular, he claimed that the annual Blessing involved participants in a celebration which meaningfully held together “joy and grief side by side.”

**Prayer and Proper Manners**

Henry noted, however, that not everyone properly honored the integral relation of these experiences at the annual Blessing. In particular, he explicitly questioned whether some of the younger fishermen adequately appreciated the annual Blessing. To clarify what he meant, the reporter noted that Henry gestured toward a “dragger whose occupants were chugging beers and whooping.” While commenting that there was “nothing wrong” with such activities at certain times, Henry mentioned that participants nonetheless had “to respect what the Blessing is for.” In Henry’s sense, “respect” likely did not mean an absence of fun or play within one’s life or the celebration of the Blessing, for Henry certainly had a

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99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
playful streak and was not one to hide it. In fact, Henry had humorously displayed such a streak at the boat parade held earlier that day. There he and his daughter Noreen Page had unveiled the transformation of his boat the Noranda into “Noranda’s Zoo.” With “wild animals of wood, chicken wire and bunches of paper napkins” crowding the bow, the boat sailed off to the wreath-laying ceremony with a large hippopotamus trailing behind it in the water. If the visual affect was not outlandish enough, then the “screching sound of jungle animals” played over the boat’s speaker system certainly put it over-the-top.\(^1\)

With this example in mind, it seemed that respect in Henry’s terms implied a certain disciplined recognition of the distinct, yet inseparable activities of celebration and commemoration at the annual Blessing. The inability to read these mutually interpenetrating activities together was not simply a breach in manners. More importantly, it was a failure of proper worship. Respect, it seemed, conveyed a certain personal disposition or opening to receive something of the Blessing’s surprising grace and wisdom, unfolded locally in praise and mourning, and in glad tidings and tears.

Henry was not the only one who was concerned about respect for the Blessing. “Some fishermen,” the Day reported in its coverage of the annual Blessing held in 1983, “said that the point of the religious event was being lost in the partying.” Certain residents of the Stonington Borough apparently echoed this sentiment too. In reference to these people, Arthur Medeiros, the chairman of the Blessing’s organizing committee, noted that several residents had previously “complained about boisterous Saturday night revelers.”\(^2\)

In response to these concerns, Fr. William P. Loftus, the pastor of St. Mary’s Parish, had recommended beginning the Saturday night dinner and dance at earlier time, and ending

\(^1\) Ibid.
it by eight in the evening. Medeiros and others on the planning committee welcomed the idea and promptly approved it. Commenting on these time changes, a reporter at the event this year noted that the “traditional two-day festival” had been “designed to be a less rowdy, more family-oriented event than in years past.” For local fishermen who had lamented the seeming erosion of the event’s family character since the early 1970s, these changes were quite possibly seen as something of a partial vindication. Fr. Loftus, in particular, was pleased by these small changes to the Blessing’s weekend schedule. In an interview, he said with a smile that the annual Blessing was “more of a spiritual affair,” and firmly, but affectionately asserted that “we’re going to keep it that way.”

Smiles apparently abounded at the celebration this year. Bishop Reilly was reportedly “beaming” as he offered thanks at the formal ceremonies this year. Pointing to the “smiles” on faces of those at the speakers’ ceremony, Bishop Reilly declared that “it’s great to be alive and happy.” No one probably knew this better than the crew of the Catherine and Mary. Three weeks earlier, the entire crew had survived the sinking of their vessel not far off of Cape Cod. While the loss of any vessel from the local fleet was a cause for sadness, many participants at the annual Blessing this year, however, were more immediately saddened by the loss of local fishermen Luther Cahoon who had died unexpectedly on land earlier in the year. At the previous year’s ceremonies by the Fishermen’s Memorial, Cahoon had offered an emotional tribute to local fishermen who had died at sea and on land. Sadly this year it was Cahoon who was explicitly remembered by name. Upon the completion of prayers offered for all Stonington fishermen who had died, Bishop Reilly sought to both assuage and assure the mourning crowd through his faith-filled affirmation that Cahoon now enjoyed “the rest of home port after a long and successful fishing career in perilous but productive waters.” At the liturgical ceremonies held in the port of Stonington this day, the
“home port” of the gathered crowd was again anticipated in prayers of remembrance. And until the goal of their travels in this valley of tears had been accomplished, they once again promised to mark their earthly sojourn toward it together in prayer and praise at the annual Blessing.

The activities of commemoration and celebration at the annual Blessing were not simply structural in character, following one upon another in a type of pre-set manner. Rather, these activities were more deeply and visibly intertwined together in a personal way, admitting of a certain degree of spontaneity and even surprise. Nowhere was this more evident than at the formal blessing of boats and fishermen. There the solemn and the celebratory, and the reverent and the raucous were united together in a visibly distinct way.

For example, at the annual Blessing held in 1985, the reception of the formal blessing was anything but dull or uniform. From his perch aboard the fleet flagship at the Town Dock this year, Bishop Reilly administered the formal blessing to each boat and its passengers as it motored past the flagship. With a gleaming shower of holy water delivered from the aspergillum thrust toward these boats and their passengers, Bishop Reilly blessed each of the colorfully decorated boats filled with similarly colorful people who stood along boat railings and sat atop boat wheelhouses. With an eclectic mix of animated gestures and reserved postures, the people on these boats variously readied themselves to receive the formal blessing by stretching out toward it with open arms or by waiting attentively with hands clasped in prayer. They would embrace it with a similar, if not more interesting coincidence of different gestures and postures. “Some of the people aboard the boats,” the Day reported,
“blew kisses or waved at the bishop, some toasted him with cans of beer and soda, and others bowed their heads and made the sign of the cross.”

The annual Blessing’s development had provided the Stonington fleet with a privileged opportunity to manifest both its unity and its vitality. If the varied personal responses of participants at the formal blessing held in 1985 were in any way indicative of this unity, then it certainly seemed like complexity was a fruit of the Blessing’s development. The unity signified in the fleet’s annual reception of the formal blessing had not simply been developed into a uniformity of reception.

This is not to say that any and every type of reception was sanctioned though. Certain members of the fleet were quick to remind others that the annual Blessing enjoined participants to honor the event’s integral relation of commemoration and celebration. Arthur Medeiros, for one, mentioned as much to a reporter at the annual Blessing held in 1986. During this interview, he stated that the annual Blessing was both “a celebration in one way” and “a solemn event in another.” Bishop Reilly reiterated this point almost verbatim to the same reporter this year, characterizing the annual Blessing as “festive, yet solemn.”

Only a year earlier Bishop Reilly had expounded at much greater length upon this characterization. In reply to a reporter’s question about annual Blessing’s significance, Bishop Reilly gestured toward a distinct understanding of the meaning of labor presumably shared by all participants at the event. He claimed that not only did he and other participants at the annual Blessing “recognize the importance of God in our daily work,” but they both similarly shared a conviction about the ultimate significance of this work.

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reference to this particular and lived recognition, he said that “for the people who devote their lives to this, there is religious meaning and a reason to remember and celebrate.”

Understanding the intrinsic implication of God’s activity and communication in human labor was not simply an internal sounding, but was manifestly unfolded in the religious actions of commemoration and celebration according to Bishop Reilly’s suggestion.

While the “people” included in Bishop Reilly’s preceding comment could have been simply limited to local fishermen, other interpretations seem possible. If, by “people,” Bishop Reilly meant all people at the annual Blessing, and, by implication, the different kinds of work they performed, his comment possibly suggest that all labor was given a decisive ordering at the annual Blessing. And if the interpretation can be considered plausible, then the annual Blessing was not celebrated simply as the interpretive form of fishing, but instead as the form of all labor. Seen in its liturgical integration at the annual Blessing, labor was ultimately ordered to the activities of celebration and commemoration. Within this re-imagined and re-narrated economy, labor was no longer bound to order of exchange or of mutual benefit, but rather was opened to an economy of sheer generosity guided by the terms of worship at the annual Blessing.

**Re-forging Friendship and Fellowship**

For Bishop Reilly, the annual Blessing was a deeply and personally significant event. In an interview with one reporter in 1986, Bishop Reilly spoke about the meaning of his presence at the annual Blessing in terms of pastoral care and friendship. Noting that a number of local fishermen were “members of the parish” of St. Mary’s in Stonington, Bishop Reilly indicated that his presence was first and foremost a response flowing from his pastoral duties as the local bishop. However, as important as these duties were, Bishop

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Reilly did not simply characterize his presence as a matter of obligation. Rather, it was more a matter of gratitude and the re-forging of bonds of friendship according to him. Commenting that he and certain members of the fleet had “become personal friends” over the years, Bishop Reilly spoke about this personal friendship by speaking about the prayers of support he and others offered at the annual Blessing. With the people who attended this annual event, he explained that their gathered presence was a sign of encouragement addressed to local fishermen. As an embodied articulation of both his and the local community’s friendship solidarity with these men, Bishop Reilly said that the annual Blessing “lets them know that we pray for them and the risks and perils they face as they seek a livelihood at sea.”

The “risks and perils” fishermen experienced at sea were not the only aspects of their work that were included in prayer at the annual Blessing. At the annual Blessing held in 1987, Bishop Reilly indicated that one of the “blessings” fishermen experienced in their work was an inspired and felt sense of joy and pride. Invoking God’s blessing of the seas that local fishermen regularly worked, Bishop Reilly told the crowd gathered at the Fishermen’s Memorial that these waters gave “life” to the community. “They provide us with bounty,” he declared, “and give us a certain sense of power and pleasure as we navigate them.” Prayers of support were subsequently joined to these prayers of gratitude in petitions for the health and safety of local fishermen. Finally, prayers of consolation were offered at the memorial for Manuel Rebello, a retired local fishermen who had died earlier in the year. Jim Henry had mentioned earlier that the annual Blessing was to be celebrated with “joy and grief side by side.” Seen in light of the prayers that were offered on this day, the shorthand phrase seemed to imply not so much a demand that people manifest certain emotions at the

annual Blessing as it did an invitation for them to participate in the total experience of the liturgy’s prayers and postures.

By the latter part of the decade, concerns about the misbehavior of some participants at the annual Blessing had generally subsided. At the annual Blessing held in 1988, Arthur Medeiros told one reporter that the event had “a very good crowd, a very orderly crowd.”\(^{107}\) Not only was the crowd “orderly,” but finances seemed to be orderly too. Organizers of the annual Blessing had long survived on a shoestring budget. Each annual event was financed by the revenue collected from the previous year’s celebration. While the financial arrangement had been generally favorable, it had been tested on a number of occasions due to inclement weather on the weekend of the event. Rainfall at previous events had stressed the ability of organizers to pay the anticipated costs of subsequent events because of decreases in revenue. Medeiros, however, was confident that there would not be a shortfall after the Blessing held this year in light of good crowds and good weather. Medeiros in fact was pleased to report that the organizing committee was likely to “break even” in terms of balancing costs and revenue. The preservation of the Blessing was important for many, and none more so than local fishermen. Prayers offered at the annual event implied confidence in the preservation of the Blessing and in the hope that all of the living and the departed were ultimately preserved in and with God. With this hope, local fishermen returned once again to the Blessing this year and joined Bishop Reilly at the Fishermen’s Memorial in prayers for the dead and prayers of support for their labor and safety.

**A Time of Deep Sorrow**

By 1989, the Stonington fleet could boast of admirable record of health and safety for nearly a decade and a half. Even though the fleet had lost a few boats in the past several

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years, not a single member of the fleet had been lost at sea during this time. This record, however, would be tragically altered just before the close of the decade. In November of 1989, the Heidi Marie along with all five of its crewmembers was lost at sea. The bodies of Arthur Banks, Kenneth Gould, Michael Hare, Mark Middleton, and Raymond Harris were never recovered. The sinking represented the single largest loss of life that the Stonington fleet had ever suffered. Unlike nearby fishing fleets in New Bedford and Gloucester, Stonington had largely been insulated from such devastating losses. Because most of the fleet’s boats had traditionally worked as day-trippers or short-trippers, they tended to stay closer to shore and carried only two to three crewmembers. Long-trippers, boats that went to sea for seven to twelve days, normally carried larger crews and ventured further offshore into the more dangerous waters of George’s Bank. When the Rosemary R. was introduced as the fleet flagship in 1970, it was largest boat in the Stonington fleet. By 1989, however, this was no longer the case. Boats two to three times its size now fished out of Stonington. Consequently, risks had multiplied over the past two decades as boats working out of Stonington increased in size and in the distances they regularly travelled.

The burden of the lives lost aboard the Heidi Marie weighed heavily on many at the annual Blessing held on July 2, 1990. Parents, siblings, and friends of these fishermen gathered to both mourn and honor their lives. Patricia Banks, the mother of Arthur Banks, gave voice to both the pain and suffering that many families of the recently deceased were undergoing. Commenting on the loss of her son several months before, Patricia sorrowfully noted that she still longed to see her son walk through the front door of her house.

Accepting this impossibility had been far from easy and was still an ongoing task. In fact,

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she indicated that knowing that this could never happen again had intensified a sorrow that only fellow grieving mothers could understand.¹¹⁰

Even though she had been grieving for over seven months, Patricia Banks held out hope that the annual Blessing could assuage her pain. With tears welling in her eyes after attending the ceremony at the Fishermen’s Memorial, she talked briefly to a reporter about the possibility of the ceremony remedying her pain. “I hope this finally puts a cap on it,” she said with an admixture of hope and pleading. Her husband, however, was unconvinced. In reference to his son Arthur, Al Banks called his son’s death “devastating” and said that the sorrow felt in the wake of such a loss “never ends.” As a veteran Stonington fisherman, Al Banks certainly had an intimate knowledge of the risks and dangers of fishing. But such knowledge did little to ease the burden of his son’s death. Al Banks, however, did indicate that the memorial ceremony held at this year’s annual Blessing had been somewhat of a personal consolation. In particular, he was gratified that his son had been memorialized by name in the new Fishermen’s Monument stone which had been unveiled earlier in the day. Inscribed with the names of each Stonington fisherman who had died at sea, the monument had been set close to the already existing Fishermen’s Memorial. For Al Banks and his wife, the monument was especially meaningful in light of the non-recovery of their son’s body at sea. “It gives us a place we can go,” Al Banks said consolingly at the close of his interview.

In addition to the five men aboard the Heidi Marie who had been lost at sea, the Stonington fleet had also lost another member at sea over the past year. Robert Cale, a local lobsterman, had died at sea in April after his boat had capsized in rough seas only a few miles from the Town Dock. At the annual Blessing this year, Wayne Cale mentioned that the pain of brother’s loss was still raw. Like many others who were grieving on this day,

¹¹⁰ Dorsey, “The sea’s sorrow never ends, but here there will be solace,” 2 July 1990.
Wayne Cale was able to find a measure of solace in the unveiling of the Fishermen’s Monument. After a sheet draping the monument had been drawn back to reveal the inscribed names of every local fisherman who had died at sea, each name was solemnly read aloud.

Not long after the solemn reading’s completion, Bishop Reilly proceeded to formally dedicate the monument in an emotionally-laden ceremony. Commenting on the importance of commemorating local fishermen, Bishop Reilly told the crowd that the monument was “meant to remember them and express our loss and our gratitude and remind us to pray for them.” Prayers of support for local fishermen followed on these words. As a preface, Bishop Reilly drew attention to the power and paradox of the ocean. He noted that the crowd before him intimately knew that the ocean was a source of both “life-giving waters” and “tragic experience.” With the Fishermen’s monument before him, and the families of several departed local fishermen and fellow fleet members circling around him, Bishop Reilly stood in the midst of this communion of the living and the departed. For all local fishermen who still went to sea, he prayed that “God keep them away from harm.” And for all local fishermen who had not returned, he offered a sign of God’s consolation and ultimate embrace of them with the blessing of holy water he sprinkled on the monument.

Time could not heal all wounds, but it could remove the burden of the dead. By the time the annual Blessing was celebrated the following year, barely a year had passed since the loss of six local fleet members. At the event, Bishop Reilly spoke publicly after the formal blessing about the sorrow that families and friends of local fishermen who had died at sea continued to experience. In reference to them, he noted that the annual Blessing “always brings back the heartache they’ve experienced.” But he was quick to note the Blessing similarly offered all who were still grieving the consolation of prayer. Before setting off
aboard the _Rosemary R._ for the wreath-laying ceremony, Bishop Reilly invited all gathered at the dock to trust that those who had been lost at sea were preserved in prayer. “As we sail through the waters today to our memorial rendezvous,” he announced, “we do recall them and we do pray for them.”

The departed, however, were not the only ones for whom prayers were offered at this event. Like previous ceremonies, Bishop Reilly again prayed that all local fishermen be kept “safe from harm.” And no one probably desired the efficacy of these prayers more than local fishermen in attendance. Even though Arthur Medeiros was a veteran fisherman with over four decades of experience, he acknowledged to one reporter that the recent loss of fellow fleet members had shaken his former sense of security at sea. With this intensified sense of fishing’s inherent risks in mind, Medeiros reported that he was relieved that there had been “no casualties this year” suffered by the fleet. “I hope,” he said in closing, “I can say same thing a year from today.”

This hope, however, was almost dashed five months later. On January 3, 1992, the _Lois Joyce_, a transient boat from North Carolina that fished out of Stonington in the winter, sank in rough weather about a hundred miles south of Block Island, Rhode Island. Initial reports about the sinking indicated that all five men aboard the boat had not survived. Resignation, however, would soon turn into celebration. While aerially searching for these men almost three days after the initially sinking, the Coast Guard relayed a report that the five-man crew of the _Lois Joyce_ had been spotted and found alive. When a Coast Guard cutter retrieved the all five crewmembers later that day, they had been adrift in their lifeboat

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for well over forty-eight hours. Three days after their ordeal at sea had begun, the five-man crew of the *Lois Joyce* finally returned back to Stonington to a heroes’ welcome.\(^{112}\)

**A Time of Joy-Filled Celebration**

At the annual Blessing held the following July, the rescue of this crew was interpreted by many in providential terms. In contrast to the more somber tone of the annual Blessing for the past two years, Arthur Medeiros indicated that the rescue had inspired a more celebratory mood at the Sunday ceremonies this year. Amidst the celebrating crowd, Medeiros affirmed to one reporter that the rescue was “really a miracle.” Building on this belief, he indicated that this “wonderful” event had been a welcome relief to a community which had lately been over-burdened by the loss of several local fishermen. “We’ve lost enough,” Medeiros somberly remarked, and reinforced the point by citing the total number of men from the fleet who had died at sea.\(^{113}\)

Medeiros, however, was not the only participant to talk about the rescue of the *Lois Joyce*’s crewmembers in providential terms. Bishop Reilly similarly interpreted the rescue as a sign of God’s mercy and preserving love. At the Sunday ceremony held at the Fishermen’s Memorial, Bishop Reilly talked about the resurrection-like character of the rescue. Commenting on a local editorial piece published shortly after the rescue, he told the gathered crowd that he agreed with the editorial’s statement that even though the ocean had at first seemed to overwhelm the lives of the crew aboard the *Lois Joyce*, the good news of their rescue had announced the unanticipated reversal of their apparent demise. Instead of


being ultimately consumed by death, Bishop Reilly reiterated that the lives of these men had been unexpectedly preserved and restored to life two days later.

Continuing his exegesis of the rescue, Bishop Reilly indicated that this event could be seen not only as a sign of the promise of new life, but also as a sign of the efficacy of prayer. Before the gathered crowd, Bishop Reilly declared that the “prayers of last summer” had been “mercifully answered by God and by the brave men of the Coast Guard.” The declaration was as much a spur to prayer as it was a cause for celebration. Shortly after announcing the rescue as a sign of the efficacy of prayer, Bishop invited the community to persevere with him in prayers of gratitude and support for local fishermen. “We pray,” he said in reference to these fishermen, “for those who go forth and those who have gone forth and not come back.”

Al Banks and Wayne Cale needed little urging to persevere in prayer for local fleet members. Both had lost family members at sea in recent years. In an interview with one reporter, Banks talked about his participation at the annual Blessing in terms of commemoration and solidarity. In reference to both his son Arthur who had been lost at sea and to fellow fishermen in attendance, he noted that he attended the Blessing to both honor his son’s “memory” and to “pray for all the other guys out here.” The task was not easy though. While admitting that he had been “tickled to death” upon learning that the crew of the Lois Joyce had been saved at sea, he conceded that the joy of celebrating this “terrific” news was mixed with the burden of the grief that he still carried. He made clear that his attendance the annual Blessing still remained “very difficult” and did not foresee any different personal response in the near future.

Wayne Cale shared this sentiment. Commenting on the happy turn of events for the crew of Lois Joyce, he said that the joyful news had still not made it “any easier” to come to
the annual Blessing. Grief at his brother’s loss had not abated much to this point. Cale, however, indicated that he had been able to understand his sorrow and come to terms with it in and through his regular participation at the annual Blessing. The event had a particular gravity to it, and continued to draw him annually within its orbit and economy of grace. Citing the importance of “tradition,” Cale specifically characterized his participation at the annual Blessing in terms of duty and good manners. “I know I have to be here,” he asserted, in brief, to one reporter. “It shows respect.”

Stonington fishermen had certainly earned the respect of many. Over the past few decades, these men had survived the tragic loss of several members at sea, the sinking of several boats, periodic decreases in the fleet size, sudden declines in fishing stocks, and the pressure of Russian competition. And if these challenges had not been burdensome enough, local fishermen continued to face the more ordinary threats of foul weather, loss of gear, and equipment breakdowns. However, with the introduction of new federal fishing regulations in 1993, fleet members would soon confront one of their most daunting challenges to date.

