For those of you who are new to the Apostleship of the Sea, and even for those who are not, I feel it is important to briefly present the historical facts, as we know it, regarding the origins of AOS, its development into what it is today and the challenges for the future.

Despite the fact that the first Disciples were fishers and the Church at its beginning relied very much on maritime transport for its development and expansion, it was surprisingly late in developing a “Catholic” pastoral approach for the people of the sea. It is true that the maritime world was not globalized as it is now, shipping was dominated by certain nations and vessels were managed by national crews, while fishing was entirely local and artisanal.

Already in the middle of the nineteenth Century, a number of Catholic-inspired organizations offered occasional assistance to seafarers, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which opened seafarers centres in Dublin, London, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Quebec and Sydney. In Italy, the Bishop of Piacenza, Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, as well as allocating chaplains for the ports of Genoa and New York, sent his missionaries on board ships to accompany the thousands of migrants who left Europe in search of a better future especially in the Americas. In 1890 the movement of the Apostleship of Prayer, through a series of articles published in its magazine, the Messenger of the Sacred Heart, invited its members to pray for Catholic seafarers and organized the sending of magazines and books to them. But it was only on the 4 October that the AOS was formally constituted by a group of lay people by the initiative of an Anglican convert. On 17 April 1922 this new ministry received the approval of the first Constitution and the blessing of Pius XI.

In 1925 the centers were already 30 in 20 nations. In 1927 we had the first International Congress in Normandy, France, in Port-en-Bessin and the transfer of the AOS headquarters from Glasgow to London. In 1931 the second International Congress was celebrated in London where the A.M.I.C. (Apostolatus Maris International Concilium) was established with the membership of one hundred and fifty centers. The responsibility of the new organism through an Executive Committee and a Secretariat was to keep contact with the centers through a newsletter.

In 1934 the third International Congress was held in Hamburg with a telegram of congratulations and best wishes from Pope Pius XI. The Congress, while recognizing the
independence of the national centers, reconfirmed the role of A.M.I.C. as an International Coordinating Center.

The fourth and fifth International Congress were held in 1936 in Sables d’Olonne, France, and in Anvers, Belgium, in 1937.

The sixth International Congress, held in Glasgow in 1938, decided to mobilize the Catholic Action for a Crusade of prayers and a campaign to build new Stella Maris Centers to antagonize the antireligious campaign of the communists.

At the start of the Second World War (1939), many of the two hundred and twenty-six Centers reduced their activities or closed, while the International Secretariat moved back to Glasgow. In 1940 Fr. Anthony Van Rixtel, from Rotterdam, the Netherlands, wrote to the Holy Father asking to establish in Rome a Coordinating Center. Most probably that request was motivated by the desire to bring to an end the internal fighting.

But we had to wait until 1 August 1952, with the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution “Exsul familia” by Pope Pious XII, for the establishment of an International General Secretariat of the Apostleship of the Sea within the Sacred Consistorial Congregation, with a Secretary General, an Executive Secretary and an International Promotor.

In October 1958 Pius XII approved the “Leges” which established the spiritual objective of this Apostolate and made sure that every seafarer receive assistance from the Holy Mother Church.

A Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Tourism (later «Itinerant Peoples») which included the «Sector Apostolatus Maris», was created in 1970.

1977 and 1982 were two important years for AOS with the promulgation of the Decree giving the Norms and Faculties for the spiritual care of seafarers and others travelling by seas and the Decree regarding some special faculties to Chaplains and privileges to the faithful of the various sectors of people on the move.

The Apostolic Constitution Pastor Bonus in 1988 changed the Pontifical Commission created in 1970 into a fully independent Dicastery of the Roman Curia, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples.

Then finally, through the Motu Proprio Stella Maris of John Paul II, it was given the appropriate structure and instruments for a fruitful work among the people of the sea.

After having looked at our past I should talk about the present reality of AOS. In all honesty I have to say that it is very difficult to offer a general overview of whom we are
and where we are. If you ask me how many AOS centers there are in the world, I don’t know the exact answer. We are many but for sure we are less than in the past. We have the latest and often sophisticated instrument for communication (cell phones, I-pad, internet, WiFi, etc.) but we remain isolated and we do not know how to communicate. How many e-mails will never be answered, how many messages are lost on the cyberspace. Some of our chaplains are overloaded by their work because, apart from being Port Chaplains, they have many other tasks to fulfill. Very often, once they get trained and prepared for the work, chaplains are moved to other pastoral responsibilities. Money is always a problem for our centers because it is not enough or not properly used. Personality issues often interfere and jeopardize the work done. Bishop Promoters and National Directors, if and when appointed, are not prepared for the task entrusted to them. In many maritime countries the Motu Proprio Stella Maris is not yet known and implemented.

