

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PASTORAL CARE OF MIGRANTS AND ITINERANT PEOPLE  
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**THE LITURGY NOURISHES THE FAITH AND HOPE  
OF THE SEAFARERS' AND FISHERS' COMMUNITIES**

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Seafarers and fishers are among those who need an appropriate pastoral care by virtue of their particular situation. This calls for a pastoral concern on the Church's part as recommended by the Second Vatican Council in its Decree, *Christus Dominus*. The Bishops' Conferences and the Bishops have the duty to provide for their spiritual care as well as possible. The rules set down by the Apostolic See are the basic norms while at the same time a margin is left for a suitable adaptation to the conditions of time, place and persons.<sup>1</sup> As John Paul II of venerable memory recalled, this attention to the people of the sea has its roots in a real spirituality.

*Stella Maris (the Star of the Sea) has long been the name preferred by the people of the sea to address the One in whom they have always placed their confidence so that she will protect them: the Virgin Mary. Jesus Christ, her Son, accompanied his disciples on their voyages by boat; he helped them in their difficulties and calmed the storms.*

The Church's commitment in her life and vocation as the Body of Christ whose life and mission she continues cannot be defined better. The situation at sea still expresses concretely the urgent need for the Church's presence. Without abandoning her commitment in the area of the people of the sea's professional life, the Church should make them aware of the spiritual storms that are threatening the boat and the ships of their existence. She should sow in their workplaces the seeds of the Christian hope that sustains her.

I am very happy to have been associated with this conference with regard to the pertinent insights that I myself will get from it. Recently the Holy Father transferred me to the See of a Diocese that includes a large fringe group that lives on the water and only survives through fishing. These are the *agégué* peoples and the *tofins*. Without daring to say that these people go out into the deep often, we can rightly emphasize their life which is often divided between family warmth and coolness as well as the dangers of the waters.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus* 18; in continuation with his predecessors, John Paul II issued the "Motu Proprio" *Stella Maris* on the Maritime Apostolate, 1997.

While this should be included in this vast area of the spirituality and the Apostleship of the Sea, the subject that I am taking up here targets seafarers and fishers more precisely. Likewise, it is my task to deal only with the liturgical aspect of their different spiritual needs. But to tell the truth, we can imagine from this that the presentation will start from the center of their spiritual life, a radiation point that involves the essential arteries of Christian life. *The liturgy nourishes the faith and hope of the communities of seafarers and fishers.*

You can easily understand why I am taking the liberty of approaching the theme by spontaneously including all the theological virtues with the virtue of charity in the background of my topic, which is the most important one that will never pass. First, I would like to refer to the situation and then arrive at what the liturgy brings to their faith, and how it cultivates their Christian hope in order to commit them to the charity spread by the Spirit of God.

### ***I. The particular situation of seafarers and fishers***

It is not easy to present the situation of seafarers and fishers. What is undertaken in this first part of our presentation only aims at getting a glimpse at the need and pertinence of the pastoral attention that we must bring to them and the mission that derives from it for the universal Church as well as for the local Churches. More concretely, this enables everyone to live in communion with these peoples and persons while opening up to active solidarity. Their situation is dramatic in the least, and yet it calls for a hopeful reading. Above all, it needs to be integrated into the Christian experience.

I will speak first about the drama that we could call more precisely the dangers of the profession of seafarers and fishers. Here it is not necessary to emphasize the fact that seafarers and fishers are directly involved at the heart of a struggle with nature for survival. They have to face the fury of the deep and the rage of storms in order to get their means of support. This aspect sometimes appears clearly in the gospels even if we are not accustomed to noting it or looking at it for itself.

As John Paul II said in 1984 to the members of the World Conference on Fishing, “We can imagine that what particularly attracted Christ to the fishers and led him to choose them for a completely different kind of work is their courage, their spirit of initiative, and their readiness to face the dangers of the wind and the waves”.<sup>2</sup> It was in this difficult life and at the heart of the fishers’ relentless struggle that Jesus met up with and called his first disciples (Cf. Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1: 16-20; Lk 5:1-11).

Before Jesus took part in their fishing, which became miraculous, Luke lets Peter sum up the fishers’ unpredictable situation which only divine providence can turn into joy: “We have fished all night without catching anything”. Through these words, we in turn can understand the situation of all seafarers and fishers who toil not only all night long, but sometimes for weeks and months on end. In proposing to the fishers of Galilee to make them “fishers of men”, Jesus surely meant to imply that they were going to put their whole human and socio-professional history at the service of people’s salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, “The contribution of fishing in the struggle against hunger” in *La Documentation Catholique*, 1881 (October 7, 1984), p. 885.

