NEW EVANGELIZATION IN THE MARITIME WORLD IN ASIA

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Introduction:

Asia in general is acknowledged, by and large, as one area/continent in the World where God and Religion play a major role in one’s life. Within our Faith as Catholics we own and boast of a large amount of Catechetical, Religion teaching and Church related training material that cater to the needs of the person to live his/her life in the world fully and meaningfully.

“Asia is also the cradle of the world’s major religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It is the birthplace of many other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism and Shintoism. Millions also espouse traditional or tribal religions, with varying degrees of structured ritual and formal religious teaching. The Church has the deepest respect for these traditions and seeks to engage in sincere dialogue with their followers. The religious values they teach await their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.”

“New economic, political and religious forces are emerging in global politics from places like Asia and the Islamic world.”

I acknowledge the presence of these religions and the thousands of instances of direct Evangelization we in Asia make through the Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults programmes (RCIA). There is no collected data specific to the Maritime world in Asia for us to gauge the direct Evangelization efforts made by chaplains (many of whom are parish priests). Today at this Panel my comments/observations and presentation also reflects the situation that Chaplains of the Apostleship of the Sea, in the Asia Region encounter, relating to the practice of the faith by Baptized Seafarers; and their ongoing and constant efforts to keep the flame of faith afloat amidst the waves of a highly commercialized competitive and globalized world. This indeed is New Evangelization!

Often and in some places persistently attracted by the vociferous appeals and campaigns of sects and other groups their beliefs are threatened as in a storm and turbulence; they may drop anchor in another group and abandon the Catholic faith they are gifted with. Hence the term New Evangelization makes sense to me in that I no longer look to bring the Gospel to them as though I was converting them for the first time and bringing them to Christianity. They are with us already! They have been largely shaped by Christian tenets, by their culture of Religion, prevailing and promoted by the Episcopal conferences in their countries. They are familiar with their faith but may not have over examined it. New Evangelization endeavours to bring back the faith to those who may have lost meaning in it; with a view that when they land ashore and
go home on leave they may find enough incentive to practice it; and grow in it, and keep on sailing till they are fulfilled and reach the shores of heaven.

On board for several months the practice of the faith of our sailing fraternity (both Maritime and Fishing) faces uncertain weather and uncharted courses; it seems on the verge of capsizing; causes disinterest in matters of Religion and Catholic teaching. Even on Cruise ships the time available for Catholic crew to practice their faith is seldom fulfilled.

It is observed particularly in the western world there are several millions of people who are Catholic by name. They come from Catholic backgrounds, know enough about church and Vatican matters (increasing due to the Web and internet, face book and twitter); but these category of persons, some observe, cannot see meaning in the practice of their faith as Catholic. **They knew the faith, but seem to have lost the creativity in finding ways to practice it.** In Asia this phenomenon can be considered to be a bit different. Here, family and group pressure and the loudness of the regularity of the practice of the faith by so many others seem to influence the individual and drive him/her to reconsidering how best the faith should be practiced. This already is the opening of the “Porta Fidei” once again in the life of the Seafarer.

“Whole countries and nations where religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing and capable of fostering a viable and working community of faith, are now put to a hard test, and in some cases, are even undergoing a radical transformation, as a result of a constant spreading of an indifference to religion, of secularism and of atheism.” *(Pre Synod document)*

Having just entered on Oct 11th 2012 the Year of Faith as Promulgated in Motu Proprio; “Porta Fidei” of His Holiness Benedict XVI, I significantly note:

“…this time of spiritual grace that the Lord offers us, in recalling the precious gift of faith. We want to celebrate this Year in a worthy and fruitful manner. Reflection on the faith will have to be intensified, so as to help all believers in Christ to acquire a more conscious and vigorous adherence to the Gospel, especially at a time of profound change such as humanity is currently experiencing. We will have the opportunity to profess our faith in the Risen Lord in our cathedrals and in the churches of the whole world; in our homes and among our families, so that everyone may feel a strong need to know better and to transmit to future generations the faith of all times….”

I see this as a **reopening of the “porta fidei”** the door of faith to our seafarers and maritime community. AOS must surely take this opportunity and not miss out on it. Embarking on this renewed voyage with a tailwind of Church Teaching and Christ as the rudder will surely keep us sailing in the faith.
New Evangelization in the Maritime World in Asia

1. The Family of the Seafarer

It is not without reason that the AOS is very concerned about the Family of the Seafarer. The setting sail of New Evangelization into the life of a Seafarer would be best with and through the Family. Under pressure of wanting to manage a relationship with wife, children and Senior relations in the family the Seafarer goes through many a mental and emotional upheaval. Thanks to the Mobile Phone, Skype and other communication modes in our day and age the least one can say is that that the Seafarer is in touch with his family.

According to Pope John Paul II "new evangelization" means to remake the Christian fabric of human society and the fabric of Christian communities themselves and to assist the Church to continue to be present "in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters" so as to animate their lives and guide them to the Kingdom to come.

