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Fr. Alberto Gatón. Photo courtesy of Fr. Alberto Gatón.

Madrid, Spain, Feb 16, 2017 / 01:56 am (CNA/EWTN News).- Father Alberto Gatón is the chaplain of a Spanish ship that combats human trafficking by rescuing people in the Mediterranean Sea. In the span of almost 5 months, his team has managed to rescue more than 3,000 people.

“Seventy percent of them are Christians fleeing from persecution in their countries,” he told CNA. “They're fleeing persecution from Boko Haram in Nigeria, the terrorists groups, the situation in their countries.”

From September 2016 through January 2017, the priest was aboard the “Frigate Navarra” in Operation Sophia, the EU anti-migrant smuggling operation in the Mediterranean Sea. The ship had a crew of 208 sailors.

“We were also collaborating to rescue people that the mafias have abandoned to their fate in the sea – we on the Frigate Navarra, along with other NGOs and other European naval forces, collaborated to make rescues,” he said.

In precarious make-shift boats of rubber and wood, hundreds of people try to cross the Mediterranean

every day, the chaplain said. “Heavy storms frequently come up, and if we're not there, they would die.”

The main goal of Operation Sophia is to “combat the mafias which are trafficking in souls on the Mediterranean,” he said, and “always help to rescue those at sea, because they are the poor people of the land who embark from all points in Africa hoping to reach the coasts of Europe and who many times end up on the bottom of the sea.”

Sometimes, it happens that due to wind, rough seas or nightfall, the rescue is hindered, he said. “Thanks be to God, we were able to rescue all the boats we were responsible for, even though some of them were in very bad sea conditions.”

Fr. Gatton recalled his first rescue: “once inside the ship, they began to dance, it was a happy day because nobody died. It was marvelous to see those who were rescued safe and sound dancing.”

But the joy of days like that is offset by the profound sadness of seeing “what point this world has come to in wickedness of heart, which when God is forgotten, is capable of sending little children, pregnant mothers and babies in inflatable boats that are like shoe boxes, floating coffins with no other fate than to be rescued or lost.”

When they rescue refugees, he said, “the first thing is to recover from injuries, have something to eat, treat dehydration...But meanwhile I am always there with the families, with the sick.”

At one point, an old woman who had been rescued asked him to bless her and the girl she was carrying.

“The parents of the little girl had gone missing before the rescue and now it was the old woman who took care of her. She just asked me to bless them. We prayed together in the infirmary,” he recalled.

On another occasion, a Protestant pastor had fled his homeland due to persecution. “I helped him in everything I could,” the chaplain said, adding that most of the time, people don't ask for anything material. “They just want a prayer, a smile.”

Fr. Gatton told CNA that his work as a chaplain has been difficult. “You are faced with death, with suffering, with violence. If you're far from home and the priest introduces himself as another shipmate for the believers and non-believers with whom they can unburden themselves, they can talk and share like they can't do with the naval officers.”

In addition to carrying out the same tasks as the other sailors, his unique task is “to be with the parishioners without forgetting that you are a soldier, but giving your all as a priest. “

The priest said that every day, Mass was celebrated on the ship. However, since there was no chapel, it was celebrated on the deck, or else inside if there was bad weather.

Another especially moving moment for the chaplain was evening prayer, offered each day “at the moment of sunset, to the Lord of the calm and the storm.” Even the atheists would join in when there

was a bad storm or if they had a sick relative.

The priest said that in the months spent at sea on the Frigate Navarra, they celebrated a First Communion, and several sailors took marriage or Confirmation prep classes.

“I always say that at sea, the atheists become agnostics; the agnostics become non-practicing Catholics, and the non-practicing, at least for a while, they practice. That's my experience.”

Fr. Gatón was ordained a priest at the age of 29, after exercising his ministry in Santander, Spain; Rome; and the United States, and at the advice of his bishop, he decided to join the army. When he began this service, he was already 45 years old.

Currently, he is Major Chaplain of the southern military region, a permanent major, and as such he belongs to the military archdiocese.

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