

From the maritime school benches to the sweat of the sea...

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Over 12 years ago, I landed my backpack in Cebu, Philippines, to spend the last of my 22 years of sailing and live the transition from life at sea to an active retirement on land¹. This transition was spent in a professional maritime school, which I saw growing during those 12 years: from 2,500 students in 1991 to more than 5,000 in 2003!

Let's position the maritime world of the Philippines: the total number of registered seamen in 2000 was 520,000 of which 200,000 were active at the end of 2001 (an increase of more than 20% versus 1995 and of 78% versus 1990).

Getting back to Cebu's "Maritime Education and Training Center", it is a private university "for the mass" now counting more than 25,000 students in different courses of which the maritime course is one of the highlight, because of the promises and promotion of adventure and dollars Norwegian and Japanese maritime investors finance part of that school and give it a good reputation of professionalism. They chose their own students from the first year and request from them a discipline that's far from the discipline of the unselected students!

I saw the growth and the transformation of that College into a University, trying in the meantime, to find there my mission as a Chaplain, keeping, however, in the back of my mind that my life as a seaman had been at sea for quite many years and its waves were my proper environment. Consequently, for the first 5 years, I went back to sea every 6 months with the profession of electrical engineer.

I found in this maritime university many retired and former seamen, now professional instructors with the goal of orienting the students towards seamanship by reminding them of the classic and unchangeable rules of sailing. Very seldom did I see instructors able to bring also to the consciousness of the students the technical and cultural evolution of the mentality in the shipping industry especially after 1995...

From 1995 the international laws became more and more strict and were also imposed in the 133 maritime schools of the country. The presence of foreign investors, especially the Norwegian and the Japanese, set certain rules and

¹ Cebu is an island with a population of 3 million people. Crossroads of the Maritime routes, it is situated in the middle of the Philippines, an archipelago of more than 7000 islands.

increased the level of recruitment and formation and applied a one-year training during which the students were paid in dollars. Nothing could be better to attract the young people who all want "to see other countries in all freedom" as the advertising claimed in the local newspapers. Between 1994 and 2000 there was a tremendous increase in the "call of the sea" and the expansion of maritime education.

Today, reflecting the trade of those exceptional years, we have more than 1,000 graduates at each graduation in that school. The students receive their diploma with, as a bonus, the uniform for the traditional photo and the pride of having completed an important step of their life. However, the first steps into seamanship are the beginning of a long and hard life that may last many months or even many years! They first have to go to Manila to apply at different agencies with the hope of finding a job on board.

Chaplain at school... trying to find a place.

I was warmly welcomed by the school Director during April 1991 who toured me around the campus introducing me as the Chaplain, but within me, my best known and loved origins and environment were "coming from the sea and ready to go back"! At our first meeting, the Director decided, right away, that the faculty members should attend a recollection weekend including Mass and Confession! The agenda was written and it was up to me to dive in and prepare a Recollection program... my first one.

I was slowly discovering Cebu and its port, but its maritime College with its flock of youths in uniform was a ground where the local Church did not venture except for Mass on the first Friday of the month. As for the reality of the Apostolate of the Sea and for the network of "Stella Maris" across the world, it was mentioned in a school booklet but very few people cared about the future of this teaching and experiences of "the sweat of the sea" while on board.

That is how the project of the first "newsletter" came to my mind; a little brochure of 12 pages filled with letters from seamen of Cebu ... I was slowly being convinced that a new chapter of my seaman's life was being written, thanks to the youth, to the seamen and their families. I shared my first experiences at meetings with the local clergy, but that provoked more confusion than hope. In learning that I had spent 22 years at sea not as a Chaplain but as an electrician seaman, the very first question that I had to answer was: "did you celebrate Mass aboard ships?" I guess now that some did not dare to ask abruptly if I knew how to celebrate !. Another moment of confusion; during the first 3 months on the campus of the maritime school, almost every day, the same question when they saw me roaming around: "is there Mass today and at what time?" The answer had already been published and posted: 2 Masses per week, Wednesday and Friday. But some also asked: "Why are you here if there is no Mass today?" The answer always brought a smile to their face: "simply to be with you."

I discovered my "new parish" by foot, by bus or jeepney, walking in the heat and the dust of the port, accompanied by some students who fought their timidity to learn and practice a few English words with this foreign Chaplain and for the pride of being the first to join what was to become the "Apostolate of the Sea" of Cebu. There was talk about the 1992 Apostolate of the Sea World

Congress in Houston, Texas, and the possibility of a delegation from Cebu... but we also visited other maritime schools and discovered the province, sometimes traveling on the roof of jeepneys... Tongues became looser on the piers and on the roads and the heat, the dust and the sweat were forgotten-We were also very busy looking for a local or a house to start the "Stella Maris" of Cebu. Why look any further than the containers that had been my environment for so many years on board and that were now on the piers of the Port of Cebu where we walked every day? Another source of confusion was that, for a long time, I delayed announcing my return to sea at school and to my surprised Jesuit Companions. I was scheduled to join the ship in HongKong. The Chaplain himself is going to sea! " How can you leave now when the new roots of this apostolate are so fragile and are only beginning to strengthen? What is this fixed idea to go back to sea? You are not tired of the sea and the waves?" I could always find a way out of such situations with silences and even some stubbornness, but the questions always surprised me. An Indian chief engineer I sailed with, very devoted catholic from Goa, once told me: "Don't you see that you are losing your time at sea when there is so much to be done on land, go take a look at India for example?"