But I do not want to paint a gloomy picture of AOS. Around the world we have hundreds of dedicated chaplains and volunteers who are doing a wonderful job, loving and caring for seafarers, fishers and their families. We have been working ecumenically with other Christian denominations for more than 40 years. When a tragedy strikes, our people often are the first to intervene to bring consolation and support. Thousands of masses are celebrated to reinvigorate the faith of the seafarers. AOS is the face of the Church for this people invisible to our society.

A few challenges:

Looking back we can say that the origin of our ministry was in the Apostleship of Prayer. Prayer was the first “service” that the members of our Apostolate offered to the seafarers. Religious communities even “adopted” ports to guarantee to AOS the constant help of prayer. Mr. Arthur Gannon, the then General Secretary of AOS, at the International Conference held in Rome in 1958 attributed the fast growth of this apostolic “Work” to prayer. Nowadays often we get caught up more “in doing” than “praying”. Seeing the reports and what is done by AOS around the world, I can say that our members are people of action more than contemplation. Let us think about our past and try to create “prayer groups” for the people of the sea. Sometimes we have old and sick people that tell us: I am old, I am useless just spending the day in bed or confined to a wheelchair. We should put a rosary in their hands and tell them: You can do a lot for the Apostleship of the Sea, everyday pray a rosary to end injustices in the maritime world, pray for the seafarers in trouble or crossing the Gulf of Aden. In this way we will help people to give a new meaning to their life and AOS will receive great benefits from their prayers. Let us try to be not only Apostleship of the Sea but Apostleship of prayerSHIP.

In the initial founding group, there were no clergy all were lay people. In the
present situation of Church, with fewer and fewer number of ordained priests, unfortunately a Bishop will not appoint a young chaplain to assist people that they do not see. Learning from our beginning we have to turn to the lay people. Our Apostolate can offer a great opportunity to people of different background and education to be involved in providing welfare to the seafarers. The ideal would be to have young people. Therefore we could try to go to maritime schools to get students involved. They would have the opportunity to hear directly from their future colleagues what their life will be. If we cannot have young fellows, we can turn to people who have retired and have time and talents to put at the service of the people of the sea. Let us try to recruit more APOSTLES of the sea.

As the first members of AOS, every day we walk up the gangways of thousands of vessels, we sit in the mess or we chat with whoever comes in, every night the doors of our Centers open to welcome tired and weary seafarers for a drink or a Skype call to their family. Some of them are sailing in rusted vessels at the limit of safety, others are abused with exploitative contracts and all of them are afraid to be blacklisted if they blow the whistle. As one chaplain puts it, we are the first link in the chain to put seafarers in touch with appropriate authorities. Let us give a strong and prophetic voice to the people who do not have one.

Maritime countries in the world create and develop long term maritime policies according to different economic and political interests. In order not to find ourselves unprepared it is necessary that as AOS we start planning at the international level, to the regional level then to the national and local level. In the different areas we should identify where ports will be developed, prepare and train people in order to be ready and present as soon as the vessels start sailing in these new ports. Considering what I mentioned before, it might be necessary to concentrate ourselves in a few ports with a stronger presence than to be scattered and isolated in many little ports.

Cruise ship is a new challenging ministry. There are different experiences and ways to have a Catholic presence on board. While we should respect the peculiarity of each nation in developing this ministry, what should be common, essential and not negotiable is the specific training and preparation for a priest to be on board of a cruise vessel. Being a chaplain on board require more than reading a manual. Specific formation is essential to provide a professional service to the seafarers and I would like to encourage every region to establish his own training programme. In AOS we have many qualified people who could be good speakers in different maritime topics. From the “AOS Manual for Chaplains and Pastoral Agents” we can get general guidelines on how to develop these courses.

Fishing is, in a way, a painful subject for AOS. At every World Congress we talk about it, many of you do a great job in offering direct assistance to fishers in troubles but we cannot really get our acts together and leave a print in this sector. It is necessary to give
new vigor to the ten years old AOS International Committee on Fishing. We should rethink to the idea that was floated at the last World Congress, in Poland, to organize a special meeting only for the chaplains and volunteers involved in fishing.

Usually during the Congresses we are planning for the future and I would like to suggest: let us plan for the Centennial celebration of AOS on October 4, 2020, maybe in Glasgow. It seems so far but is only eight years ahead, and it will be here sooner than we can imagine. These eight years ahead could be called “The road to the Centennial of AOS”, a road for a renewal and a new enthusiasm for our apostolate.

We should not be afraid to lift the anchor and sail in to the open sea of our future. As long as we keep looking at Mary, *Star of the Sea*, we will never lose the way and will be guided to the safe port of Jesus.