Regulation and Resentment

Under a federal law that went into effect on January, 1, 1993, the State of Connecticut’s catch-limit for fluke was drastically reduced to nearly a quarter of its previous size. In 1992, Stonington fishermen had caught over three-quarters of the 400,000 pounds of fluke landed in the state. With the state’s new fluke quota set at 118,000 pounds this year, they now had to compete for a considerably restricted resource. Because fluke comprised anywhere from ten to twenty percent of spring and summer catches for day-boats operating out of Stonington, some in the fleet were understandably worried about their future economic prospects and survival. New federal regulations preventing boats from catching
species like cod, haddock, and yellowtail flounder on eighty specific days of the year only compounded the worries of these fishermen.\textsuperscript{114}

While some local fishermen disputed the need for such regulations, few disagreed that certain fishing stocks were dwindling. The design and enforcement of these regulations rather than their intent was what most upset fishermen in Stonington. The protests they advanced, however, did not simply fall along the fault-lines of the relative interests of state and federal governments. Rather, their protests were primarily aimed at the management disparities between regional fisheries councils in the U.S. Because these councils were primarily responsible for the management of federal waters, different regions of the country had historically benefitted from more generous catch-limits and gear restrictions. When the federal government enacted new fishing restrictions in 1993, Stonington fishermen argued that federal officials had uncritically accepted data on landings from each state between 1980 and 1989 in devising these restrictions. Without taking into account regional differences in management plans, they claimed that states like North Carolina that had been under looser regional guidelines in terms of conservation were now being unfairly rewarded. Larger catch-limits, however, had not been the only benefit afforded to fishermen in Southern Atlantic states according to Stonington fishermen. Because these states had permitted the mesh size of fishing nets to be smaller, fishermen operating out of these states had been able to save on fuel and maintenance costs by gathering more fish and smaller fish in a shorter period of time.\textsuperscript{115}

Stonington fishermen attempted to redress regional disparities by filing a lawsuit. Claiming that new restrictions had been unevenly applied on a state by state basis, they sought to increase their annual fluke quota. Their lawsuit was eventually successful, but the victory was meager. Even though the State of Connecticut was able to increase its fluke quota from 118,000 to 250,000 pounds, the amount still left the state 150,000 pounds short of its allotted landing from the previous year.\textsuperscript{116} In the wake of this decision, local fishermen were left to consider whether they stood to benefit from further legal recourse.

While legal action was one way to challenge federal restrictions and state enforcement, renewed attention to the community's history and culture was another. The introduction of new federal regulations in 1993 apparently inspired a reexamination of the “Portuguese” heritage of many Stonington fishermen. In an interview addressing these regulations, local fishermen John Rita talked about the significance of fishing in terms of his family tradition and Portuguese heritage. Citing the example of his father who had been born in Portugal and who had taught him how to fish, Rita said that he had been immersed in a specific tradition and culture of fishing in Stonington from a very early age. “The way I grew up it was just a way of life,” he said simply.

**Portuguese Pride Revived and Enlisted**

The idea that fishing implicated a “way of life” was carried over into his following comments. While noting that fishing was his “job,” Rita was quick to add that it was more than simply a job. Louise Pittaway, a curator at the Lighthouse Museum in the Stonington Borough, supported such a suggestion. Commenting on historical differences between English and Portuguese settlers in Stonington, she indicated that the Portuguese had

\textsuperscript{116} For the change in limits, see Crombie and Wotjas, “Rendeiro: Change in fish quota not likely,” 28 November 1996.
established a distinct, local tradition of work. She contrasted the aspirations of the Portuguese fishermen in Stonington with those of notable local explorers of English heritage to make her point. In particular, she stated that the Portuguese did not privilege ideals like the “grand plans and entrepreneurship” of Nathaniel Palmer, a local nineteenth-century explorer credited with discovering the continent of Antarctica. Unbound by the impulse to seek new markets and frontiers, Pittaway suggested that the Stonington Portuguese had developed a local tradition of work committed to the deepening of tradition rather the constant ranging after new capital. “Their goal,” she said in reference to them, “was to be the best fishermen they could be,” and to do “what they knew best.” However, in light of new regulations, Pittaway openly wondered whether their “best” would be enough to preserve the fleet.117

Like others in the fleet, John Rita was not about to abandon fishing, and the tradition it honored, without a fight. After speculating about the possible loss of local jobs which relied on the fleet’s earnings, Rita made clear that he neither expected nor desired a government “handout.” He simply wanted to work. He highlighted an apparent conflict in federal policies to make his point clearer. In light of new federal fishing regulations, he stated that even if certain fishermen wanted to work, “federal people” were apparently dictating that they could not. Rita gestured toward what he saw as an apparent contradiction between this federal policy and Present Bill Clinton’s “Workfare” proposal to overhaul federal welfare policy. “I thought that’s what people from the president on down wanted to do—put people to work,” he rhetorically asked. “We’ll, we want work,” he declared, a reply that was at once an answer and a challenge.118

118 Ibid.
In reference to current federal policy, Arthur Medeiros was similarly incredulous. Suggesting that the scientific basis for new fishing regulations was questionable, Medeiros proffered his own theory about recent decreases in fishing stocks as a challenge. “I believe in cycles,” he told a reporter. “I saw fishing get bad in 1950s and then it got better. I’ve seen species go down and then come back like the fluke now. They’re coming back on their own.” While few could question Medeiros’ practical experience at sea, his theory about the replenishment of fishing stocks was disputable. Whether correct or not, Medeiros was nevertheless aware that his theory made little practical difference in overturning current policy at the moment. The task of Stonington fishermen in the meanwhile was to endure the hardship of regulations and persevere according to Medeiros.

At a meeting of the local fishermen’s association in February of 1993, he invoked this task. “We’ll survive,” he declared after a heated exchange among fishermen about the need for federal regulations. “One way or another, we’ll survive.” John Rita agreed. He promised that the fleet’s situation would “turn around,” but did not specify a time frame. Instead, he offered fishermen an approach. “It’s just a matter of surviving these rule changes,” he asserted.119

Preservation was important to fishermen in Stonington. The ideal integrated the practice of their work, the tradition of their labor, and the personal dignity of their members. In light of new fishing regulations that went in force in 1993, many local fishermen seemed to indicate that these restrictions posed a serious threat to this ideal. These regulations, however, were not the only real threat. Stonington fishermen were tragically reminded of this almost one year after their heated meeting about new quota restrictions. In February of 1994, local fleet members Frederick Iasiello and William Litke both perished at sea after the

119 Ibid.
lobster boat they were working on, the *Lady Lynn*, capsized in frigid waters several miles west of Stonington.\(^\text{120}\)

**Commemoration and Call for Justice**

At the annual Blessing held five months later, their deaths were mourned in a special way. Because Iasiello and Litke had each been engaged at the time of their deaths, Cindy Hyland and Kim Lord, the respective fiancés of these two men, had been asked to lay the symbolic wreath at this year's ceremonies. Both had agreed to the request. On Sunday, August 1, 1994, Hyland and Lord both attended the “40\(^{th}\)” annual Blessing of the Fleet. Standing before “hundreds of people” huddled around the Fishermen’s Memorial on this afternoon, Bishop Reilly prayed in a special way for Iasiello and Litke whose names had been newly inscribed on the memorial stone. After this ceremony and the formal blessing of boats, Bishop Reilly sailed off to the wreath-laying ceremony aboard the fleet flagship with friends and family members of Frederick Iasiello and William Litke.\(^\text{121}\)

With the flagship’s arrival at the appointed spot past the harbor breakwaters, Hyland and Lord eventually were prompted to lift and carry the ceremonial wreath. Aided by Mary Ann Litke, William Litke’s mother, Hyland and Lord brought the wreath forward and placed it on the boat’s railing where Bishop Reilly prayed a blessing over it. Finally, the three women hoisted the wreath and released it into the water. As the wreath bobbed along the surface, Kim Lord could no longer hold back her grief. According to one reporter, she wept “uncontrollably” after the wreath’s release. Lord, however, was not left to endure her grief alone. Mary Ann Litke and Cindy Hyland came to Lord and held her in their arms as she wept. Sailing away from the wreath, these three women powerfully signified something of

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\(^{121}\) Ibid.
the abiding presence of love the annual Blessing invited all to celebrate, even in the midst of
the profound personal absence the event similarly called all to commemorate.

The remembrance of William Litke and Frederick Iasiello had occupied the attention of most at the annual Blessing in 1994. This remembrance, however, was not the only immediate concern of the gathered community which was integrated into the event this day. At the ceremony held at the Fishermen’s Memorial earlier in the day, Bishop Reilly had explicitly called attention to the local anxieties that had emerged in the wake of new fishing regulations. Before the crowd gathered there, he lamented the apparent injustice that members of Stonington fleet had recently suffered due to the enactment of these regulations. Observing that the fleet was “facing difficult times these days,” Bishop Reilly specifically attributed this condition to “very stringent government regulations” and “the effects of unfair competition.” As the ordained advocate of almost all fleet members, Bishop Reilly indicated that rectifying such regulations was matter of justice the local Church was committed to. More than a regional or federal matter, these regulations, Bishop Reilly seemed to suggest, were an ecclesial concern due to its impact of the dignity of work and workers.\textsuperscript{122}

Bishop Reilly, however, would not be able to carry the task of affirming this dignity forward much longer. In the fall of 1994, he received notice that he was to be newly installed in the adjacent Diocese of Worcester, Massachusetts. With Bishop Reilly’s departure in 1994, the task of advocating for the dignity of Stonington fishermen was now left to another pastor. An answer to who this new pastor would be was not immediate though. A year would eventually pass between the departure of Bishop Reilly and the installation of Bishop Daniel A. Hart on All Saints’ Day, November 1, 1995.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
History Pictured, Recorded, and Renewed

In the meanwhile, the forty-first annual Blessing of the Fleet was held on July 31, 1995. Msgr. Thomas Bride, the current administrator of the Diocese of Norwich, presided at the celebration. At the event this year, staff members from the Mystic Seaport featured some of the work that they had gathered and crafted over the course of the Stonington Fishing Oral History Project. Initiated in 1993 shortly after new fishing regulations had been enacted, the Stonington Fishing Oral History Project had commenced with the intent of documenting the lives, traditions, and work routines of several fleet members in a series of interviews and photographs. While the project was still underway in 1995, some of its initial work was put on display at annual Blessing in 1995. Photographs of several fleet members with accompanying quotes from them were featured under a large tent at the green in front of the Town Dock.

The exhibit evoked a number of different responses including joy, wistfulness, and even lament. The niece of one local fisherman brimmed with tear-filled pride in the wake of viewing the exhibit. Commenting on the emotional impact of the photographic display, she related to a reporter that she had been “crying” because she had “never been more proud” of her uncle and other local fishermen. Others, however, were more sedate. One woman who had family working in the fleet indicated that the exhibit was an important, if lamentable work of preservation. “Someday,” she warned, “the older people and people like me won’t be around to tell people how it was.” As a result, she stated that the display would be “the only thing” these people could “go back to” and consult in reference to the community’s history. While her remarks were disquieting, others were similarly concerned.

about the survival of the fleet too. One of those people was local lobstermen Richie Madeira. In an interview, he openly speculated about the possibility of the fleet going down “the tubes.” Gesturing toward the exhibit, he noted that if this possibility were to become real, the community would at least have a material reminder “to say how it was.” Unlike the remarks of the previous commentator, Madeira’s seemed to be more in the style of a eulogy rather than a lament.

Not everyone talked about the exhibit in terms of immediate subjective responses or forecasts about the fleet’s future though. Appealing to annual Blessing’s animating activities of “celebration” and “blessing,” Jacqueline Fellows-Malagrino, the daughter of one fleet member, summarized that the exhibit was “what the event is all about.” In particular, she noted that what the annual Blessing was “all about” included both the “celebration” concerning “those who have died” and the “blessing” of the community’s “fathers and brothers.”124 Interpreted within the context of the annual Blessing, the exhibit’s significance seemed to at once both include and exceed the community’s temporal concerns according to her. Like the fleet’s boats and other material elements annually enfolded within the annual Blessing, the photographs of local fishermen on display this year seemed to cooperate in both intensifying and illuminating the celebration’s fundamental action and content.

**Fear and Federal Loathing in Stonington**

By 1996, the fleet showed signs of serious stress due to the impact of federal fishing regulations. While many local fishermen did not desire early retirement, some had become resigned to the prospect in the wake of these regulations. At the annual Blessing in 1996, one veteran fleet member indicated as much in an interview. David Jones, captain and owner of one local dragger, reported that he had taken a second job on land in the light of

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124 Ibid.
financial pressures that were related to quota restrictions. Even though Jones indicated that he planned to continue fishing, he could not say the same for several other local fishermen currently under similar pressures. “A lot of fishermen,” he distressingly noted, “are getting out of it because they aren’t able to survive.” Commenting on his boat and the other short-trip boats in the fleet, he stated that current federal fishing policies had inordinately impacted smaller boats like these for the worse. Yet even as serious as these concern were, The Day’s report indicated that present anxiety had ultimately given way to a certain hope at the annual Blessing celebrated this year. In particular, the report explicitly suggested that “the sunny weather and celebratory mood” on display at the event had “seemed to prevail over uncertainty about the future and sad memories.”

This apparent mood, however, did not last for long. In October of that year, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection notified the fleet that the state’s designated fluke quota had been reached. Barred from landing fluke for the remainder of the year, fleet members were expected to throw all fluke overboard, even if they had been caught in the effort to haul other fish. Joe Rendeiro, for one, was incensed by the ruling and its consequences. As a rebellious and creative challenge, Rendeiro explicitly threatened to ignore the ban and donate all of his fluke landings to charity as an act of civil disobedience. However, before Rendeiro attempted to carry out his threat, Sidney Holbrook, the commissioner of the Connecticut DEP, intervened and urged restraint. The intervention apparently worked. In particular, Holbrook was able to persuade Rendeiro to delay his protest until they saw the results of an upcoming meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Fisheries

Management Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission held in Philadelphia next month.\textsuperscript{126}

Not content to simply hear a report of the results, Rendeiro accompanied Holbrook down to fisheries management meeting held in Philadelphia. At the meeting, both publicly petitioned the two fisheries councils to replace current state by state quotas determined by regional boards with a single coastal quota covering all Atlantic seaboard states. If revisions were not made, Holbrook made clear that the State of Connecticut would simply opt out of the current fisheries plan, and refuse to enforce its mandates. Furthermore, he mentioned that State of Connecticut was currently contemplating whether to file a federal lawsuit if action were not taken soon.

The two councils, however, were undeterred by Holbrook’s remarks, and did not make any revisions to the current fisheries management plans. Commenting about the results of the meeting in a later interview with one reporter, Rendeiro said that he was “very disgusted” with the meeting. But the results were not the only troubling aspects of the meeting according to him. Rendeiro indicated that the personal demeanor of council bureaucrats had angered him even more. Recalling the councils’ reception of his petition, he stated that there had been “no feeling of emotion from these people,” adding incredulously that it had been like “talking to a wall.”\textsuperscript{127} The apparent absence of council members’ personal interest in the concerns of petitioners like him, and the apparent absence of a passionate stake in their work seemed to be almost unbelievable, if not downright anathema to Rendeiro.

\textsuperscript{126} Crombie and Wotjas, “Rendeiro: Change in fish quota not likely,” 28 November 1996.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
The ruling preserving the status quo on quota restrictions was a blow to fleet members in Stonington. Unfortunately they had little time to contest the ruling. On November 15, 1996, only days after the ruling in Philadelphia, one of their own was detained by the Connecticut DEP and formally charged with violating the state’s fluke quota restriction. By landing twenty-six fluke at the Stonington Town Dock, Tim Medeiros was the first Stonington fishermen to be charged with breaching quota restrictions. Even though Medeiros protested that the fluke he landed were for family use rather than commercial sale, he was unable to convince DEP enforcement officers. The violation was therefore now a judicial matter.

Reform Provoked

For Rendeiro, the DEP’s indictment of Tim Medeiros apparently was a breaking point. Over the past three years, fleet members in Stonington had tried persuasion, had lobbied state and federal officials, and had even trusted some of these officials to effect revisions to current quota restrictions. By December of 1996, with no significant change in quota restrictions forthcoming, Rendeiro was prepared to change the fleet’s tactics with or without the blessing of other members. Direct action was needed, and it could not wait any longer. Two months earlier, Rendeiro had announced his intent to disobey the quota restriction if revisions were not soon implemented. He did not make empty threats. Rendeiro was a man of his word, and he expected others to keep theirs. Sidney Holbrook had threatened legal action on behalf of the Stonington fleet, but had apparently not followed through at this point in time. Rendeiro, however, was stubbornly loyal to both words and others to a fault, and he was about to show all just how loyal he was.

On December 7, 1996, Rendeiro deliberately landed one-hundred pounds of fluke in violation of the state quota. Rendeiro had called Holbrook earlier in the day to let him know that he was not postponing his protest any longer. Stating that he had fluke in the hold of his boat, the *Quiambaug Queen*, he reported that he did not intend to throw the fish overboard. Holbrook urged restraint once again, but was rebuffed.\(^\text{129}\)

At the dock, the crew aboard the *Quiambaug Queen* delivered a tote of already filleted-fluke into the hands of two workers from a nearby homeless shelter in Westerly, Rhode Island. By the time DEP officers showed up and boarded the boat, all evidence of the catch had been taken away. Yet even though there was no evidence to implicate him in a violation, Rendeiro did not hide the fact that he had landed fluke. In fact, he told DEP officers at the dock as much. However, while Rendeiro did not deny landing fluke, he did deny the officers’ assertion that such an act was prohibited under current law. Rendeiro had anticipated this assertion and had prepared a response. Using a claim frequently invoked by fishermen in Southern Atlantic states to circumvent fluke quotas, Rendeiro alleged that the fluke he had landed were a different species than those restricted under current state and federal law. The claim was dubious at best, but DEP officers had no choice but to withhold charges because of lack of evidence.

With his actions this day, the legend of “Outlaw” Joe Rendeiro was born. Rendeiro had craftily avoided criminal charges. His primary intent, however, was not so much to exploit or ridicule the law as it was to protest it. Rendeiro wanted to challenge the law, not debate its details. Rendeiro was particularly critical about the wastefulness current law encouraged, and mentioned as much to one reporter on the day of his protest. Commenting about his action, he noted that he had caught over fifteen hundred pounds of fluke earlier in

the day whose total worth was about fifty-three hundred dollars. With the exception of the one hundred pounds he had kept and later donated, he had to throw the rest overboard, even though almost all the fluke were already dead. Because most fluke died in the two to three hour trawls fishermen regularly made, Rendeiro wondered aloud how the practice of casting away dead fish could be called conservation. He called the practice good “for nothing” in terms of conservation, and included that it did make much business sense either. Adding to his point about the senselessness of casting dead fluke overboard, he mockingly described this process as something akin to “throwing $20 dollar bills into ocean.”

Rendeiro, however, made clear that he had not intended to flout the law. He noted that he would continue to throw back most of the fluke he catches for the remainder of the state’s ban, but would keep some to donate to local charitable agencies. He explained that he hoped to achieve greater justice for the Stonington fleet through incremental rather than excessive challenges to the law. The protest tactic he had just used represented a first step. If changes were not made to current restrictions, he stated that he would increase the pressure on legislators by providing fluke free of charge to any senior citizen who promised to contact the state’s congressional members about the issue. Rendeiro was confident that his proposal would win local support. “I’ll have people lined up and down the dock,” he boasted to the reporter.

While Rendeiro was confident about his proposal, he was even more certain of the cause that motivated it. Claiming that current fishing regulations made a “mockery of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights,” Rendeiro asserted that he was only seeking equal treatment under the law. As further support for his claim, he accused federal and state

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130 See Fishing Out of Stonington, 39.
governments of failing to support the “equal rights” guaranteed to him and fellow fleet members, indicating that they were derelict in this duty. Finally, he predicted that current fishing restrictions simply could not bear the test of constitutional challenges.

Local state representative and future federal congressman Robert Simmons agreed. Simmons had made his agreement public by joining Rendeiro in his protest at the town dock this day. Standing beside Rendeiro aboard the _Quiambaug Queen_, Simmons recounted a number of legislative actions he had already taken to address current fishing restrictions and noted that they all had been derailed. Like Rendeiro, Simmons was frustrated by legislative dead-ends. However, he was hopeful that a change in tactics could help better address the problem of current restrictions. In fact, he championed Rendeiro’s protest as the “next step to bring the problem forward and get it resolved.”

Civil discussion had apparently run its course. Simmons suggested that Rendeiro had inaugurated a new stage in the current debate about fishing restrictions, and hinted that bolder actions and intensified pressure on his part would soon follow. “Now it’s time to express myself in an even stronger way,” he pledged. Whether this “stronger way” was likely to achieve the goal of reform, however, was not mentioned.

