

Bad Weather Doesn't Stop 2017 Mass Offered for All Hart Island Deceased



After 2017 Ascension Thursday mass for all Hart Isle dead, those attending pause for a photo.

For a quarter century, members of the City Island community, including but not limited to St. Mary Star of the Sea parishioners, plus relatives of Hart Island deceased, some coming from far distances, had gathered on the Fordham Street ferry slip early Ascension Thursday mornings. Their common purpose, regardless of any difference in religious faith: to take the short NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) ferry ride to Hart Island to attend a mass offered for all dead buried there.

But on May 25, 2017, the dozen and a half who showed up, despite pelting rain and winds turning umbrellas inside-out, waited outside the gate to be admitted onto the ferry slip.

A number of the civilians waiting outside the gate remembered participating in the annual observance on prior occasions during somewhat rainy weather, but could not recall the conditions being quite so stormy.

After a brief interval (which in the rain only seemed longer than it actually was), the captain of the DOC burial detail emerged from the ferry slip, having returned from an inspection run to Hart Island.

He expressed regret for the wait but earnestly explained that the DOT ferry captain viewed the high winds and choppy waves, with worse being forecast, as raising safety concerns.

The DOC captain noted that the judgment call not to transport people from City Island to Hart Island and back on the DOT boat was one for its captain to the make. but not one with which he disagreed, having seen the rough waters on the inspection run.

The DOC captain also noted conditions on Hart Island itself were very adverse both for burial work and for the annual open-air mass. He expressed regret that the planned event couldn't go forward under the adverse circumstances, pointing out he and the Hart Island staff had made the necessary advance preparations for it but that the weather was not cooperating. The captain invited the group to consider seeking to reschedule it and explained whom in DOC to contact to make such rearrangements.

A veteran member of the group, who had attended nearly all the 25 previous Ascension Day Hart Island remembrance masses, turned to Fr. Augustus Onwubiko of St. Mary Star of the Sea and asked if the mass, intended to be offered in Potter's Field that morning for all the dead buried there, could be said, though unscheduled, at the City Island church instead, due to the unforeseen developments.

"Father Gus," as he is known, readily agreed. Members of the group did too. Before adjourning to the church, they thanked the DOC captain for his courtesy in giving them such clear, detailed and understandable explanation. They expressed appreciation of the concern for their safety shown by the DOC and DOT captains.

Thus, the 26th annual Ascension Day mass of remembrance for all Hart Island dead did take place on the scheduled morning but, due to extraordinary circumstances, just not on the island where the previous 25 had been offered. ###

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