However when we address new evangelization of the family we have to think in terms of when the seafarer is home, touched shore to be on leave; is there with wife and children. He often struggles as to who is the ‘Captain’ or ‘Master’ in ‘M.V Homehouse’! He could be in the engine room or on deck on board but at his home he wants to be on the bridge! Mother or another relative has been managing his home when he is on board, so the balance of power seems to shift away from him. This can be disconcerting for him. It becomes quite a challenge for him when he finds that his son suddenly calls him “Uncle”; and the grandfather is “Papa”.

The need is to re-bond relationships; to re-invent ways of enjoying his days together as family with Religion and Church matters being given enough space and time, during his stay at home. To help this re-bonding and re-inventing the AOS needs to make use of other Parish structures that help Family life and living - Family cells, Women’s Associations (meeting while the Seafarers is on board); Marriage Encounter; engaged encounter, Couples for Christ etc. Most of our AOS Chaplains are also Parish Priests or Assistant Vicars in Asia; so this should go well if worked at consistently.

2. Shrines of Devotion & Practice

The several Shrines to Our Lady & the Saints in the whole of Asia help tremendously in the New Evangelization wave. There would seldom be a Seafarers who when he returns home on leave does not make a pilgrimage (with Family) to a shrine of his /her choice to revitalize practice of the faith.

In Pakistan we have shrines in honour of Mary at Mariamabad, (named after Mary) in Archdiocese of Lahore (Punjab). St. Thomas the Apostle came (Near Rawalpindi Islamabad) to Texla where now his shrine stands tall to attract especially Seafarers. Khushpur, in the Diocese of Faisalabad is known as the Rome of Pakistan; since a Catholic village from where 22 bishops, many priests, religious, catechists, teachers and
other Church worker emerged! St. Anthonys Chapel, Monora Archdiocese of Karachi is frequented all year round.

**In Bangladesh** chaplains tell us of St. Anthony’s shrine in Dhaka, Our Lady of Diang in Chittagong, and Our Lady’s shrine at Baromari in Mymensingh.

**In Sri Lanka**, the National Basilica of Our Lady of Lanka, Tewatte, Ragama is a huge draw for all Christian seafarers on leave. Our Lady of Matara is a big draw since it is on the edge of the sea.vii

**In India**, huge as it is for the intensity of the practice of Christianity I can name only a few such as the National Shrine Basilica of our Lady of Vailankanni in south India, the Basilica of Our lady of the Mount in Bandra, Mumbai. The Infant Jesus of Prague shrines in Nasik, Maharashtra; and in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh. The Shrine Basilica of Bom Jesu in Goa. Sri Lankans come to the shrine of Bl. Joseph Vaz in Goa. More recently the shrine of St. Alphonsa, the first Indian Saint in Bharananganam, Kerala has been a regular with Seafarers. The retreat Center in Pota, Chalakudi Kerala has thousands of people in varied languages in week long retreats and sessions. Several other Regional shrines nurture and enliven the faith constantly.viii

**In Singapore** the shrine of our Mother of Perpetual Help famously called the Novena church attracts foreign seafarers who love to go there on a Saturday.

**It would be good for the AOS to be involved in these shrines** at least by way of offering themes and topics that may be covered in the preaching during the annual Novenas or on such days like Sea Sunday, World Fisheries Day and such like etc. In Pota it may be possible to have a special Maritime Theme Retreat only for Seafarers and their families. The aims and themes should re-create a ‘porta fide’ towards ‘new evangelization’.

3. **The Information Technology (IT) world**

Enough is being said about this sector already; in the way in which it has changed the lives of our seafarers so intensely! Loneliness of seclusion of the lack of hearing the voice of one’s children and spouse has disappeared! It’s all Mobile! How do you look **today**, what have you dressed **today**? Sorry I can’t be there when my first baby is born; how is the child doing now, whom does the child look like? What are you doing at the **moment**, what have you cooked for the children **today**; is all just a Skype call away! It’s all too engaging and exciting & keeps our seafarers afloat in their jobs and psyche while away from home for such long months.

What is already stored in Wikipedia and the net as material available for anyone to click and see/read/access is already in place. And more will always be forthcoming. Besides this a specific approach is possible to send out/feed in/circulate messages on sms/face book/twitter that **build up the faith of our Seafarers**; help them remember truths etc. Beginnings have already been made I understand. Competition in this sector
to say who is the first to have done this or is doing it already is so huge that I will prefer not to enumerate any. Just sending out religion Quotes, albeit on a daily basis, in my view may not be sufficient in view of New Evangelization in the lives of seafarers.

