

## **PROBLEMS AND NEEDS OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL AOS**

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Dear people of the Apostleship of the Sea.

I was very surprised to be asked for this task to address you today. I will share my experience and through it, some problems, challenges and needs will appear.

I feel it is a very poor intervention. I do not want to bring the attention to me. I just want to say that I am a very privileged person to be part of the AOS ministry and mission in Yokohama, Japan.

1. The now Cardinal Hamao asked me, 15 years ago, to be in the AOS Chaplain in Yokohama, after the former Chaplain died suddenly. His 16 years work made my taking over easier as there were already a practice and activities. **AOS was not new** in Yokohama.
2. I was given the opportunity to be a full time chaplain, without being in charge of the foreign community at a nearby church. So I was **free** to give priority to the seafarers and be flexible to adjust my schedule to their situation and needs, for example, masses at their convenient time, transport for the seafarers to the nearby church (Catholic or others), when mass was not possible on board. If I was not free like this, I would not have been able to give a good service especially on Sundays. Thanks to Bishop Umemura to have given me the same opportunities. He has himself come with me for the ship visiting; he came to the Seafarers Centre and met some seafarers too.
3. I am happy to have 4 regular **lay volunteers** to work with and some others occasionally.
4. I am privileged to have a **Seafarers Centre** (owned by The Mission to Seafarers) as a base for the work. There are a lot of advantages, with some burdens as well of course.
5. As I was already working in a parish of the Diocese; therefore I continued receiving the same stipend and I was provided with a place to live, too.
6. AOS has its **own accounts**, the same as any parish. There was a very good amount of money left by the former Chaplain; it was and still is of very good support.
7. I have started this work before the implementation of ISPS. It was, then, much **easier to enter** the ports and get on board the ships than it is now. ISPS has brought good improvement for the ships safety, but at the same time plenty of restrictions. Some private ports just do not allow us at all to go for ship visiting, they deny the seafarers to go ashore. The process to enter the ports is much

more complicated.

8. Now as National Director, I am on the Commission for the Refugees, Migrants and the People on the Move and with the representatives of each Diocese. Therefore, it **gives me a place** to inform about AOS ministry and raise collaboration, little by little.
9. I am with Bishop Tani who is in charge of this commission. It is a big advantage that Bishop Tani shows great **interest** in AOS. In case of the appointment of another Bishop who would not show such a strong interest, the National Director's influence might be very limited. He has appointed 3 other AOS members to be with me to make my responsibility more effective. He **attends** actively our yearly AOS National Conference. Without his support, AOS would not be as it is now.
10. The 3 other members and I are financially supported by the Commission so that it gives me (us) a lot of advantages for attending international conferences, for visiting AOS members in Japan, for material, etc. Each year for the day of the Refugees, Migrants and People on the Move, Bishop Tani publishes a message that is sent to all Catholic churches and religious orders. Donations are welcome. Half of this fund raising goes to the National Commission, the other half goes to each Diocesan Commission. It is up to the Diocesan AOS representative (if any) to get financial support from his Diocese.
11. I am privileged also to work ecumenically with the Anglicans, the Methodists, and formerly with the German Mission.
12. Privileged to be with the seafarers
  - a. 80% of the seafarers coming to Japan are from South East/Asia. Among them about 30% at least are from the Philippines, then from China and Europe. There are a little more than 3,000 Japanese active seafarers.
  - b. If we look at the origin of the seafarers, we have an idea of the religion they belong to, if any. I have the opportunity to meet many Catholics, mostly Filipinos. Even among them, the situation is changing, secularization has started, fundamentalist groups are growing, etc. 99% of masses onboard are requested by Filipinos. Fewer and fewer crew is asking for mass onboard, 1/4 compared with 20 years ago. I never had any request from seafarers of traditionally catholic countries. It is not only a language problem.
  - c. I have opportunity to meet many seafarers from other Christian denominations. It is very interesting to hear what they believe, the way they celebrate and they pray. Sometimes we can go to a quite deep level of understanding and communication. **Ecumenism** is a part of the AOS ministry.
  - d. I have many contacts with seafarers of other faiths as Buddhism, Shintoism, Islam, etc. Contacts also with people from communist and socialist backgrounds. This is an occasion to listen to their point of view, to learn many good things they have. In Japan, only 1% of the population is Christian, 0.3% is Catholic. It is a common reality all over Asia. This is an **inter-faith or inter-religious** dialogue in unofficial contacts.
13. Privileged also to deal with port agents, authorities, stevedores, watchmen, Japanese Seamen Union and ITF, etc, It is a very important part of my work as I (we) have to deal with them for our work. I consider my presence among **people of the port** as a part of my vocation as a missionary priest.

- a. There are very **few Christians** in the port related world.
  - b. People in and around the ports are **not familiar** and can not imagine without difficulty the kind of services we offer to seafarers. They often see the ship visitors as people trying to convert people to their religion.
14. Being a priest, I have opportunities to **share my experience** and reality of the outside world to the Church people, through clergy meetings and other occasions. But other people have few occasions to share their experience and concerns for the seafarers. There is a challenge to find and give them opportunity to do so.

Myself and probably many people and priests involved in this missionary work can tell we have been transformed by it. Visiting seafarers onboard gives one a great opportunity to meet people of different nationalities, faiths and beliefs. We spend a good lot of time with them, listening to them, sharing freely on their faith, family concerns, working conditions, etc. With full respect, we can occasionally share our own faith. We are with them, in their own working and living place. The Holy Spirit is working through us for the benefit of the seafarers and also through the seafarers for the benefit of the priest, of other ships visitors and then of the Church community.

I am one of the few privileged Chaplains. I hope we can provide to more people the conditions that have made me privileged; - to more people in Japan itself where we have more than 200 ports, 105 have a Catholic church near by, - to more people in all Asia where the ministry must have a special color, - to all other part of the world that will be visited by Asian seafarers. Asia is becoming the centre of the world. Will the Church and the Gospel be present at the right time? I hope so.

Thanks for your attention.