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Sunday, May 07, 2000

Clergy, rescuers honor tradition

By Michael D. Clark
The Cincinnati Enquirer

NEWPORT — A mariner tradition found its way inland Saturday as Tristate rescue and emergency boats lined up along the Ohio River to receive blessings of safety.

Bagpipers played "Amazing Grace" and area Coast Guard Auxiliary members saluted from aboard a large, open-deck boat docked on the Kentucky side of the river at the base of the Taylor-Southgate Bridge.



The Rev. Lawrence R. Strittmatter blesses emergency vessels on the Ohio River
(Steven M. Herppich photo)
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About a dozen rescue boats cruised slowly in front of a Catholic priest and former U.S. Navy chaplain while Coast Guard fire-fighting boats sprayed high arcs of water out over the Ohio River.

"Dear Lord. Be with those who travel on these waters," said the Rev. Lawrence Strittmatter of Kettering, Ohio.

The blessing of the fleet honors both those who serve on the seas and on inland waterways, Keith Stuart, division captain of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, told the small crowd.

"Down through the ages, particularly in the spring of the year, sailors would go to the village priest and ask him to bless the vessels," said Mr. Stuart, who also served as master of ceremonies for the second annual event.

"These men and women keep boating safe on our rivers," he said.

The annual blessing also serves as an occasion to honor those who gave their lives in the line of duty while patrolling the waterways.

Last year's blessing included tributes to others who died while serving on land. The inaugural event honored Cincinnati Police Officers Ronald Jeter and Daniel Pope, who were shot to death in December 1997, and Covington Police Officer Michael Partin, who fell from the Clay Wade Bailey Bridge while chasing a suspect in January 1998.

More than three dozen uniformed Junior ROTC members from area high schools participated, much to the pleasure of Dick Zornes of Independence.

"I love seeing these young kids in the ceremony. The cadets parading by are as proud of peacocks," said Mr. Zornes, whose son is a member of the Coast Guard unit out of Villa Hills.

"This is a great tradition to fly the flag and honor the people in the boats."

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