4. Nothing like the continual supply of the Printed word

It has been an age old practice (since the founding of the AOS 90 years ago) that one of the little ways of keeping the faith on board is the distribution of literature. And there is no shortage of this in any of the chaplaincies in Asia. The variety, the number of languages this goes into, the colour-fullness of it the pocket-size or otherwise size of it is immense. Novenas, holy-picture prayers, book-markers flyers, you name it and we have it... For free distribution. Not to mention Rosary beads and statuettes or small holy frames of saints or with meaningful captions or sayings.

In keeping with New Evangelization we need something new for distribution in the print media on board and at our centers. We need to keep open the “porta fidei”. It would be good to explore how church teaching can be simplified, made understandable, made relevant to the life of our Seafarers and fishing communities etc and such like printed. In what form? This may have to be explored and experimented with; say with a pilot project of sorts.

5. Individual Attention as a concerned Chaplain

Lost to the vagaries of nature and the open sea for days on end; Seafarers look for something inner to satisfy them, something peaceful and something serene. May be the efforts of new Evangelization being made by Chaplains and maritime workers worldwide, and especially in Asia through the Apostleship of the Sea will recover lost ground and re-energize, revitalize the practice of the faith in our seafarers and their families. We are there to help them refuel. These good men and women; lost for the moment in their tortured journeying, need to rediscover the basics of their faith hope and love!

There is nothing like giving individual attention. I do believe that saving one individual, ultimately can save the world. In the Lord there is plenteous Redemption. I need not further elaborate on this since all Chaplains of the AOS in the Asian Region do whatever is in their power and available time to meet Seafarers individually and in Villages of Asia where fishing communities live and struggle with a one-to-one encounter. This should be kept going.

Conclusion

The wave of New Evangelization in Asia, one may say, was begun as a ripple by His Holiness John Paul II of happy memory, on Asian soil in India, Nov 6th 1999, when the Pope signed on the Altars of the Sacred Heart Cathedral, New Delhi and proclaimed his apostolic letter - “Ecclesia in Asia”.

Starting with the subtitle “The Marvel of God’s Plan in Asia’ John Paul II, of happy memory begins his Apostolic Exhortation with these words:

“The Church in Asia sings the praises of the “God of salvation” (Ps 68:20) for choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil, through men and women of that continent. It was in fact in Asia that God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning. He guided the patriarchs (cf. Gen 12) and called Moses to lead his people to freedom (cf. Ex 3:10). He spoke to his chosen people through many prophets, judges, kings and valiant women of faith. In “the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4), he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Saviour, who took flesh as an Asian! Exulting in the goodness of the continent’s peoples, cultures, and religious vitality, and conscious at the same time of the unique gift of faith which she has received for the good of all, the Church in Asia cannot cease to proclaim: “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love endures forever” (Ps 118:1).” xi - John Paul II. xii

Over the years the ripple has taken momentum. One cannot see a ground swell or tsunami like enthusiasm in the task of new evangelization, but the leaven in the dough effect is certainly present. The seeds have been sown. We cannot do everything. The little we do, we must do very well. It is up to “God’s Grace to enter and do the rest” xiii

Chaplains of the AOS continue to pursue the Pastorale of Seafaring communities and Seafarers; they continue to try their best to enliven the faith of this section of the society to help them in their life as Christians and their practice of the faith as Catholics.

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1 Religious cultures and Realities “Ecclesia in Asia”, John Paul II, India 1999. No 6
2 Section 6 ‘Civic and Political life’- Pre-synod document, quoted by Pat Collins CM. Good New Archives Sept/Oct 2011
3 Pre-Synod document quoted by Pat Collins CM. Good New Archives Sept/Oct 2011
4 Motu Proprio , Benedict XVI , Porta Fidei No 8 ; Oct 11, 2011
5 See 3. In this paper below “The Information Technology (IT) world”
6 Xiii Ordinary General Assembly Lineamenta. Section on New Ways of Being Church No9.
7 The Statue of Our Lady on the High Altar was washed away I the Tsunami 26thDec 2004. One week later a person not of the Catholic faith came to give it back to the Parish Priest Fr. Charles Hevawasam, saying he had found this statue in the back yard of his home two kilometers away. He had never seen it before and guessed that it may be Catholic. He came to return it to its rightful place!
8 vii Information on the Shrines has been collected from the AOS National Directors of each country.
9 viii Slogan of motivation of the Congregation of the most holy Redeemer (C.Ss.R. - Redemptorists-, to which I belong)
10 I was present for this great event as Executive Secretary for the commission of Labour of the Catholic Bishops conference of India. I served from 199 till 2006. One major concern of the commission has always been Seafarers, port workers and fishing communities.
12 xi Further to this event in 1999 Pope John Paul II mentioned New Evangelization for the first time in Poland and then explained further in South America.
13 xiii Archbishop Oscar Romero: from his famous words- “The Future not our own”. Servant of God Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez (15 August 1917 – 24 March 1980) was a bishop of the Catholic Church in El Salvador. He became the fourth Archbishop of San Salvador, succeeding Luis Chávez. He was assassinated on 24 March 1980.