

MARITIME MINISTRY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

H.E. Msgr. Paul *HINDER*
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia (United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen)
Abu Dhabi

The Region

1) Geographical Location:

Geographically, the Arabian Gulf is an extension of the Gulf of Oman. Although known in the West as the Persian Gulf, among Gulf Arabs the region is known as the Arabian Gulf.

An inland sea, the Arabian Gulf is connected in the east to the Gulf of Oman by the Strait of Hormuz, and its western end is marked by the major river delta of Shatt al-Arab, which carries the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris.

Covering an area of 233,000 Sq. Kilometers, the Arabian Gulf is 989 kilometers long and separates Iran from Iraq and those countries on the Arabian Peninsula with a coastline along Gulf waters. These waters are quite shallow and range from 50-90 meters in depth.

2) Gulf Cooperation Council

Countries of the Arabian Gulf can be broadly grouped into two categories. The first are those comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council, a regional organization formed in 1981 seeking to unite common social and economic goals and common defense.

Members of the GCC are Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Factors bringing these 6 nations together are their common religious and political traditions and a long and venerable maritime tradition.

Non-GCC countries include Iran and Iraq (geographically) and Yemen (historically).

Non-GCC countries aside, the governments of the region are traditional monarchies governed by constitutional law, which more or less institutionalizes the customs and social mores of the region's conservative Sunni Muslim heritage. The sociopolitical structure in any Gulf Arab state can be classified as benevolent-authoritarian.

GCC economies rely heavily on foreign troops and military hardware (mainly from the US, Britain, and France) to protect themselves from radical Islamic fundamentalism and political terrorism generating in poorer Muslim nations.

Up to the present time, GCC countries (with the exception of Bahrain) have been politically stable, and there has been no serious political issue that could impact the climate.

3) Open Seas Policy

Regional economies are in great need of barrier-free global trade for developmental progress. These economies remain heavily dependent on the import of most of their requirements (food, clothing, building materials, electronic products, and machinery). Moreover, these economies must continue to meet the growing expectations of a generation of local citizens nurtured by great material luxury and a taste for western culture. Hence, sea-lanes must remain open at all cost.

MTS/AOS Partnership in the United Arab Emirates

Port Ministry as a specific apostolate of the Church of England has existed in many shapes and forms in the UAE since 1962 with 2012 celebrating 50 years of giving in the Emirates.

Although the Mission to Seafarers for most of this period was the sole provider for international seafarer's welfare and pastoral and spiritual support in the UAE, in 2007 the Apostleship of the Sea established a chaplain in Fujairah under Msgr. Paul Hinder, Vicar Apostolic of Southern Arabia whose jurisdiction extends over the UAE, Oman, and Yemen.

In 2010, things took a decisive turn generating a new and exciting period of port ministry for the UAE. In response to a request from the then functioning MTS Executive Director in Dubai, Bishop Hinder appointed a full time AOS Chaplain to work in *almost total ecumenical collaboration* with MTS.

Clearly there was need for another Chaplain on staff due to the heavy load of welfare cases, which had been increasing in tandem with the fast paced development of local maritime infrastructure. Moreover, a "Mass priest" was needed, as the vast majority of Christian seafarers are Roman Catholic.

In the last two years, the MTS/AOS partnership has changed dramatically with the AOS chaplain resident in Dubai recently appointed MTS Manager, running the Dubai offices and attending to welfare cases as they arise. A new Executive Director has been appointed by London and is scheduled to arrive in mid September 2012.

UAE Maritime Apostolate

1) Flying Angel

The *Flying Angel* is the world's first sea-going seafarer's support vessel. Launched in February 2007, the vessel services the crews that call in the UAE east coast anchorage of Fujairah (one of the largest anchorages in the world). During last five years it has welcomed over 100,000 seafarers. In 2011, 25,000 seafarers enjoyed satellite Internet, telecommunications at a low cost, a shop, DVD/book library, and a chaplain on board.

2) Seafarers in Distress

Although less than 10% of the world's shipping is considered sub-standard, the unregulated waters of the UAE attract many owners who wish to trade without giving their crews what would internationally be considered as the minimum standard. Added to this fact, trade unions (such as ITF) are yet to be allowed into the country, which makes MTS/AOS the only and last resort for seafarers in distress.

3) Piracy

The High Risk Area is growing every day and any crews approaching the shores of the UAE run the risk of attack, being taken hostage, or even killed by pirates.

4) Welfare fund

We operate a welfare fund, which relies heavily on the generosity and goodwill of the UAE society, and we are grateful to everyone for their support. Without it we would not be able to do our much needed humanitarian work.