While Rendeiro’s protest had apparently emboldened his supporters to take stronger action, it was not clear whether his protest would similarly embolden his critics. For his part, Rendeiro did not think so and offered two reasons in an interview to justify this assumption. First, if the authority of American constitutional law was not enough to convince others of the rightness of his cause, Rendeiro indicated that the superior authority of the natural law surely would. Appealing to his charitable donation of fluke, he confidently asserted to the

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132 Ibid.
The argument was strong, but not irrefutable. However, if appeals to constitutional law or moral suasion were not enough to protect him from legal punishment, Rendeiro seemed to suggest that the self-interest of DEP officials surely would. Speculating that the DEP risked seriously bad publicity in enforcing what Rendeiro and others considered to be an unjust law, he concluded that it was not in the organization’s interest to charge him with quota violations. He was sure of this conclusion and said as much to the reporter. Stating that the DEP “won’t come down and arrest me,” Rendeiro indicated that his protests could move forward with minimal resistance.

The State Responds

Rendeiro’s assumption, however, proved to be incorrect. Rendeiro was arrested the following month after DEP officials charged him with landing fluke in excess of mandated day-trip limits. In addition to the state’s allotted annual quota, fishermen in Stonington were also prohibited from landing more than fifty-five hundred pounds of fluke in the course of a day-trip. This provision was reduced even further to only three-thousand pounds once fishermen in the state had landed thirty percent of the state’s annual quota for fluke. Even though Rendeiro had not landed the excess fluke as a protest, his arrest further exacerbated already existing tensions between him and DEP officials. A superior court judge in New London, Connecticut later fined Rendeiro one-hundred and fifty dollars.

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and ordered him to undergo accelerated rehabilitation. Rendeiro later noted that his “rehabilitation” basically meant that he had to stay out of legal troubles for six months.\footnote{M.E. Reilly-McGreen, “Fluke quota protester arrested again,” \textit{The New London Day}, 3 November 1997, B1, B5.}

Rendeiro was not the only fisherman in Stonington who was detained by DEP officials in January of 1997. At the beginning of the month, Bill Bomster, the captain of the \textit{Patty Jo}, and Jim Allyn, the captain of the \textit{Matthew Melissa}, were both issued written warnings after they similarly landed fluke in excess of day-trip limits. However, because their over-the-limit catch fell within the DEP’s two-hundred pound leeway policy, both captains received formal warnings rather than fines. Nevertheless, the DEP’s action was perceived by many at the Stonington town dock that day as overreaching. Local fish buyer Lester Gay accused DEP officials of “making mountains out of molehills.” Pointing to the ten percent leeway policies operative in other states, Gay asserted that fleet members in Stonington were held to more stringent landing standards in comparison.\footnote{Groak, “DEP Seizes Excess Fluke; Two Warned,” 4 January 1997.}

The comparison, however, was about more than uneven legal standards. In an interview, Bomster suggested that Connecticut’s strict leeway policy simply did not fit with the real practices of commercial fishing. Slight overages were not unusual. Because fishing boats were not equipped with scales, fishermen estimated the amount of fish they caught by tallying the number of seventy-five pound baskets that fish filled. The science was inexact. Bomster reported that he had filled 66 baskets full of fluke earlier in the day, estimating that he was fifty pounds under the allowable day-trip limit. When he later learned that he had exceeded the limit by two-hundred pounds, he figured that no more than an extra fish or two had been placed in each basket.
Annoyance with DEP enforcement turned into anger after Bomster learned that the state had sold the fish seized earlier in the day. Proceeds from the sale had been applied to the state budget’s general fund. Protesting this action, Bomster argued that the fish should have been donated to a local charity. DEP officials differed with Bomster though. Michelle Sullivan, official spokesperson for the DEP, noted in a phone interview that that the protest of the sale of the fish was beside the primary point of honoring and enforcing current law. Commenting about her agency’s involvement in “fighting to change the current system,” she claimed that the possibility of change was only made “more difficult” with each quota violation, and recommended that local fishermen not “abuse the system.” Local fishermen, however, were hard-pressed to see the logic of respecting a “system” that sanctioned injustice.

**For and Against Cooperation**

While differences in relative respect for the current “system” separated Stonington fishermen and DEP officials, both groups were united in their common agreement about the need to change the system. On January 21, 1997, forty or so fleet members met with Sidney Holbrook, state representatives and Governor John G. Rowland to discuss strategies for changing current fishing regulations. The meeting was held in the upper room of the Portuguese Holy Ghost Society Club.  

At the meeting, Gov. Rowland revealed that the state was prepared to sue several federal agencies in order to amend current quota restrictions. Acknowledging the failure of previous strategies to overhaul these restrictions, he told fishermen that litigation was the “only course of action” now available. Because “by the book” approaches had not worked

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137 Ibid.  
to this point, he asserted that the current situation now demanded “more direct action.”
Holbrook agreed. Commenting on the time that he and Rowland had already “spent talking
to the bureaucrats in Washington,” Holbrook lamented that their mutual appeals had “fallen
on deaf ears.” With the new threat of litigation, however, Holbrook suggested to fleet
members that these bureaucrats might just be more attentive.

Fleet members in attendance were generally pleased by the state’s new and bolder
proposed strategy. Calling the meeting one of the “best” the state and the fleet had ever
had, Arthur Medeiros indicated that the meeting had gone a long way toward remedying
tensions between the two groups. By the end of the meeting, Rowland had apparently won
over previous critics of his among the fleet. Some local fishermen, in fact, were so
encouraged by Rowland’s strong advocacy of their cause that they joked with him afterwards
about the possibility of gubernatorial pardons for recently arrested fleet members. Medeiros
was heartened by this turn of events. “Everyone seems to be on the same page,” he said
approvingly to one reporter.

Or so it seemed. Joe Rendeiro had been in attendance at the meeting, and was not
convinced that the state’s proposals went far enough. While he conceded that the state’s
proposed lawsuit was “a step in the right direction,” he said that the lawsuit did not do
much, in the way of immediate action, to revise unfair quota restrictions. Even though the
state had enough resources to endure the possibility of a lengthy litigation process, Rendeiro
indicated that certain local fishermen did not. At the meeting, Rendeiro had asked David
Leff, the assistant commissioner of the DEP, to consider not enforcing current restrictions
until a fairer management plan could be enacted. In response, Leff stated that such an
action could be even more damaging than current regulations because the federal
government could simply close down the entire fluke fishery in the state if it was provoked.
He added that initiating a lawsuit now, even if it was likely to be drawn out, was better than no action at all. The claim was reasonable, but certain fishermen wanted to make sure that the state officials would honor their commitment to follow through. Walter Allyn, in particular, pressed Governor Rowland about the state’s commitment. “We have to be on the same page,” Allyn enjoined the governor. “We’re just looking for one thing—equality.”

**The Offer and Promise of Reconciliation**

Before state officials went forward with their lawsuit, several local fishermen made one final attempt to persuade members from the two Atlantic fisheries councils to revise the existing quota system. On April 9, 1997, members from the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council and Atlantic States Fisheries Commission unveiled a proposal establishing new rules for the commercial harvest of fluke, scup, and black sea bass. The proposal, however, did not contain any changes to the current quota system. During the public comment portion of the meeting, local fishermen made their dissatisfaction with the plan known. Familiar complaints about the unfairness of the current system were raised, and familiar proposals, like the establishment of a single coastal quota for fluke, were offered. Combining these two familiar appeals in his public comments at the meeting, local fisherman Mike Bomster criticized the current quota system for creating an unnecessary rivalry between fishermen like them in the Northeast and their Southern Atlantic counterparts. According to him, this rift was not natural, and could therefore be overcome. With the adoption of a single coastal quota, Bomster suggested that a relationship of cooperation rather than of competition could be restored between the local fleet and

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139 Ibid.
fishermen in the South. “Instead of being against each other, we could work together,” Bomster appealed.140

At the meeting, a spokesman for Sen. Christopher Dodd pressed this case further. Commenting on the unfair deal Stonington fishermen had received under the current quota system, he called on members of the two fisheries boards to work toward more just revisions. In doing so, he made clear that these fishermen were not simply trying to sidestep the good of conservation in their pursuit of commerce, but instead were asking for a more workable relation between the two. “The fishermen acknowledge the importance of saving the fish,” he told members of the boards. “They just ask that it not be done at the expense of fishermen.”

Unlike other speakers at meeting, local state representative Robert Simmons framed the need to revise the quota system in terms of public safety. Smaller quotas since 1993 had led to increased tensions between fleet members and transient fishermen from the South who fished out of Stonington in the winter. With tighter quota restrictions, Simmons noted that certain boats raced from port to port to unload their catches where quota limits had not been reached. He even pointed out that Stonington police had been called to the town dock on at least one occasion make sure that shouting matches between local fleet members and certain transient fishermen did not become more hostile. Bringing his public comments to a pointed end, Simmons ominously suggested that a failure to enact needed changes could lead to increased physical violence or even death.141 While bold, his suggestion ultimately proved to be unpersuasive. In the wake of the meeting, the two fisheries boards decided not to amend the current quota system.

141 Ibid.
By the summer of 1997, Stonington fishermen faced mounting anxiety about their economic future. All attempts to change federal quota system had been frustrated to this point, and there was little likelihood of any change in the near term. Litigation was still an option, but it remained just that. Several months after state officials had promised to file a lawsuit in federal court, local fishermen were still awaiting action. And even if action had been taken, these men knew it could be years before a decision was rendered. Hope for improved economic conditions, and trust in the promises of state officials had seriously ebbed. A time of anxiety and uncertainty had settled amidst the life of the fleet. Questions about whether their immediate concerns and hopes for the future could be transformed were both real and pressing.

**The Annual Blessing as Reconciling**

The annual Blessing, however, marked a concrete way forward for the life of this community. The celebration did not ignore the immediate concerns of community members. But neither did it privilege them. The annual Blessing offered participants a concrete time of a different order. Unlike the current time of uncertainty, tension, and even distress felt within the fleet community, the Blessing demonstrated a time wherein hope could be restored, reconciliation could be realized, and new life could be anticipated. Such a time re-inaugurated both the season and ultimate reason of the fleet’s work. At the annual Blessing, prayer integrated the fleet’s personal concerns and sorrows, revelry transfigured them, and commemoration offered a sign of real freedom from their grip.

On Sunday, July 27, 1997, fleet members demonstrated what real fellowship and reconciliation looked like in the context of the annual Blessing. Unlike the terms of political compromise or American legal procedure, the terms of the annual Blessing were more personal, affective, transcendental, and even concrete. On this day, such terms were
distinctly indicated in the hospitality local fishermen extended to DEP commissioner Sidney Holbrook, the words that they exchanged, and the prayers they shared. While differences in labor commitments continued to separate local fishermen from Holbrook, the context of the annual Blessing showed that such differences could be reconciled, and even transformed.

At the annual Blessing held in 1997, the friendship that Holbrook had forged with several fleet members over the years was displayed in a distinctly public way. Local fisherman and boat captain Bob Guzzo had previously invited Holbrook to join him aboard his boat, the Jenna Lynn, for the boat parade and wreath-laying ceremony on this day. Decorated according to a “beach party” theme, the Jenna Lynn had been decked out with plastic palm trees and a sandbox. All aboard the boat were dressed in Hawaiian shirts, and Holbrook was no exception.142

Holbrook’s presence aboard the Jenna Lynn was not simply an indication of some temporary peace treaty between the fleet and the Connecticut DEP. Nor was his presence simply a light moment in an otherwise tense relationship between the two groups. Rather it was a sign of real friendship at once including and exceeding the respective labor commitments of Guzzo and Holbrook. Wheelchair-bound, Holbrook could not board a boat like the Jenna Lynn without the special assistance of Guzzo and his crew. Using a ramp designed for the transport of fishing gear and supplies onto boats, Guzzo and his crew gingerly guided Holbrook down the narrow ramp from the pier.

Before the start of the formal blessing, Guzzo and Holbrook were both interviewed by a local reporter who had joined them aboard the Jenna Lynn. Only seven months removed from his arrest by DEP officers for exceeding day-trip catch limits, Guzzo made

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142 Jeff Mill, “A blessing for the past and future: For some, it’s a ritual, for others, it’s a new experience,” The Westerly Sun, 28 July 1997, 1, 7.
light of the incident. “Hey it’s all a game,” he told the reporter. And putting his hand on Holbrook’s shoulder, he said that Holbrook was supporting the fleet as well as he could under the present circumstances. “Sid's trying to do the best he can for us. He knows what it’s all about,” Guzzo noted.143

Holbrook was similarly gracious in response. And like Guzzo, he talked about the friendship between the two using informal nicknames. “I’ve known Bobby for twenty years,” Holbrook began in his defense of local fishermen. “And I know, and the governor knows that the fishermen are very important.” So important were these fishermen to Holbrook that he stated that they had a “special place” in his “heart.” As support for this point, Holbrook commented that he had attended the Fishermen’s Mass earlier in the day, and had prayed for local fishermen to “have a safe year and a good catch.” The prayer, however, was not without a slight qualification. In a half-joking way, Holbrook added that he prayed that the fleet’s “good catch” would be achieved “within the bounds of the law.”144 At this, Guzzo did not say a word, but did flash a wide and mischievous grin at Holbrook.

As Jim Henry had once noted, the annual Blessing was time with “joy and grief side by side.” The celebration held in 1997 was no exception with its intertwining of revelry and remembrance. On this day, the boat parade was a boisterous and joy-filled affair, featuring both formality and improvisation. Wrapped in a white blanket, and holding a paper torch, one woman imitating the Statue of Liberty ornamented the front of the American Dream as it passed near the fleet flagship to receive the formal blessing. The Kelsey Marie, captained by Chuck Fellow, trailed not far behind with flashy Mardi Gras-themed decorations and a similarly colorful crowd on deck. As the Kelsey Marie motored by the flagship, one excited

143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
passenger on the boat called out to Bishop Hart to reassure her that all aboard had been
blessed. The animated outburst provoked peals of laughter from both Bishop Hart and
onlookers at the dock. Attempting to assuage her concern, Bishop Hart grinned and
shouted back, “Yeah, you are blessed,” causing the amused crowd to laugh even harder.\textsuperscript{145}

Like previous celebrations, the festive soon gave way to the solemn. With the arrival
of the fleet flagship at the appointed spot past the harbor breakwaters, passengers on each
boat circled there readied for the commemorative wreath-laying ceremony. Commencing
the ceremony, Bishop Hart first offered prayers for local fishermen who had been lost and
never recovered at sea. As the bowed heads of all gathered came back to attention, Bishop
Hart reached for his aspergillum and called attention the symbolic burial ground before all of
them. Sprinkling holy water onto the waters in front of the ring of boats, Bishop Hart
prayed, “We ask you Lord to bless this resting place.”\textsuperscript{146}

Upon the completion of this prayer, Mary Ann Litke, the mother of departed
fisherman William Litke, and Grace Wells, the mother of departed fisherman Michael
Iaseillo, lifted the commemorative wreath and carried it forward to the flagship’s railing.
With Bishop Hart’s blessing of the wreath, these two women gently cast it into the water
below. Adding a personal touch to the ceremony, Wells brought forth a bouquet of roses in
memory of her son, and cast them similarly into the water near the wreath. As Wells
grieved, Mary Ann Litke indicated to a reporter aboard the boat that the wreath-laying
ceremony was a particularly burdensome experience for the mothers and widows of
deceased fishermen. Commenting on the personal agony of the ceremony, she noted that,
amidst her continuing pain, she persevered in this annual duty out of an enduring love and

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
loyalty to her son. Lest anyone think that the passage of years had diminished her suffering though, she made clear that the intensity of her pain flooded back each time she had to carry the commemorative wreath. “You know it never gets easy when it’s your child,” she lamented with tears welling in her eyes.147

**Hope and Disappointment**

In early November, local fishermen received word that state officials had finally filed three separate lawsuits in federal court on their behalf.148 The lawsuits alleged that William M. Daley, the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, had knowingly sanctioned an unfair quota system, and had deliberately ignored requested revisions once he had been apprised of this problem. Claiming that further inaction on Daley’s part was likely to result in serious economic losses to commercial fishermen in Connecticut, and reduced revenue to the state government, state officials pressed for a speedy trial.149 All three lawsuits contended that the current quota system, in its unfair discrimination against residents of Connecticut, was unconstitutional under the terms of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery and Conservation Act. The appeal to this act had a certain irony to it. Originally welcomed for its enlargement of federal powers over international waters in mid-1970s, state officials now argued that these powers had been abused and needed to be corrected by a stronger emphasis on states’ rights.

If the state’s legal action in early November had inspired optimism among Stonington fishermen about the prospects of near-term structural change, such hopes were not to last long. Only days after the state’s three lawsuits had been filed, local fishermen learned that the state’s quota for fluke had been reached, and was to remain in force. Several

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147 Ibid.
of these fishermen had hoped that the state’s recent legal action would be followed with a suspension of the current quota system during the litigation process. They soon learned, however, that the Connecticut DEP had not adopted this strategy. Until revisions were made by the federal government or by legal order, the agency apparently remained committed to enforcing the current system. Local fishermen were not pleased, and none more so than Joe Rendeiro.

The “Outlaw” Answers

On November 28, 1997, “Outlaw” Joe Rendeiro returned to the high seas to agitate for change again. Frustrated by the continued sanctioning of the current quota system, Rendeiro phoned DEP officials earlier in the day and told them that he intended to land, and subsequently donate a hundred pounds of fluke in violation of quota restrictions. Because Sidney Holbrook had recently resigned from his role as DEP commissioner to become Governor Rowland’s co-chief of staff, he was not on-hand at the DEP’s office to answer Rendeiro’s call. Whoever had answered the call in the office apparently pressed Rendeiro to reconsider his protest and warned him that if he landed fluke at the town dock, he would be arrested.

The DEP official was not bluffing. When Rendeiro later made it back to Stonington to unload his catch, he was greeted by eight state game wardens at the Town Dock. These enforcement officials soon boarded the boat and detained Rendeiro along with two of his crewmembers, John Babin and Perry Fratus. Questioned for over two hours, Rendeiro and his crew were eventually charged with multiple violations of the fluke quota and ordered to

150 M.E. Reilly-McGreen, “Fluke quota protestor arrested again.”
appear in court. The charges were serious. If convicted, Rendeiro risked the forfeiture of his fishing license.\footnote{M.E. Reilly-McGreen, “Fluke quota protestor arrested again.”}

Rendeiro, however, was not moved by the threat. Carrying a sharp, if not irrepressible sense of justice to his everyday work, Rendeiro was not easily bowed. Apprenticed in a tradition of work descended from a long line of Portuguese fishermen, Rendeiro had been principally formed according to rules set in terms of guild-like traditions rather than bureaucratic policies. The ideal of honor it supported, and the strong commitments to principle it engendered were important to Rendeiro. Visibly dedicated to the traditions he had received, and the moral code it maintained, Rendeiro was not given to compromise. Equivocal concepts of justice were simply unjustifiable, if not unthinkable within the rigorous code that he implicitly held.

Rendeiro indicated as much in an interview later that day. During this interview, Rendeiro suggested that he was involved in an exceedingly stark and dramatic struggle for justice. In regard to his role in this struggle, he left little to the imagination. Invoking the legend of Robin Hood, he characterized DEP officials as the “Sheriffs of Nottingham,” and disparaged them for their apparent ignoble seizure of his catch. Because Rendeiro was on the receiving end of the DEP’s unjust actions in his account, he maintained that he and his crew were not “criminals.” A critical distinction was subsequently offered to warrant this judgment. “We may be outlaws, but we are not criminals,” he declared. “There’s a difference.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Unfortunately, Rendeiro was unable to convince DEP officials that the distinction had enough of a meaningful difference to prevent the seizure of his catch. These officials
were not immune from persuasion though. Not long after Rendeiro’s catch had been seized, one state official made clear in an interview that the state intended to donate the fish to local soup kitchen. What the official mentioned was almost as important as what he did not mention. In the wake of criticism following the state’s sale of fish seized in Stonington last January, it seemed like state officials had been persuaded to adopt a different tactic.

Upon hearing about the intent of state officials to donate the fish he had caught, Rendeiro volunteered to deliver the catch to the same homeless shelter he had supported last December. His request was quickly rebuffed by state officials though. For Rendeiro, the perceived slight seemed to only add insult to already existing injury. Not long after the snub, he launched into a bitter critique of the DEP’s apparent mismanagement of state fisheries under the current quota system, and its implicit encouragement of wastefulness. “The state is advocating that it’s better to throw away fish than feed hungry people,” Rendeiro angrily indicted. “That’s how I see it,” he harrumphed.154

Rendeiro was not alone in his view. Bob Guzzo was similarly at pains to reconcile the DEP’s ideal of conservation with its current policies. In an interview, Guzzo indicated that these policies represented a significant disconnect from the real practices of fishing. “We are throwing more fluke over now than I’ve seen in 20 years without trying to catch them,” he lamented. Gino Rendeiro, the brother of Joe Rendeiro, joined Guzzo in his criticism. Commenting on the realities local fishermen faced at sea, Gino Rendeiro noted in an interview that he and others had largely been unable to avoid catching fluke in their search for other fish species. “We’re trying to catch squid, and we’re catching fluke by the hundreds of pounds,” he declaimed in exasperation.