However, we can also see in this the indication that Jesus understood perfectly the harshness of their professional struggle for daily survival, to the point that he made it the metaphor of the drama that characterizes their resolute struggle for the eternal life of all men. This discovery of the situation of seafarers and fishers through the Lord's own eyes and attitude appears again on the bank of Lake Tiberiades in Saint John in the context of the Resurrection. To really appreciate the wonder of this apparition and the power of the Risen Lord, it is necessary to understand this fishers' life to which the disappointed apostles wanted to return after the tragic events of their master's death. The evangelist wanted to express their dramatic situation by putting them back into the far from brilliant setting of the fishers' life that seemed to be their fate again. The same desolation had marked their going out on the waters of the lake: "That night they caught nothing" (Jn 21:3). Only the presence, the indications and the power of the Risen Christ gave them back strength and joy.

The difficult situation of their daily work is also complicated from a purely human standpoint. Leaving for work at sea is always a moment of anguish for the seafarers' families and for them before the uncertainty about coming back home safe and sound. The stay at sea always represents a period of isolation when human lives give in to uncertainty that can go as far as insecurity. When they are looking for a job and an income, fishers and seafarers can sometimes find themselves in the hands of bosses who have a great love for easy profits but no consideration for human life and the dignity of the person. This not only concerns the inhuman conditions to which crews are sometimes subjected. We also have to remember the hateful crimes which the media have accustomed us to discover with horror, often too late, the dramatic situations which the seas and the oceans have concealed for months.

How can we forget that sailing over the seas and going from port to port and living far from one's native land and family context give seafarers and fishers over to an instability that is often expressed in laxity from the spiritual, human and moral standpoints.

To interpret this situation with hope, it needs to be taken as part of the life of our humanity. From this viewpoint, it would be necessary to mention and welcome the fine ecclesial and civil initiatives of all kinds. For example, we could mention the associations that organize hospitality for these perpetual migrants who are looking for a little hospitality and human warmth in the ports and in a foreign land.

The liturgy is a privileged context for the Church's commitment in the sense that she refocuses the seafarers' and fishers' life on their Christian faith and gives it the spiritual basis for its dynamism.

## ***II – The liturgy refocuses the life of seafarers and fishers on their Christian faith***

Even before directly involving the seafarers and fishers, first the liturgy gives their faith and their life the pledge and guarantee of an effective ecclesial responsibility, of the Church's presence in their life.

So the liturgy refers first of all to the presence of the Church that brings her accompaniment and apostolate to its cutting edge and the source of its efficacy.

[...] *the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper (Sacrosanctum Concilio (SCo) 10).*

Without stressing the sacramental aspect already, we can explain this ecclesial and ecclesiological reference of the liturgy based on the context of the seafarers and fishers. One of the urgent needs of this kind of context is a need for identity and roots. We could discover it by thinking of two religious deviations that constantly threaten these nomads of the sea, apart from putting their faith and religious life in parenthesis. I would speak, for example, of the temptation that may be proper to a certain culture to give oneself over to a spirituality or mysticism with roots in local traditions, such as the adoption and veneration of some spirit of the water or the sea. This very often leads them to a syncretism that is difficult to remove. I would also mention the risk of a popular religion devised according to one's needs and personal feelings. Now, we know that while it starts from a Christian basis, popular religion does not move away from it any less through a kind of spiritual eclecticism or a spirit of sectarianism.<sup>3</sup> These deviations can jeopardize faith and undermine Christian identity by creating a kind of religion with no ecclesial foundation.

The liturgy affirms this identity by integrating a community of this kind into the community of the Church which she makes present in this way. So the initiative is up to the Church in all the liturgical celebrations through her hierarchy.

On this condition the liturgy gives the seafarers and fishers the ecclesial matrix that must underlie their spirituality and, as a consequence, their whole life and work. The liturgy makes concrete the concern of a Church that accompanies them by nourishing them. At the heart of her liturgy the Church opens the world to the salvation and grace of which she is the guardian and dispenser. In fact, it is the depositary of grace which, through the liturgy, the Church opens up to believers through the sacramental generosity that makes her the "universal sacrament of salvation"; and through the dynamism of their faith, which is consolidated, believers draw the "mysteries of the resurrection". Through the liturgy, seafarers and fishers enter into the "assembly" gathered together "to celebrate the paschal mystery" (SCo 6), the mystery of their faith. Actually, the Church herself lives of the mysteries that constitute her since she is not only the dispenser but also the beneficiary of the grace she communicates. From this liturgical framework the conviction also originates that in all the stages of existence and in all the areas of human work, the Church has the mission to be built while benefiting herself from the sacraments she celebrates. These professionals of the waters and the stay at sea thus grow in faith by belonging to the Church and making her live in their workplace.