Our welfare services include:

- Representing seafarers in disputes involving non-payment of salary, contract substitution, and delays in repatriation
- Emergency food and clothing distribution
- Counseling services for victims or those under threat of piracy
- Abandoned/shipwrecked crews
- Liaising with seafarers and their families in times of difficulties
- Distribution of gifts during Ramadan, Nowruz (Iranian New Year), and Christmas
- A network of Lawyers who handle court cases (on a *pro bono* basis where possible)

Providing Pastoral Care

1) Mass and Sacraments aboard Ship

Celebration of Mass and other sacraments (e.g., Confession, Anointing of the Sick etc) is the exclusive remit of the AOS Chaplains resident in Dubai and Fujairah. As mentioned previously, one of the motivating factors behind the formation of a joint MTS/AOS maritime apostolate was the declared need on the part of MTS Dubai for AOS chaplains who could also serve as "Mass priests" for Roman Catholic Seafarers coming mostly from South Asia and the Far East. At times, Eastern European Seafarers who are Orthodox will attend Mass and receive communion.

All other specifically "religious" ministry is shared. This would include the blessing of ships, workboats, oilrigs, wind farm installation vessels, and maritime business offices, as well as praying over those in need and distributing religious literature, rosaries, and scapulars etc.

2) No “External” Maritime Co-Workers

Due to geopolitical realities inherent in the region, port security in Dubai and the Northern Emirates is extremely tight and precludes the formation of teams of parish-based, lay Maritime Co-Workers. At some points, the UAE is less than 40 nautical miles from Iran. Traveling by sea from the northern emirate of Ras Al Khaimah to Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman requires sailing through the Strait of Hormuz. Hence, with the exception of a few creeks, entrance to all GCC ports is restricted to those connected with a maritime company, having undergone CID clearance and holding valid entry permit. This is also the case in all other GCC countries.

3) Formation of “Internal” Maritime Co-Workers

This has not, however, prevented the formation and utilization of willing Catholic lay volunteers already employed in the maritime industry with easy accessibility into ports. Those working for ship agents or as chandlers, as well as port/free zone workers employed in the business of shipping, are of great help in informing port chaplains of seafarers in need. In addition, groups of volunteers working in local businesses as part of CSR initiatives are gathered during the holy month of Ramadan and Advent season to wrap small gifts for seafarers.

Since 2007, there has been an active AOS team in place in Fujairah made up of non-seafaring maritime personnel who assist the Port Chaplain in conducting a monthly Mass celebration inside the port for seafarers on workboats and supply vessels. This team also assists in the annual distribution of Xmas gifts to transient and resident seafarers in the Fujairah anchorage. Moreover, they inform MTS/AOS Dubai of any seafarers in distress.

Since 2010, sustained networking has been underway with Catholic, non-seafaring, maritime personnel employed in other major ports of Dubai and the Northern Emirates. Hard work has paid off. With these networks in place the AOS Chaplain in Dubai is able to more effectively pastor Catholic seafarers. In the past year two individuals from Jebel Ali Port have been trained and appointed as Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist.

Ministering in a Muslim Environment

1) Moderate Islam

With the exception of Saudi Arabia and parts of Yemen, Islam in most Arabian Gulf countries is quite moderate with non-Muslims guaranteed the right to practice their faith and to build houses of worship. In some Gulf cities Hindu temples and Sikh *Gurdwaras* now exist alongside Christian churches --something unheard of in Cairo or Beirut or Damascus. Moreover, Gulf Arabs assume that Westerners and many Asians are non-Muslim...no problem...to each his own. Although non-Muslims are free to proselytize among themselves (albeit discreetly), attempting to

convert Muslims to another faith is against the law. However, Muslims are free to proselytize non-Muslims.

2) Relations with the Authorities

Daily contact with Gulf Arabs working in port security, the police, and immigration is usually marked with courtesy and respect although at times some officials can be a bit diffident and distant. On the whole, however, officials are proactive in helping to solve many of the problems that seafarers face, oftentimes going out of their way and working overtime in order to get a problem settled. Obviously knowing the language is a great boon in terms of tackling the many problems that come our way.

3) Conclusion

Maritime ministry in the UAE is at best exciting, often challenging and always rewarding. The UAE is enjoying fast paced development, and it looks to most who visit like a gleaming example of how life could be for the rest of the Middle East. With its tolerance of all world religions, modern infrastructure, and efficient bureaucracy, the UAE is welcoming to expatriate workers from over 100 countries. It has become the main financial and business hub for the region. It has also become the major center for maritime industry in the region, since most of the shipping going into or out of the Arabian Gulf will call at one of the ports in the UAE.