154 Ibid.
John Babin, however, was in no mood to apologize for a quota policy he accused of being fundamentally at odds with real fishing practices. Commenting on his detainment earlier in the day for deliberately landing fluke, Babin did not demonstrate any sign of remorse for his actions. In fact, he plainly asserted that he and the others aboard the *Quiambaug Queen* had done the “right thing.” Babin was so confident of the moral legitimacy of their protest that he declared that he would risk arrest again if it helped to bring about a real and expedient change to the current quota system. While Babin hoped that the protest would draw “a little attention to the problem,” he made clear that public awareness alone was not the only protest goal. Speaking on behalf of the captain and crew of the *Quiambaug Queen*, Babin said that the group hoped “to get the public behind us” and create stronger pressure for change.\(^{155}\)

This was no easy task though. Some fleet members were still cool to the idea of Rendeiro’s more confrontational approach. Even before Rendeiro’s second arrest, his approach had already been the subject of several heated discussions among fleet members.\(^{156}\) Championed by some, and rebuked by others, Rendeiro’s approach remained a topic of concern and controversy. In an interview, Rendeiro was questioned about the passionate debates he had apparently provoked among fellow fishermen. Shrugging his shoulders, Rendeiro offered the simple, but firm reply that his crew was “behind” him, and said no more. The answer was practical, but did little to resolve current disagreements about tactics.

Bob Guzzo, however, was a bit more philosophical about Rendeiro’s approach. Nevertheless, he agreed that Joe Rendeiro’s was currently the best available option to create change. “I don’t think there’s a better way to do it,” Guzzo asserted in defense of Rendeiro’s approach.

\(^{155}\) Ibid.  
\(^{156}\) Ibid.
direct action. As support, Guzzo noted that, unlike previous legislative efforts, Rendeiro had actually aroused public interest in the debate about the current quota system. Accusing “lawmakers” of being “too slow on the draw,” Guzzo indicated that Rendeiro had acted with the haste and boldness necessary to generate attention and expedite change. Whether this change could be expected sometime soon, however, Guzzo did not address.

**Liberty, Limits, and the American Legal Tradition**

By the time the annual Blessing was held several months later in July of 1998, no significant changes had been made. And if the comments of several people in attendance at this year’s event were any indication, none were expected anytime soon. Local fisherman Al Madeira was indignant about the government’s apparent inaction on regulatory changes. But he was even more upset by what the government had done than what it had not done. Commenting on the negative impact of “government regulation” in an interview at the annual Blessing, Madeira fumed about the current fluke quota and federal limits on the number of days he could fish. Not one to mince words, Madeira claimed that he and fellow fleet members were “gagging” on these regulations.157 The evocative charge suggested that the relationship between local fishermen and state and federal officials had reached a certain crisis point. No longer were government actions in relation to the fleet seen as simply intrusive. Instead, Madeira indicated that these actions had become outright abusive.

The fleet’s relationship to federal and state governments had not always been this way. Only twenty-five years earlier, fleet members had championed the federal government’s defense of their traditional territory against the incursions of Russian fishermen. At this time, however, more than the protection of local labor interests was likely

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at stake. Seen through the lens of Cold War oppositions, Russian fishermen had represented for many, the absence of political and labor freedoms. Alluding to this characterization, Madeira recalled being encouraged at a young age to appreciate the freedom his father was able to enjoy as a fishermen in the U.S. “When I was in junior-high,” he recounted, “my teacher said I was lucky my father didn’t work in Russia where the government told fishermen how to fish, when to fish, and how much to fish.”

Commercial fishing in the U.S., however, had apparently undergone a radical change since Madeira’s middle-school days. Claiming that “conservation” was currently “just another way to spell communism,” Madeira seemed to imply that the fleet’s labor had been co-opted by the U.S. federal government under undemocratic terms. Within the narrative of this supposed inversion, conservation designated not so much a guiding moral principle as it did a negative political shift. Declines in fishing stocks and American political ideals were not entirely unrelated in this narrative. While Madeira did not advance any particular remedy to the fleet’s current economic and political situation, his account did raise serious ethical questions about the fleet’s participation in the current federal quota system. If local fishermen intended to preserve their tradition of work, the American political ideal of liberty seemingly had to be salvaged. The two had been historically joined together, but this did not mean that they were identical. The fleet’s preservation of tradition presupposed their reform of liberty. Only by working to honor the former ideal could the latter be recovered. This was the fleet’s indispensible basis for American political reform. Guided by their tradition-formed work, the fleet went forward in the hope of renewing both its local life, in particular, and America, in general. And no tradition was more important to such a formation and renewal than their celebration of the annual Blessing of the Fleet.

158 Ibid.
Few groups were disdained by fleet members as much as government regulators. Lawyers were an exception though. Local fishermen loathed the prospect of opportunistic litigation almost as much as unfair regulation. Before the forty-fourth annual Blessing of the Fleet was held on July 26, 1998, Al Madeira had pitched the idea of holding a Saturday-night “open house” aboard several of the fleet’s boats at the town dock. At a meeting of the Blessing’s organizing committee, he proposed that an “open house” event could be a way for the fleet to extend even better hospitality to the general public. By allowing more people to step aboard their boats and talk to captains and crewmembers, he suggested that fleet members could welcome more questions, and provide a more intimate and personal sense of their daily life and concerns. While greater appreciation of fleet members and their work was important, this goal was not the primary reason behind his pitch. Instead he claimed that an “open house” event could possibly inspire a wider and more serious respect for the annual Blessing. Aboard the fleet’s boats, Madeira suggested that fleet members could invite the general public to “see” the annual event as a “blessing and not just a summer beerfest.”

Members of the organizing committee, however, did not approve Madeira’s proposal. The open house event was simply too much of a liability issue according to them. Because the annual Blessing was held public property, and had been since the town’s acquisition of Longo’s Dock in 1967, the town of Stonington was principally liable for anyone who was injured on town property at the annual Blessing. The town, however, was not liable for anyone who was hurt aboard the fleet’s boats because they were privately

159 Ibid.
owned and insured. Unwilling to accept further liability, Madeira said that the town’s insurer had refused to extend its coverage because of lawyers who “drum up lawsuits.”

One blow was followed shortly by another. Madeira soon learned that even his boat’s insurer would not accept liability for anyone aboard his boat who was not a crewmember. With this denial, he indefinitely shelved his proposed development to the annual Blessing’s celebration. Like political freedoms in the U.S., litigiousness was an American tradition in need of transformation. If the former’s integration within the annual Blessing was any indication of the possibility of reform, the incorporation of the latter was seemingly not beyond the reach of this celebration. Fleet members anticipated the annual Blessing as a time of renewal and as and hallowed place of grace. The anticipation excited a hope that traditions could be transformed and even elevated. American litigiousness was no exception to this hope.

**A Legal Challenge of Their Own**

Whether such a tradition had been integrated within the celebration of the annual Blessing by 1998 is not clear. What is clear though is that by the fall of 1998 fleet members were prepared to use litigation to press their case for overhauling the current quota system. On September 5, 1998, several veteran local fishermen called a press conference at the Town Dock to announce that the fleet intended to sue the State of Connecticut for enforcing a system they deemed to be inherently “unconstitutional.” At the press conference, local fisherman Walter Allyn made clear that the fleet was “not asking for much” in its demands for change. “All we want,” Allyn stated on behalf of fleet members, “is to be treated equal.” Fleet members had invoked the importance of equal treatment before, but until now had not openly threatened the litigation of state officials to achieve this goal. Such threat was likely

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160 Ibid.
not unrelated to the fleet members’ growing financial anxieties, and their skepticism about the near-term resolution of lawsuits still pending in federal court. In Walter Allyn’s case, financial pressures had in fact already convinced him to abandon ground-fishing in favor of scallop-fishing.\footnote{Groark, “Fishermen mull lawsuit against state,” 5 September 1998.}

Rendeiro had similarly not been immune from these pressures. While he still pursued groundfish, Rendeiro had done so at a serious financial loss. Since the implementation of the current quota system in 1993, he estimated that his annual earnings had been halved. At the press conference, he indicated that state officials were not unaware of his financial loss and the similar losses of fellow fleet members, but had done little to stop the bleeding. In particular, Rendeiro accused state officials of a damaging remove from the working-class concerns of local fishermen. Suggesting that the former lacked sufficient empathy, Rendeiro demanded that these officials get out of their “ivory tower” and “get real.”\footnote{Ibid.}

In a phone interview later that day, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal tried to temper this criticism. He clarified that his office had already taken legal steps to address the fleet’s labor concerns, and was prepared to press such concerns even further through a set of legal briefs his office planned to file at the end of September. In reference to the status of currently pending lawsuits, he said that he was optimistic that a decision about them could be rendered by the end of the year, but added that he could not “control the judge’s schedule.” Nevertheless, Blumenthal made clear that his office intended “to keep the heat and light as focused as possible on the process.”\footnote{Ibid.}
Fishermen, however, did not work according the time of court proceedings, and were prepared to file suit against the state if demonstrable progress on their case had not been made soon. Acting in his relatively new role as Governor Rowland’s co-chief of staff, Sidney Holbrook noted in a phone interview that he had met with fleet members on two occasions in the week before their press conference, and had counseled restraint. Holbrook was realist though. Fleet members’ patience was not unlimited, and was nearing a breaking point. Holbrook knew that these men were a determined bunch with a definite independent streak. If financial pressures continued to mount, there was little that he could do to prevent the fleet from advancing their lawsuit. When Holbrook had met earlier the previous week with fleet members, he was aware that his word only had so much authority in their final decision on the matter. Even though he thought that a new lawsuit was likely not to work to the “advantage” of these men, he had ultimately told them that “they could do what they wanted.”

Liturgical Reform and Development

As fleet members considered whether to advance the reform of federal fishing regulations through new litigation, another type of reform was already taking shape in Stonington. This latter reform, in particular, was related to the celebration of the annual Blessing. Fr. Philip Geogan, the pastor of St. Mary’s Parish, led the task. Appointed to St. Mary’s Parish in 1993, Fr. Geogan had served on the annual Blessing organizing committee in his role as fleet chaplain for the past several years. During this time, he had developed an intimate knowledge of the annual Blessing’s history and development through both conversations with the event’s organizers and his participation in the annual celebration. Based on this accumulated knowledge and his pastoral concern for intensifying the liturgical

164 Ibid.
fullness of the annual Blessing, Fr. Geogan proposed two important reforms in preparation for the event’s celebration in the summer of 1999.\footnote{Fr. Philip Geogan, interview by author, transcript, Stonington, Connecticut, 15 March 2007.}

The first reform was related to strengthening the annual Blessing to the Feast liturgical connection to St. Peter, the fleet’s patron saint. Originally the annual Blessing had been celebrated on the first weekend of July, the weekend immediately following the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29\textsuperscript{th}. But over the course of the past two decades, the annual Blessing’s celebration had drifted to the third or fourth weekends of July. The shift was partly due to concerns about lower attendance in light of local Fourth of July festivities and the annual Sailfest celebration in nearby New London, Connecticut. Since the mid-1970s, this latter event had been regularly held on weekend after the fourth of July. Seeking to reinvigorate the bond between the two annual liturgies, Fr. Geogan approached Bishop Hart about the possibility of receiving a dispensation to celebrate the Mass of St. Peter the Fisherman at the Fishermen’s Mass held on the Sunday morning of the annual Blessing weekend.

Bishop Hart apparently agreed to the request. This approval was likely more than a technical concern of canon law though. Over the past few years, Bishop Hart had regularly presided at the celebration of the Fishermen’s Mass. While all previous local bishops had presided at the formal blessing of the fleet, Bishop Hart was the first to lead the celebration of the Fishermen’s Mass. Celebrating the Eucharist with fleet members along with their families and friends had thus become a distinctive feature of Bishop Hart’s personal and pastoral relationship to the local parish and fleet. As one called in sacrament and office to intensify the bond of communion between God and the local church of the diocese of Norwich, Connecticut, Bishop Hart was quick to support Fr. Geogan’s creative proposal to
strengthen the liturgical bond between the communion of saints and the communion of pilgrim laborers who formed the local fleet.

The second reform was closely related to the first. Like his reform of the prayers offered at the Fishermen’s Mass, Fr. Geogan similarly sought to reorganize the Sunday afternoon prayers annually invoked at the Fishermen’s Memorial, the formal blessing of boats and fishermen, and the commemorative wreath-laying ceremony. Over the course of the Blessing’s annual celebration and development, the prayers offered in these places had interwoven various combinations of the extemporaneous and the formal, with the latter largely taken from the Book of Blessings. Attending to the historic shape and development of this organic mix of prayers, Fr. Geogan organized them into distinct prayers of praise and petition for each distinct aspect of the annual Blessing’s Sunday afternoon liturgical program.

On Sunday, August 1, 1999, Fr. Geogan’s recently developed liturgical reforms were formally integrated in the 45th annual celebration of the Blessing. Because Bishop Hart was unable to attend the celebration this year, Fr. Geogan was given the opportunity to introduce these reforms in his appointed role as the principal celebrant of both the Fishermen’s Mass and the formal blessing. At the Fishermen’s Mass this morning, Fr. Geogan began by calling all who had gathered in the pews of St. Mary’s Parish to prayer. The singing of the Kyrie followed. Personally invoking Christ as “our forgiveness and peace” and “refuge and safe harbor,” Fr. Geogan reminded those gathered that Christ ultimately supplied the terms of their call to be a community of repentance and a community of pilgrim laborers directed to a personal “harbor” in excess of their ordinary labor experience.166

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This call had a personal model, and was brought to the attention of all in the opening prayer that followed. Commending St. Peter as the one called by Christ from his fishing boat to be both “head and guardian” of the Church, Fr. Geogan invoked the intercession of this saint and asked for the fleet’s protection. As the prayer continued, Fr. Geogan did not fail to note that St. Peter’s intercession was an activity of communion embracing both heaven and earth, and the living and the departed. Appealing to this saint to “open the gates of heaven for those who have finished life’s journey,” he petitioned St. Peter to bring the departed to the “safe harbor” cradled within the communion of God.

With the subsequent start of the Liturgy of the Word, fleet members and their families heard a reading from the Book of Sirach, instructing them about “God’s plan that calms the deep.” (Sir 43:24-31) The reading then specified that this plan’s “story” has been intimately and organically known by those who “go down to the sea in ships.” This knowledge, however, was not without qualification or limitation. While noting that the story of the divine’s plan was unfolded in the midst of creation, and even within human labor, the reading indicated that the fullness of such a plan always remained in excess of the limits of human understanding. Because human understanding of God could never be exhausted, the reading enjoined hearers to “praise” God “all the more” in light of this ever-present and mysterious surplus.

Building on this invitation to prayer, the second reading, drawn from 1Peter 3:15-17, announced that the “praise” of God implicated members of the Church in the joy and grief of the incarnation of God’s Son and his passion and death on the cross. While commending the “hope” that these members demonstrated in their veneration of Christ, the reading made clear that, because of such praise, Christians had to be prepared to suffer defamation, libel, and even greater dangers. Moreover, because this praise excited the formation of a
community whose sign was the peace of Christ, and whose life commended Christ-formed practices of penance and reconciliation, the author indicated that this fellowship would possibly provoke harmful challenges from certain peoples and powers.

As a response to these real and possible challenges to the witness of their life, the gospel reading, taken from Mark 4: 35-41, encouraged hearers to persevere in faith. As St. Peter demonstrated in this passage, such faith certainly did not preclude hesitancy or even moments of doubt and frailty. Instead, like Peter, the commitment of faith provided the grace to persevere in those moments when doubt or weakness was most intense. For fleet members struggling with fears of their future economic survival, St. Peter’s example was not insignificant to their lives.

When the homily and recitation of the Creed had later been completed, Arthur Medeiros, the chairman of the Blessing organizing committee, a position he had held for the past two decades, stepped forward to the altar to read the Prayers of the Faithful. As a preface to these prayers, Fr. Geogan asked all to pray to “pray for one another, our Church, and our whole human family.” When Fr. Geogan had finished, Medeiros read the first few intentions for the local bishop, local church, and St. Mary’s Parish. Prayers for fleet members, “their families,” and “their success and their safety” were next invoked, with the added request that the fleet receive a “just share” for their work.167

By July of 1999, the fleet’s desire for justice was as intense as ever. Yet not to be forgotten was the fact that the annual Blessing’s celebration was as much about the commemoration of the departed as it was about advocacy for the living. Medeiros soon reminded all gathered of this as he stood at the altar. Offering petitions for all fleet members who had died at sea, Medeiros proceeded to read the names of each and every one.

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167 Ibid.
of these men out loud. The solemn announcement of each name echoed throughout the
walls of the sanctuary and the hearts of hearers. Asking all to commend their prayers to
“our Lord, through Mary, Star of the Sea and Refuge of Mariners” upon the reading of the
final name, Medeiros closed the prayers of the faithful by leading a communal recitation of
the Hail Mary.

If St. Peter signified the bonds of communion obtaining between the universal and
local church, and between the living and the departed, nowhere was this communion better
illuminated than in the commendation of the saint’s example in the prayers following the
reception of the sacrament of communion, the Eucharist. Stretching his hands outward at
the altar in blessing toward the people, Fr. Geogan asked God to hear the prayers of all who
had been “called to this table in honor of Peter the apostle.” Strengthened through this
saint’s example, Fr. Geogan further prayed that the gathered community be kept “faithful”
to Christ who “alone has the words of eternal life” and who was the way to “eternal joys.” In
a certain profound and mysterious way, the story of the fleet’s labor were at once enfolded in
the terms of this closing prayer, renewed through attention to St. Peter, and unfolded in the
anticipation of the Kingdom already inaugurated and to come.

The close of the Fishermen’s Mass inspired fleet members and their families out into
the streets, exciting the next part of the day’s liturgical celebrations. Later on in the
afternoon, not long after the street parade’s conclusion at the Fishermen’s Memorial, Fr.
Geogan offered the new, reformed prayer for deceased fishermen. Calling attention to
God’s work of creation, he invited all to be mindful that they had been created to
“experience” God’s love in and through their “love” of the divine work of creation.
Grounding this prayer in the experience of a call out of love to love at once unfolding within
creation and pointing beyond it, Fr. Geogan subsequently petitioned that all deceased fleet members be brought to “forgiveness, light and peace” in God’s presence.\textsuperscript{168}

This hope for the consummation of fleet members in the communion of heaven, however, was certainly not unrelated to the sign of its anticipation on earth. Fr. Geogan noted as much in the closing prayer at the monument and memorial. Appealing for a strengthening of the faith of those gathered, he explicitly encouraged all to persevere in the hope that departed fleet members would be seen “again in the place where death is only a memory and Jesus is Lord, forever and ever.”

The hope of the fleet’s eternal preservation was subsequently expanded out into the hope of the fleet’s temporal preservation in the prayers offered at the formal blessing of boats and fishermen. Fr. Geogan opened the ceremonies by invoking the “God of Sea and Sky.” Praying in the name of the “Master of the Wind and Cloud,” the “Son from Beginning” who “calmed the sea for Peter,” and the “Spirit, source of wisdom and right judgment,” he asked that all boats and fishermen be protected, to be granted success, and accompanied on every trip. Finally, he petitioned God, “Eternal Three in One,” to be forever the “safeguard” and “friend” of these men.\textsuperscript{169}

For participants at the annual Blessing, the perfection of this hope seemed to be ultimately illuminated in terms of the commemorative integration of the sacrifice of those fleet members who had never been recovered at sea in the paschal mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection. At the designated spot past the harbor breakwaters, Fr. Geogan joined all who were present on the boats circled together there. Appealing to the name of God “who alone knows the depth of the oceans and destiny of souls,” Fr. Geogan asked that “those


\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Prayers}, “Prayer over the boats…,” copy, Stonington, Connecticut, 15 March 2007.
who never returned from the sea” be commended into God’s “care” and receive “pardon and peace.” Furthermore, he petitioned that all present with him be granted the desired reunion with the departed “on heaven’s safe shore where death is no more and Jesus reigns as Lord, forever and ever.” Like few theological images could, “safe shore” integrated an experience that was familiar to all fleet members, but was at the same time stretched to the imaginative limit. More than an ultimate destination of their work, “safe shore,” in the liturgical context of the Blessing, was an image of the ultimate destination of their lives: their consummation in the communion of God.

Jim Henry, Sign of Continuity in Change

When Fr. Geogan had completed the “prayer for the deceased,” Jim Henry slowly stepped forward to the boat railing with the memorial wreath in his hands. If the newly-reformed prayers of the annual Blessing signified the development of the new in continuity with received tradition, no one better represented this development than Jim Henry. Forty-four years after he had played a leading role in organizing the “first” Blessing of the Fleet, Henry now carried the memorial wreath for the first time.

Henry had been an enduring presence in the fleet’s life and annual celebration of the Blessing for the past four and a half decades, anchoring its most hallowed traditions to the roll and pitch of numerous changes and developments. Various local crises like the current regulatory muddle had tried both the fleet’s spirit and resources in latter half of the twentieth century. But they had survived, and had done so through a remarkably novel combination of social preservation, labor innovation, and liturgical celebration. Henry was a personal and living sign of this extraordinary endurance. The eighty-six year old hands now grasping the

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memorial wreath were a bit more sinewy and weathered than the hands that had pulled St. Peter’s float forty-four years ago. Yet, for all their wear and tear, they remained strong and sturdy.

