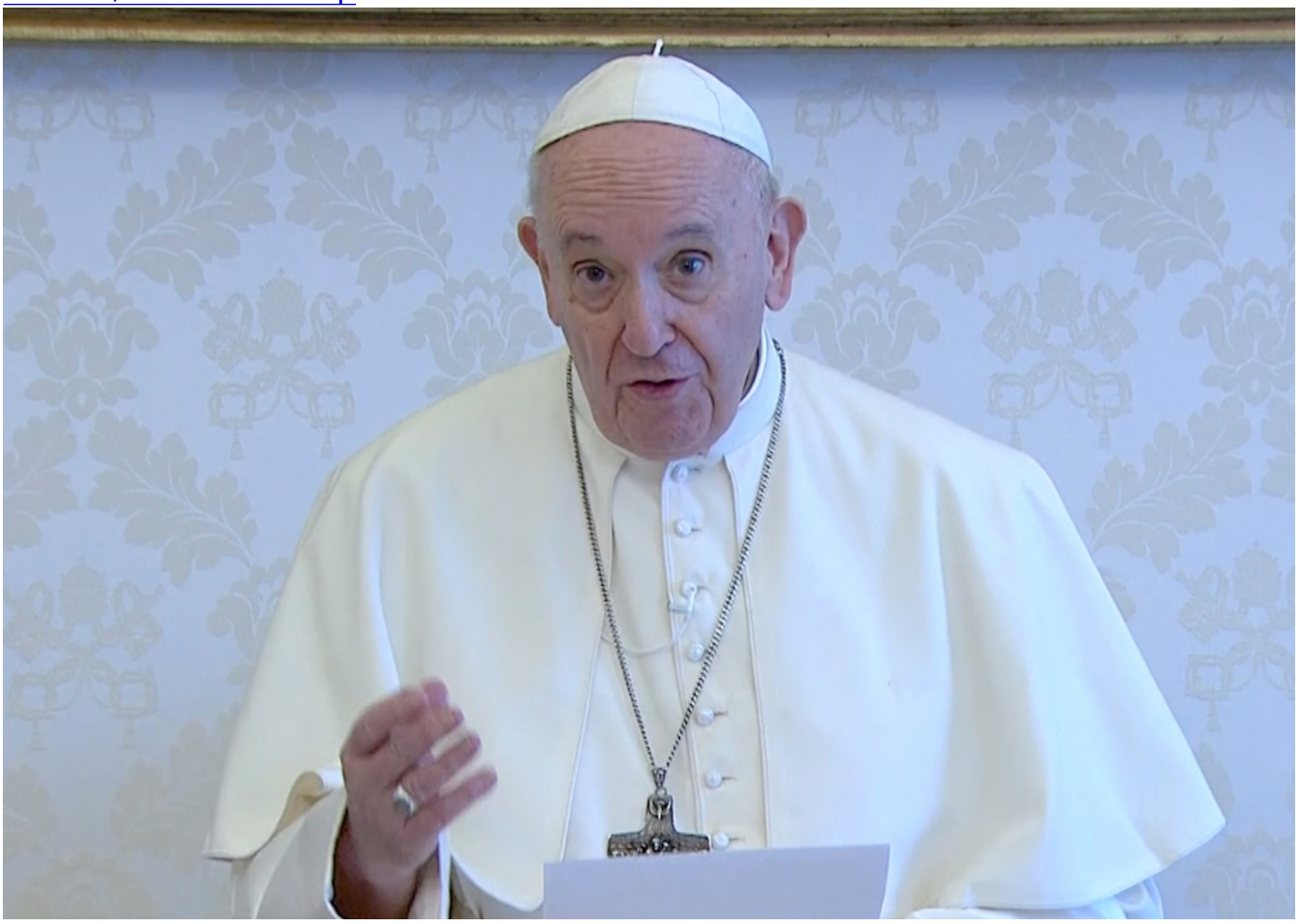
Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis offered prayers to seafarers and people who fish for a living during a video message filmed at the Vatican June 17, 2020. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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As travel restrictions continue in the hope of slowing the spread of the coronavirus, Pope Francis offered his prayers and solidarity to those who work at sea and have either been prevented from going ashore or have not been able to work.

In a video message June 17, the pope told seafarers and people who fish for a living that "in these past months, your lives and your work have seen significant changes; you have had to make, and are continuing to make, many sacrifices."

"Long periods spent aboard ships without being able to disembark, separation from families, friends and native countries, fear of infection — all these things are a heavy burden to bear, now more than ever," the pope said.

Antonio Guterres, secretary-general of the United Nations, issued an appeal June 12 asking governments to classify seafarers as "essential workers" so that those blocked on ships in port could go ashore and so that new crews could rotate in to keep the sea shipping industry going.

"The ongoing crisis is having a direct impact on the shipping industry, which transports more than 80% of traded goods — including vital medical supplies, food and other basic necessities — critical for the COVID-19 response and recovery," said a U.N. statement.

Due to COVID-related travel restrictions, hundreds of thousands of the world's 2 million seafarers have been "stranded at sea for months," Guterres said.

In late April, the International Labor Organization reported that some 90,000 seafarers were stuck on cruise ships — which had no passengers — due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and that in some ports not even seafarers in need of medical attention were allowed to go to onshore hospitals.

On other ships, the shipping company forbids crews from disembarking for fear that they could bring the coronavirus on board when they return.

Expressing gratitude to seafarers and fishers for the work they do, Francis also assured them that they are not alone and are not forgotten.

"Your work at sea often keeps you apart from others, but you are close to me in my thoughts and prayers and in those of your chaplains and the volunteers of Stella Maris," the centers around the world run by the Apostleship of the Sea.

"Today I would like to offer you a message and a prayer of hope, comfort and consolation in the face of whatever hardships you have to endure," the pope said. "I would also offer a word of encouragement to all those who work with you in providing pastoral care for maritime personnel."

"May the Lord bless each of you, your work and your families," the pope said, "and may the Virgin Mary, Star of the Sea, protect you always."

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