**Christophe draft speech for event in Bilbao 23 March 2023**

(***Welcome guests and dignitaries)***

It gives me great pleasure to be standing before you here in Zierbena – the maritime gateway to the beautiful, vibrant city of Bilbao and of course the spectacular Basque Country. And Zierbena of course is also the point of departure for Spanish holidaymakers, heading to Ireland and the UK!

Last November this event was cancelled. But today the Bay of Biscay has been a little kinder to us - and the beautiful *Salamanca* and her officers and crew are here to welcome us, so a big *merci* to them for hosting us.

Spring gives us the chance to look ahead. But I want to start by looking back a little, into our past. You may not know, but this is Brittany Ferries’ 50th year at sea, and we are delighted to be marking this occasion on all our ships and in all our ports.

The company was founded in 1973 by farmers, who wanted to export their vegetables from France to the UK. Incredibly they managed to construct a port, they acquired a ship, and they began a ferry service. And Brittany Ferries was born.

But right from the start, they wanted far more. Theirs was a long-term vision to create sustaining and enduring links connecting regions and peoples, developing partnerships and bringing prosperity to regions.

Fifty years on we still have the same farmer-shareholders. And we still have the same vision.

Brittany Ferries is not a here-today and gone-tomorrow operation. Our port and regional partnerships are long-term, sustainable, enduring and mutually beneficial. This is key to everything we do, and everything we offer our customers.

When we came to Bilbao in 2011, another ferry operator had just deserted you. But we didn’t come here opportunistically. We came to bring prosperity to all by creating enduring trade and tourism links between regions and people.

And what a partnership it has been!

Twelve years ago, you gave us a home, and a new ferry terminal. As we have grown, you have grown with us giving us all the space, expertise, support and infrastructure that we and our customers need.

It is through close collaboration that we have seen Bilbao develop as a significant and strategic hub for Brittany Ferries. We have built strong ties, developed lasting connections and friendships, and today all of us at Brittany Ferries would like to thank all of you.

We started here with a ship called Cap Finistère, and a route from Bilbao to Portsmouth. And over the years we’ve grown, added routes for freight and boosted passenger volumes. Later this year our one millionth passenger will pass through the port.

But we’re not stopping there. We think there is more potential – and in particular the link we are celebrating today.

Once again, we believe it is through partnerships and collaboration that we can fully realise that potential. You may have noticed that Salamanca is a floating tourist office for northern Spain. And we are proud to welcome representatives from Tourism Ireland, who will be making a presentation to you shortly.

We also have a VIP group of Irish journalists who have travelled down from Rosslare with the ship. You are all very welcome on board. Thanks to Basque Tour they will enjoy a three-day tour of the beautiful region, before returning home to write their reports for holiday-hungry Irish readers.

On the other hand, we look forward to taking some of our media friends from Spain to Ireland in the weeks to come. We want you to experience the warm welcome of Wexford and beyond, so that you may bring Ireland’s legendary warmth, colour and culture to more Spanish tourists.

We are proud to be part of a collective - working to build something special. And we are proud to serve Bilbao with two of the most modern, comfortable, technically advanced and environmentally-friendly ferries in the world – Salamanca and her sister-ship Galicia.

Launched just last year, Salamanca is the first of four LNG vessels to join our family as part of the biggest fleet renewal programme in our history. Cleaner, greener, quieter and more comfortable: she is quite a leap forward.

But an LNG-powered ship without LNG fuel goes nowhere! And again, I come back to partnership. Because the port of Bilbao and our fuel partner Repsol invested in the LNG infrastructure here, to make re-fuelling Salamanca a reality.

Now we have the right ship for the route - and the means to fuel her. So we can develop a truly sustainable tourism link, connecting this great Basque city with Rosslare and the beautiful region of Wexford.

Forward reservations that are up by 68% so far this year, which is an encouraging start. But we need to keep pushing. Because if we do so collectively, something beautiful will start to happen. People will make their own connections, the word will get around, businesses will start to benefit, and the regions become enriched, economically and culturally.

This is a winning formula, a formula adopted since the inaugural crossing of our first vessel Kerisnel 50 years ago. Fifty years from now, I will probably not be here. But if we work hard, this route will be. And seaborne connections from Bilbao to Rosslare will not be a news story.

It will be a route that is taken for granted for the many benefits it brings to the regions. This is exactly how it is for the route connecting my home in Roscoff with Plymouth, 50 years after the first sailing, on 2 January 1973.

Thank you.