I found the proper answer to those questions only very recently: "I am willing to listen to you when you talk about losing my time at sea for 22 years, but I also ask you to listen to this: for 22 years I could observe what happened at sea, how the waves follow the waves and are never identical, exactly like the ships and the people, the storms or the moments of solitude. I saw how the Vietnamese refugees surprised us at sea on a ship under French flag, how the French flag and the sailing conditions have rapidly evolved, how choices must be made and seem to go adrift, how I found myself the only Frenchman among international crews, giving my vocation as a Jesuit a larger international sensitivity and an opportunity to grow, and how, after many vacation periods in the Philippines, I chose this country to live my Mission with the people of the sea. And how do you explain the fact that I am today in Cebu, surrounded by all these young men at the maritime school, developing Christian formation and experiences that would help them keep the road "on land or at sea".

The first ties with the students, the seamen and their families naturally went through expected and unexpected breaks and the moments of departure have always been "special", almost like an "hour" that only lasts a few minutes... but they can also be a fruitful crisis! Nobody dares to say "Go" (of course!) and that is also part of the "hour", but the "Come back" is in the hands of the "POHON" and of its providence. POHON is one of the first friendly word that I learned in Cebu; it can be translated by our French saying "A-DIEU-VAT " or "GOD'S WILL". The

leavings, the returns, the dangers of the crossings and the absences... really the parable of my life's experiences continues on land and at sea...

It speaks to me as something inspiring and convincing among the waves of confusion and determination in the history of those young men and women, future seamen and migrants of the Philippines.

Their youth is their best passport. With these letters and the trust that makes them write, they learn to overcome the obstacles, to live with the "waves of destiny", as in the beautiful song in Cebuano that always make them cry when I sing it. They learn to talk about those waves and to multiply their chances of success for themselves and for following generations. They taught me to find my own place on land and to be happy during the first 5 years of my retirement, without any regret to have turned a page. The newsletter that we have published together for more than 12 years has become a treasure of living memory, of their traditions and their voices; it's their "taking root" to the concerns of the Church to make contact with the people of the sea. It is also my own "taking root" and the special moment when I listen to the waves of their lives, even from far away, and their worries for the future. This newsletter has become a perfect tool for those who want to join this ministry and to get to know it from the inside. Our newsletters travel around the world and may give them the knowledge and the assurance that someone, somewhere has read their story and that the bottle at sea has landed somewhere...

For the last ten years, during recollections and seminars on "awakening" to maritime life given in maritime schools in the Visayas, on their rights and responsibilities, seamen and seamen's wives came to talk about the "sweat of the sea, on board and at home"... It has a strong taste of salt! There were tears even in front of hundreds of silent students who were sometimes shocked by such emotion... but they bore fruits, although not always immediately...

Many times those seamen and even more their wives expressed, for the first time, what is the reality of their life, as seafarers, as husbands and wife and parents through thick and tick! In the time of routine, and times of crisis ... They are our best instructors leading the seamen-to-be through their first approach of this career even before they set foot on board.

That is how Joemar, Jayson, Richieboy and Brian, among many, revealed themselves in the first experience of talking in public about their experiences on board. Seamen's wives, at first very shy, are now frustrated if interrupted in their sharing. In their own way they all reveal the fire that burns within themselves and invite the young students to live a moment of intense listening of what is to become this career, in the concrete life of those young seamen. What a show of miracles!

After three years in school, very often surviving from little jobs, or living, for a few, under the shelter of Stella Maris Center, they will have learned how to survive in Manila: I think of Boyet. For one and a half year, at the mercy of his employer,

while he waited for the first ship to board, he cleaned the summerhouse, washing and ironing the clothes but particularly taking care of the old grandfather. He knew how to grab the first opportunity, without a single peso to pay his first boarding! Another one. Allan, wrote me a letter describing his wait at his company in Manila... before we published it, we had somewhat "fixed" his letter not to reveal the name nor dangerous information, but once published, he was scared to be blacklisted because the captain had found the newsletter and it was on his desk! Better not to stir mud in the world of the merchants of men! However, we must know how to open the eyes of the new arrivals on the maritime market.

This kind of learning is not taught on school benches, but in the trust of partners of Stella Maris, which does not count the time for listening and pursue the dialogue. Their youth is their best passport but it must go through the baptism of the sweat of their forehead and of the sea.

Conclusion...

The flesh and bones of this Mission with those young people is to propose those seminars and recollections, to publish the newsletters, to patiently weave the chains of Stella Maris network to make it a "family", to celebrate with them when they return unexpectedly, to prepare them for marriage or to let the years of the unmarried bear their own fruits. All that has been created with the patience of accompanying these young people to face their future, not to suffer it.

The proposed retreats to some volunteer seamen or students at the Jesuit Retreat House are needed, they want to experience silence, they want a trustworthy dialogue to discover God besides them, a God who knows how to walk on land as on the sea... God at sea is besides them and with them even while sleeping !. He also acts for man. It is the secret of His companionship, which does not stop calling young people to put themselves at His service and become a Companion!