News



Father Bill Reynolds, a retired priest of the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, and a longtime maritime minister, is pictured in an undated photo distributing Communion during a Mass he celebrated aboard a cruise ship. The Catholic chaplaincy for cruise ships is facilitated by the Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America. (OSV News/courtesy Father Reynolds)

Barb Arland-Fye

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Davenport, Iowa — September 12, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When the sea is rocky, distributing Communion during Mass aboard a cruise ship can be challenging, but Father Bill Reynolds maintains a steady presence.

The retired priest of the Diocese of Davenport has been ministering as a priest/chaplain in maritime ministry since the late 1990s, beginning when he was still in active ministry.

Through a quarter-century as a Catholic maritime minister, Reynolds, 73, has conducted three burials at sea, presided at countless Masses aboard ship, accompanied families dealing with a medical crisis, and provided a spiritual presence for passengers and crew members alike.

This spring, upon his return to Newton after ministering aboard a Royal Caribbean cruise ship that traveled to Spain, he said, "I would have been content to stay at home for a while, before heading out to sea again in early August with the Holland America Line for Alaskan cruises."

That was before Doreen Badeaux, secretary-general for the Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America, asked whether he could be available for an upcoming two-week Alaska cruise.

"This ministry is so important. I'm willing to go to extra lengths to make sure we have a priest onboard the ship," said Reynolds. He feels a special commitment to the crew members because many of them work on the weekends. "Crew members usually cannot get to church, so we take the church to them," he told The Catholic Messenger, Davenport's diocesan newspaper.

Badeaux is effusive in her praise for Reynolds. "He's fantastic. He's very pastoral and fatherly and very kind." She described how Reynolds responded after an engine room explosion March 22 aboard a Holland America Line's cruise ship on which he was serving. The tragedy, which claimed the lives of two crew members, happened on the last day of his cruise, in Half Moon Cay in the Bahamas. "He let me

know immediately. He wanted to make sure the next priest getting on board would be aware."

Reynolds offered to be of assistance as needed and celebrated the regularly scheduled 5 p.m. Mass that evening. "We consoled the passengers, prayed for the deceased and their family members and crew members. The priest who followed me conducted a memorial service and blessed the space where the accident happened," Reynolds said. Tragedies such as this one have been a rare occurrence in his maritime ministry.

Typically, he is the only clergy member on board, although long cruises during religious holidays may include Protestant ministers and a rabbi. As a priest serving in the apostleship, Reynolds provides daily Mass, counseling, confession and the sacrament of the sick — for passengers and crew, he said.

His maritime ministry began after he took his first cruise, as a passenger, nearly 30 years ago. After attending Mass on that cruise, he struck up a conservation with the priest who presided.

The priest encouraged him to consider maritime ministry. Reynolds sought and received the approval of his bishop to apply. He's been cruising ever since, more frequently since retiring in 2020 as pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Newton. He also serves as vice president of the apostleship. "I do enjoy it," he said of his maritime ministry. "It's nice to be able to be with people who appreciate their faith and want to go to Mass even while on vacation."

Advertisement

Earlier this year, Reynolds presided at a burial at sea on the Holland America Line ship.

Badeaux told OSV News that a passenger seeking such a burial for a loved one has to arrange such a request with cruise ship officials ahead of time.

"I travel with my laptop, which has the Catholic burial rite on it, so I can readily respond to such requests," the priest told The Catholic Messenger. The church's Order of Christian Funerals has a specific prayer for such a burial, asking that the Lord who calmed the sea in Galilee may grant peace and tranquility to the deceased

person.

The ceremony aboard the Holland America ship took place in a quiet area of the promenade deck that was not too windy. The small gathering consisted of Father Reynolds; a widow who had properly prepared a dignified, biodegradable container as the church requires for her late husband's cremated remains; the widow's friend; and a ship staff officer.

At the proper time in the rite, Reynolds advised the widow that when she was ready she could drop the container into the sea.

"She composed herself, kissed the container and deposited her husband's remains in the deep. He had been a Navy man," Reynolds said. "The officer called the ship's bridge to get the ship's precise location, which was to be noted in an official record of the burial."

A year earlier, Reynolds conducted a burial at sea rite for Lynn Mack, who was not Catholic. Her husband, Robert, also not a Catholic, brought his wife's cremated remains on a Royal Caribbean Cruise Line ship on a repositioning cruise (a one-way cruise, usually at the end of a cruise season) from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to Baltimore.

Robert Mack, who did not have the priest's contact information, later emailed the Iowa Knights of Columbus, asking the fraternal organization to forward his message of gratitude to Reynolds.

In his email, the widower wrote, "Earlier this year you performed a ceremony during the 'burial at sea' service for my deceased wife of 55 years, 5 months and 10 days. More than you know, my gratitude to you for your service is immense. I deeply appreciate the supplications that you made to our Lord Jesus Christ on dear Lynn Mack's behalf. Thank you for your (support and) words of comfort that Lynn is now in heaven in all of its glory.'"

The email deeply touched Reynolds. "The message of Robert Mack is a testimony to the importance of having a priest on cruise ships to assist the needs of passengers and crew, Catholic or not."

The Apostleship of the Sea of the USA is a Catholic maritime ministry organization, based in Port Arthur, Texas, in the Diocese of Beaumont. In 2015, Cardinal Daniel N.

DiNardo, who leads the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese and is metropolitan of the province that includes Beaumont, granted the apostleship the status of a private association of the Christian faithful.

Badeaux said the organization facilitates the cruise ship priest program, which involves approximately 500 cruises annually and 283 priests to provide ministry on those cruises. "We'd like to have more priests," she said. "We are getting all cruise lines to understand the importance of what we're doing."

Most of the priests are over 50 but "we're getting some younger priests into the program. That's exciting," Badeaux said. "Once they get onboard and see the ministry themselves, they get excited about it."