

“Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come” (Mt 24:42). As we pray for the safety of those trying to flee Afghanistan, there is great anguish and uncertainty in Kabul. At a moment’s notice, tens of thousands of people have fled the dangers of war for an uncertain future. The threat of war and terror often leads to mass evacuations.

At the outset of the Korean War in December 1950, a merchant marine was ever vigilant and prepared for an hour in history he did not expect. Captain Leonard LaRue welcomed more than “14,000 Korean refugees on his ship, the S.S. Meredith Victory, at the port of Hungnam in North Korea; the ship’s normal capacity was 59 passengers and crew. LaRue then carefully traveled 450 miles through mine-infested waters to safety in Japan.”ⁱ The ship did not have the food necessary to take care of everyone. One wonders how people survived without plumbing and with very limited water rations.

As thousands of voices cried out in prayer, the Lord provided. On Christmas Day, the peacetime ship with no armor and no way to defend itself arrived safely in Japan. No one was injured although the birth of 5 babies meant the ship arrived in port with more passengers than when it departed. “My God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19).

Reflecting on that miraculous event, LaRue noted: “I think often on that voyage. I think how such a small vessel was able to hold so many persons and surmount endless perils without harm to a soul... the clear, unmistakable message comes to me that on that Christmastide, in the bleak and bitter waters off the shores of Korea, God’s own hand was at the helm of my ship.”ⁱⁱ

In 1954, Captain LaRue gave the sea up for a life of prayer. He entered Saint Paul Abbey in Newton, New Jersey as a Benedictine Monk and took on a humble role of service in the community. Brother Marinus LaRue was thankful to God that he was awake and alert when needed. He never had reason to think that it was by his efforts alone that such a miraculous feat was accomplished. “Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 31).

“Who, then, is the faithful and prudent servant, whom the master has put in charge of his household to distribute to them their food at the proper time?” (Mt 24:45). We pray for the safety of the tens of thousands who have escaped to freedom. We pray for those still attempting to flee and for the many who will not be able to leave. If we need a guide to help us, we might ask the “man who orchestrated the largest humanitarian rescue operation by a single ship - Servant of God Marinus (Leonard) LaRue.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Amidst a world of uncertainty where threats come from invisible viruses, from violent storms, from wildfires, from man’s inhumanity to man and a thousand other causes, vigilance is always necessary. We never know when the Lord will look to us to help our brothers and sisters in need. “Stay awake! ... So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come” (Mt 24:42a, 44).

ⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/news/248755/he-once-rescued-14000-refugees-now-could-he-intercede-in-afghanistans-crisis

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.