

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PASTORAL CARE OF MIGRANTS AND ITINERANT PEOPLE
XXII WORLD CONGRESS OF THE APOSTLESHIP OF THE SEA

**THE ROLE OF THE BISHOP PROMOTER IN FOSTERING COOPERATION WITH THE LOCAL CHURCH
AND ALSO ON OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO BE FACED**

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INTRODUCTION:

As chief Pastor, the role of the Bishop in his Diocese is normally focused on the flock in his own diocese. In the case of him also having a role of being the Bishop Promoter, however, he has to keep in mind a larger vision and perspective relating to the various pastoral outreach of the AOS available to be done and already being done. The mandate and the link with the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People is to be borne in mind; so too the teachings of the Holy See relating to this work.

Everything happens at the local Church level. The Port Chaplain may also be the Parish Priest in his parish. And as it is the case with 10 out of the 12 chaplains I have in India they are also in the Education field in one way or another. So pressures on the individual Chaplain are varied. They are challenged to perform in the AOS trying to find that little bit of extra time needed to do all the work of the AOS.

MAIN CONCERNS FOR COOPERATION

As Bishop Promoter there would be three areas as I see them which need attention in fostering cooperation with the Local church.

1. The work of the AOS must not be seen in isolation from that of the other works done. For e.g. in some places the Legion of Mary visits Ships and distributes literature. Or members of the Stella Maris are also Legion of Mary or St. Vincent De Paul members. In another the Prison Ministry of India collaborates with the welfare of “prisoners” who may have been in trouble. A collaboration between all these “branches” and “wings” of the church may be nurtured and the people of God in a particular parish be made to feel that the AOS is everybody’s concern.
2. There is a need to get parishes in one particular Coastal Diocese together in thinking of what can be done for the AOS and of the AOS even though that particular parish may not have a Major or Minor Commercial harbour; but certainly will have some activity of fishing and fishing trade.
3. Priests of the various parishes in the Local Church need to be motivated to thinking in terms of outreach of a specific kind for people for the sea. The “four walls of the church” approach needs to be reduced and the “beyond the bell tower” attitude needs to be nurtured.

OPPORTUNITIES.

Opportunities of the AOS and those created by the AOS are varied in different parts of the world. In the western world since the shipping industry was a leader & pioneer somehow AOS developed the need to establish its apostolate on the lines we find it now. Stella Maris Centers flourished and volunteers came forward depending on the motivation provided by the Local Chaplain. It is common knowledge from the reports of the Regional Coordinators world wide that in many Ports in Countries like Australia, England, and Europe the “Stella Maris” Sea farers centers abound. They

function with volunteers and with some paid staff. Their success is varied depending on the increase and decrease of activity in that particular port. They seem very popular and needed. Common pressures in the world of shipping apart (short turn around time, shore leave, ISPS, anchorage discharge) the AOS in these are beacons of Hope to the Seafarer and are witnesses of Hope through the Liturgies they conduct, the Word preached by the Chaplain and Deacons and the Service (Diakonia) they provide to all seafarers irrespective of their religion or race.

I should think that the position of the AOS in the South Asia World and in some parts of the South East Asia world is slightly different than the countries mentioned above.

The holding of the XXII World Congress of the AOS here in Poland and the consequent publicity that this event will get is a great opportunity in my part of the world to nurture the AOS and to spread its wings. Opportunities are immense I should think.

The shifting trend of less and less sailors being able to come ashore to spend less and less time in “centers” as such leads us to think in terms of “services” rendered to Sea farers in different ports.

Shipping Sector:

Bishops in the country /especially coastal arch/diocese should be motivated to look more keenly at the AOS ministry to Sailors; and the need to induct volunteers , who albeit may be actual workers and employees inside the Port. (Examples of these in my own country are, Tuticorin , Cochin , Chennai, Goa , Kolkata and Mangalore. This can be a versatile force in the providing of services to people on board. Most of these volunteers are already motivated as “ apostles” more can be done by way of trying them in the methods of AOS and having them induct others in the field.