With Fr. Geogan’s blessing of the memorial wreath, Jim Henry lifted the wreath and released it into the water below. Even though the completion of this commemorative activity certainly freed Henry from the wreath’s weight, it had hardly unburdened him from the weight of the memory of the departed. Calling to mind the death of his cousin Arthur Arruda at sea in 1953, Henry recalled the last moments of his cousin’s life in an interview after the wreath-laying ceremony. In clear and painful detail, Henry recounted that his cousin had been swept overboard as the two were hauling in their most recent trawl. Even though his cousin had initially caught hold of a rope, preventing him from being totally submerged in the water, Henry reported that Arruda soon lost his grip and fell into the ocean. Drifting away from the boat, and unable to swim like many fishermen of his generation, Arruda flailed his arms in a desperate attempt to stay afloat. Seeing his cousin’s dire predicament, Henry hollered to Arruda to keep paddling. Seizing a rope near him, Henry tossed it in the direction of his cousin, but it just missed him. By the time he had pulled the rope back to him to attempt a second toss, Arruda had rolled over and disappeared underneath the waves. Panic-stricken at this sight, Henry dove into the ocean in a last-ditch attempt to save his cousin, but Arruda was already so far down that he could not be reached.172

Even though Henry had taken extraordinary action to save his cousin, even now he still felt that he could have done more to rescue him. “There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about it,” Henry achingly remarked. Arruda’s death, however, was not the only

172 Ibid.
death that weighed on Henry. Over the course of his five-decade career, Henry had personally known most of the men whose names were inscribed on the Fishermen’s Memorial. And like Arruda, these men continued to inspire heartfelt sorrow. Henry indicated as much at the end of his interview. “Tears come to your eyes when you think about the boys who have been lost,” he poignantly remarked. However, if Henry’s earlier remarks were any indication of the complex and paradoxical meanings of the annual Blessing, the grief of loss expressed in his tears was joined to the joy of redeemed and glorified life these tears similarly implied.

The annual Blessing encouraged fleet members to plunge their hope of transformed life in Christ into the soil of the land they inhabited and the depths of the waters they worked. Whether they extended this hope to the regulations that bound the latter and impacted the former was another question though. The first series of lawsuits filed by Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal had suffered defeat in both the U.S. District Court in Hartford, Connecticut and the Second District Court of Appeals in New York City. At the beginning of a new millennium, fleet members were thus confronted with the reality of burdensome regulations still in place, and the prospect that they were not likely to be revised anytime soon.

**Litigating a “Perfect Storm”**

Five days before the celebration of the annual Blessing in late July of 2000, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal met with fleet members at the Town Dock to unveil his intent to introduce a new legal challenge to the current regulatory system on their behalf. At the press conference, Blumenthal asserted he was exceedingly frustrated with the

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173 Ibid.
preservation of the status quo in light of recent legislative and legal challenges. He, in fact, held little back in his criticisms. Charging that current regulations were supported more by the interests of “politics” rather than of “conservation,” Blumenthal wondered aloud whether a “more inane system” could be constructed, and concluded that it could only be done with difficulty.\footnote{Ibid.}

The acerbic remark was humorous, but Blumenthal was not laughing. Claiming that the State of Connecticut’s forced cooperation in the current regulatory system’s “unconstitutional process” was undoubtedly unjust, Blumenthal asserted that this “injury” was only matched by the simultaneous “insult” in being effectively “shut out of participation” in the decision-making procedures now preserving the system. He further charged that the current regulatory process was a “mockery of states’ rights,” and suggested that it was rotten through and through. In a verbal swipe at the apparent absurdities that current processes sustained, Blumenthal acidly remarked that the system stunk “even worse” than the fish that fleet members regularly had to throw back into the ocean in light of quota restrictions.

Not one to be outdone in criticisms of current quota restrictions, Joe Rendeiro reiterated Blumenthal’s concerns about the wastefulness that these regulations inadvertently encouraged in an interview later that day. Yet even Rendeiro could not match the intensity of Blumenthal’s defense of the Stonington fleet and its interests on this day. Seeking to rally the support of the fleet behind his newest lawsuit, Blumenthal made clear that he intended to raise both controversy and alarm in the halls of Congress with his constitutional challenge to the regulatory powers of the federal government. In fact, he told listeners that he hoped
to create nothing less than a “perfect storm” in the courtroom with the introduction of his lawsuit.

Before an audience largely composed of fishermen who worked in the North Atlantic, Blumenthal’s appeal was probably no accident. Only a month earlier, the film adaptation of Sebastian Junger’s bestselling 1997 book *The Perfect Storm* had been released in theaters nationwide. Based on the events leading to the sinking of the Gloucester, Massachusetts-based fishing boat the *Andrea Gail* in October of 1991, the film and its story was likely not unfamiliar to many fleet members.

Blumenthal, however, did not come to local fishermen simply to deliver a satisfying dose of populist anger and rhetoric. Fleet members had heard promises about the legal overhaul of current regulations from the Attorney General’s Office before. Because these men were not likely to support the state’s newest legal challenge in the absence of compelling reasons, Blumenthal had to make exceedingly clear why his case should be supported. At the press conference this morning, he attempted to make his case to fleet members. Unlike the previous round of lawsuits filed in 1997, Blumenthal explained that his newest legal challenge was likely to succeed based on two factors. First, he noted that his soon-to-be filed legal brief had integrated the comments and concerns of the judges from the New York Appeals Court who had ruled against the State of Connecticut’s last round of lawsuits. Second, he mentioned that recent rulings issued by the U.S. Supreme Court suggested a trend toward greater support of states’ rights. With sharper constitutional arguments, and a more hospitable legal climate, Blumenthal boasted that his lawsuit would “send Congress back to the drawing board” to revise federal fishing regulations.

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The Task of Restoring Wholeness and a Way of Life

Jane Stahl, the deputy commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection, spoke shortly after Blumenthal had finished. Like Blumenthal, she called for the current system’s reform according to the ideal of a “commitment to fairness.” Commending local fishermen for their apparent dedication to the principles of both fairness and conservation, Stahl stated that the task of regulatory reform was not simply one of repair. Instead, she suggested that this task was grounded in something much more deeply personal. Speaking to the importance of founding reforms on “fairness” and a “commitment to conservation,” she said that such reforms “must be done in a way that makes everyone whole.”

Like Stahl, First Selectmen Donald Maranell explained that regulatory reform was “issue of fundamental fairness.” But unlike Stahl, he suggested that the ideal of “fairness” or equality was principally grounded in the “American Dream” rather than something like personal wholeness or integrity. Commenting on the inherent inequities of current regulations, Maranell blasted the system as a betrayal of the “American Dream.” Built on the principle that hard work was rewarded, he indicated that this “dream” was being undermined through the enforced un-fairness of the current system.

In an interview this day, Arthur Medeiros agreed that the system was “broke.” Clarifying what he meant, Medeiros made clear that he and fellow fleet members did not think that laxer conservation standards would remedy the problem. The demands of stewardship and demands of respecting labor were not and need not be seen as mutually opposed. In closing, Medeiros noted that fleet members simply wanted a policy intending to

178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
both “save the fish” and “save the fishermen.” Whether the fleet could be saved at this point was another question.

**A Change in Tactics**

By the beginning of 2001, most fleet members were at an emotional and financial breaking point. Federal reductions on the time fishermen could spend at sea in search of certain species had inadvertently increased the economic pain they were already suffering under existing quota limits. Because fluke was now being landed on fewer and fewer days, prices had dropped significantly in light of its saturation of local markets. Fluke had fetched prices as high as four dollars per pound a few years ago, but now were being sold for a little as a dollar. With the financial incentives of fishing only further diminished at this point, fleet members resolved to try a new tactic in their protracted struggle with federal regulators.

On January 14, 2001, fleet members announced at an informal press conference that they would not land any fluke until financial and regulatory conditions permitted prices to rise. Renderio served as the spokesman of the protest. Speaking to the reasons for the fleet’s now announced refusal to land fluke, Rendeiro asserted that they were fundamentally unwilling “to catch such a majestic fish for such a little price.” No doubt born from years of labor at sea, Rendeiro’s comments indicated that the commercial value of fluke could not be separated from its aesthetic worth. Fluke was not simply another commodity at the mercy of the laws of supply and demand, but rather a creature to be respected through its catch and appropriately valued through its purchase and consumption.

With the obvious exception of fleet members, few people understood the complex economic relationship between fish and fishermen as the former moved from net to dinner

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180 Ibid.
plate. Mike Gambardella, the owner of Gambardella Wholesale Fish and the major fish buyer at the Stonington Town Dock, however, was one such person who intimately understood and appreciated this relationship. Acting in solidarity with the fleet, Gambardella agreed not to buy fluke from any boat at the Town Dock, including out-of-state, transient boats operating out of Stonington, until fleet members determined that economic conditions had become more favorable. Acknowledging that such a stance carried some financial risk, Rendeiro was quick to praise Gambardella’s decision. Rendeiro was similarly quick to admit that the fleet’s protest was precarious too. The protest’s effectiveness was largely built on the assumption that prices would rise once the fluke quotas of other states had been reached by the middle of the year. If these quotas were not exhausted by this time, the plan was not likely to work. And even if they were, there was no guarantee that prices for fluke would rise. But, with financial anxieties running high and regulatory restrictions unlikely to change, fleet members were confronted with relatively few, if any alternatives.

The Blessing and Politics Joined and Distinguished

On July 29, 2001, fleet members were gathered to worship at the 47th annual Blessing of the Fleet. At the parade this day, the quake of rifle reports and cannon fire eventually gave way to the sonorous and stirring performance of “Amazing Grace” by one marching band. Like the interweaving of cannon thunder and musical harmony that reverberated through Stonington Borough this afternoon, the annual Blessing similarly intertwined the

182 Ibid.
rumble of national politics with and within the rhythm of the liturgy. Both had their drama, and both had their distinct and novel movements.

Robert Simmons, now the region’s U.S. congressional representative, marched together with Fr. Philip Geogan during the street parade this day. Elected only nine months earlier, Simmons had already drafted legislation to ease some of the financial burdens faced by fleet members. In an interview, he noted that he had recently introduced a bill to provide tax breaks to local fishermen for the purchase of safety equipment. While the realities of local and national political concerns were never entirely separate from the annual Blessing, Simmons noted that the “religious ceremony” was principally a time to be “offering prayers” rather than discussing politics.184

Fr. Geogan likely did not disagree with this sentiment, but his understanding of the relationship between the politics of labor and liturgical celebration seemed to be a bit more nuanced. At the ceremony held at the Fishermen’s Memorial immediately following the parade, Fr. Geogan offered prayers for departed fleet members and support for those living here on earth. Speaking to the local burdens resulting from federal regulations on the number of days that fleet members could go to sea, he indicated that such a restriction struck at both the dignity of both work and workers. “There just no way to get fish except to go fishing,” Fr. Geogan declared to all gathered. Using this logical point to describe the current economic predicament the fleet now faced, he encouraged all to think about fleet members and to pray for them in light of their “hard and dangerous” work.

The Undoing of the Outlaw

By the summer of 2002, the fleet’s work had grown even harder, but not because of bad weather or because of poor conditions at sea. Financial pressures were instead the

184 Ibid.
principal culprit. These pressures had exacted quite a toll on the fleet over the previous year. In an effort to be unburdened from Connecticut’s federally-mandated regulations, three of the fleet’s boats had been sold and moved twenty miles east to the port of Point Judith, Rhode Island. And if this was not enough, the fleet had recently suffered one of its most serious blows to its size and strength with the surprising retirement of one veteran fleet member in the spring. Citing the difficulty of retaining good crewmembers in light of sharp financial declines and uncertainties in take-home pay, “Outlaw” Joe Rendeiro had decided to cut his financial losses and put his boat up for sale.185

The move was significant. Over the past eight years, the Quiambaug Queen had been a local sign of controversy and creative resistance. Enlisted in the fleet’s struggle for fair treatment under the law, the Quiambaug Queen had come to be seen as much more than an instrument of commerce. Aboard this boat, Rendeiro had labored for the overhaul of current law as well as the preservation of the fleet’s life and work. With the boat’s recent work in service of tradition and reform, few could dispute the significance of the Quiambaug Queen’s loss.

On July 28, 2002, fleet members turned once again to the hope and consolation of the annual Blessing in midst of mounting worries about their future survival. At the event, these worries were both integrated and reconciled in and through both praise and lament. Over the course of the day, fleet members prayed with Bishop Hart and disclosed stories of their current struggles to reporters.186 As a living witness to the future that fleet members desired and to the work they were tasked to perform, the annual Blessing unfolded these

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aspirations and duties in terms of the mass they celebrated, the blessings they received, and the commemorative wreath they laid at sea.

The faith that was given flesh here was a faith emerging from their celebration of the sacrament of communion, carried out to the sea, and returned to port in the renewed hope of reconciling the joy and grief of fleet members and their families. Such a faith admitted of struggle and sorrow, and a hope grounded in the reconciliation of their concerns rather than their removal. As the departure point and site of the fleet’s work, this faith was commended to fleet members as both gift and task.

**Federalism and Fury**

And a strenuous task it was. Three weeks after the forty-eighth annual Blessing, fleet members talked at length to one reporter about the fleet’s current hardships and future prospects. Most thought that these prospects were grim in light of current economic conditions. Claiming that the fleet’s future was in “serious danger,” Bob Guzzo wondered out loud about how a complete collapse of the fleet would wreak serious damage to the local economy. Joe Rendeiro shared these sentiments. In particular, he noted that the fleet’s current situation was not good, and speculated that even if catch and trip restrictions were soon lifted it simply might be “too late for some people.”

Layoffs had already occurred at some local businesses due to decreased revenue from the fleet’s labors. Not long ago, Mike Gambardella had stood in solidarity with local fishermen in protest of the decreased value of fluke. Such a stand, however, had not come without a significant cost to his business. Citing significant decreases in revenue, Gambardella said that he recently had to lay off three workers from his fourteen-employee

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operation. As if that was not enough, he reported that he currently was not even taking a weekly paycheck in order to prevent the loss of another employee.\textsuperscript{188}

Gambardella, however, was not the only local business owner to be negatively impacted by the fleet’s troubles. Jeff Wilcox, whose family-owned marine supply store had been in operation for one-hundred and twenty-three years, reported that his business, even though it had once employed eleven people, had now dwindled to him, his son, and a part-time bookkeeper.\textsuperscript{189}

Al Madeira was in fact so frustrated by current economic conditions that he actually wanted to get out the fishing business altogether at this point. Yet even though he wanted to, he simply could not at the moment. Financial and regulatory pressures had driven him to put his boat up for sale, but he could not sell it because potential buyers feared ending up in his predicament. Caught in this double-bind, Madeira was torn by both anger and exasperation. Saying that he was “fed up” with the current anxieties of work, Madeira blasted the federal government for its role in both creating and compounding these anxieties. “The government took my business and devastated it to the point where it’s not worth anything anymore,” he fulminated. “I used to love this business, but now I hate it.”\textsuperscript{190}

U.S. Representative Robert Simmons was not unaware of the fleet’s burgeoning resentment toward federal officials. In an interview, he claimed that there were two major factors driving this resentment. The first was related to the distance of the federal courts and the decisions they made from the ordinary realities of the fleet’s life. Simmons charged that the recent negative rulings made by federal courts could be attributed to a clear misunderstanding of fishermen’s “day-to-day life” and “the risks of the business” associated

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid.
with their labor. The second factor was intertwined with the first. Citing recent legal pressures generated by “special interest groups,” Simmons indicated that these groups had demonstrated an even greater indifference to the lives of fishermen in general. Prior to the recent legal action of these interest groups, Simmons said that fishermen had been able to work more cooperatively with federal agencies to draft regulations. This was apparently no longer the case.

While the claim about previous cooperation was a bit exaggerated, it, nevertheless, did suggest that the fleet members had come to be, in a certain way, on the receiving end of a newer and more inhospitable form of American litigiousness. The combination of the two factors was potent, and Simmons indicated as much in his closing remarks about the strength and limits of local fishermen. While fleet members could “deal with hurricanes, bad weather, and schools of fish that duck and dodge them according to Simmons, he determined that they simply could not “deal with a federal court system that can put them out of business.”

Calling on Revolutionaries and Radical Activists

Several days later, fleet members met with Simmons and several other state and federal officials at the Town Dock to discuss what could be done to relieve the economic anxiety that had now reached a crisis point. Timothy Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere, and Patricia Kurkul, regional administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service, were two of the more prominent federal officials in attendance. Both were authorities in fisheries management and protection, and had come

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191 Ibid.
to listen to local concerns. Whether they could adequately respond to the wave of frustration that was about break upon them was another matter.

Aggravated by years of onerous regulations and unfulfilled promises, local fishermen did not conceal their anger and anxieties at the meeting today. The time for civil discussion had long since passed. Now was a time of reckoning and rebuke. Arthur Medeiros was one of the first to give voice to the intensity of the fleet’s current frustrations. Appealing to the negative local impact of federal day-trip limits, Medeiros indicated that fleet members were growing increasingly restless and ornery. These men, he told federal officials, “want to get up and go to work.” However, with current law limiting fishermen to twenty or twenty-five days at sea in search of certain species, Medeiros wondered aloud whether fishermen could be called fishermen if they hardly ever fished. The dignity of fishermen emerged from their work, and no less than this dignity was at stake in the debate about federal regulations.

Openly interrogating federal officials at the meeting, Medeiros angrily asked how fishermen could be told to work at sea for only a fraction of what they had previously worked. Before federal officials could reply, he answered that such an expectation was simply “preposterous.”

Keeney acknowledged that current regulation needed to be reworked, and made clear that he was prepared to lobby for these revisions before Congress. As a former commissioner of environmental management overseeing both Connecticut and Rhode Island, Keeney was familiar with the negative local impact of federal regulations. Local state senator Cathy Cook soon reiterated this theme in her plea to Keeney to take more expedient action on overhauling current law.

193 Ibid.
The plea was not lost on Keeney. During his public remarks, he indicated that the fleet’s current predicament was undoubtedly a symptom of inequities built into the federal regulatory system. At present, he noted that no state other than Connecticut could claim to be faced with the prospect of losing an entire fishing fleet. The prospect was not accidental. Keeney made clear that more could be done “to prevent the American fishing industry from being regulated out of existence,” and pointed to his petition before Congress to revise the Magnuson Act to help ensure a fairer and more equitable system as a step in the right direction. With his colleague Patricia Kurkul’s additional note that the National Marine Fisheries Service was almost at the point of delisting fluke as an overfished species, it seemed like the winds of reform might finally be favorable to the local fleet.

Joe Rendeiro, however, was not convinced. Rendeiro had experienced too many letdowns, and was not about to be disappointed again. Charging his public remarks with saltier humor and more revolutionary fervor than before, Rendeiro let everybody at the meeting know just what he thought needed to be said and done to achieve reform. With nuance and qualification giving way to unvarnished speech, Rendeiro threw restraint to the wind, and pressed forward with an indictment like no other.

Rendeiro first called out Governor Rowland and state legislators for what he considered to be weak challenges to federal regulation. Claiming that these state leaders lacked the “intestinal fortitude to tell the federal government to stick that regulation where the sun don’t shine,” Rendeiro dared officials present at the meeting to take bolder and more dramatic action. Rendeiro wanted a revolt rather than another discussion. Such a tactic, however, was not a license to promote any type of action to achieve reform. Instead, Rendeiro offered two examples from American history to those gathered as models for the type of action he envisioned. First, he appealed to the civil rights movement and indicated
that the indignities and unfair treatment currently suffered by local fishermen bore a certain resemblance to those experienced by African-Americans in Selma, Alabama in the mid-1960s. Rendeiro even invoked the life of slain civil rights activist Medgar Evers and suggested that fleet members could seek inspiration from his witness to the dignity of all persons and their right to equal treatment under the law.194

Building on the ideal of fairness, and its fuller historical integration into law through the actions of American civil rights leaders, Rendeiro called attention to another, earlier American movement for reform and equality. In particular, he cited the example of American revolutionaries and indicated that they had challenged the idea that fairness was the special provision of a particular state. Rendeiro noted that the attempt to stifle this challenge had not been successful for the British. And if the past was any indication of present limits, similar challenges were not likely to be successful for any other group, foreign or domestic. Appealing to the frustrations of fellow fishermen at the meeting, and attempting to rally them to renewed action, Rendeiro declared he was “tired” of regulations “being pushed” on the fleet. “King George tried to impose his laws on us, and we kicked his ass!” he thundered.

Like the American revolutionaries who fought for fair treatment, Rendeiro made clear that he was not about to back down from the current challenge before fleet members. Even though he had “quit fishing,” Rendeiro affirmed that he had not “quit fighting.” The fleet was too important, its work too dignified, and its traditions too honorable to be simply brushed aside without a fight. With rising voice, Rendeiro boldly pledged that he would not “quit fighting until they shoveled dirt on my face.”195

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194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
The crowd gathered at the Town Dock had been fairly raucous before Rendeiro spoke, but in the wake of his final remarks they were nearly riotous. Local legislators, in particular, had been swept up in Rendeiro’s rhetoric and clamored for action. Local state representative Diana Urban announced that it might be “time for civil disobedience” and pointed to the long tradition of this activity in the U.S. to advance her claim. Stating that the U.S. had been established by a “bunch of rabble rousers,” she suggested that it was fitting to retrieve their example once again and put it into action. First Selectman Robert Dibble echoed this call, and urged to legislators to heed it. Apparently inspired by Rendeiro’s insistence that Connecticut officials simply should not enforce a federal system that they knew to be unconstitutional, Dibble exhorted Governor Rowland in absentia to refuse to enforce a federal system “patently unfair to the residents of the state.”

David Neff, deputy commissioner of the state DEP, tried to intervene at this point by reminding Dibble that all public officials had taken an oath to uphold the law, but his remarks fell flat. Dibble shot back that legal avenues had been pursued and roundly defeated. If the fleet waited much longer for federal officials to reset quotas or for federal courts to overhaul the regulatory system, Dibble asserted that the fleet might not be around to see the implementation of these possible reforms. Neff apparently did not respond.

