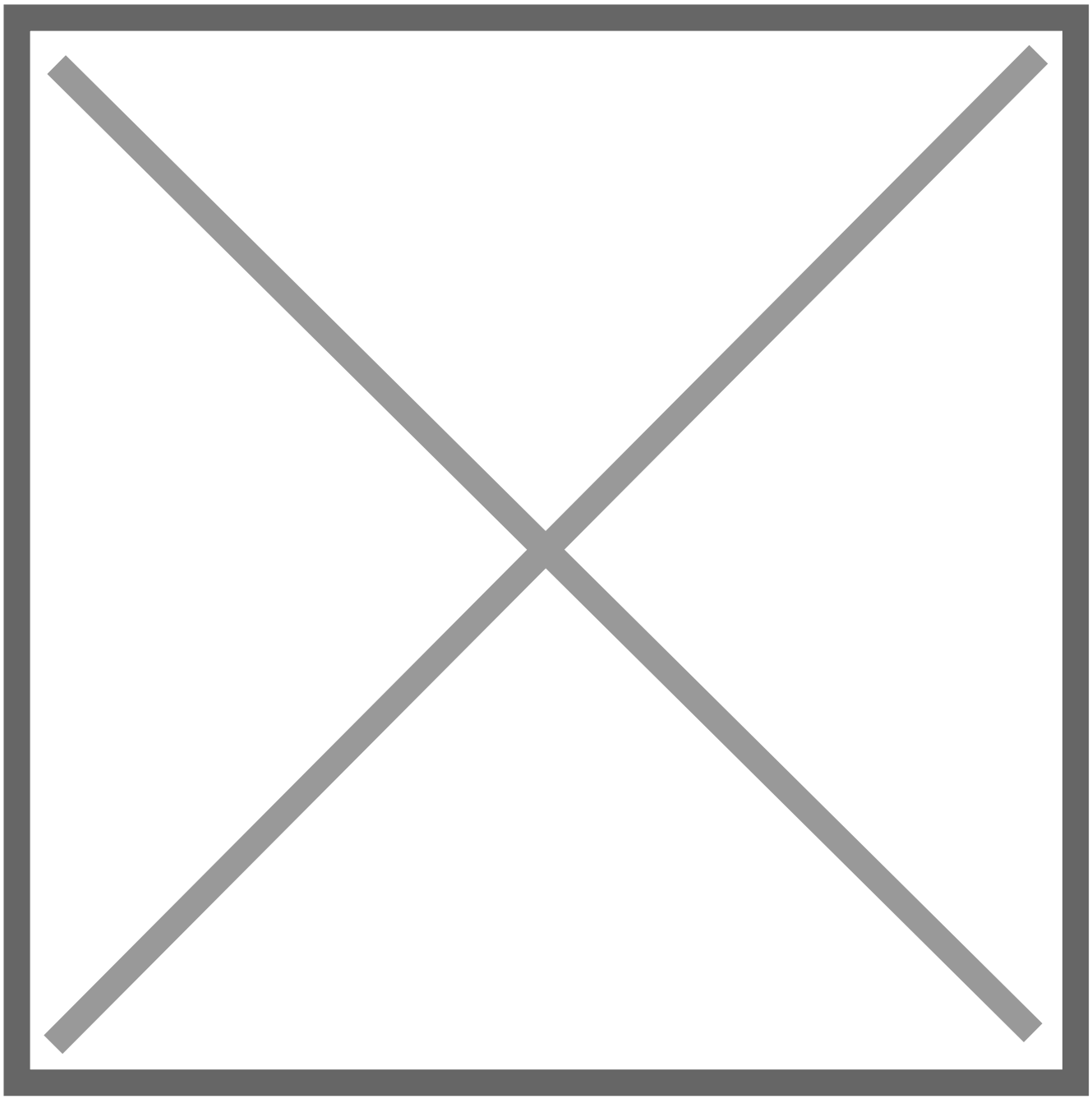
News



Vessels are seen in the Strait of Hormuz in the Musandam Peninsula April 27, 2026. As the U.S. and Iran face off over the Strait of Hormuz, Catholic maritime ministry leaders are calling for prayer and support for the thousands of souls trapped at sea amid the war. (OSV News/Reuters)

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As the U.S. and Iran face off over the Strait of Hormuz, Catholic maritime ministry leaders are calling for prayer and support for the thousands of souls trapped at sea amid the war.

