

How To Live One's Work Spiritually

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The Bible and the media very often concur when they talk about the seafarer's life: they show their concern in situation of danger or by shipwreck. Can the several month long daily life aboard ship, the pace of a seaman's life, marked by departures, returns and crossings, urge us to *look for God in all things* and to bring out some of the main features of a spiritual life lived throughout the days and nights in this type of work?

The Book of Wisdom 14:1-6 evokes the many hazards there are when putting out to sea and braving the violence of the waves, counting only on one's own forces or on the power of idols. But it is Psalm 106:23-32 that might especially attract our attention. In that prayer, sailors are in the company of those who lost their way in the desert and of refugees who find no city to live in, of those who sat in misery and in prison, of those out of breath and in the shadow of death, of those who perceive closely the storm and the distress of their life. Sad fate and hard reality of forgotten minorities! And it is there, in their anguish as well as in thanksgiving that all these migrant people are going to learn to recognise the Lord in their human adventure.

Did not the last Congress of Apostolatus Maris mention this situation common to all migrants, in which *binding one's lot to that of others is the first fundamental catechises*? Let us then try to discover in the pace of a seaman's life, by rough weather or by quiet sea, the expression of a life of faith, hope and charity, in a word, of a spiritual life in things of the daily routine. Departures, returns, and crossings are the three main moments of seafaring, of which I would like to stress the particularity.

1 - Knowing how to live the departure

For a seaman, to travel means to leave, and perhaps even more, to leave again. It is important to know how to live the departure, how to live the break-ups when embarking after having intensely lived the others' presence and the return to one's own roots at home. It is always a moment of *crisis*: separations never become a habit. Family, social, friendship and ecclesial ties, this whole world of stability by which a man is rooted somewhere and where he finds security, are under great strain. Stepping with one's luggage over the gangway, and gradually binding one's lot to that of a crew, is a daring and risky process: there are not many old acquaintances with whom to shake hands and one of the first things to do is to find one's place and function among people that were not chosen.

At each embarking, there is something new to be faced: the people, the boat, the techniques, the weather, good or bad, the length of the journey. The crew will shape up or not, with a certain number of elements not necessarily known in advance. The seaman's profession is not perceived only on the quay, or in the port of call, or on leave, but also within that space - the boat - which one is always tempted to put between parentheses.

Time needed to adapt to the boat, and also to my own reactions in facing a certain loneliness and all sorts of hardships; the sense of humour and the patience needed with machines and people often seem unreasonable. But it is only through this one can *find the right spirit*, and sometimes find it for others. As to the relationships experienced while on leave ashore, they have now to be lived in a different way, as a memory, waiting for, the mail for letters to be written.

This is truly a time of meeting, made of commitment, dialogue, and mutual dependence with men who have often no other choice than to live at sea. If you allow me, I would call it a time of obedience to what is real.

2 - Knowing to live the return.

Likewise, but in the opposite sense, one has to know how to live the return: to find one's place again, and to keep it, in the life as it is organised on land, being aware of the weight of the distantness caused by the absence, of the *dephasing* and of the evolutions one did not attend. After months, one finds his family and his friends again, who did progress together. The isolation in which the seaman has lived and has endured more or less painfully, prevented him to follow closely the evolution of the groups to whom he wants and has the feeling to belong anyhow. It is urgent for him to live the *now* of these holidays, and to open himself to the concerns of the people with whom he is reunited today.

For many, today, the return is final when the time has come to retire - and the couple has to learn again to live together. Or, it means returning to a different kind of activity because of redundancies or unemployment. With this type of return, husband and wife will often have to renew their mutual trust, reconsidering the choices made during the other's absence, taking the other into account according to his/her known personality, facing the need of using in a new way the time granted to each other, as well as the freedom that has to be respected. After the first euphoric days following the return comes the time of a patient mutual discovery

The most visible signs of that return and of the sailing are the letters written and received on both sides. They remain as the most important sign of the effort for the deepest communication, during the separation, between those who remained behind and the one who left. Writing is indeed an opportunity for reflecting on one's history to find out whom we care for, and what moves us: *it helps to communicate in a very substantial way, perhaps even better than if we saw each other every day at home*, as some couples venture to say.

Knowing how to return means knowing to live the presence, especially to receive the presence of the other, spouse. Children, friends, with whom one will attempt to take new steps into trustful togetherness.

3- Knowing how to live the hazards of the crossing.

To devise a human life, a human way of life with the others, within the ship community one did not choose and is always in movement, is what I call knowing to live the hazards of the crossing, and its duration.

This community is often hard to bear, but one cannot estrange himself from it; it is in the community, and often in a relation of fellowship that the various emotional frustrations can be accepted. In many cases, the life (or survival) of each is linked with that of his mates. It is fellowship that makes one seldom drink alone, or go alone ashore. Likewise no one is ever left by himself with his troubles or

with a heavy job to do. Those who put their energies into creating the conditions for a truly humane communal life, often in spite of failures, refusals, and contradictions, are transformed by their effort and called to conversion. Most of the time, it is a question of fighting for vital daily needs: food and drink, cleanliness, solidarity. This does not make headlines in the papers, but it is what helps to perceive what sailors have to say about their hope, their love, their faith in life ... In the universe of a ship where, often for fear of the headmen who make their power felt, many a sailor hesitate to affirm his convictions and to show his solidarity, it seems to me essential that solidarity becomes effective, especially when the needs of their communal life and their dignity are at stake. With crews increasingly broken up into several nationalities, races and languages, this is a stake of paramount importance for the human rights.

There are many events to be lived out day by day during a crossing, when the seaman cannot avoid issues of solidarity. This is why the time spent at sea cannot be considered as being between parentheses. When believers meet on a ship, they often speak of their Church connections, of the Church they know when on leave or in their country. But it also happens that the Church succeeds in expressing herself on board, thanks to the encounter with the local churches in the ports of call, or when men have the heart to pray together: a Church that expresses herself like that is never on vacation!

The seamen's spiritual life is moulded by the daily routine lived with fellow workers one did not choose, and they have to find the gestures, the words, and the pace that can express what keeps them going, and how they recognise the Lord in their human adventure. By the grace of these encounters, they may learn how to be thankful!

Wisdom 14:1-6

*Again, one preparing for a voyage and about to traverse the wild waves
cries out to wood more unsound than the boat that bears him.*

*For the urge for profits devised this latter,
and Wisdom the artificer produced it.*

*But your providence, O Father! guides it,
for you have furnished even in the sea a road,
and through the waves a steady path,
Showing that you can save from any danger,
so that even one without skill may embark.*

*But you will that the products of your Wisdom be not idle;
therefore men trust their lives even to frailest wood,
and have been safe crossing the surge on a raft.*

*For of old, when the proud giants were being destroyed,
the hope of the universe, who took refuge on a raft,
left to the world a future for his race, under the guidance
of your hand.*

Psalm 106:23-32

*Some went off to sea in ships,
plied their trade on the deep waters.*

*They saw the works of the LORD,
the wonders of God in the deep.*

*He spoke and roused a storm wind;
it tossed the waves on high.*

*They rose up to the heavens, sank to the depths;
their hearts trembled at the danger.*

*They reeled, staggered like drunkards;
their skill was of no avail.*

*In their distress they cried to the Lord,
who brought them out of their peril,*

*Hushed the storm to a murmur;
the waves of the sea were stilled.*

*They rejoiced that the sea grew calm,
that God brought them to the harbour they longed for.*

*Let them thank the Lord for such kindness,
such wondrous deeds for mere mortals.*

*Let them praise him in the assembly of the people,
give thanks in the council of the elders.*