Walking with the Saints and Honoring Tradition

Rendeiro had incited fellow fishermen and local officials to march toward equality in the way of American revolutionaries and civil rights activists. One year later, on July 27, 2003, fleet members would once again process forward in communion with St. Peter and the local bishop. Amendments to the Magnuson Act to ease state quota restrictions and day-

\[^{196}\text{Ibid.}\]
trip limits had not been passed at this point, and there was no guarantee that they would anytime soon. Nonetheless, fleet members continued to pray and parade with St. Peter. In the blessings they received and the commemorative prayers they invoked, these men and their families indicated that the fleet was ultimately preserved not so much through the vagaries of politics as through the presence of the saints in communion with Christ.

National and state politics, however, had traditionally been given a place at the annual Blessing, and this year’s celebration was no different. Speaking to the significance of both the fleet and the Stonington Portuguese in remarks at the Fishermen’s Memorial ceremony, former First Selectman Nicholas Kepple suggested to the crowd that Stonington’s development and history were inseparable from the lives and tradition of the two. Kepple, in particular, exorted all gathered to “remember the importance of the Portuguese heritage and the fleet to the community.” The imperative was not without a specific rationale. Claiming before the crowd that both Stonington Portuguese and the Stonington fleet were “an established fabric of our lives,” Kepple seemed to indicate that these two related groups were not simply another commercial industry and ethnic group alongside others in the town, but rather living traditions that animated the community’s life and ideals.

The annual Blessing was a time to give thanks to both the people and work that gave Stonington life, and the ultimate source that gave life to this people and work. In an interview at this year’s annual Blessing, Susan Medeiros, the wife of local fishermen and Blessing co-chairman Tim Medeiros, talked at some length about both the anxiety she regularly experienced in light of her husband’s work at sea, and the pride she felt in light of the tradition her husband carried on in and through his work preparing the annual Blessing.

Tim Medeiros soon joined the interview, and noted that his wife’s anxieties were not without cause. Calling to mind a harrowing incident aboard his boat over two decades ago,
he recounted how he had become entangled in the netting spool as it was being wound and nearly crushed to death after his arm had been caught. Even though he was “pretty battered-up,” he claimed that “by the grace of God” he was able to eventually cut himself free and sail back to port.¹⁹⁸

Whether by grace, by political advocacy or some certain integration of both, fleet members received a larger fluke quota share in February of 2004 though the amendment and re-authorization of the Magnuson Act. While the increase was certainly better than previous limits, it still remained far short of Connecticut’s allowable landings prior to 1993. Nevertheless, the announcement represented something of a modest victory for the fleet even if other federal regulations continued to be largely, if not increasingly burdensome.¹⁹⁹

**Celebrating a Half Century and More of Blessing**

With this small measure of good news in early 2004, fleet members turned toward preparations for the 50th annual Blessing of the Fleet. Two weeks prior to this celebration, a local newspaper carried a four page spread on the fleet’s life and history.²⁰⁰ A short article about the annual Blessing’s beginning was included. Concentrating on the leading role that Jim Henry and his wife Virginia played in organizing the “very first” annual Blessing, the article dated this celebration to 1954.

The date was curious, and did not comport with most other accounts of the Blessing’s history that had regularly appealed to 1955 as the founding year. While the

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¹⁹⁸ Ibid.
article’s author did not provide any evidence for using 1954 rather than 1955 as the founding year, the error was most likely due to the confusion of the critical distinction between “anniversary” and “annual” celebrations.

Appropriate original date or not, the 50th annual blessing was celebrated in the presence of thousands on August 1, 2004. Arthur Medeiros, chairman of the annual Blessing now for the past twenty-six years, was overjoyed to see the annual event’s celebration reach such a historical mark. In an interview, Medeiros said that the accomplishment was “amazing,” but noted that he thought that it was “even more remarkable” that so “very little” had “changed” over the course of the previous five decades of annual celebrations. Asked whether there would be more celebrations to come, Medeiros was quick to reply in the affirmative, asserting that he and other fleet members wanted the annual Blessing “to go on forever.” However, if what was being celebrated that day truly anticipated forever, fleet members could testify that such an activity surely was not without struggle, reform, and even confrontation. While certainly experienced as a gift, the communion both celebrated and re-inaugurated at the annual Blessing was similarly commended and received as a task and challenge. As some participants would soon discover, the challenge of communion was not simply a task to be performed at some time outside of the Blessing’s celebration.

A Breach in Manners

At the annual Blessing in 2004, storm clouds hung visibly overhead in the Stonington Borough on Sunday afternoon. Unknown to participants though, a storm of another sort was about to break upon them this day. At the Fishermen’s Memorial ceremony, Republican

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state senator Cathy Cook and Democrat state representative Diana Urban joined Bishop Cote, fleet members, and others gathered in prayer. When Bishop Cote had finished offering prayers for deceased fleet members, Cook and Urban unfurled a proclamation from Republican State Governor Jodi Rell, and read the message aloud. At the proclamation’s conclusion, Cook apparently was moved to deliver some unprepared remarks in praise of Governor Rell’s policies and long-standing positions. In particular, Cook extolled the Governor’s unstinting support of women and women’s “reproductive health.”

At the mention of the latter, numerous people in the crowd almost immediately blushed, and none more so than Bishop Cote. Cook’s praise of Governor Rell’s advocacy for women’s “reproductive health” was a coded reference to the latter’s unqualified support of legalized abortion on-demand. In the context of a Catholic liturgical celebration, this coded reference, even if unintended, was a serious breach of manners. Even though Cook was apparently oblivious to the error, few others in the crowd had been. Advancing political support for legalized abortion on-demand at a Catholic liturgical celebration shortly after prayers had been offered for the preservation of both the living and the departed was gravely contrary to the intent of the event. Political conditions in 2004, however, worked to both magnify and intensify Cook’s error.

At the time of the annual Blessing’s celebration in early August of 2004, John Kerry’s presidential campaign was steeped in serious moral and social controversy among Catholics, in general, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), in particular. Nominated at the Democratic National Convention only days earlier in Boston, Senator John Kerry from Massachusetts had just become the official presidential candidate for the Democratic Party. The first Catholic from either major political party to be nominated to candidacy for

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the presidency in the post-Roe period, Kerry had inspired serious and contentious reflection among Catholics in light of his public support of legalized abortion on-demand. Such reflection was, for the most part, organized around the formation of conscience, and how this formation was publicly applied in prudential judgments at the ballot box. As a response to these concerns, the USCCB had organized a task force headed by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C. the previous November to address the Catholic Church’s pastoral response to Catholic politicians who publically and knowingly supported the legal protection of abortion.\(^\text{203}\)

However, before the task force could issue its results, the USCCB was compelled to address a new development. In February of 2004, the controversy surrounding Kerry’s public support of legalized abortion intensified in the wake of comments from Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis. Asked in an interview about whether Catholic politicians who supported legalized abortion could and should receive the sacrament of communion, Burke responded that he would deny the sacrament to Kerry if the latter came before him at mass. The response almost immediately set off a flurry of debate among fellow bishops, Catholic commentators, and even Vatican officials. With the exception of a select few, most Catholic bishops indicated that they would not refuse to administer communion to Catholic politicians who publicly objected to the Catholic Church’s teaching on abortion. However, quite a few did publicly assert that such politicians should deliberately refrain from receiving communion until their stances were reformed. Nothing less than continuing damage and scandal to the Catholic Church’s witness of communion was at stake according to them.

At the USCCB’s annual meeting in June of 2004, the issue of Catholics in political life and their reception of communion was taken up and debated. Discussions were lengthy and opinions ranged, but the bishops eventually agreed to a formal statement about their shared, public ministry as “teachers of the Catholic faith and of the moral law.” Entitled “Catholics in Political Life,” the statement outlined five pastoral tasks in light of current social and political conditions. Four of these five tasks were explicitly constructive. In particular, they emphasized the bishops’ commitment to teach and to persuade others about the inherent dignity of all human life, to act in support of public policies ordered to the protection of this fundamental principle, and to maintain communication with public officials charged with interpreting and integrating this principle into policy and law. Acknowledging concerns about public scandal to the Catholic Church, the statement’s sole negative task called U.S. bishops not to honor any person who acted in defiance of the Church’s moral teaching on the dignity of the human person through “awards, honors, or platforms.”

The statement closed with a commentary on prudential judgments in pastoral activity based on Vatican II’s affirmation of the Eucharist as the “source and summit of Catholic life.” Addressing the question of whether communion could be denied to certain Catholics in political life, the statement commended the local judgments of bishops within their own dioceses as the best way toward an answer at the moment. Committed to the Church’s tasks of repentance and reform, the statement’s authors reminded all that the Church was not immune from the “polarizing tendencies of election year politics,” tendencies that extended even to the misuse of “Catholic teaching and sacramental practices” for narrow political

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ends. With the Eucharist’s strengthening of the bonds of communion and its mystical unfolding in the Church’s mission in the world, the statement’s authors concluded that the sacrament both invited and encouraged all Catholics to more worthy reception and administration.²⁵

As a consensus document, “Catholics in Political Life” was a fairly careful, nuanced, and even restrained pastoral statement. This interpretation, however, did not prevail in subsequent press reports and public commentary about the statement. Even though the statement included five pastoral tasks, almost all discussions of the document were reduced to the single negative task mentioned within it. This was the immediate social-political context of Senator Cathy Cook’s infelicitous remarks in front of Bishop Cote and others at the Fishermen’s Memorial.²⁶

Bishop Cote was apparently not unfazed by Cook’s remarks, but he did not offer any immediate public criticism. Walking with local fishermen over to the Town Dock in preparation for the formal blessing in the wake of her comments, Bishop Cote prepared for the next part of the liturgical celebration. Not long after all the fleet’s boats had been boarded and had roared to a start, Bishop Cote commenced the formal blessing of boats and fishermen with his petition of St. Peter to grant all fleet members safety, success and good judgment.

At this year’s celebration, few could claim greater gratitude for St. Peter’s intercession than crewmembers of the Ava Claire, a fishing-boat based out of nearby Niantic, Connecticut. Only three months ago, the Ava Maria had literally been sliced in half by a

²⁵ Ibid.
container ship in foggy conditions near Long Island. The collision had been thunderous, but astonishingly no lives had been lost in the wake of the accident. As a sign of thanksgiving for all who had been saved in the wake of this collision, fleet members aboard the Stonington-based *Stacey and Geal* had decorated their boat with a banner that read, “Thank St. Peter for the Safe Return of the Crew of the Ava Maria.” With this banner flapping in the wind at the boat parade, crewmembers aboard the *Stacey and Geal* displayed their call to thank to St. Peter through their reception of the blessing administered by Bishop Cote.

Sailing out toward the breakwaters at the fiftieth annual Blessing of the Fleet, fleet members and their families carried more than a shared desire to draw all previous celebration to the summit activity of commemoration. In particular, they carried forward a message that had been made concrete through their intertwining of the call to thanksgiving with the reception of blessing, in their enfolding of the tasks of the present in the renewal of tradition, and in their reconciliation of the exertions of the pilgrim communion on earth with the joy of the communion of saints in heaven.

If the fiftieth annual Blessing of the Fleet was a compelling sign of Church’s mission to the world through liturgy and labor, Cathy Cook’s remarks there had indicated that this mission continued to be both a task and challenge in need of fuller and wider realization. Cook’s verbal gaffe had not been reported in press accounts of this year’s event, but it would not go unmentioned by others. In the wake of the fiftieth annual Blessing, Bishop Cote requested, and members from the annual Blessing’s Organizing Committee agreed, that local politicians could parade in, but could no longer speak at subsequent celebrations until further notice. Cook was not Catholic, and nothing further was pursued by local church officials or fleet members in response to her remarks. However, the same could not be said of officials from her party’s state delegation. When some of these officials later learned
about Cook’s inappropriate remarks at the annual Blessing in 2004, they reportedly issued a formal reprimand to her and asked her to apologize to members of the annual Blessing’s Organizing Committee.207

The Blessing’s Task, Challenge, and Offer of Reconciliation

By the time the annual Blessing was held the following years, tensions between Cook and others involved in planning and presiding at the celebration had apparently eased. At the Sunday afternoon parade this year, Bishop Cote and Cook exchanged handshakes, and even paraded together, if only at some distance.208 The apparent alleviation of tensions attributable to the past year’s celebration, however, was not equivalent to the forgetfulness of them. Bishop Cote, and members of annual Blessing’s Organizing Committee, had not only reflected on these tensions, but had actually implemented reforms to annual Blessing’s Sunday program in light of them. Speeches from elected political officials at the Fishermen’s Memorial ceremony had indeed been suspended until further notice.209

Prayers offered at this ceremony on this day spoke to the both natural desire to preserve and honor human life and the illumined hope that such life was ordered toward lasting preservation. Until the equality presumed in American political speech and law could be reconciled to the equality proclaimed at and through the annual Blessing, politicians were presumably not likely to be given platforms at this celebration.

In an interview at the annual blessing this year, one fleet member called the celebration “a time to reflect and a time to move forward.”210 The words were succinct and fitting. Fleet members and their families were indeed prepared to move forward as they

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previously had, but only in and through the terms of the annual Blessing. Unlike other types of public reform in the U.S., the reform of the annual Blessing implicated participants in the need for repentance and reconciliation. Fleet members had demonstrated what this call looked like in their compelling, but non-coercive protest of the federal quota system. Witnessing to the equality which they both celebrated and anticipated, fleet members had shown that the task of reform presupposed and was inextricably tied to a shared personal witness of repentance and reconciliation.

At the start of 2006, this task continued to be a work of hope underway. The Magnuson Act was up for debate and re-authorization in Congress. Fleet members certainly hoped to see improvements to the act that would ease existing restrictions on quota limits for fluke. But based on reports that year about the underwhelming recovery of ground-fish stocks, they were likely to encounter serious opposition to their case for change.

When the annual Blessing was celebrated later this year, the Magnuson Act’s reauthorization was still pending in Congress. During the celebration, the subject was apparently not discussed at any considerable length. However, what was discussed at length was both the significance and inspiration of the annual Blessing. In an interview, one local fisherman tried to explain the personal impulse behind his annual attendance. Commenting about his annual participation, he remarked that he got “blessed all the time,” and called the activity “good.” These remarks were qualified though. Building on his previous comments, he made clear that the significance of the Blessing was “not about the partying,” but instead “about getting the holy water.”

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The significance of the formal blessing’s reception, however, was not, and could not be disentangled from the carrying of the commemorative wreath. In another interview this day, Mary Ann Litke talked about the pain and peace of bearing the wreath. Since her son William had died at sea in 1994, Litke had regularly helped to carry and lay the commemorative wreath at the annual Blessing. While this duty continued to be painful, she noted that she had been filled with an unanticipated sense of peace at this year’s celebration. In the wake of her husband’s recent death, she indicated that she had been comforted by the thought of her son’s reunion with his father. Gazing out over the water, she remarked, with a smile, that she felt her son was “finally with his father.”212

Fleet members had long gone forward to labor in the hope of the pilgrim fishermen on earth being reconciled with the sainted fishermen in heaven. Whether fleet members could reasonably hope for an eventual reconciliation of their interests with those of federal regulators, however, was another matter. The reauthorization of the Magnuson Act was eventually signed into law on January 12, 2007. Fleet members, however, were largely not excited by its passage. Because the reauthorization largely preserved the status quo on the size of ground-fish landings, day-trip limits and the system for allotting state-by-state quotas, fleet members were hard-pressed to call it reform. Nevertheless, they continued to work, and continued to pray for better days ahead.

Conclusion: The Blessing as Communion Celebrated, Given, and Personally Unfolded

On Sunday morning, July 22, 2007, fleet members and their families gathered once again in St. Mary’s Parish Church to celebrate the Fishermen’s Mass at the annual Blessing of

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212 Ibid.
Under clear skies, the parish church was bathed in sunlight and warm air this morning. Temperatures were gradually increasing, and so was the number of people who were now streaming into St. Mary’s. On the steps of the church, several members of the Knights of Columbus, dressed in formal attire and brightly-colored capes shimmering in the sun, were busy greeting parishioners and guests. Inside, the sanctuary was filled with the sound of numerous family reunions now taking place. Peals of laughter and cries of surprise intermingled with an excited flurry of handshakes and hugs exchanged between local fishermen and family members from out-of-town. Over in a side aisle, several of these men welcomed Sidney Holbrook, former commissioner of the Connecticut DEP, who had just been wheeled into the church. Updating him about personal and business news, these men talked with Holbrook right up to the start of mass.

With the opening notes of the processional hymn “Saint Peter, the Fishermen” now resounding throughout the church, everyone in unison rose in attention with folded programs in their hands. Set to Beethoven’s Hymn to Joy, all sung out in praise to “Great Saint Peter, friend of Jesus, chosen leader of the Church” to “pray for all who go down to the sea in ships to fish.” Appearing with swords pointed heavenward, several Knights of Columbus led the procession to the altar. Verses asking St. Peter, the “Rock,” to be for all both “sure protector” and “guide most sure in faith” accompanied them as they walked forward. Altar servers separately carrying a cross, lighted candles, and an incense boat followed not far behind. Finally, Fr. Dennis Perkins, the current interim administrator of St. Mary’s Parish and principal celebrant, rounded out the procession. As he strode toward the altar, voices rose in “Glory to the Three in One.” Building to the final lines of the hymn with

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the resounding boom of choir voices and organ pipes reverberating together, all sang out in the hope that their “praise of Blessed Mary, dear Saint Peter and all Saints with the Church” would “reecho unto earth’s remotest ends.”

When the liturgy later came to a close with the reception of communion, and the offering of the closing prayer, all in St. Mary’s Parish redoubled their efforts to let their song of praise redound throughout the church and into the world. Singing “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” they called out to God, “Trinity of love and power” in the hope that their song would rise to heaven through “glad hymns” sounding “from land and sea.” With the hymn’s finishing flourish, all who had gathered for mass at the annual Blessing walked out into the streets and down to the shore of the Stonington Borough to parade once again with St. Peter, to remember those who had died, and to seek and receive the blessing that they all so affectionately anticipated. The time and grace of the annual Blessing traveled with this gathered body and was made present and magnified through them once again.

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Chapter 4: The Inner Meanings of the Annual Blessing

On July 22, 2007, the fifty-third annual Blessing of the Fleet was held in Stonington, Connecticut. Since the annual Blessing memorialized local fishermen who either died or who were lost at sea, it inherently commended past losses. Like previous observances, this day was marked by solemn gestures and ritual remembrances. This year’s Blessing, though, included an additional and somewhat different tribute. Specifically, the tribute was designed to honor the upcoming loss of an important type of fleet member. This member was the Jenna Lynn, a sixty foot fishing trawler that had fished out of Stonington for over forty years, and had served as the Blessing’s ceremonial flagship since 2000.

For the captain and crew of this boat, this day was an especially somber occasion. It marked the final time that they would parade the Jenna Lynn publicly. Due to age and wear, this boat would be retired at the end of the year. Unfortunately, the steel that had forged important bonds over the years had now corroded to the point where the boat was barely seaworthy. When one festival attendee asked a crewman how he felt about the upcoming loss, he patted the boat’s railing and commented that “it’s tough to see her go.” The gesture and comment were simple. Yet this simplicity pointed to deeper meanings about the relationship between fishermen and boats. This relationship was complex, and the Blessing helped to express and intensify it. When we consider what was taking place on the Jenna Lynn at this most recent celebration, we can see, if only partly, how these deeper meanings were articulated. The formal blessing of this boat was not simply a festive exercise. Rather it was
more like a sacrament of anointing or an administration of last rites that offered comfort, allayed doubts, and provided hope during a time of transition for the boat's crewmen.

This brief example is instructive. The annual Blessing integrated certain material objects into its sacral context through prayer and performance, and speech and gesture. The objects helped to organize and concentrate the attention of people at this celebration. They expressed specific beliefs and commitments, and signified certain bonds. These objects were, at once, agents and revealers for this community. As such, they can be properly understood as symbols. In order to better understand the function of particular symbols at popular Catholic rituals like the Blessing the Fleet, it is important to attend to the people who encountered them and places where they resided.

The central symbols of popular Catholic rituals normally are objects or images that can be identified as religious by both participants and observers alike. Examples include statues or paintings of saints, crucifixes, or monstrances. Objects or images like these are determined to be religious often because they are located primarily in religious settings or spaces. The symbol is defined by where it is normally situated. Symbol and setting, thus, cooperate to create meaning. Ritual, though, offers an alternative way to 'see' certain symbols and settings through its rupture of the everyday. I suggest that an examination of one popular Catholic celebration and its central symbol shows how the ritual rupture of the everyday contributes to an alternative way of understanding the relationship between symbol and community, and symbol and world.231

Unlike other popular Catholic rituals the annual Blessing of the Fleet held in Stonington, Connecticut has been organized around a symbol that is normally understood to possess commercial

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231 This phrase is used by Louis Marie-Chauvet in *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995) 330-331. He comments that “objects or materials used in ritual are…separated from their utilitarian purposes.” As such, they come to signify different types of meanings and relationships through ritual. For example, he notes that while Eucharistic hosts are regularly understood as type of bread, at mass they “have been so removed from the status as ordinary bread that, now flat, round, and white, they remind us of bread only with great difficulty.”

