

It happened the other night in the Port of Davao

All I want for Christmas is a Santa Clause red suit!!!!

At our Stella Maris Seafarers' Center in the Port of Davao, Southern Philippines, we have established the tradition over the past 12 years of our existence of following the time-honored custom of caroling on board ships during the weeks before Christmas. This year is no exception.

We were scheduled to start on Saturday, 8 December. We had a good guitarist and a few good singers who could carry the melodies and also put out considerable volume. With the help of the "volunteer" choir, the caroling would not be a burden on our Staff. I should have been less optimistic. On Thursday night, Elmer, the guitarist and lead singer came to our Center and said "goodbye" to all of us - he was leaving on the evening Super Ferry to Manila. The implications did not dawn on me - maybe because I was a bit tired. Elmer is a Maritime School graduate and he was going to Manila in search of placement on a ship to do his compulsory Apprenticeship period. He had located relatives who were willing to let him stay at their home near the Port Area.

Next morning, it hit me - there goes our Guitarist and lead Singer and probably most of the volunteer Choir!!!! And so it was that we had a caroling schedule but no singers aside from our AOS Staff who had more spirit than actual singing ability!!!

In desperation I turned to my friend, Fr. Pete Lamata, the Parish Priest of the nearby Parish of St. Joseph the Worker. As always, Fr. Pete was a good listener and sympathized with my problem. He told me to speak to his Parish Manager who would arrange for one of the Parish Choirs to assist me.

And so it is that yesterday (Saturday: 8th December) we started our annual round of caroling on board the ships. Yesterday's ship, the M/V Al Zohal, was still loading bananas -- 1/2 the crew was still working when they all should have been "off duty" prior to sailing at dawn Sunday morning. Our "Volunteer Choir" consisted of three middle-aged women from the parish and a really good musician with an electric Yamaha organ. They made magic with the hymns & carols. The crew is all Sri Lankan; mostly Muslim.

After the first 4 songs, they asked us to stop a few minutes. Some of the guys ran out and came back with their own traditional type of tamborining. Then it got even livelier! The Captain asked us to stay for dinner and also mentioned that he would like to have some help on last minute Christmas shopping --- he was signing off contract once the ship got to Saudi.

My Co-worker, Virgie, said that she and Franz, our 2nd driver would run downtown and do the shopping. Most of the items on the Captain's list were Christmas decorations for his home and most important was "one Santa Claus red Suit" for himself to play Santa for his kids when he got home. He had told his young children that he may be a bit late for Christmas but, when he did come, he would bring Santa with him!!!! And so, Captain Raid jokingly said: "All I want for Christmas is one red Santa Clause suit!!!!"

During the meal we found out that many of the decorations were for the ship so, Lisa, Virgie and Rosie volunteered to stay on board and help direct the crew in decorating the ship's mess halls and common rooms - one for the officers and one for the crew. I was sent back to the Center to run things for the usual Saturday night influx of Filipino Seafarers from the

American President Lines' container ships, which come in every Saturday afternoon for 4-6 hours in Port.

Then when the crew-members on duty heard that we had a program for the off-duty guys, they asked us to stay on and repeat the performance for them! And so we had a "double-header with overtime" for decorating the social rooms and mess halls. The 3 ladies got back to our Center at 11:45PM --- tired but happy. The ship sailed at 4:30AM Sunday, 9 December.

Because of the strict laws in Saudi, the 26-member crew would not be able to get off their ship. Once they leave Davao City, they are confined to the ship in all 7 ports in which they discharge bananas. But as they sailed away, they said they were happy; the 40 days' round trip would be made easier by the fact that they had the best-decorated ship on the route!!!

And so it goes: At our Stella Maris Seafarers' Center in the Port of Davao, our Pastoral model is "hospitality expressed through service deluxe to our Brothers in Christ from many different cultures". The service may be caroling and helping to decorate the common rooms of a ship to help soften the harsh all-male environment. Best of all, we have fun doing it as do the volunteers from the Parish who admit: "...this is a different experience from the parish!!!"