

# Pope says space station crew like a 'tiny U.N.' with peaceful diversity

VATICAN CITY — One perk that comes with floating aboard the International Space Station is NASA arranges for occasional calls with celebrities to keep the astronauts' spirits high during their monthslong flights.

Before his first space mission began this year, Catholic astronaut Mark Vande Hei of Falls Church, Virginia, requested a call from Pope Francis, and Oct. 26 his wish upon a star came true.

The pope linked up live from the Vatican with the six-man crew as they orbited 250 miles above Earth.

"Good morning, good evening," the pope told the crew at 3 p.m. Rome time "because when you are in space, you never know" what the real time is.

During their 20-minute link-up, Pope Francis asked five questions about how their unique perspective from the frontier of the universe has changed or enriched them and what lessons they could share with people back on Earth.

Saying society today is very individualistic, but what is needed is collaboration, the pope asked them how the ISS is an example of that collaboration.

Flight engineer Joseph Acaba of Inglewood, California, said it is the diversity of each individual that makes the team stronger.

"We need to embrace who we are as individuals and respect those around us, and by working together we can do things much greater than we could do as individuals," he told the pope.

Pope Francis said they were like a tiny United Nations, in which the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. Thanking them for their work, he said they were "representatives of the whole human family" working on such an important project in space.

When the pope asked what brought them joy during their long mission, Commander Randolph Bresnik from Fort Knox, Kentucky, told the pope that it was being able to see every day “God’s creation maybe a little bit from his perspective.”

Bresnik, a Baptist, said, “People cannot come up here and see the indescribable beauty of our earth and not be touched in their souls.” His fellow crewmembers were also Christians: two Russian Orthodox and three Catholics.

“We see the peace and serenity of our planet as it goes around 10 kilometers (six miles) a second, and there are no borders, there is no conflict, it’s just peaceful,” Bresnik said. “And you see the thinness of the atmosphere and it makes you realize how fragile our existence here is.”

The commander said he hoped the beautiful images they capture from space and their example as international crewmembers successfully working together would be an inspiration and a model for the rest of the world.

The pope said he was struck by Bresnik’s awareness of the fragility of the earth and humanity’s capacity to destroy it, but also the hope and inspiration the astronauts could feel.

When asked by the pope what has surprised them most about living in the ISS, Vande Hei said it was how differently things looked from such a unique perspective. He said it was also “unsettling” to be in constant rotation and have to orient himself by deciding himself what was “up” or “down.”

“This is truly human thing — the ability to decide,” the pope replied.

When asked what made them want to become astronauts, Russian flight engineer Sergey Ryazanskiy said his grandfather was his biggest inspiration because he had been the chief engineer on the Soviet team that built Sputnik, the first artificial satellite successfully launched into earth’s orbit. “So for me, it is a great honor to continue what he was doing to fulfill his dreams,” said Ryazanskiy.

After Pope Francis asked for their thoughts about Dante Alighieri’s verse in the Divine Comedy that love was the force that “moves the sun and the stars,” Russian flight engineer Alexander Misurkin said only love gives you the strength to give

yourself for others.

Italian astronaut Paolo Nespoli said he hoped that someday people like the pope, “not just engineers, physicists,” but poets, theologians, philosophers and writers “can come here to space, which will certainly be (the case) in the future, I would like for them to be able to come here to explore what it means to have a human being in space.”

It was the second time a pope has called ISS crewmembers; Pope Benedict XVI spoke with 12 astronauts in 2011, praising them for their courage and commitment and for their comments on how science can contribute to the pursuit of peace and the protection of a fragile planet.

Nespoli was present on the ISS for both calls. Among the small number of personal possessions the devout Catholic is allowed onboard, he keeps a prayer card of St. Padre Pio and an olive branch he received from Pope Francis as a reminder of the importance of taking care of earth “our common home.”

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