News



The Dali cargo vessel is pictured March 26, 2024, after it crashed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore causing it to collapse. An indelible mark has been left by on countless lives — from grieving families to stranded seafarers and displaced workers. (OSV News/Reuters/Nathan Howard)

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The collapse of Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge on March 26, 2024, left an indelible mark on countless lives — from grieving families to stranded seafarers and displaced workers.

Six construction workers — immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala who had been working on the bridge — lost their lives when a powerless cargo ship, the Dali, struck the bridge, sending nearly the entire 1.6-mile-long structure into the Patapsco River. In the days and months that followed, families of the deceased found support in the Catholic community.

One year later, the Catholic community continues to stand in solidarity with those affected.

For Andy Middleton, executive director of the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Apostleship of the Sea ministry, the tragedy changed more than just the city skyline. It changed his faith.

"Personally, it changed the way I pray," said Middleton, a parishioner of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore at Holy Cross. "I no longer just say prayers of thanksgiving and ask God for things. Now I'm more conscious of always praying for others."

Before the collapse, Middleton and his team had already ministered to the sailors aboard the Dali, assisting them with personal needs while in port. After the accident, their mission expanded to caring for the marooned crew, who found themselves stranded in Baltimore, awaiting legal proceedings.

The city of Baltimore, the state of Maryland, multiple businesses, owners of cargo on the ship and the families of the six people killed on the bridge are all suing the Singapore companies that own and manage the cargo ship.

Middleton and Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop Adam Parker visited the crew May 1, 2024, bringing care packages and celebrating Mass for Catholic crew members. Bishop Parker recalled how deeply the sailors' faith moved him.

"The most striking moment of that visit was when I put the list of the highway workers who were killed on the makeshift altar," Bishop Parker said. "One of the Dali crewmembers immediately got up, looked at the list, and wanted to have it so that he, too, could continue to pray for those who lost their lives."

Middleton has since taken Dali crew members to sports events, hosted them at his home, and even introduced them to American football.

"Andy has certainly been a Godsend to them," Parker told the Catholic Review, Baltimore's archdiocesan news outlet. But for all the support, the crew longs for home.

"They are holding up as well as can be expected," Middleton said, noting that some of the men have not seen their families in over 18 months.

One of those stranded is Charles, a native of India and a member of the Dali crew, who has become a regular at Sunday Mass at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Baltimore's Locust Point neighborhood. Deacon Steve Sarnecki has walked alongside him in his uncertainty. Charles, who asked that his last name not be used, gave permission to Sarnecki to tell his story.

"He's worried. He's nervous. He doesn't know what the lawyers are going to ask him," Sarnecki said. "He wasn't the captain or the chief engineer. He was an assistant to an assistant in the engine room."

Beyond the legal uncertainty, Charles struggles with isolation.

"He has a nice apartment. They are feeding him, but he is separated from his family in a culture that is not his own," Sarnecki said. "My heart broke when I put him on Facebook with his wife."

While seafarers are used to long absences from home, this is different.

"Work is sacred," Sarnecki said. "There is beauty in work."

The disruption extends far beyond the crew. Longshoremen were out of work for months, relying on state aid and union support. Even with the port reopened, business is not the same.

"The port is still not recovered," Sarnecki said. "The volume of work is not what it used to be. I would love to see exhausted longshoremen."

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For Redemptorist Fr. Ako Walker, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Baltimore's Highlandtown neighborhood, the past year has been one of profound grief and service. As families of the fallen waited in anguish for news, he stood by them, offering what little comfort he could.

"You could feel the sadness and difficulty of accepting this news," Walker said. "There were people talking, crying, and others sitting in silence. I was there as a presence, trying to support the families."

He later led the funerals for two of the deceased and joined Baltimore Archbishop William Lori and Auxiliary Bishop Bruce Lewandowski in a candlelight vigil to honor the victims.

During the funeral Masses, Walker set aside his own emotions to minister to the grieving. "I had to forget my own feelings and emotions and just show them the face of Christ," he said.

Carlos Alexis Suazo, brother of Maynor Suazo Sandoval — one of the fallen workers — recalled the difficulty of the holidays without him, especially for their mother, Rosa.

"If you talk to her about Maynor, it touches a very sensitive nerve — a wound that hurts too much," Suazo said.

Suazo found solace in Walker's support.

"He came to our house when we needed him the most," Suazo said. "There were at least 80 of us in the family, and he prayed with us. Fr. Walker is a great human being."

In the year since the tragedy, the Catholic community has rallied to support the victims' families and others affected. The Archdiocese of Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge Relief Fund has raised more than $190,000, while an additional $70,000 has gone to support the Apostleship of the Sea's work with international seafarers who labor at the port.

As the anniversary approached, a special Mass was planned for March 27 to remember the six workers. Walker's homily was set to focus on hope.

"Hope never disappoints," he said. "We have to continue to live in hope because these men are now in God's hands. It's not just something we say to comfort ourselves; it's the truth of our faith."

The effects of the bridge collapse reached beyond those directly involved. Guadalupe Espino Molina, case manager at the Building Hope Dundalk Support Center, saw firsthand how the disaster deepened struggles in an already vulnerable community.

"There was a need even before the bridge collapse," Molina said. "But after the collapse, that need grew even greater."

Opening in September as a partnership between three Catholic Charities programs, the center offers mental health care, employment support and other services free of charge. Serving Dundalk, Essex and surrounding areas, the center has become a vital resource for those left isolated by the bridge's destruction.

With bilingual staff and a dedicated Spanish interpreter on-site daily, the center ensures language is not a barrier to care.

Since opening with just nine clients, the center had served 206 clients by the end of February. Molina expects that number to reach 260 by the end of March.

A year later, the bridge is gone, but its absence is still surreal.

"It's a shock that it's not there," said Middleton, who grew up in Dundalk. "I find myself taking a familiar route and saying to myself, ‘Wow, it's really gone.'"

Through loss, faith has deepened. Middleton's ministry has gained visibility, drawing more support.

"If there's a good point to this tragedy, it's that it brought a spotlight to our ministry and the hardships of seafarers," he said. "But we also talk often about the families who lost loved ones, and we don't want them to be forgotten."