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Pageantry of annual fleet blessing marks start of fishing season

Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain will preside at the Blessing of the Fleet celebration originating in downtown Gig Harbor at 1 p.m. Sunday, June 7.

The colorful celebration begins with the sounding of church bells, and the procession under police escort from Saint Nicholas Parish to Jerisich Park, where Archbishop Sartain will lead a brief prayer service before boarding a boat and laying two wreaths honoring fishermen who have died in the past year and in hope for a safe season and bountiful catch.

A time-honored tradition that dates back centuries in fishing communities around the world, the Gig Harbor Commercial Fishermen's Civic Club, Saint Nicholas Catholic Church and the Knights of Columbus began sponsoring the Blessing of the Fleet in 1971.

In the past, more than 100 boats and more than 2,000 citizens have participated in the ceremony. The procession to the dock will include a bagpiper, Knights of Columbus flag bearers and an icon of Our Lady of the Harbor and the two wreaths on a Roman *lectica*, or litter, carried by a four-man honor guard in regalia followed by local officials and citizens.

The Blessing of the Fleet tradition goes back many centuries. Some legends place its origins with early Greek fishermen. One story tells of Sicilian fishing crews asking clergy to bless boats and their crews after fishermen were saved from certain death in a storm. According to the legend, the fishing boat had lost its way in a thick fog when the fishermen saw a light in the distance. Following the light, they made their way safely back to shore, where they discovered the light had come from a medallion of the *Madonna del Lume* (Mother of Light) set in a grotto high on a cliff.

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For more information contact John Moist, (253) 255-5050 or go to <http://qigharborkofc9238.com> or the Gig Harbor Chamber of Commerce web site: <http://www.qigharborchamber.net/index.php> and scroll to "What's Hot."