…"Of the four priests who came to an untimely death in the fatal disaster of the Titanic, (one was) Rev. Joseph Peruschitz, O.S.B. He was...on his way to St. John’s Abbey, Minnesota" (See pages 6-7).

Upper Bavaria to Minnesota —
Saint John’s:

In the welter of myth, legend and apocryphal developments currently associated with the woeful demise of the Titanic early in this century, a locally relevant, true human interest story has emerged.

The abbey archives recently received copies of the Munchener Katholische Kirchenzeitung (hereafter, MKKZ) 12 April 1987 and Margit Auer’s article in Die Zeit (DZ) (December 19, 1997) that detail aspects of an engaging story of a German Benedictine who sailed on the British luxury liner Titanic during its disastrous maiden voyage to New York 86 years ago.

That monk, Father Joseph Peruschitz, OSB, was on his way from Holy Cross Abbey, Scheyern, Bavaria, to work at Saint John’s Preparatory School. He was a teacher of mathematics, music and gymnastics; had functioned as a prefect in his monastery’s school; and was ordained in 1896, 17 years earlier. Local archives are mute about Father Joseph’s position-to-be at Saint John’s.

The cited sources were translated by Father John Kulas, professor of German at Saint John’s. Excerpts are listed as DZ and MKKZ when quoted directly; other connectives are furnished by Father Alberic Culhane, Quarterly editor. Reprint permission granted.

Memorial Stone

The memorial stone situated in the east wing of the Benedictine Abbey of Scheyern, Bavaria, reads: “May he rest in peace — Reverend Father Joseph Peruschitz, OSB, who died on 15 April 1912, dutifully gave his life on the ill-fated ocean liner, Titanic, in the 42nd year of his life, the 17th as a priest and monk.”

The Benedictine priest from Scheyern and Father Byles [Rev. Thomas, an Irish priest of St. Helen’s Parish, Essex, England] showed themselves ready to offer every possible assistance... As the magnitude of the danger became clearer and the agitation of those left on board notably increased, everyone earnestly besought the priests for their ministration.

‘As the last boat was lowered, those who were on it were able to see clearly the two priests leading the rosary; they could hear great numbers of kneeling passengers fervently responding. Then the lights of the Titanic went out and everything was in darkness. Yet neither wailing nor screams of terror could be heard. The only sound as the ship disappeared beneath the waves was that of many voices joined in peaceful prayer.”

Titanic Fascination (from DZ)

“Many people are still fascinated by the sinking of the Titanic. The mystique surrounding this tragedy continues to be nurtured by the approximately 3000 books which have appeared on the subject as well as by several films. Interest in the Titanic has reached new heights with the appearance of the latest Hollywood film which has just opened in the USA. Of course, the story of Joseph Peruschitz from Scheyern gets no mention in this 200-million dollar film. [However, a survey of Holy Cross Abbey archives] would have sufficed to enrich the screen play with one more human interest story....”

Then the lights went out and everything was in darkness.

Midnight: 14 April 1912

“About midnight on April 14, 1912...as Captain Edward J. Smith issued the order: ‘Women and children to the lifeboats,’ there was little panic. Among those who remained calm was Joseph Peruschitz and an English priest who was on his way to New York to celebrate the wedding of his brother.” The article cites “an account of the actions of the two priests from the New York periodical, America. ‘All the survivors with whom we spoke recount an extraordinarily gripping and consoling scene associated with this tragic occurrence...”
A Titanic Connection

**Eyewitness Accounts (from MKKZ)**

“Miss Agnes MacCoy, steerage passenger and one of the survivors, gave the following report from her bed in St. Vincent’s Hospital, New York:

‘There were two Catholic priests on board...both of them assisted women and children as they climbed into the lifeboats. The people on the last lifeboat to leave the “Titanic,” subsequently picked up by the “Carpathia,” related to me that a throng of people — Catholics, Protestants and Jews — had fallen to their knees around the two priests. The priests exhorted everyone to prepare to appear before the judgement seat of God. They prayed the rosary and gave absolution. By this time the water had reached the deck.’

“One of Father Peruschitz’ former students [and also a survivor] reported: ‘He could have had a place in one of the lifeboats, but he declined to take it. Instead, crucifix in hand, he rushed from cabin to cabin, consoling the remaining passengers and saying the prayers for the dying. Almost all of them were on their knees, weeping, beseeching God, and praying. The world press was fulsome in its praise and its expressions of admiration for the conduct [with Father Byles] of this brave and self-sacrificing priest.’

“Of the 2,206 people who had been on board, 703 passengers and crew were rescued; 1,503 men, women and children went down with the ‘Titanic’ to its watery grave.”

**Memorial Window**

At St. Helen’s Parish, Essex, England, a memorial window reads: “Pray for the Revd Thomas Byles, for eight years rector of this mission, whose heroic death in the disaster to SS Titanic, April 15, 1912, earnestly devoting his last moments to the religious consolation of his fellow passengers, this window commemorates.”

**S. S. Titanic**

Largest in the World. Cost $10,000,000. 882 feet 6 inches in length; displacement, 66,000 tons. Sailed April 10th, 1912, from Southampton on her maiden trip. Struck an iceberg on the night of April 15 and sank with a loss of life of more than 1,500.

A 1912 commemorative postcard photo of the S.S. Titanic from the abbey archives collection.