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THE DEACON: ORDAINED FOR THE PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD, THE LITURGY AND CHARITY

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In order to explain my experience as a deacon, I have to point out two aspects which, in my opinion, have conditioned the entire exercise of my ministry at the service of the people of the sea:

- 1) The fact that I was a professional merchant seafarer and am currently a professor in the Faculty of Navigation of Barcelona has enabled me to keep up a close dialogue with all the people and bodies in the port-maritime area of Barcelona.
- 2) The fact that I was appointed at the moment of my ordination as Diocesan Delegate of the Apostleship of the Sea in Barcelona. This involved the need to take responsibility for a pastoral action within the “Stella Maris” community and in the port area, as well as the possibility to put a great number of initiatives in motion.

From these perspectives, I have tried to develop the maritime pastoral activity through three action guidelines, which I consider essential:

- 1) Work with the seafarers, trying to be of assistance to them in everything they may need on the spiritual, social, labor, cultural, etc. levels. This guideline is obviously the main element, to which the rest are subordinated.
- 2) Relations with all the private and public port bodies in such a way that Stella Maris will be considered a necessary and important body, fully integrated into the port community.
- 3) Relations with other national and international centers, fostering work in a network, as well as developing the ecumenical (ICMA) and even the inter-religious dimension.

How can these three action guidelines be applied from the viewpoint of the title of this round table: The deacon ordained for the proclamation of the Word, the liturgy and charity?

Charity:

It is obvious that a deacon is ordained for service in order to show Christ’s serving image. In this sense, his charisma finds a wonderful area for fulfillment in the Apostleship of the Sea which, as we know, is especially identified with the parable of the “Good Samaritan”.

A deacon at the head of a Stella Maris must practice charity through direct action with seafarers, and also indirectly as he organizes and coordinates the activity of a group of volunteers. Everything revolves around the practice of charity in helping the seafarers with everything they may need as persons for their well-being, while always pointing out that over and above the services rendered, what is most important is the love with which they are offered so that a seafarer will feel affectionately welcomed and supported.

Over the years, apart from the initiatives undertaken in Barcelona, I have always tried to learn what is done in other ports and apply the projects launched internationally, adapting them to

the reality of Barcelona. So besides trying to develop the traditional services as well as possible, I have promoted the foundation of the Center for Seafarers' Rights of Barcelona (inspired by the Center for Seafarers' Rights of New York), the creation of the Solidarity Committee with the People of the Sea (Welfare Committee) of Barcelona, the incorporation of the Barcelona Stella Maris into the port emergency plan according to the guidelines of the "Crisis Preparedness Committee", and, for the past five years, in collaboration with the International Sport for Seafarers, the organization of the Mediterranean and Black Sea Soccer Cups. I could also mention the creation and coordination for the past four years of a program for embarked chaplains in accordance with the agreement reached with a Spanish cruise ship company.

Is all of this related to the diaconal exercise of charity? I think it is because these activities are aimed not only at improving the seafarers' living conditions and work, but also at making seafarers feel that there is someone who is thinking about them.

Here I would like to point out an additional element: the importance of ecumenism in maritime pastoral care. Charity must lead us to help every person to achieve legitimate well-being in accordance with his cultural and/or religious needs.

This implies, on a first level, collaboration with pastors of other Christian denominations, trying to join forces to improve the services provided, and endeavoring to offer the seafarer the spiritual assistance he needs. I cannot deny that in my efforts in this area the conviction that every Christian has the duty to work for the union of the churches has had great influence, together with the fact that for nine years I was the Regional Coordinator of the ICMA for the Mediterranean and the Middle East. All of this has led me to establish regular, very cordial relations with pastors from different foreign communities. At present, in Barcelona we maintain very good relations with the following communities: German Evangelical, British Anglican, Russian Orthodox and Romanian Orthodox.

However, there is another much more difficult, but no less important level: the interreligious level. In this area I have paid special attention to the Muslims who make up an important group (approximately 18% of the world fleet). Over all these years, I have continuously sought contact with the imams who head the mosques near the port. The task has not been easy, but in the end we have achieved collaboration with the Islamic Council of Catalonia and some Muslim seafarers have already benefited from this.

I think that this service is fully a part of the practice of Christian charity and the action of the Good Samaritan to help a person find what he needs for his personal well-being.

Proclamation of the Word, the Good News of Our Lord:

We all know that seen from the outside, the work of Stella Maris is fundamentally social. What do the seafarers ask from us? A means of transportation, a telephone, a computer with Internet, a place to spend a little time enjoyably, advice, help when they have problems...and only in a few cases what we could call purely religious attention. In these circumstances, how can a deacon or any Christian proclaim the Word?

I would say that there is a first level, which we could call of silent proclamation of the Word that can consist of a smile, shaking hands, or any manifestation of affection and solidarity. One Muslim captain exclaimed with surprise and gratitude, "You are Christians and you offer to take us to a mosque!".

However, occasions certainly exist for the verbal proclamation of the Word: when a mortal accident occurs on board a ship and the captain asks for spiritual assistance for the crew, this is a moment in which the Word can bring great consolation and hope.

This can also be done on the occasion of blessing a ship or an office in the port, or during the celebrations which a deacon can preside, such as weddings, baptisms or funerals, in our case of seafarers, fishers, dock workers, students or professors from the Faculty of Navigation. These are all occasions to proclaim the Word.

Another important way is through news bulletins because of their potential for circulation: in our case, we send “Noticias de España” (News from Spain) to about 60 ports all around the world. On weekends I include the Mass readings and a comment on the Gospel.

Liturgy:

Masses in Stella Maris: The deacon “serves at the altar and animates the celebrations”. As the person in charge of Stella Maris, in collaboration with the priest who is celebrating, I have been concerned that the celebrations are as worthy and festive as possible, and that special attention is paid to the cases when seafarers of different nationalities take part.

Ecumenical celebrations: Likewise, I have organized and prepared ecumenical ceremonies regularly during the past six years. These celebrations are authentic external signs of brotherhood.

Baptisms, weddings and funerals: Here personal relations with seafarers, fishers and people of the port of Barcelona have led them to ask me to officiate at these celebrations.

Stella Maris thus represents a place in the port of Barcelona where the professionals of the sea who are believers can feel that the liturgical celebrations are more familiar to them.

Conclusion

The practice of charity, the proclamation of the Word, and the liturgy are thus applied as different expressions of one same reality. A deacon must serve his seafarer brother through celebration, proclamation and charity. He must always have the humility of someone who serves, and, at the same time, the strength of someone who animates and dynamizes while keeping very clearly in mind that as the deacon Saint Francis of Assisi said, we have to be first and foremost instruments of God’s love.