"We have organized prayers of intercession, and many of our chaplains are trying to reach out to see how we can advocate," said Sr. Joanna Okerke, the U.S. national director of Stella Maris, the Catholic Church's maritime apostolate, the name of which invokes the Marian title of "Our Lady, Star of the Sea."

At times referenced as the Apostleship of the Sea, the initiative traces its origins to 1920s Scotland and has enjoyed the support of numerous popes, including St. John Paul II — who provided updated norms for the work in 1997 — and, most recently, Pope Leo XIV. The apostolate is overseen by the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

In the U.S., Auxiliary Bishop Frank Schuster of Seattle is the bishop promoter for Stella Maris.

An estimated 20,000 seafarers are currently stranded in the Persian Gulf, according to the International Maritime Organization, the United Nations agency tasked with ensuring maritime safety, security and environmental compliance.

IMO secretary-general Arsenio Dominguez shared that figure in an April 16 interview with CNN, describing the seafarers' situation as "terrible."

"It is the mental health, it's the fatigue that these innocent seafarers are actually going through," he told CNN host Richard Quest.

Dominguez said he was "very grateful to the countries in the region, because they continue to provide the essential supplies, even with the challenges that exist."

But, he warned, "the longer that this conflict goes on," the more the situation at sea "becomes a crisis."

Iran officially closed the Strait of Hormuz — a key maritime chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman — on March 4, days after the U.S. and Israel launched joint Feb. 28 attacks that killed several of Iran's top officials, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

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Throughout the war, both Iran and the U.S. have blockaded the strait, continuing to do so despite a ceasefire and a brief respite in the stranglehold on marine traffic. U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said at an April 24 press briefing that the stoppage would remain in place "for as long as it takes."

At least seven seafarers were killed in March as ships came under attack, with Dominguez issuing a March 6 statement calling the blockade "unacceptable and unsustainable."

At the outset of the war, Bishop Luis Quinteiro Fiuza, interim president of the Apostleship of the Sea, wrote to the Stella Maris bishop promoters worldwide, with the text summarized in an April 17 Facebook post by Stella Maris in the United Kingdom.

"Bishop Luis expressed deep concern about the current military operations and heightened tensions in the Strait of Hormuz and their direct impact on seafarers," said Stella Maris U.K. in its post. "These are civilian men and women who are not part of the conflict, yet through their daily work they sustain families, support global trade, and serve the common good. Despite this, many now find themselves

operating in conditions of heightened tension, facing fear, uncertainty, and real danger."

The post quoted from the bishop's letter, saying, "We invite the entire Apostleship of the Sea family to pray, for those in high-risk areas, for their safety and protection from harm, and for the families who wait at home with concern."

The blockade has made an already difficult and dangerous profession more deadly, said Sr. Joanna, a member of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus order.

"This issue is affecting many people," she said. "Many are still at sea, and their families are worried. This is disintegrating families."

Doreen Badeaux, secretary general of the nonprofit Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America, told OSV News that concerns about the stranded seafarers were discussed at the group's conference earlier in April.

"It's the tremendous stress that they're under," recounted Badeaux, whose organization serves as the professional and educational association for Catholic maritime ministers, cruise ship priests, mariners and others who support maritime ministry.

Fr. Paul Makar, a Ukrainian Catholic priest from the Archeparchy of Philadelphia who is in training for Stella Maris ministry, told OSV News that it's essential to provide the stranded sailors "with at least some sort of relief."

The priest — a former naval officer and licensed merchant marine engineer — said the crews caught up in the blockade are grappling with an array of stressors compounded by the conflict.

With more than 80% of the world's goods shipped by sea, Makar explained the work entails long months on the open water and demanding port loading schedules.

Crews sometimes work "24 to 36 hours straight just to meet deadlines for loading and offloading," he said.

Other anxieties he named were storms, piracy, safety issues and "ship abandonment" — where vessel owners withdraw support for ships, leaving seafarers stranded and uncompensated far from home. Data from the International Transport Workers' Federation shows that abandonment reached "record levels" in 2025, with

more than 6,000 seafarers victimized in 2025 alone, the sixth year of such increases.

Now, said Makar, seafarers impacted by the blockade are "worried about where they're going to get their next meal from, and whether they're going to have air conditioning and enough fuel. There are some ships out there that have not been able to receive fuel."

He urged prayer for all affected.

"It is a very dangerous profession, and has been since the dawn of time," said Makar, adding that Stella Maris and other maritime ministries "always reach out" to let seafarers know "they're not alone."

This story appears in the **War in Iran** feature series. View the full series.