

## **THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL BISHOP PROMOTER**

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1. In respect of specific nature of Gdynia, the venue for this AOS XXII World Congress may I, in the first place, draw your attention to the Holy Father – John Paul II’s voice, who exactly 20 years ago visited this City. Regarding our maritime community he focused on the role of the People of the Sea in the life of the nation and the state and also on a larger international context accompanying our Work, but above all in the life of the Church. The Pope then said: „The sea tells man on a necessity to seek one another, on a necessity of an encounter and co-operation, on a necessity of a cross-human and cross-national solidarity”. We can conclude that the Shepherd of the Catholic Church portrayed, in a synthetic form, specific nature of this community: seeking one another, encounter and co-operation. The word solidarity, very meaningful in this sea-side region, was voiced with none the less significance. More than anything this word was so dramatically meaningful at that time when the communist system collapsed. The system which not only made a fundamental anthropological error, but above all, it disintegrated every community including the community of the people of the sea in an attempt to destroy them from inside. We could no longer refer to that ideology, yet the Pope’s words are of universal nature, as seeking one another, co-operation and solidarity impart an essential direction to the life and work of the people of the sea. These words also impart direction to our present way of thinking.

2. Such an approach to this theme also uncovers the role of the Bishop Promoter who, according to the „Stella Maris” Pastoral Letter, „revives, among other Bishops, the interest in this particular area of pastoral mission”. We can say that real performance of this ministry towards the people of the sea rests with those who undertake this service on a day-to-day basis, i.e.: the National Director, the Chaplains and their supporters – lay apostles. Within this context the role of the Bishop Promoter should be of an inspiring nature, what is more, this inspiration should be extended over all Bishops, mainly diocesan, performing their ministry in a country referred to in the Pastoral Letter mentioned above, i.e. in a country with an access to the sea. The very essence of the local Church Conferences is co-operation in all possible areas. The statute of the Episcopal Conference of Poland provides that Bishops gather to jointly decide on more important matters, and their decisions, based on considerations of a large number of conference participants, indicate their collegial character and nature of the Episcopate (see: Introduction). Consequently, each domain requires joint actions for better cognizance of and insight into the issues. Generally Bishops of the sea-side dioceses face similar problems. I say „generally” because even in typically sea-side dioceses problems may be different (living standards, varying rate of unemployment, greater or smaller commitment in religious life). However, even if we contemplate here a country with an access to the sea, even

Bishops of „inland” dioceses may not be unaware of the problems touching the people of the sea, for at least a simple reason that seafarers and their families do live in the inland dioceses. The Bishop Promoter, as it seems to result from the papal document, is the keystone for all these problems, a unifying force through which we can reach the sea workers and their families.

3. Let's try to track the practical forms and ways of this mutual, friendly co-operation within the local Churches in response to the circumstances and challenges we face in our work. In this respect meetings enabling direct share of experience become of vital character. Such meetings as today's World Congress, continental and regional gatherings have tremendous importance for a wide variety of experiences we contribute and share during such meetings. They are also so important because the world is shrinking and on the forum of these international experiences we can better understand our own problems and guide our people of the sea regarding situations they have never experienced before. After this general outlook let's try and touch more specific aspects. It is self-explaining that seafarers are people on the move, people staying far from their homes, separated from their own local Churches and their families. The whole care of the Apostleship of the Sea, including the Bishop Promoter who oversees the pastoral centres of „Stella Maris”, should be concentrated on ensuring that local Churches be, for the seafarers who visit them, a foster, friendly and warm Church reminding them their own remote local Churches. We know well that the essence of our own community relationship are familiarity, openness, brotherhood, common language and acceptance. Who should generate this type of climate for the seafarers and how to do this? Certainly the priests who understand necessity to create such a climate; also the priests with their supporters who know the nature of man of the sea and try to comprehend the seafarers' cultural backgrounds. I think that we may dream of a centre visited by seafarers that is able to create an atmosphere for the seafarers to feel like in their own parishes. Is it possible? Perhaps not to the full extent, however attempts should be made to create most favourable conditions. What is most important is to create the climate of genuine humanism, Christian brotherhood. This should not merely be hospitality offered in a hotel style. Certainly, conditions for spiritual comfort and religious formation should be created as well. This will always be „something instead” however, as much as possible of a brotherhood and family flavour. This will be a foster family, but still family. I do think that an example of the role of St Joseph as a foster father is much telling within this context. It is a new, foster family seafarers meet while on the move. Can Bishop Promoter influence this mission? Certainly, both personally and, above all, indirectly through proper inspiration, which allows to make the contacts less formal and come closer to the familial correctness and spontaneity that will overcome otherness of language, customs, and even religion, as everybody knows, our Stella Maris centres should be open for contacts with all people, who are our brothers. Such an approach of the foster family is the task we may not resign from as it is also a motto included in our Congress' theme.