Traditional Fishing Sector

In the 6500 kilometer coastline in India there are NINE maritime states. Within these there are 20 Arch/Diocese headed by Bishops, who are not all official Bishop Promoters. The Shepherding of their flock is usually to the fishing community by and large. Most fishing communities are good church going people. Many parishes have a good percentage of Catholics. Some have a 100% catholic population. Their life is arduous. The challenge they face of going to sea day after day, even when they don't catch anything or very little on a given day is something to admire, at the same time wonder about. These poor traditional fishermen and women and their families have within them a certain tenacity, a certain resilience which is specific to them! Bishops getting together under the banner of the AOS can do much for this sector for their pastoral and spiritual welfare.

Getting more involved in their situation of fishing (not only providing them with Church services) as an ongoing apostolate in these coastal diocese is a wonderful opportunity we have as AOS to spread the message of Hope and service. This was done to a great extent for example in the local churches affected by the Tsunami of 2004. Diocese of Trivandrum ,Tuticorin, Chennai, Pondicherry-Cuddalore (+ some others) and especially the Diocese of Kottar under the leadership of Late Most Rev. Leon Tharmaraj, (a former Bishop Promoter) rendered yeomen service to victims of the Tsunami. In fact the work is still to be finished and the AOS has done its bit in these areas with the support of the Universal Church and the AOS International office.

Even when it comes to the Liturgy in the Church the need would be to have many more special days - Sea Sunday (third in July) , International Fisheries Day (Nov 21) apart; to Celebrate at the local church level every singly passage of Jesus in his interventions an accompaniment with this disciples , in a boat , on the shore & in the storm.

CHALLENGES

(i) Ecumenical

Permit me to say that one major challenge a Bishop Promoter would and should face and take up is the Ecumenical dimension of the AOS. This is the mind of the Church. In some countries like in Australia there is a written agreement of cooperation and collaboration between the AOS and other Churches. I am inspired by this very much. It is still to be done in India and in my part of the world. This should be taken up seriously. Small moves have been made and bigger ones are in the

offing. In Tuticorin, for e, g, the MTS and the AOS are searching for ways and means to share resources. The Bishop of Tuticorin Most Rev. Yvon Ambrose encourages this.

At the National Level the National Director is now on the Board of Seafarers Welfare initiated by the ICSW. In each of the local ports our Chaplains are also on the board of such welfare. Also on the board are the MTS Chaplains and the BISS.

(ii) Appointment of Chaplains

It quiet often is the practice that the appointment is for and as “parish priest”. It is then left to the priest himself to discover or re-discover his “additional” portfolio as a Port Chaplain. This needs to be addressed by the Bishop Promoters and priests may be appointed a full time Chaplains ; even though then may not resided in and within the port parish.

A further challenge would be to mandate that even if a Chaplain is not “full time” and that for reasons of shortage of priests one cannot be appointed as such then that he at least devote 50% of his pastoral time in the week for the AOS and allied services. This “part time” title would also help I should think.

(iii) A delicate challenge

The area of dysfunctional or underperforming chaplains is always a delicate issue to address. In some places the work of the AOS has come to a standstill due to this factor. Here is where the point I make in number 2 above comes into focus. Bishop Promoters need to take a close look at such situations. Certainly all is not lost in these circumstances. May be that the particular chaplain may not have the skills needed to be an active and effective chaplain. May be there should be some mechanism to either relocate him in another parish and/or get him an assistant who may be doing the work of the AOS under the mandate of the Bishop Promoter.

CONCLUSION.

I would like to conclude with the oft quoted common “Vision of the AOS”

‘In a world where things are made to wear out people are searching for things that last. Good men and women, lost for the moment in their tortured journeying, not only need but want an understanding of the basics of faith, hope and love. These are interpersonal virtues, the ones that touch the most valued and basic experiences in their lives. While in the vast oceans lost to the vagaries of the ever uncertain moods of the waters, sailors are in the constant search of the peaceful, the silent, and the human. While they touch shore depending on the time they have for rest and leisure (ever decreasing in a fast paced, competitive, commercialized and globalized world) there is a need to reach out to them and accompany them in their time on shore. This is what AOS world wide tries to do’.

May Mary Stella Maris , help us in bringing Hope to the Seafarer, may she help us in the services we render to them , through our liturgy and the word of God , and may we all be earnest witnesses of the love of God to all seafaring people and people of the sea .

Thank You.