

**STELLA MARIS MASS**

Today we offer Holy Mass in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Stella Maris, Star of the Sea, though I wonder if I am the right celebrant as I've been known to get seasick on the ferry to the I-o-W! In this Mass, we pray for all seafarers, for those who travel by sea and who work at sea; we pray for their safety and for their salvation. We also pray for God's blessing on the work of the AoS which, through its chaplains and volunteer ship visitors, offers spiritual, pastoral and practical support to seafarers, not least here in the ports and shipping centres of our Diocese. In this, the AoS performs a truly evangelistic work, seeking to help those in need far from home, regardless of their religion.

FATHER, YOU HAVE OPENED A PATHWAY THROUGH THE SEA. Travel by sea, even in today's massive ships with their impressive technology, can at times be fraught with danger. In the 1stR, the author of the Book of Wisdom, 22 centuries ago, makes fun of those who trust in magic idols, or think that a prayer to the figurehead of a boat can protect you from danger. No, he argues, only God's PROVIDENCE can keep you safe, as with Noah's Ark when THE HOPE OF THE WORLD TOOK REFUGE ON A RAFT. Wisdom is one of the last books of the Old Testament; it anticipates truths of faith that Jesus would clearly reveal. Indeed, St. Ambrose and some of the Church fathers discerned here an implicit reference to the salvation Jesus won for us on the wood of the Cross. The point is, every single moment of our lives is in God's hands and so rightly we pray for His protection. Indeed, before we set off on a journey, whether by sea, land or air, we should unite ourselves in prayer with the loving Heart of Jesus Christ. But let me come back to this in a moment.

For the image of a ship sailing across the sea is a symbol dear to Catholics, who traditionally envisage the Church as the Barque of Peter, sailing through the storms of history. When earlier this year, I was interviewed on TV about the election of the new pope, I was asked if I thought Pope Francis would solve the crisis in the Catholic Church. Gosh, NO I said: HE WON'T; HE CAN'T. The Church has been in crisis ever since it was in that boat with Jesus, on the choppy waters of the Sea of Galilee. Indeed the Church is always in crisis, because it is made up of sinners, of ordinary folk like you and me, and it will only be at rest when, fully converted, we have reached the shores of Paradise to be with Jesus forever. The AoS, I am sure, keeps this in mind when helping people navigate the waves of our enthralling, yet often toxic secular culture. This is why we pray in this Mass for the grace of the Holy Spirit to help seafarers find a personal friendship with Jesus Christ, or at least through the practical and pastoral help given, to be shewn the way to Him.

IN THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY STAR OF THE SEA you HAVE PROVIDED A LIGHT IN THE STORM said the Collect. The Virgin Mary has always been very close to seafarers. Indeed, the first ever Marian prayer, the Sub Tuum Praesidium, is said to have been written by sailors in 3C: 'We fly to your protection, O holy Mother of God. Despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin.' It would be a great thing if, in this Year of Faith, the AoS gave out that beautiful prayer to those willing to receive it. But in this Mass, let's make that prayer our own. Let's ask the Lord to grant his protection to all who live and work at sea, and his love to their families and friends, and salvation to all who support them.