

Bishop's Mass aboard cargo ship brings joy to crew longing for liturgy

ABOARD THE STAR TRUST (CNS) – Moments after Bishop William E. Koenig of Wilmington, Delaware, completed his first Mass on a refrigerated ocean cargo ship on the Delaware coast, he chatted with a group of Filipino crewmen who were attending Mass together for the first time in months.

“What’s your favorite port,” he asked the 20 or so men who have been at sea since January.

“This one,” said crew member Kim Rasyll Cambiado with a beaming, ear-to-ear smile.

“That’s good,” the bishop replied. “This is my favorite ship.”

The men, all of whom are Catholic, were docked at the Port of Wilmington where their ship was delivering its cargo of Chilean fruit.

The ship had been in the port for a brief time when a call came to the communications office of the Diocese of Wilmington April 4. It was leaving in a day or two and the men would be at sea for Easter. Could the diocese find a priest who would be willing to say Mass aboard the ship where the men were confined without shore passes?

Word of the request made its way to Bishop Koenig. Not only could the diocese find a priest, but the following day the prelate, in his first year as a bishop and as Wilmington’s shepherd, was making his way up the gangway of the freighter.

“This is a first for me,” Bishop Koenig told the eager crew gathered in the galley ready for Mass when the bishop arrived in mid-afternoon. “I’m really happy and joyful to be with

you.”

English is the primary language for most of the men, so speaking with the bishop was free and easy.

Cambiado jumped at the chance when the bishop asked if someone wanted to do a reading at the Mass. The men travel the world on the cargo ship, working nine months and then having three months off, and Cambiado said he hadn't been to Mass since New Year's Eve.

Chances to practice their faith are limited and it was worse at the height of the pandemic. Some were aboard the ship as many as 17 straight months.

Cambiado said he last went to Mass back home in the Camarines Sur province on Philippines' Bicol Peninsula. His brother, parents and grandparents are devoutly Catholic and missing Mass is a rarity. His home parish is Nuestra Senora de las Angustias, or Our Mother of Sorrows.

The 535-foot, 13-year-old Star Trust cargo ship sails under the flag of Singapore. Since the middle of February, it has made stops in Senegal, France, Italy, Turkey and the United States.

The men don't have a lot to do on the ship, so the internet is critical. Most have electronic devices that allow them to utilize Facetime and WhatsApp programs to stay in close contact with family.

On some ports of call, they get time for a change of scenery and relaxation at facilities such as the Seamen's Center of Wilmington where Christine Lassiter is executive director.

The ranch-style home located on port property not far from the dock has amenities such as games, snacks, gently used clothing and places where the men can have some quiet time and privacy to make calls back home.

The mission of the Seamen's Center is to meet the needs of the seafarers who visit the ports in Delaware, according to the group's website. Its goal is to make the time in port worthwhile for the men by providing personal, practical and spiritual assistance to help ease the pain of loneliness and isolation and to offer a respite from the hazards of the sea.

"They were ecstatic, not only to have Mass but to have the bishop," said Lassiter, who placed the first call that got the ball rolling on the bishop's visit.

The men were seated and ready when the bishop arrived a few minutes early. They were dressed in bright, new coveralls.

"That was a show of respect for them," Lassiter told The Dialog, Wilmington's diocesan newspaper. "They're very respectful. I'm sure if they had dress clothes, they would have been in their dress clothes."

"That is something they will remember forever. They are extremely thankful people, grateful for everything. It's so nice. They really do appreciate everything you do for them."

Interacting with the bishop after Mass, each of the men held the bishop's hand to their forehead, which is a show of respect in the Philippines.

Cambiado was happy to have some good news to share with family.

"I'm going to tell them I had my first Mass on board a ship," said Cambiado, who is taking part in his first voyage. "I'm very happy to meet the bishop of Wilmington."

The 23-year-old single man is a student back at home. He's currently enjoying seeing the world and getting on-the-job training.

Cambiado has an idea of what he wants to do in the future. He wants to have a family, but he's not in any hurry.

“My plan is I’m not getting married till 30,” he said.

The bishop was sensitive to the isolation that can face seafarers and shared joy in celebrating Mass with them.

“We pray for the people in the maritime industry,” he said in his homily. “We pray for our families, pray that they are safe. God calls us in this season of Lent to look at the great love God has for us.”

After Mass, the bishop spent time speaking with men and shared some chocolate cake proudly served up by the chief cook.

“That was astounding,” Lassiter said. “They are just happy people, a joy to be around.”

Owens is editor of The Dialog, newspaper of the Diocese of Wilmington.