

XXII° WORLD CONGRESS OF APOSTOLATUS MARIS

Gdynia, Poland

June 24 -29, 2007

Explanation of the theme:

“In Solidarity with the People of the Sea as Witnesses of Hope, through Proclamation of the Word, Liturgy and Diakonia”

1. In preparation to the next AOS World Congress, we have received numerous suggestions to the effect that its theme should be “pastoral” and that we should take this occasion to better understand our vocation and pastoral commitment in favor of the People of the Sea. We believe that this suggestion is timely, as there has already been many initiatives and efforts in that direction in many parts of the world in recent years. The word “pastoral” is taken here in the wide sense, as we do not want to exclude in our apostolate anything that is inherent to the life and work of the men and women of the sea. It is hoped that this will be also an opportunity for AOS to reflect on and take stock on what constitutes its spirituality and its specific contribution to the maritime world.
2. The maritime profession remains today one of the most difficult, demanding and dangerous occupations in the world. The seafarers, fishers and their families are facing all manners of difficulties and dangers and they are the first ones to suffer the negative effects of globalization (see Final Document of Rio World Congress, 2002). Our reflection and commitment towards the people of the sea is rooted in the conviction expressed by the Second Vatican Council that: *“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts”* (Gaudium et Spes, Preface).
3. Amid new pressures and new threats against the working and living conditions of seafarers and their families, AOS vocation is to stand alongside them, in their struggle for more dignity when their rights are ignored and “to support the work of the faithful who are called to witness to their Christian life in this sphere” (Motu Proprio, Stella Maris, Art I). In a world which is increasingly marked by lack of hope, we do so by keeping the virtue of hope alive in our hearts and by looking for the signs of its presence in the maritime world. As *“Church we have the responsibility of reading the signs of time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel... we should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come.We must be able to understand the aspirations, the yearnings and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live”* (G.S N°4).
With this in mind we shall, during the Congress, examine our present and future involvement as a Church organization in a maritime world in constant evolution, with particular reference to merchant ships, fishing vessels, cruise ships, yachts, port workers, seafarers’ family organizations, maritime students, etc.

4. After reflection and consultation it was decided that our Congress be “developed” around 2 main notions: “**witnessing**” and “**hope**” inspired by 1 Peter 3:15-17: “*Always be ready to give an answer when someone asks you about your hope. Give a kind and respectful answer and keep your conscience clear.*”

These two realities will be articulated around Proclamation of the Word, Liturgy and Diakonia, bearing in mind the Holy Father Benedict XVI’s teaching in his Encyclical “Deus Caritas Est”: “*The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia), and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being*” (N.25).

This Congress will be a time for AOS to interrogate itself about its commitment to these three-fold responsibilities which constitute the essence of all pastoral activities.

- The place of the proclamation of the Word in the Apostleship of the Sea.
- The celebration of the Sacraments as the source and “raison d’être” of our pastoral care.
- The service to all but especially to the poorest as the priority and hallmark of AOS.

5. We have also included the term solidarity in the theme for two reasons. First, as we are going to Gdynia, which is 20 km from Gdansk, the birthplace of the “Solidarnosc” movement, we have thought that it would be fitting to render a tribute to the Polish labour movement Solidarity, which was instrumental in bringing such great historical changes and finally made possible Europe’s reunification. The second reason is more theological as we believe that our mission is God’s vocation realized “in solidarity” with the maritime world by sharing the lives of those who are part of it. The context marked by secularism and, at the same time, by a growing multireligious and multicultural reality, is also a reminder that AOS has a great tradition of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and of cooperation “in solidarity” with every man and woman of good will.

6. We pray that this next World Congress be a time of grace for the AOS and that our reflection, prayer and sharing will enable us to progress in our mission to reach out, as members of the Church, to all the People of the Sea. As we set forth on this new journey of faith, hope and love, we confide to Mary the “Stella Maris”, our Congress and we ask her for her protection and guidance.