Chauvet also states that places are transformed by symbols. He comments that “the place of religious ritual is always ‘consecrated,’ that is, set apart, taken out of its status as a neutral space by a symbolic marker of some kind.”
rather than religious significance: the fishing boat. An examination of what boats have regularly done to and for people, and what people have done to and on boats in the course of this celebration will help disclose what this community believes about the relationship between work and family, work and community, and work and the world. This study will primarily explore how interaction with this type of material object and its various representations during the annual Blessing has sanctioned the construction and harmonization of the commercial, domestic, social, and religious lives of this community. I claim that the significance of this celebration’s central symbol resides precisely in its reconciliation of fishermen and family, work and world, and, ultimately, community and God.

In what follows, I suggest that a focused attention to the interaction between symbols and ritual participants, to the ritual language of communion, and to the symbolic relationships both signified and forged through this popular Catholic celebration reveals how certain realities are recognized, and how the world is consequently seen. It is in the symbolic rupture of the everyday activated through popular Catholic ritual, in the liminal space or dialectic between clarity and ambiguity, and control and dispossession that knowledge is revealed, meaning is shaped, and a certain way of living and being in the world is commended. Specifically, I will closely examine how boats at this celebration function to re-establish and reconcile relationships between 1) fishermen and work, 2) fishermen and family, 3) fishermen and community, 4) women and work, and 5) fishermen and the dead.

Fishermen and Work

The annual Blessing of the Fleet allowed fishermen to express the anxiety and ambiguity, and fear and frustration regularly experienced in, and occasioned by their work. As a celebration of this working community, the weekend celebration sought to heal the wounds of a people worn by work, worry, and weather. It responded to both the immediate and the perennial concerns of fishermen. Fishermen called attention to these concerns by locating themselves on the objects that
often produced the anxiety and frustration they sought to alleviate: fishing boats. By locating themselves on what many considered the most significant source of frustration in their lives, fishermen specifically identified what troubled them, and what caused them pain. On boats, they also organized themselves around other sources of conflict at work like fishing gear and fellow crewmen. The Blessing indicated that fishermen were inseparably linked to the pain and problems they experienced. Fishermen drew near to those things and people that caused them considerable frustration to display a fierce hope amidst trial, a determined strength amidst uncertainty, and a stubborn solidarity with others who suffered and caused suffering. This display not only revealed the sources of struggle experienced in and through work but also demonstrated strategies for resolving conflict. Boats helped to confirm the hope, strength, and solidarity of fishermen and assisted them in renewing commitments to work and to each other.

Fishermen commended their work through prayer at this celebration. They asked the community to join them in this task and petitioned Saint Peter to intercede for them on his behalf. Fishermen specifically looked to the local bishop who regularly celebrated the formal Blessing to lead them in prayer. They invited him to assist in alleviating and commending the anxieties that they regularly experienced. The bishop concretely expressed his concern for and solidarity with these fishermen by celebrating the formal Blessing on the appointed fleet flagship. It was on this boat that the local bishop asked others to pray with him to the “God of Sea and Sky,” to “Jesus [to]…accompany…boats on every trip [and]…protect all on board,” and to the “Spirit, Source of wisdom and right judgment.” Fishermen prayed to God on boats at this celebration to help safeguard the ships that they operated, and calm the places where they worked. On this day, they centered themselves on the sources of pain and suffering in the confident hope that the Blessing would perform its reconciling and healing work. By offering prayers fishermen revealed how they were established, sustained, and directed by the economy of God. It was in praying on boats that

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232 Official prayers of the Blessing of the Fleet held in Stonington, Connecticut. Author’s possession.
they received the gift of their work, and it was in their pledge, their collective “Amen,” that they faithfully re-committed themselves to returning this gift.

Once the formal prayers concluded boats were, then, sprinkled with the water of blessing as each motored by the bishop. One by one, each boat was blessed and traveled out of the Town Dock and toward open water. In a way, this ritual activity rehearsed the daily routine of fishermen before the crowd assembled at the Town Dock. The Blessing stressed the important need for divine protection and guidance in the lives of fishermen; lives regularly subject to the power and peril of the open ocean, and lives intimately aware of how small errors at work could occasion tragic consequences. The sensed need for blessing resulted from the experience of work, an experience that, in turn, intensified the need for blessing. As one veteran fisherman noted: “Anytime we get a little blessing we are going to take it.”233 The journey of each boat out of the Town Dock, and eventually out past the harbor breakwaters, also, indicated that the blessing traveled with them. Fishermen were not simply abandoned to the impersonal might of the sea. Rather they were sent forth by and with blessing of God. This celebration on boats helped to reconcile tensions between fishermen and work, and expressed the confident belief that fishermen went forth to work under the continual care and guidance of the “God of Sea and Sky.”

Boats symbolized the relationship between fishermen and work at the Blessing. They expressed both the inherent tensions and concord between the two. In many ways, fishing boats were appropriate symbols of this relationship. Like the relationship between fishermen and work, the bond between fishermen and boats was complicated. It was a relationship that allowed for considerable freedom but also created significant dependence. For many, the ‘health’ of boats was intimately connected to the ‘health’ of fishermen. In a port like Stonington where the fleet was small compared to others like those in New Bedford, Massachusetts or Gloucester, Massachusetts, and

where many fishermen owned the boats they operated, the relationship between the health of boats and fishermen was intensified. “Family owned” boats required significant emotional, physical, and financial investments. Family boat owners were largely unable to bear costs associated with regular loss of gear, the mishandling of equipment, or lax maintenance. Fishermen, thus, were obligated to display a proper respect for and commitment to boats through their handling and maintenance.

Since many boats were owned by Stonington fishermen, mechanical and equipment problems that occurred on boats were similarly “owned” by them. As a result, there was low threshold for tolerating reckless mistakes or inadequate skills. The intimate relationship between fishermen and boats demanded that certain labor practices and expectations were honored. The cost of carelessness was appreciably higher on the open ocean. It was a cost that this community knew intimately and, in turn, led to rigorous expectations for local fishermen. Risks to safety were mitigated by devotion to the details of crew quality and boat and gear maintenance. As one fisherman commented, “[Fishing] is not a game…Some boats that’s all they do is rip nets, day in and day out. [Stonington] guys have got to know how to fix them, or they don’t get jobs.”

Fishing was a serious business, and demanded an exacting attention to detail and quality that was most concretely expressed in care for the boats they operated.

The Blessing exhibited certain fundamental relationships between fishermen and work. The intensity of this relationship though was sometimes overwhelming. As one fisherman’s wife commented: “The boat was his life, and as he says, the boat came first. The money was spent on the boat because that earned us our living.” For many fishermen, money, or the lack of it, was a constant concern and a significant source of anxiety and tension. Family boat owners were required to pay for regular costs like labor, bait, fuel, gear, boat insurance, and any outstanding debt associated with repairs or overhauls. Additional expenses like family health insurance and fluctuating fuel and bait prices also contributed to operating costs. Unexpected changes in weather, fish stocks, and

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234 Tim Medeiros quoted in Calabretta, 42.
235 Doris Berg quoted in Calabretta, 100.
federal or state regulations that limited catch sizes or work days further burdened already considerable costs. The Blessing allowed fishermen to reveal the tenuous, and at other times all-consuming relationship to work. They came to heal this fractured and fracturing relationship.

Fishermen turned to the Blessing to air some of their most immediate labor concerns. At various points in the Blessing’s history, fishermen protested both the existence and non-existence of certain federal regulations, and petitioned lawmakers and the general public to honor their requests.

Fishermen stood on and by boats to express a stubborn commitment to work, the source of continual trial and tribulation. At many points, fishermen had to ask themselves whether or not the pain and suffering occasioned by work was really worth it. The annual Blessing allowed many of them to answer this question publicly.

The relationship between fishermen and work was not simply negative though. The Blessing allowed fishermen to celebrate the freedom to and the freedom for work. Fishing exacted costs concerning time, money, and stress, but it gave fishermen a certain measure of flexibility, fun, and freedom. One fisherman characterized his work as a “thrill.” Others commented that they treasured the independence, the wherewithal, and the “fresh air” of fishing. Freedom or independence was the most commonly prized aspect of fishing. It would be a mistake though to think that the ‘freedom’ fishermen cherished was somehow equivalent to modern autonomy. This was not a freedom from others that allowed fishermen to opt out of certain commitments to families and the local community, or to suddenly create new ones at any given moment. Rather it was a freedom for others, and for work.

Specifically, this freedom was grounded in commitments to tradition, community, and craftsmanship. As mentioned earlier, Stonington fishermen were bound to the family culture of this community. This culture held fishermen to specific standards. Fishermen were allowed to work, if

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236 Phil Torres quoted in Calabretta, 138.
237 See Richie Madeira, Arthur Medeiros, Michael Medeiros, Robert Berg, John Rita, Tim Medeiros, and Anna Rita, quoted respectively in Calabretta, 138,140,142.
and only if, they exhibited a certain competency, and, most importantly, demonstrated a proper respect for captains, crews, and the instruments of labor. Competency and respect, though, were not simply appropriated by the deliberate self-choosing of fishermen. Rather these characteristics were acquired. It is a fact that points us to some important presumptions about this community’s idea of freedom.

The freedom fishermen recognized and talked about was an idea indebted to specific traditions and virtues previously cultivated in community. Freedom was premised on commitments to the traditional art of fishing, and the virtue of respect. This latter commitment demanded responsibilities to others, and to the traditions that formed and informed the work of the local fleet. Freedom, therefore, was not primarily understood as a capacity for self-determination. Nor was it reasoned to be some type of special immunity from responsibilities to others. Since freedom was anchored to and sustained by certain goods in this community, it was only defined by reference to them. Freedom, therefore, was a determined idea or activity. As a communal inheritance, this idea established certain patterns of respect and responsibility, and directed people to goods both sanctioned and strengthened by the settled wisdom of previous generations.

The freedom that the Blessing recognized and commended was grounded in certain moral and spiritual commitments to work and others. One fisherman summarized the idea like this:

The best thing, in my opinion, is just the freedom. It’s being out there. It’s knowing that you are responsible. You and your captain, or your crew are responsible for every penny in your paycheck…And that’s something a lot of people don’t understand. It’s not a job where you can just go through the motions and do well, or if you have an off week, you’re still going to receive your same hourly pay…So, it’s real rewarding when you have a good day, and you come home, and you’re exhausted, but you know you did everything you could today.238

238 Michael Medeiros quoted in Calabretta, 140.
Freedom, thus, was recognized in responsibility to others and work, and in dependence on others and work. The Blessing celebrated this freedom by drawing fishermen together on boats. It was on boats that fishermen displayed what freedom looked like, what is was bound to, and what it demanded. At the Blessing, fishermen proclaimed in word, image, and prayer that the freedom they loved was a freedom that involved inherent relationships of dependence and respect both to and for crewmen, the tools of the trade, and, ultimately, God.

Finally, this celebration indicated that the relationship between fishermen and work involved joy through the Sunday boat parade. Boats were carefully outfitted and dressed for the Sunday parade and blessing. Banners were hung, garlands and pennant were twined around rigging, and American and Portuguese flags were raised atop masts for all to see. In addition, each boat was expected to display a particular theme visually. Boats became ‘pirate ships,’ odes to the Stars and Stripes, Hawaiian floats, and the bark of Saint Peter. Privateers, Uncle Sam, Hula dancers, and saints all joined to celebrate the work of this community. The boats were spectacles of excitement and energy at the Sunday Blessing. They were playful and play-filled. By adorning boats in bright colors and gaudy displays, fishermen powerfully indicated in rich and evocative imagery what was of central importance to them. This embellished display had a double-sided edge to it though. It revealed, at once, how the primary source of fishermen’s pleasure and pain were united in this one object. Fishermen, thus, paraded boats to show who they were, and what their work involved. The Blessing was a platform for the display of identity and was the place where the pride and pain of work was integrated and reconciled.

Fishermen and Family

Boats were a visible sign of the link between the domestic and work lives of fishermen. This link was visibly expressed at the Blessing by the assembly of fishermen along with wives, sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and in-laws on boats. On Saturday night
while local community members and tourists came to sample and savor sumptuous foods and tasty treats under the large food tent on the green near the Town Dock, fishermen and family members gathered to eat and drink and spend quality time together on the intimate setting of boats. It was here that fishermen re-established bonds and renewed commitments to wives and children, and parents and relatives. The gathering of family members on boats this evening showed others who fishermen worked for. The presence of family members on boats proved to be one of the many blessings that fishermen received at this celebration.

There was a more practical reason why families assembled on boats this weekend: it was one of few times, if not the only time, each year when fishermen and families could plan to spend significant time together. The work schedules of fishermen regularly limited involvement in many family activities. These schedules disrupted basic family routines. During certain fishing seasons, family meals were a near impossibility. At other times they had to be regularly adjusted to accommodate erratic work schedules. Major holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas also were not entirely immune from the demands of work. In the tension between the work and domestic lives of fishermen, work often exerted the greatest force, and therefore provoked many unwelcome shifts in family life.

The annual Blessing allowed fishermen to remedy some of unfair demands that their work lives had created. By drawing near to loved ones on the instruments that occasioned these rifts, fishermen not only recognized the important sacrifices that family members made, they also hoped to bring themselves, their boats, and their families into a living and visible harmony. Fishermen initiated the work of reconciliation at this celebration by offering the gift of food, conversation, and, most importantly, time. On boats this evening, regular absence was healed by intimate presence.

Boats symbolized both the distance and the nearness of family. Many fishermen remarked that time spent away from family was the most significant downside of fishing. Fishermen missed
ballgames, birthdays, school functions, and a host of other family activities while out at sea. Fishermen helped to bridge this distance by placing photographs of loved ones in boat cabins and wheelhouses. They even named boats after wives, children, or mothers. Boats were literally marked by the importance of family life, and helped to provide a surrogate home for many fishermen. Each time boats went out to sea they carried family members with them. In some cases, this was literally true. Fathers worked with sons, and brothers worked with brothers in this community. One fisherman commented on the bond that was forged between his father and him at work in this way: “He really didn’t know me before I was a fisherman. And I didn’t know him either. We got to know each other, good and bad. The boat really promotes that.”

Even though work sometimes exercised unfair demands on family life, the above indicated that it sometimes helped to strengthen certain family bonds. It was a paradox that this community knew, and it was a double-bind that people hoped to reconcile at the annual Blessing.

The family culture of Stonington fishing was a mark of pride for many. One fisherman clarified this point by reference to his son and grandsons. He commented:

My son worked with me all these years, and he wanted to do it himself...While he’s fishing I take care of everything on the dock. That’s my job. It’s a business, but it’s a family business. And now he’s got his son that goes with him to help him pick lobsters. He’s ten. And once in a while one of his other sons goes with him, too. It’s a regular tradition, doing it just the way I did it

Fishing was a traditional activity, and it was traditional precisely because it involved the family. The Blessing recognized and confirmed the hallowed nature this tradition, and helped to integrate the realities and themes of distance and nearness by organizing family members on boats. This celebration was at once a ritual of healing and affirmation for families. It sought to repair fractured bonds, and strengthen and remind others of the powerful influence of tradition.

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239 Mike Grimshaw quoted in Calabretta, 134.
240 Michael Medeiros quoted in Calabretta, 174.
241 Manny Madeira quoted in Calabretta, 172.
Boats held a special status at the Blessing. As the central objects of blessing, they, too, were privileged sites of family gathering this weekend. This status indicated something that fishermen and family members were intimately aware of: boats were family members. At the Blessing, fishermen displayed boats like proud parents. They dressed them up, paraded them around, and called attention to their recent achievements and successes. Boats, too, functioned like husbands. They discharged the duties of a faithful spouse by supporting and sustaining the family. Whether successful or not, boats were treated with a special care and attention that rivaled how some other family members were treated. This devotion though was a source of resentment for some. The Blessing provided a forum to express the anger and envy that certain family members held. It was a time to gather near the source of regular pain and suffering, plead that it would be more faithful to the demands and concerns of family life, and hope that it would return the care and devotion that was regularly shown to it. Yet it was also an occasion to draw near the symbol of blessing that they now celebrated to express gratitude for the preservation of family life, and recommit themselves to the care and maintenance of it.

The Blessing helped to commend the continued survival of family life. One retired fishermen reported the strong, even intense affection for family life amidst trial and tribulation in this way: “I survived it all and I done well. And we’re enjoying life, because I worked hard, and we saved it. And I brought up a big family. And I got a terrific family. I have a wonderful family.” The repeated references to family in the above quote indicated the central importance and crucial function of family in sustaining the work of fishermen. Once a year, this community revealed the tensions and double-binds that fishermen and their families experienced, and looked to the Blessing to provide much needed consolation and hope. The Blessing responded to families that drew near to each other on boats by integrating the demands of work life and family life, reconciling them, and

242 Manny Madeira, interview by Fred Calabretta, OH 93-19, G.W. Blunt Library Archives, Mystic, CT.
promising the gathered community that families would continue to survive, and possibly even
flourish.

The reconciliation between fishermen and families was also performed in the celebration of
the Mass of Saint Peter, the Fisherman on Sunday morning this weekend at Saint Mary’s Church in
the Borough. It was here that fishermen and families drew together for worship, praise, and
consolation. They joined in prayer with the local bishop who regularly celebrated this mass to
acknowledge sins and ask for pardon and peace. Through the intercession of Saint Peter, this
community asked for the help of his prayers to free them from the bonds of sin and suffering.
Readings from the Book of Sirach, the First Letter of Peter, and Gospel of Matthew respectively
enjoined them to praise “God’s plan that calms the deep,” to remain faithful in suffering, and to
“take courage” in the presence of Christ.²⁴³ Fishermen and families along with the gathered
community, then, rose for the Prayer of the Faithful. A specific intention was directed to fishermen,
their families, their success, and their safety. Fishermen and families, thus, offered prayers and were
offered in prayer. Fishermen brought the offering of gifts, and in a way offered who they were and
what they did through both the real and symbolic presentation of gifts. This offering was visually
reinforced by the presence of miniature fishing boats, fishermen, nets, and lobster pots that were set
before the altar. A painted cardboard triptych that featured the Stonington harbor was set behind
these miniature models. This background piece specifically identified the materials and people that
were being offered and commended on the altar of sacrifice. By praying in front of familiar symbols
that were placed on the altar, fishermen and families were called to realize that the altar where Christ
worked his saving graces was linked to them, and, consequently, extended to what they did. When
fishermen and families received the Body of Christ, it was a sacramental practice that called them to
“Receive who they were” and “Become what they received.” It was a sign of who they were, and
promise of what they should become. Communion signified the reconciliation that was effected

²⁴³ Official prayers of the Blessing of the Fleet.
Before all gathered here on this day. Before the dismissal, the church community was invited to read the prayer of peace which asked: “God our Father, Creator of the world, You established the order which governs all the ages. Hear our prayers and give us peace in our time that we may rejoice in your mercy and praise you without end.”244 This prayer of peace was both an expression and a performance of the healing between fishermen and families that many gathered here sought. United in renewed confidence and firm faith, fishermen and families returned to their boats in preparation for the culmination of the Blessing weekend.

At the formal Blessing on Sunday afternoon, fishermen and families gathered together on boats in costumes and semi-formal attire. They shared meals of stuffed clams, oysters, lobster, and Portuguese soup. They were feasts of communion that re-established bonds between fishermen and family members. It was a communion that proceeded from and was amplified by the meaning of the communion they recently received at mass. In fact, the Blessing weekend was a ritual enfolding of various activities of communion that were linked together by the gathering of families. When fishermen later unmoored boats and motored toward the fleet flagship in anticipation of the formal blessing, they displayed tightly compacted crowds of family members that filled decks and overhung railings. Family members hoped not only to receive the Blessing offered by the local bishop, but to actually be touched by it. Once the blessing was given, fishermen and families proceeded out of the Town Dock area and toward the breakwaters where fleet members lost at sea were memorialized and prayed for. This ritual journey signified that the concerns of family life were continually present to fishermen and carried with them out to sea. The journey also showed the pledge of families to remain faithful to the work of husbands, brothers, and sons. It was a statement of determined resolve that families moved forward amidst trials, tribulations, and even tragedies; that they would persevere; and that they would survive. It is important to remember that boats, fishermen, and family members were blessed at this celebration. In a way, the Blessing was initiated by families who

244 Ibid.
gathered on boats Saturday evening and finally referred back to them on Sunday afternoon when they prayed and paraded on boats.

**Fishermen and Community**

The Blessing of the Fleet helped to celebrate the heritage of the Stonington Borough’s Portuguese community. Fishermen proudly displayed this heritage on their boats by hoisting Portuguese flag atop masts, and running colorful green and red streamers and pennants from the bow to stern of boats to further reinforce the connection of fishermen to Portuguese culture. Some boats that participated in the Sunday parade were transformed into sensational odes to Portuguese culture: children were dressed in Portuguese folk dance outfits, traditional folk music played over loudspeakers, and boats were festooned with Portuguese flags that were twined around rigging lines and wrapped around deck railings. Families gathered on boats to eat traditional Portuguese foods during this weekend celebration. They were delighted by sweet smells of simmering Portuguese chowder and just baked Portuguese Sweet Bread (*massa sovada*) that wafted through the night air. They, too, were beckoned by sizzle of Portuguese sausage (*linguiça*) and Portuguese stewed pork (*caisola*), and exhilarated by the sight of boiled red lobsters and steaming Portuguese stuffed clams. Families luxuriated in the sense environment of the Blessing. They relished the rich and savory foods that were consumed this weekend. Through feasting on these delicious foods, people re-established ties to Portuguese culture and re-affirmed Portuguese identity. The sights and smells of the Blessing stimulated this connection to culture and identity which, in turn, was confirmed through the festival feasting. Families gathered on boats to eat and drink familiar foods and to savor and be reminded of who they are.