From this, a real ecclesial conscience emerges for them. The liturgy recalls and lets them experience that they constitute, in their own community, an ecclesial community, the Church that accompanies them. This presence of the Church owes its efficacy and saving fruitfulness to the presence of Christ himself. The liturgy thus sets up in the context of the rather unordinary life at sea or on the waters the Church's

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Meslin, *L'expérience humaine du divin. Fondement d'une anthropologie religieuse* (Coll. Cogitatio fidei 130), Paris, Cerf, 1988, pp. 235-286.

efficacious presence where the undeniable encounter with Christ is made. By becoming aware in this way of living in the Church and being the Church called to celebrate the mysteries of the Redeemer, seafarers and fishers can grow in knowledge and the encounter with God in Jesus Christ and become resolutely committed to him. It is first through the Word of God present in all the liturgical celebrations that this presence unfolds. It always becomes the mirror of a more intimate discovery of God that allows the faithful in return to discover that they are the object of God's concern and called to seek him more in order to love him more profoundly.

The Christological dimension can appear in this way in all its density. Christ becomes present in this framework of the exercise of his priestly function (Cf. SCo 7.2) to sanctify the life and work of the men of the sea and the stay on the waters. *Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present for all time, and the faithful are enabled to lay hold upon them and become filled with saving grace* (SCo 102).

It is also necessary to emphasize the characteristic of the liturgical year which unfolds the mysteries of Christ's life in the time dimensions of our existence. The liturgy opens them up to this reality which is at the heart of our struggles where God joins us through the efforts of his Son at our side. The liturgy reassures and enables them more than anything else to look for the Lord's presence not only to calm the fury of the waters and waves, but also so that their work will be fruitful.

This presence of Christ takes on a particular meaning in the Holy Sacrament, which then becomes the place of recollection and silence for personal recourse to the Lord when the winds become adverse. The *Norms* regarding the work of the apostleship of the sea rightly ask to give a special place to those who develop a devotion of this kind in order to make them pillars of the community of seafarers and fishers.<sup>4</sup>

Through the sacraments celebrated by the Church, the faithful are integrated into Christ who is the primordial sacrament of the encounter with God. The divine life offered in Jesus Christ spreads in fact like a lymph in the Church to irrigate all the members by associating them with his personal mystery. "In that Body the life of Christ is poured into the believers who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ who suffered and was glorified" (LG 7.2). This takes place in a fundamental way in the Sacrament of Baptism in which the faithful are made similar to Christ by dying and rising again with him. The breaking of bread lets them partake in his Body in order to elevate them to communion with him and with one another (Cf. LG 7).

I am taking the liberty of stressing in a special way the Eucharist which the Second Vatican Council understood rightly as the "fount and apex of the whole Christian life" (LG 11). In the liturgy, the expression aims at the meaning and efficacy of the rituals for participation in the grace and life of God. This is made concrete in the Eucharist where by taking an active and personal part in the liturgical action; the faithful are restored by the Body of Christ to manifest the unity of the Church which they are aware of forming (Cf. LG 11.1). They are inserted into the community dimension of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. John Paul II, "Motu Proprio" *Stella Maris*.

Christian salvation and live from day to day the communion of saints that manifests the Eucharist in its dual horizontal and vertical dimension.<sup>5</sup>

*From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, as from a font, grace is poured forth upon us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way (SCo 10).*

The Sacrament of Reconciliation, as well as the ethical and socio-professional commitment that results from it, enable us to understand better this in-depth action of the liturgy. The liturgy of Reconciliation constantly remakes this union with Christ and life with him in his Church by letting the professionals of the waters draw from the sources of divine mercy. By opening them up to reconciliation with the Church and their community on board, and especially with their working companions, this sacrament promises to be a truly favorable wind for the crews. The community celebrations of penance and the personal acts of reconciliation which should result from them are really able to renew the atmosphere on board and make everyone row with good sense by aiming at the good of all. Then the Church will be there in her role of ferment of unity in these communities especially because the lack of privacy could be harmful through conflicts of all kinds.

My presentation thus draws attention to the seriousness of the liturgy in these contexts where the temptation should obviously be avoided to offer only furtive occasions for isolated sacraments or to mark the Christian feasts. In this kind of context, the liturgy is called to truly exercise a role of edification that can create a real spirituality of life at sea and on the waters. In scrutinizing the depths of the sea and the waters to extract its riches for their survival, seafarers and fishers could, for example, with the resources of their Christian faith and in the light of the Gospel, realize that what lets man live and what supports humanity is neither superficial nor easy, but requires instead a spiritual depth with dimensions as unlimited as those of the sea. In reality, it is Christian hope that would be developed and strengthened in this way over the seas and waves.

