

Mass of Remembrance for Mariners and People of the Sea

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, Mary said “yes”. Mary said “yes”. That is how discipleship begins. It begins with the word “yes”. And to all of you present today and those who are joining us online, thank you for your “yes” in joining us today to pray for our seafarers and their families throughout the world. These men and women sacrifice for us by spending months away from family so that we can enjoy our way of life. Many people in our culture do not realize that daily life, as we know it, would come to a halt without our seafarers. What is happening right now in the Strait of Hormuz underscores how dangerous seafaring can be and how important seafarers are to the world economy. Indeed, the United Nations estimates that over 80 percent of tradable good or components of everyday items that we have come to depend on have to be shipped over our oceans and at times even lakes and rivers. According to a quick search on the internet, there are almost 1.9 million seafarers out on the ocean right now, doing everything from operating cargo ships to staffing cruise liners. And so, we take this moment to thank all who live in the seafaring world, and in a special way today we pray particularly for those who lost their lives doing this work, especially this past year, and for their families. We also lift in prayer our seafarers who are in harms’ way right now, our men and women in uniform, sometimes fishermen, let me correct that, often times fishermen, but most especially for the crews serving on ships in the Middle East and other dangerous parts of the world. We pray for crews who have been abandoned by their companies and are stuck aboard ships for long periods of time without pay before they can finally depart. Furthermore, in my experience, when illnesses happen on cruise ships, much attention is given to passengers, which is important, but to my eyes there is usually not enough attention given to the crew who must live on these ships. So many to pray for. What we are therefore doing here at this Mass, at this basilica, remembering our seafarers and their families, is very, very meaningful and important. Thank you for being here.

As Bishop Promoter, I happily extend my gratitude to all our chaplains here present and online who serve at our ports attending to the needs of our seafarers when they arrive. Jesus says to the good and faithful servants in Matthew Chapter 25, “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me”. That is what our ministry is. Our port chaplains and those who assist our port chaplains are called to see the face of Jesus in our seafarers when they arrive at their ports and welcome them as they would welcome the Lord. I have witnessed our chaplains doing this so very well all over the country. I am also grateful to our ecumenical partners we work closely with such as the North American Maritime Ministry Association and International Christian Maritime Association. Thank you for your “yes” to the Lord in providing this ministry and for our mutual collaboration.

We are of course, above all, most grateful to our Holy Father, Pope Leo, for his “yes” by taking an interest in the Apostleship of the Sea and providing leadership so early in his pontificate. We pray in thanksgiving for Bishop Luiz Quinteiro for saying “yes” to be as our President ad Interim for the newly reorganized Apostleship of the Sea worldwide as we enter a new chapter for seafaring ministry in the life of the Church, and Fr. Salinas as well, who both are working hard for us in Rome. And because I am now feeling very neurotic for thanking so many people by name just now. News flash: being a bishop is a dangerous occupation. Just so I don’t leave anyone out, thank you everybody!

My friends, our Holy Father, Pope Leo, has this to say about our Gospel reading. He said, “The Mother of Jesus is the woman with whom God, in the fullness of time, wrote the Word that reveals the mystery. He did not impose it on her: he first proposed it to her heart and, having received her “yes”, he wrote it with ineffable love in her flesh.” He goes on to say, “God loves to hope with the heart of the small, and he does so by involving them in his plan of salvation. The more beautiful the plan, the greater the hope. And, in effect, the world proceeds in this way, driven by the hope of so many simple people, unknown but not to God, who despite everything believe in a better tomorrow, because they know that the future is in the hands of the One who offers them the greatest hope.” My friends, I believe that describes our seafarers very well. They are in this line of work because they are driven by the hope in a better tomorrow. However, they are also like so many in our world who are often unknown and forgotten, but not by God, and not by Mary our Mother in faith, and not by us.

You see, it is Mary’s steadfast and unwavering faith in the future that gives her title, Star of the Sea, such meaning and gives us such hope. Just ask Brother Marinus, whose life inspires us and whose cause we pray for. He would agree that life is so often like being on an ocean. We have clear days. We have stormy days. Life is always moving, like waves in the ocean. The waves that come at us are at times pleasant. However, sometimes waves in life can hit us hard. When it gets dark in life, above the waves is a star that does not move, that does not waver. Mary, the Mother of our Lord and our Lady Star of the Sea won’t permit us to get lost if we keep our eyes fixed on her. We must keep our eyes fixed on her. She will always guide us to her Son Jesus. Yes. Mary gives us all hope because spiritually we are all people of the sea in an eschatological sense. We are all people of the sea, sailing together on the barque of Peter to heavenly shores. All of this was made possible, all of this became possible, because Mary said yes in our Gospel reading. Mary said yes, be it done to me according to thy word.

My friends, St. Bernard of Clairvaux had this to say about Our Lady Star of the Sea, he writes, “O you, whoever you are, who feel that in the tidal wave of this world...if you do not want to founder in the tempest, do not avert your eyes from the brightness of this star. When the wind of temptation blows up within you, when you strike upon the rock of tribulation, gaze up at this star, call out to Mary.” St. Bernard challenges us, call out to Mary. Such very good spiritual advice. Therefore, together, as a people of faith, we cry out to Mary today, right now, at this mass in remembrance of seafarers, that she watch over and protect our People of Sea and guide them by her light to the Light of Life, to her Son Jesus Christ, who alone is our savior and Lord, and who alone is the way, the truth and the life.