4. The matter of high importance, engraved upon the apostle's heart who follows Christ is to seek seafarers arriving to our ports. It is true that some of the visitors enjoy recorded addresses of the AOS centres and contacts previously established, however there are also those who should be looked for. The Bishop Promoter, who knows local environments, is to think through, together with his Chaplains and lay apostles, the methods that allow to discover routes to the Apostleship of the Sea Centres. These methods will include address cards and posters displayed in the ports, but above all, the presence of a Chaplain or his supporters easily and clearly recognisable. The word opportunity, i.e. the chance created and time dedicated is used here to adequately describe what we mean in

this respect. The local Church should be present on the new, for the seafarer, territory. We should seek seamen, create opportunities for them, show interest in them, attract them to Church. May they come. May they see. May they share love. This may sometimes be assistance which, otherwise, should have been extended by maritime offices; sometimes this will be a regular, routine human contact and warmth of feelings shown. However, above all this should be opportunity to discover the local Church, which and who for the visiting seafarers becomes their foster Church for some time. The new local Church, however, may not be a scene to be observed by seamen, but a community in which they actively participate, also during liturgy, i.e.: by voicing prayer of faithful. It is important for this foster family to offer, as it is the case in Gdynia, a short relax at the Kaszub Sports' Centre, where seamen may enjoy sports and games as well as undertake religious reflections at the local Chapel. It seems also important that seamen could have a closer contact with the Stella Maris employees' families, although this requires more widespread knowledge of a foreign language. One of the most crucial method of evangelisation is to show kindness to them. These general principles of the Apostleship of the Sea constitute the topics the Bishop Promoter discusses with the priests in view of discovering new ways of doing things which often bear fruit being a result of shared reflections. However, at any opportunity the Bishop Promoter should be aware of and alert to these tasks in order to share them with other local Bishops who encourage the Chaplains, especially those who are newly appointed to this duty.

5. „Stella Maris” centres are prestigious pastoral establishments. For example: in Poland we have four „Stella Maris” Centres more and less effectively organized, however, there are also situations when there are no Chaplains in the ports and the local community is not organised enough to ensure pastoral care to the people of the sea. This is a coincidence of special circumstances for the Bishop Promoter to take care of, who, through substitute initiatives should arrange pastoral care through the activities of local priests. The influence of the Bishop Promoter on the local Bishop is of critical nature in this regard. Under such circumstances and conditions the role of the Bishop Promoter becomes noticeable. At such moments he becomes a true shepherd. He does not replace the local Bishop since, - as John Paul II says – The Work of the Apostleship of the Sea does not constitute an autonomous canonical unit, on the other hand, however, he stimulates, as a sensitive and competent person, various forms of presence in the local Church community. The document mentioned above states that the AOS Work extends special pastoral care to the people of the sea and should also support faithful people who are called in order to give testimony of the Christian life in this community. These challenges may adopt a variety of forms, depending on prevailing circumstances. More initiatives are undertaken in all possible dimensions, i.e. religious, social, cultural, sports and in-family meetings, the better.

We can say that the Bishop Promoter's position in the AOS Work set up by John Paul is of an essential, animating nature which triggers various initiatives. His role both within the Episcopal Conference as such, in a country with an access to the sea as well as in the sea-side dioceses and finally towards lay institutions (full autonomy of both reserved) is vital. The Bishop Promoter is delegated by the Holy See to the Work which has not any canonical autonomy. He has his duties towards the whole community of the local Church. He obtains an important scope of tasks. Within this context a comparison with the Apostles immediately suggests itself: they were fishermen so the people of the sea. It is them who, on their way, encountered the World's Greatest Navigator, Jesus Christ who charged them with enormous challenges by saying to them „Follow me” – the term

which is frequently used among people of the sea as a term showing care of others on board ships, at sea and in ports. And although the way was not easy Christ insisted @ „If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mt 16,24). In the leading theme of our Congress we find the words „Witness of Hope”. This is the very climate we are in and accomplishment of this way undertaken through the witness of hope constitutes participation in the triple mission of Jesus Christ, which was entrusted both to the priests (in a sacramental way) and to the laymen (common priesthood) to achieve the goal through the Word of God, Liturgy and Diakonia. There are no other mission which could be more complete and no mission which would be able to better consider existential needs of man. This is what the Bishop Promoter knows, however, this knowledge should be shared with others on an impromptu basis and always with regard to the prevailing circumstances and conditions, similarly to the pace of the seamen’s lives and those who serve them hosting seafarers at their local Church. The driving force for all these activities and the guiding spirit who understands the changing fortunes of the seafarers’ lives is and must be the Bishop Promoter.