### ***III – Christian hope over the seas and waves***

The liturgy does not only nourish the faith of seafarers and fishers; it also increases the Christian hope which faith arouses and gives rise to in them.<sup>6</sup> Let us look concretely here at how, through faith maintained in the crucible of the liturgy, the life of seafarers and fishers is led to the meaning that the God of Jesus Christ gives it, while assigning to all the results of their early activities a destination in God that is both an ultimate end and a first efficient cause.<sup>7</sup> In this context of isolation and work outside the family context, only liturgical life can create the desire to live faith more intensely like a vector of what leads us towards the future and plays a real role of ferment of their hope in order to make it Christian hope.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 20,21.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Ha-Hae*, q. 17, a 7, resp.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, qu. 17, a 5, resp.

Concretely, I would like to go once again to the heart of the Second Vatican Council to *Gaudium et Spes* to let us hear the challenge of putting Christian hope at the heart of earthly activities.

*She [the Church] further teaches that a hope related to the end of time does not diminish the importance of intervening duties but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives. By contrast, when a divine instruction and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man's dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest; riddles of life and death, of guilt and of grief go unsolved with the frequent result that men succumb to despair (GS 21).*

This text is well known and describes the challenge well which I have just spoken about. It requires Christians to find these new reasons that propel the sometimes arduous tasks in the direction of our march, the global march of humanity to God. In order to raise this hope in the communities we are considering, I propose to you to give it roots in faith in Jesus Christ through whom God gives us access to all these gifts.

***Conclusion: Nourished by the liturgy to bring charity to the heart of human encounters***

*The liturgy in its turn moves the faithful, filled with "the paschal sacraments," to be "one in holiness"; it prays that "they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith"; the renewal in the Eucharist of the covenant between the Lord and man draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire (SCO 10). With an appropriate liturgy that lets them take part in the sacraments in order to consolidate their faith and nourish their hope, the people of the sea make their individual and collective lives the framework of a real Christian experience which charity makes fruitful.*

By living their Christian life through liturgical life, those who cross over seas and oceans towards these appointments filled with promise thus become the artisans of this charity to be communicated like ferment in exchanges of all kinds. Their adventure through ports and climes becomes a discrete but effective apostolate inasmuch as it is anchored to the hazards of their professional life. Animated by such charity, the crews, seafarers and fishers make oceanic distances, which apparently remove and separate, links between peoples. Then they will always come back to the fold in their native land not just with financial resources, but also rich in what they have reaped in humanity over the course of their calls in ports and encounters. Charity is capable of inserting all their voyages and daily work into the dynamics of this need to go towards others, driven by their constant communion with the Lord who has set them on fire with his charity.

Charity thus sets up a Eucharistic consistency: the love accepted spurs to become love that is given under pain of betraying the sacrifice offered.<sup>8</sup> In their contact with the Lord in the Eucharistic liturgy and the adoration that accompanies it, the seed of these dynamics is sown: the social mission "which seeks to break down not only the walls that separate the Lord and ourselves, but also and especially the walls that separate us from one another".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 82.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

This openness to others in charity already begins to bear fruits within the crew itself and among the fishers themselves. Christians know moreover that they are committed to a public witness of faith that keeps them serene despite the violence of the adverse winds and the threatening force of the seas and waves. They bring their companions the assurance that the Lord's apparent slumber in the back does not undermine in any way his concern and power which are ready to pacify the storms and give meaning to their voyage and make their work bear fruit.

I dream of a mystique of pilgrimage<sup>10</sup> animated by charity for all these professionals called to take on the risks of voyages by sea and over the waters. It would be a real rediscovery of self in the mirror of God's concern and in the charity lived to the dimension of far-off climes and regions.

The accounts of voyages and adventures show how the different crews and seafarers have solidarity with one another when, for example, there are moments of danger and other crews are threatened. Some have given their lives to save others. By drawing from the heart of their Christian life and nourishing themselves with the charity that irrigates it, Christian seafarers and fishers can live a spirituality that prepares them, at every moment, to give their life for their traveling or professional companions. The liturgy, which inserts their concrete time into the time of salvation, also integrates it in this way into the mystery of Christ and brings about their redemption, according to the effective expression of K. Rahner.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For this kind of mystique, as a very suggestive starting point one can read M. Meslin, "L'expérience religieuse du pèlerinage" in *L'expérience humaine du divin*, pp. 174-195.

<sup>11</sup> K. Rahner, "Rédemption du temps", in *Écrits théologiques*, IV, Bruges, Desclée de Brouwer, 1966, pp. 181-201.