This annual celebration also met the emotional and spiritual needs of a people that had gradually emigrated from the Stonington Borough. When the Blessing was first established and, 

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then, re-established in the early 1950s, most Stonington fishermen lived in the Borough. The Portuguese community then was mostly concentrated in an area just south of Cannon Square. The houses in this area were densely compacted, and in a way, symbolized the intimate connection of community members. Fishermen lived together and they worked together. Families understood the hard work involved in fishing because they lived close to it in the Borough. Eventually, many Portuguese families migrated to other areas of Stonington. Unfortunately, some were compelled to leave due to property tax increases caused by gentrification. On a practical level, members of this Portuguese community traveled to boats during this celebration because they were unable to return to the homes of their youth. Even though the Blessing weekend evoked a sense of loss for older members of this community who once lived in houses now occupied by seasonal residents, it was an opportunity for many of them to return to the roots of their childhood, to the places where they learned the virtues of work and the responsibilities of family life, and to the streets, piers, and people that informed what it meant to be ‘Portuguese.’ Boats became surrogate homes for the Portuguese community on this weekend. They signified the process of both emigration from and reintegration into this community. The Blessing helped to span the distance that this migration had created, and helped to return the Portuguese community to its home. The distance was bridged by the gathering of this dispersed community on boats.

For one weekend a year, the Portuguese community of the Stonington Borough was restored. Family ties were re-established, memories were recalled, and bonds between place and people were revived. The Stonington Borough was a place that many fishermen and family members remembered fondly as a “fishing town,” or as “Portuguese.” One Stonington fisherman recalled that he could not think of a Portuguese family that was not involved in fishing.246 This recollection was confirmed by another who commented that the Borough “was a close-knit community where most

246 Joe Rendeiro quoted in Calabretta, 148
of them were fishing people. Everybody out of Stonington fished.” Memory seemed to exercise claims on people, places, and history. It helped inform the present by reference to remembered places and practices. Memory provided meaning for specific rituals at this weekend celebration like family meals that were held on boats. This importance of this dining practice was highlighted by one fisherman who lamented the withering of this tradition:

> It’s getting away from that now, because now we’re second- and third-generation Americans, but it used to be that Sunday was the day that you went to the oldest grandmother’s house. And you went there and had a nice big Portuguese dinner, and the whole family came. And I think that’s what kept the feeling of community with fishermen going all these years.

This comment revealed identity conflicts and indicated a certain erosion of tradition. In short, this erosion meant that the community’s children were becoming less ‘Portuguese’ and more ‘American.’ This lament though hinted at a source of resolution. At the Blessing, family meals helped to produce the Portuguese community which produced work which produced the Portuguese community which produced family meals. This weekend celebration reassured people that Portuguese traditions remained alive. Like the fishermen that regularly went to sea and returned home safely, this community would also survive. The integrity of work, thus, helped to confirm and preserve the Portuguese community and its traditions.

Finally, the Blessing staked proprietary claims on people and places. The community that gathered to celebrate this annual tradition announced to the Borough and to the residents that now lived there that this town was their place. In a way, the Blessing was a powerfully reconstituting activity. It declared that the Portuguese community was here to stay through the work of fishermen. The Portuguese community reclaimed the Stonington Borough by parading boats on both water and land.

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247 John Rita quoted in Calabretta, 156.
248 Michael Medeiros quoted in Calabretta, 172.
During the Sunday parade that wound through the Borough’s main roads and side streets, observers waited in anticipation for one specific parade float: the children’s dory. This float featured a fishing trawler replica that was crowded with the young sons and daughters of Stonington fishermen. It was adorned with colorful pennants and signal flags, and was hauled by a pickup truck driven by fishermen. The sons and daughters smiled, waved to crowds, and tossed handfuls of candy to groups of animated children that scrambled to retrieve the treats scattered on pavement and sidewalks. This festive display held more significant meanings. It showed that fishermen and children were inseparably linked. The presence of children on this parade float revealed that the concerns of work were united to them as well. Their presence also indicated that children enriched the meaning of boats. They provided fishermen with a much needed sense of the fun and adventure of fishing. Children helped refresh all who crowded together on sidewalks and street corners by passing out candy. Through this activity, they showed how the community was sustained by the work that boats performed. By parading the children’s dory throughout the streets of Stonington, the boat indicated that the community was blessed by the work of fishermen and their families.

When this float traveled by the expensive homes of wealthy summer residents, the presence of children on this boat signaled the future commitment that some of these children would make. Specifically, this presence revealed that children would help to preserve the Portuguese community and its traditions through work as fishermen. This presence, too, stated that children would refuse to relinquish the Portuguese claim on the Borough, and would continue to remain faithful members of this community through commitments to family life. The Portuguese community was here to stay. The parade of the children’s dory declared to all present that though summer residents would come and go, fishermen would remain faithful to the Stonington Borough, the home of the Portuguese community, through their enduring presence. This annual celebration, then, was a ritual re-conquest. Through the power of memory and the performance of ritual, the Borough re-imagined and reconfigured the Portuguese community that gathered to pray, play, and parade during the Blessing.
weekend. This annual celebration reconstituted a dispersed community, blessed it, and restored it to its home.

**Women and Work**

Women provided essential contributions to the organizational and spiritual success of the annual Blessing. From its earliest establishments, numerous women played central roles in helping to plan, prepare, and assist in the production of the weekend. Responsibilities included, but were not limited to: organizing Sunday parade groups, directing children’s activities, cooking and serving festival foods, decorating boats and parade floats, collecting gate fees, and selling commemorative t-shirts, hats, and other memorabilia. Over the course of the Blessing’s history, certain women also served on the traditionally-male Blessing of the Fleet Committee as treasurers. This latter role was one that fishermen’s wives were especially skilled at because many were normally responsible for managing both domestic spending and commercial finances related to the regular maintenance and operation of boats. In a way, women’s activities at the Blessing were an extension of specific domestic roles and responsibilities. Women rehearsed commitments to the preservation of family life through their efforts in the planning and production of this weekend. The overlap of the domestic and commercial lives of fishermen was shown in a concentrated fashion through the work that women performed at the Blessing.

The conspicuous presence of women at the Town Dock and on fishing boats was an especially notable feature of the Blessing. During this weekend, women inhabited work areas and instruments that were normally all-male preserves. The presence of wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters was a pronounced difference to the everyday world of the Town Dock that fishermen experienced. The Town Dock setting that most fishermen knew was somewhat like a Boy’s Club where as one fisherman commented “there’s a lot of camaraderie, joking around, helping each other
on shore.” It was a world that another fisherman noted also extended out to sea. He relayed: “We
stay on the CB sets most of the day, and we call each other names and sandbaggers and kidding
around mostly, just something to pass the time of day. That’s it you know, we kind of all grew up
together, we’re friends.” The world of work was one where fishermen traded stories and insults
and practiced the shrewd exchange of information about recent fishing activities. This latter activity
was a well-developed art among fishermen that involved negotiating careful balances between
concealing and revealing information, between protecting recently gathered knowledge and offering
pieces of it to other fishermen. The social environment of the Town Dock was neatly summarized
by one fisherman: “It’s a bonding together of several people in the same profession to try to have the
best things that we can do. We’re very close, we’re very proud, and we don’t like to be trod on.
We’re independent.” The everyday world of the Town Dock initiated fishermen into and regularly
rehearsed commitments to work and to each other, regulated specific boundaries and practices, and
produced certain tribal-like ties. It was a world that was fiercely independent and fiercely male. It
was this world that women entered into and eventually challenged at the Blessing.

Like fishermen, women had their own art of subtle and shrewd exchange. At the annual
Blessing, women defied the everyday conventions of the Town Dock. They overtook piers and
boats, and occupied other places normally reserved for men. Presence at the Town Dock was
important to many women at the Blessing. The spaces that they inhabited here regularly created a
distance that adversely affected domestic life. Fishermen spent long hours away from family while
working, and even when they were not at sea the social environment of the Town Dock consumed a
great deal of their time. One informant recalled that when the weather was poor her father and other
fishermen would drink and play cards until early evening. At times, he became so involved in card
games that he forgot to return home for dinner. As a result, the informant was regularly sent by her

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249 Michael Medeiros quoted in Calabretta, 44.
250 Tim Medeiros quoted in Calabretta, 44.
251 Walter Allyn quoted in Calbretta, 94.
252 Interview by author, written notes, Mystic, CT, 13 March 2007.
mother to the Town Dock to retrieve her father. The story indicates that both the demands of work and the male-dominated culture of the Town Dock created conflicts in domestic life. Women deliberately intruded on this domain at the Blessing to reassert a type of control over it. They challenged and chastened the culture of the Town Dock and exhorted fishermen to be mindful of and remain faithful to the responsibilities of family life. The conspicuous presence of women at the Blessing, thus, was not something that was simply novel; it was downright provocative and rebellious. It was a presence that announced certain claims and calls to action. For many women, the Blessing was a time to recall husbands to the home and to reclaim them for the home.

The Blessing invited women to express deeply-held resentments toward the regular absence of husbands or fathers. The annual celebration was an opportunity for women to draw near to instruments and areas that contributed to both the physical and emotional distance of fishermen from domestic lives and responsibilities. Women resisted this absence through their presence on and around boats this weekend. Wives and mothers joined together to alleviate the suffering they regularly endured by identifying and making contact with its root. Boats were heavily implicated in this suffering, and, in a way, symbolized opposition to domestic life and virtue. One woman already commented that the boat was her husband’s “life.” Like wicked mistresses, boats drew husbands and fathers away from the demands and responsibilities of the home. They supplanted a certain care and devotion that should have been directed toward wives and children. Boats distracted husbands’ and fathers’ attentions, and they regularly intruded on the affairs of family life. In a way, boats were understood as indifferent to the concerns of women that toiled to maintain homes, manage family finances, and tend to children while their husbands ran off to sea. In short, boats challenged the maternal dominance of the home. At the annual Blessing, wives and mothers stood together in solidarity on boats to reassert their authority over the home, to rebuff challenges to it, and to beckon husbands to recommit themselves to the responsibilities of family life. Women turned to this
celebration in the hope that husbands would more fully turn toward them and the needs of the home.

Women bore heavy burdens in this community, and none more so than the wives whose husbands worked on trip boats. Long trippers or trip boats were vessels that normally went to sea for seven to twelve consecutive days or even longer. It was well-known in this community that these boats caused considerable stress on the family life of many. Some wives explicitly forbid husbands from working on trip boats. Even though some women lived with the demands of this “tough business,” as one person commented: “Some of them don’t make it. And I think that the reason is that they probably just didn’t see what they were getting into.”

One woman who endured the regular absence of a trip boat husband intimately knew the hardship that this life involved. In an interview she expressed the suffering that she had experienced, and the toll that this life sometimes exacted. She recounted:

I remember one instance where my oldest had just gone to kindergarten, and she brought home measles and chicken pox to others. And that was six weeks that I didn’t stick my nose out of the door, except to hang clothes. The groceries were delivered to the house. And at one point I remember calling my mother and asking her to come, in tears, just to sit for a few minutes while I took a walk. Because I felt like the whole world was closing in on me. It was just almost more than you could take.

Amidst the pain and sometimes overwhelming suffering that trip boat routines occasioned, this woman explained simply that she “had to go on with… everyday life for the children…Just take care of them.” The survival of this working community was intimately bound up with the work of women and their preservation of family life. They were the ones that shouldered some of the heaviest burdens of this community and “did whatever needed to be done” in order for families to ‘survive.’

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253 Ann Rita quoted in Calabretta, 126.  
254 Betty Fellows quoted in Calabretta, 126.  
255 Ibid.
When women gathered at the Blessing they brought the pains they regularly had experienced, and the trials that they had endured. They also brought the reward of this struggle: the gift of family life. It was a gift that pointed to one of the most important sources of blessing at this weekend celebration: women themselves. This gift was not lost on some that gathered at the annual Blessing. Women were the anchors of this working community. They provided a type of much needed stability amidst the everyday dangers and flux of fishing. The work that women performed maintained the work of fishermen and preserved commitments to family life. The Blessing honored the ‘gift’ of the community’s women in subtle and sometimes surprising ways. Recently, one fisherman called attention to the importance of this gift at the Blessing through a simple, yet revealing remark. As his boat drew near to the fleet flagship where the bishop administered the formal blessing, this fisherman pointed to someone on the deck below from the wheelhouse perch where he stood, and yelled out, “Make sure you get my mother.”

The bishop and the assembled crowd greeted this comment with smiles and laughter. The fisherman’s remark was brief and humorous. Yet it indicated something deeper about the relationship between women and the work life of fishermen. This comment showed, if only partly, how the blessing of boats was intimately connected to the blessing that was received, and consequently continued by women. Moreover, it revealed that the success of commercial life was inextricably bound to the success of domestic life. In a way, the formal blessing of this mother was a somewhat reflexive exercise: it revealed that women were one of central agents of this community’s blessing, and it referred back to them on this day. The central contributions of women were a necessary part of the Blessing’s production, a production that, in turn, helped preserve family life, community, and tradition.

Finally, the annual celebration disclosed a type of relative and double-edged authority that women possessed in this community. When women claimed or re-claimed a certain authority over the work of fishermen on this weekend, it was an authority that drew them into ever closer

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256 Field notes from the Blessing of the Fleet, Stonington, CT., 22 July 2007. Author’s possession.
relationships with the work and instruments that occasioned regular suffering in their lives. The requirements of women’s authority, thus, were inescapable. Authority required standing with rather than away from the sources of pain within this community.  

The way of life that was celebrated at the Blessing involved commitments to perseverance amidst pain, to solidarity, and to realization of justice through maternal charity. It was a way of life that had a cross at it center which at once was a source of suffering and a sign of redemption. The suffering this community regularly endured was referred to and blessed by the cross of Christ at this celebration. It was a cross that was elevated above the altar of St. Mary’s Church and intimately revealed in the presence of boats at this weekend celebration. Women stood on and near the crosses of this community at the Blessing and embraced husbands, fathers, brothers, and children on them. Here, they recommitted themselves to the painful, yet gracious power of these crosses. Boats harnessed together the trials and triumphs of women and the larger community. The Blessing showed in a powerful and provocative way how boats both socially and symbolically held families, united them, blessed them, and restored them to the hope that was continually offered by the cross that stood at the center of the community’s religious life.

**Fishermen and the Dead**

The Blessing helped sanctify the memory of the dead. This memory was a central reason for its original establishment, and a guiding principle of its continued celebration. People gathered at this event to remember the sacrifice of many local fishermen, and to honor the high, and, sometimes, tragic cost that commitments to this work exacted. In the words of one fisherman, it was a time to “pay tribute” to those who lost their lives at sea. This tribute was a highly personal and somber occasion for many fishermen and families who had experienced the loss of fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. Once a year, the local community was invited to grieve and commemorate the

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257 For comparison, see Orsi, 204-216.
258 Al Madeira quoted in Calabretta, 160.
loss of loved ones at the Blessing. Through prayer, symbol, and ritual, fishermen and families revealed how the power of memory formed and informed reflection on this community’s life and work.

Memory helped to re-establish bonds between the living and the dead at this annual event. This activity allowed grieving fishermen and families to bridge a divide that resulted from the loss of loved ones at sea. Each member of this community that died at sea was named and prayed for at the Mass of St. Peter this weekend. The naming announced that the dead were still remembered, and remained close to this community’s life. This nearness was further indicated on Sunday when an anchor-shaped wreath was laid at the Fishermen’s monument to commemorate the dead. People saw the names of dead inscribed on this stone, and were literally able touch them by tracing fingers over certain names. By emphasizing nearness, memory brought the living and the dead together in communion at the Blessing. One fisherman who had suffered the loss of his son commented that this ritual communion was a characteristic function of the Blessing. He remarked: “One thing I never want to forget, you know, what happened. And that day helps not to forget it. To me it’s like paying tribute to my son…Hopefully, he’s looking down on us when we do that and he’s saying, “[m]y family still remembers me.””

The Blessing helped to transform the grief of many by rekindling memories of the departed through prayer and ritual. These memories, in turn, helped restore bonds between the living and the dead. By presuming the memory of a person who freed people from the power of death, the Blessing reassured families that relationships to deceased loved ones could indeed endure beyond the grave.

People met on boats and piers this weekend to tell the stories of lost loved ones and to transmit them to younger generations. Veteran fishermen and elder members of this community

259 Al Banks quoted in Calabretta, 162.
helped to preserve these memories by entrusting them to future stewards through prayer and story. The ritual re-telling of memories was important to the community. By invoking the memory of the dead, fishermen and families introduced children to honored traditions and beliefs. This communal memory taught children about the virtues of labor, sacrifice, and perseverance amidst trial. It announced the importance of family life, and revealed that bonds between family members continued even after death. Since the Blessing was established and ritually structured to commemorate the dead, children were enlisted to preserve this memory and consequently continue the weekend celebration. Memory of the past and expectation for the future converged at this event.

The Blessing articulated and sanctified the mystery of life and death. It drew together both themes to affirm the connection between the living and the dead. Specifically, the Blessing helped people reflect on this hallowed mystery by situating them on the objects that contributed to the pride and pain, and life and death of community members. It is not inconsequential that the most important ritual memorial of the dead occurred on fishing boats this weekend. When boats circled together on Sunday to commemorate those who were lost at sea, they signified, in a way, the mystery that fishermen and families gathered to consider. Boats gave life, and they took life. They were, at once, sources of gratitude and grief. It is important to note that the commemoration of fishermen who were lost at sea occurred on the objects and place that contributed to their deaths. Like many who visited deceased loved ones at cemeteries, families gathered together on boats to memorialize the local fishermen who died at sea. Once a year, they traveled to the cemetery of the sea to remember lost loved ones at their final resting place. The community decorated this resting place by laying a memorial wreath shaped like a broken anchor to recall the memory of those who were unable to receive a proper burial. The wreath symbolized both the absence and presence and deceased loved ones, and helped heal the pain of loss by reconciling the living and the dead at the Blessing.
When we consider what was taking place at the Blessing, we can see that enduring links were forged between memory and forgetfulness, tradition and innovation, and heaven and earth. It was a time when the weight of memory bore down on people and impressed itself on this community’s life. This weight was indeed burdensome for many. Once a year, the memory of the dead required this community to meet and confront profound losses and sorrows by gathering on and near to the sources of them. Boats both located and delivered this community to the principal causes of its pain and suffering. The memory of the dead and the respect it engendered also demanded that fishermen recommitt themselves to their work, and to the daily trials and troubles that resulted from it. Memory involved specific responsibilities, and consequently drew fishermen and boats into ever-tighter bonds. The annual Blessing revealed that the demands of memory were indeed formidable for many, and inexorable for some.

While the memory of the dead burdened this community, it also buoyed them. Memory helped reconstitute the Stonington Portuguese community. The ritual remembrance of the dead demonstrated that links between heaven and earth extended to bonds between individuals. In a visible and concentrated way, the Blessing indicated that vertical relationships between the living and the dead helped to strengthen and intensify horizontal ones between community members this weekend. This ritual remembrance was also an exercise of cultural, moral, and spiritual reorientation. The memory of the dead recalled community members to the place where their identity was first learned and formed. It reminded them about commercial and domestic responsibilities, and it taught them about the origin and ultimate end of all work and life. Memory formed and informed those who gathered at the Blessing, and helped direct and sustain them.

Conclusion

The Blessing initiated a sacred drama where the Stonington Portuguese community’s most honored beliefs, commitments, and traditions were revealed to themselves and others. The
performance unfolded on boats and piers this weekend. The Blessing drew people together to retell stories and renew relationships to faith and fishing. It summoned a dispersed community to its home, and reminded it of its debt to the past and commitment to the future. This commitment was honored through the retrieval and transmission of memory to children. The Blessing established visible bonds of communion between fishermen and work, fishermen and families, the young and the old, and the living and the dead. These bonds were strengthened and intensified this weekend through the foods people ate, the prayers they offered, and the gift of time and attention that was given and received.

Like fine layers of sediment deposited over time, the Blessing contained a variety of meanings that had accumulated due to changing currents in this community’s history, and the regular ebb and flow of its daily life. Each layer contributed to the density of meanings that was revealed at this annual celebration. Tradition and innovation, power and dependency, clarity and uncertainty, and thanksgiving and sorrow all merged together on this weekend. The Blessing helped reconcile the tensions of this community’s life by concentrating them on the central symbol of this celebration. Boats reflected the conflicts of this community’s life, and embodied the poles of pride and pain, and assurance and ambiguity. Solid wooden boat frames and hulking steel structures revealed both the resolve and fragility of commitments to work and family life. Through speech and gesture, parading and praying, and revelry and remembrance on boats this weekend, the Blessing elevated and directed the inherent tensions of this community’s life to the cross of Christ. This cross was a sign of the communion that was re-established between the world and God through the redemptive suffering of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It was a communion that drew together the mystery of life and death, helped console grief, and renewed faith. By reconciling this community to the cross, the Blessing sanctified the mystery of people’s lives, inspired them to work faithfully, and united them in confidence to the hope of future glory. This weekend was indeed what it was popularly called: a time of Blessing.
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