News

A section of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore is seen collapsed into the Patapsco Rive

A section of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore is seen collapsed into the Patapsco River March 26, following a main support column being struck in the early morning hours by the container ship Dali as it was leaving the Port of Baltimore. (OSV News/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

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The Archdiocese of Baltimore's Apostleship of the Sea is normally a "friendly face" for international seafarers visiting the port.

That role is about to expand, according to its director, Andy Middleton, after a container ship was involved in the catastrophic collapse of one of Baltimore's major thoroughfares.

The Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed about 1:30 a.m. March 26 after a 900-foot container ship collided with one of its major support pilings. According to state and U.S. Coast Guard officials, a search-and-rescue mission was underway for an unknown number of survivors.

Middleton said the Apostleship of the Sea, based at St. Rita Parish in Dundalk, had ministered to members of the crew March 24 and 25, delivering Easter boxes to the group aboard Dali, which was berthed at Seagirt Marine terminal.

Middleton said he had been in touch with a member of the crew just hours after the collision and that all of them were safe and uninjured. The organization, begun by the archdiocese in 2003 to serve visiting crews, plans to assist the sailors once bridge debris is removed from the ship and it settles in a berth.

Meanwhile, Baltimore Archbishop William Lori said he was saddened and asked for prayers for all involved.

"I am saddened, as you are, to learn of the tragic incident overnight that led to the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge over the Baltimore Harbor," Lori said. "Pray with me for all involved, especially the victims traveling over the span at the time of impact, the construction crews on site and all of the first responders acting with urgency to rescue survivors. Let us join in prayer asking the Lord to grant consolation and strength as we cope with this terrible tragedy."

According to state officials, two people were rescued from the water after the complete collapse of the structure. One was transported to a hospital and the other refused treatment. AP reported that by late morning six people remained unaccounted for, and all are believed to have been working on the bridge at the time repairing potholes.

The bridge, named for the writer of the national anthem, "The Star Spangled Banner," is part of I-695 Baltimore Beltway, spanning the Patapsco River connecting parts of Baltimore City and Baltimore County. It serves thousands of truckers and automobile commuters each day and is the entry point for the Baltimore harbor's ship traffic — one of the busiest ports on the East Coast.

Baltimore City Major Brandon Scott asked for prayers for the victims and first responders. "This is first and foremost an unthinkable tragedy," Scott said. "We have to pray for all involved and especially our first responders."

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Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski, a Catholic who grew up in the neighborhood adjacent to the bridge, said: "We have a long road ahead. Right now, we are focused on the search and rescue."

Maryland Gov. Wes Moore declared a state of emergency. According to AP, Moore said the cargo ship "reported losing power just before it crashed and caused the bridge to collapse" and that a mayday call from the ship allowed officials to limit traffic on the bridge before the crash.

The Apostleship of Sea was ready to assist anywhere needed, particularly to fulfill its mission of serving seafarers.

Middleton said the ship, flagged out of Singapore, with mostly a crew from India, was headed on a 28-day trip to Sri Lanka. He said it was taking an extended route because the ship was avoiding the unrest in the Middle East. His group helped several members of the crew shop for supplies, and it also provided a place for them to relax.

Middleton, 50, has served as director of the Apostleship of the Sea since 2019 when its founding director, the late Msgr. John Louis FitzGerald, retired. The parishioner of Holy Rosary in Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood started with the group as a volunteer in 2009.

Center volunteers, many of whom are Knights of Columbus, visit merchant ships at the Port of Baltimore Monday through Saturday, dropping off rosaries, scapulars and prayer cards, along with secular magazines and books.

"We try to provide any service the crew might need while they are in port," Middleton told the Catholic Review, Baltimore's archdiocesan news outlet. "We take them to Mass, take them shopping, provide a place for them to relax. We're that friendly face they see when they come to the Port of Baltimore. We do everything from provide Catholic religious services to transportation for shopping."

Middleton said he reached out to his contact on the ship shortly after the collision, who assured them that the crew was all safe and didn't need anything at the moment.

"They were pretty well stocked because they were prepared for a long trip," he said. "When they do make it back to a berth, we will be ready to assist them in any way

we can."

He also said they planned to minister to the crews of the seven ships currently in the port that might be marooned there for quite a while.