

NEW REALITIES – NEW EVANGELIZATION

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There is no doubt that the maritime world has changed in the last decade. We have bigger ships, fewer crew members, tougher economic times, less time for shore leave, the emergence of major piracy issues, different ethnic composition of ship's crews, and the advent of better electronic means of communication, amongst other things.

Seafarers Time At Port

It would seem that fewer and fewer seafarers have the time to leave ships while in port. This has a major implication for our Stella Maris centres and port chaplains. The services that our centres used to provide can no longer be acknowledged as reaching all the seafarers that they should. Ship visitors, especially chaplains on ships and on the docks, are more important than ever.

There is a problem here because dioceses are finding fewer and fewer priests and sisters to work at the port. While lay people do a heroic service, we must consider the administration of sacraments and evangelization, which is among the main reasons the church, has a presence at the port in the first place.

Although the role of the priest is to provide sacraments, it is also the responsibility of the ship visitor to provide pastoral care. Both of these go hand in hand. One cannot happen without the other. Evangelization calls all of us to be the face of Christ to all seafarers and port workers. Ship visitors need a spiritual director to achieve these aims.

Personally, I feel that port and ship chaplaincy must take over more of the churches efforts in our Apostolate of the Sea because when you think about it, about 50% of the seafarers, who are on a ship at any one time, do not even get off a ship during the ship's time in port.

Countries of Origin

Let us look at the maritime world from the perspective of the new realities of the countries of origin of seafarers. I do not know for certain how many seafarers there are on ships at any given time. I presume about 1 ½ million. The largest number of seafarers still comes from the Philippines, but the new reality is that between Russia and Ukraine, there are almost 200,000 seafarers. Ukraine alone supplies over 80,000 seafarers. Recent statistics indicate that Catholic and Orthodox seafarers make up about 60% of all seafarers. These numbers force us to review how we look at the Apostleship of the Sea.

Eastern European Seafarers

In Odessa, and other well respected schools in Ukraine, over 8000 cadets a year study at the academy to become seafarers. Over 1000 specialists graduate every year. That is the reason why you see so many Ukrainian officers on ships.

This has a huge implication for the church. It must study and look at Eastern Europe culture, faith and society. Every ethnic group is different of course, but to properly understand the Eastern European mentality, you have to study it.

The obvious first impression is that Eastern Christianity is not similar to the Western (Latin) Church. The church calendar is different, food is unique, and even the way they might look at the ship is different. Some seafarers may look at a ship as a place of work, and while it is that, a Slavic mentality might also look at it as home. You are actually visiting seafarers in their temporary homes. The rules of visiting apply, as if you came to them at their place of residence in their native countries.

Religious needs will be met if we understand the facts. Eastern Europeans are a religiously conservative people. They actually like to see their priests dressed like priests (in cassocks) and obviously to present themselves as members of the clergy. Since Eastern Europeans have an instinct to praying before icons, it is very important to bring them to an Eastern Church with icons and iconostases and a place to light a candle before the icons and time for some quiet prayer. Those centres with buses for seafarers would do these seafarers a huge favour if they could arrange for a visit to an Eastern Church from time to time.

Eastern Catholic Churches across the world must start to consider their responsibilities in supplying chaplaincy to each Stella Maris Centre around the world to meet the spiritual needs of seafarers from their home countries.

New Requirements In Stella Maris Staffing

Obviously there might not be an Eastern Catholic Church near every port but there probably are Eastern Catholics (Ukrainians). It would make sense to me if each Stella Maris Centre would seek out volunteers, ship visitors who could visit seafarers, speak to them in their own language, and organize religious and cultural events especially at the major feast days of the church year. Centres should have newspapers and other material which serve the needs of the seafarers. All seafarers get home sick and anything which would make them feel at home is very much a part of evangelization.

All Seafarers' centres should now have chaplains and volunteers who reflect the ethnic composition of the seafarers coming to port. There one would expect to see local Filipino, Russian, Ukrainian, Indian, Chinese, and volunteers of the various ethnic groups that make up the world's seafarer population.

The Catholic Church is a universal church. The many ethnic groups make up who we are as a Christian community and it is our responsibility to represent our church family in all its diversity.

Spirituality Of Our Ships Visit

There is an element of superstition and magic in any seafarer's life. Even those, who say that they do not believe, pray when the ship is in huge seas and high winds.

Knowing God and prayer are necessary elements of our presence on ships. This does not mean that we are very direct with our message. One of the best elements of any chaplain is not what he/she says but how we witness to who we are. Chaplains must look, listen, learn, and pray. Seafarers open up to people they trust. That is why long serving chaplains and volunteers are important. They get known, trusted, and loved. They become more effective witnesses.

Ethnic Mixes On Ships

One major problem today is the tendency by some ship owners to mix ethnic groups on a particular ship. This is done on purpose to have a natural tension on board. When work and profit are the main reason for hiring a crew, a possible family atmosphere of the staff may not be very important to owners. A ship visitor needs appropriate training and formation in order to help smooth uneasy situations. We must always recognise the importance of a ship visitor who has the formation and expertise to offer guidance. Sometimes it is the responsibility of the church to spot any practices which are against basic human rights and then help to solve this problem.

Seafarers operate in one of the most dangerous occupations in the world. They are mobile workers and are very vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, ill treatment, and injustice. Ship's visitors should know how to help in any given situation. There are organizations which can and should help when this is spotted and reported. But chaplains should not think that they are policemen, but at the same time, they cannot just let these incidents go unnoticed. Proper procedures must be learned and followed up on to improve the lives of all at sea.

Piracy

Piracy is a new and major problem. We all know about the Somali pirates but the Gulf of Guinea, on the other side of Africa, is becoming a new "hot spot". There are hundreds of attacks each year and, even at present, probably hundreds of seafarers are being held. Abandoned seafarers are often subject to cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment. It is unacceptable that today this should go on without the church's voice of protest and its diplomacy to ease this pain.

Not only the Ship but also the Port itself

Our evangelization efforts should also consider the port itself and not just the seafarers. Very often port workers will only meet someone from the church while they are at work. There are the security guards, crane drivers, truck drivers, port personal, and all others who work there. A priest in a cassock cannot and will not

talk to everyone at the port, but his very visible presence at the port is a witness in itself. Again the port is a dangerous place to work. The visible presence of God at the port can put a lot a people at ease because they see the presence of Christ amongst them.

The challenge for our church is to ensure that a priest is allocated to work with seafarers and port workers whether it is part of his parish community or sole responsibility to the care of the people of the sea.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the role of a ship and port chaplain is a very challenging task in a quickly changing world. No one can perform this work without a personal source of spiritual substance through private prayer and the sacraments. Our co-workers must all be Christ-centred people who witness what is in their soul.

I pray that as we start our week here in Rome, we may be filled with a renewed strength to rededicate ourselves of bringing Christ to those we serve.