

Seafaring And Family: Two Realities In A State Of Tension

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I take up this theme in a two fold perspective based on my own experience.

- 1. As a merchant seaman with seven years of seafaring on Spanish ships;*
- 2. As deacon in charge of the Apostleship of the Sea in Barcelona since four years.*

1) In my experience as a seaman I found that life at sea fosters routine habits and a tendency to loneliness, as against every seaman's dream of a family life.

When I shared my life between sea and family, I had the impression that I was living two different realities: ship and home. Both were part of my life, and both were in away incompatible. I longed to be home with my family, but I felt to be truly myself only at sea.

I was looking forward with great expectations to meet my wife; I wanted to take our then only daughter into my arms; I made projects for our vacations. But when I arrived home, I often felt disoriented, I had difficulties to assimilate all the small events. There were of course very happy moments, but it is equally true that I felt like being on Visit. In fact, I had the feeling of being "in transit" in my home, since I was there only on leaves. But once onboard again, I longed for my leaves.

I have to say that I owe to the sea to have met my wife during a trip to Argentina, and sometimes, the illusion making and the imagination proper to seamen helped us to overcome many obstacles in order to get married. My wife went to sea with me during the first months, which turned out to be rather easy even though she is an inland native. It required much love to grow as a couple, for my profession made things difficult. Had I continued to go to sea, I think that I would not enjoy now the reciprocal understanding with my wife and children. At sea, I did not understand much of family matters as I do today.

Talking to other crew members, I often had the impression had that when they spoke about their families, they had ideals rather than reality in mind. I have also met many wives of colleagues; those advanced in years especially seemed to get used to organise their life without being overwhelmed by their husband's absence.

In reality, the seaman becomes a man of habits, and he gets used to some quietness. Life at sea is hard under some aspects, but it can also be easy: you do your work, but your free time is all yours, at least in merchant seafaring. On the other hand, the family gets used to do without husband and father, and even if there is much affection, not living together is a great factor of separation.

I heard comments from older seamen who could not adapt to family life once they retired. To conclude with my maritime experience, I would say that a seaman and his family are united in their thoughts more than in reality, and that they get used to live separately.

Granting leaves more frequently, as is the case today at least in Western countries, has certainly improved that situation; but, as I will explain further on, the image of the husband as an "eternal visitor" still remains.

2) Regarding my experience as a deacon dedicated to maritime pastoral care, I would like to present the results of a survey, and comments gathered at meetings with seamen's wives and children.

In 1984, we circulated a questionnaire, and I want to pick three of the questions submitted to seamen:

- "Does the separation from your wife create any problem to you?"
48% of the merchant Seamen answered yes, and so did 50% fishermen of the industrial fishing, and 30% of individual fishermen (the latter have obviously less problems because they are more regularly at home).
- "Would family relations improve if you stayed ashore?"
The three sectors gave similar answers: for 52/54%, there would be improvement; for 30/38%, there would be no change, and for 3/5%, relations would get worse.
- "When the father is at home, are there problems with the children?"
59% of the merchant sector say no, and 24%, say yes. The two fishing sectors give approx. 55% no, and 33% yes.

It is difficult to assess these answers. However, it is revealing that nearly half of the people surveyed in the merchant and fishing seafaring consider that the separation from their wife does not create any personal problem. Is it because they consider the separation as something normal?

In answering the second question, a majority believe that relations would improve, probably by common sense, but the number of those who think that they would be the same is not negligible, which might be considered as a loss of sensitivity to the issue.

Finally, regarding possible problems with children, the proportion of yes remains important, especially if we consider that the festive nature of the seaman's time off at home is less subject to the frictions of daily life.

Then, I may quote some comments of seamen's wives heard at meetings in Vigo, Spain: "The husband's presence during his short stays at home tends to create a hectic life, because we want to live intensely what little time we have together". "We must organise our lives without our husbands". "Sometimes husbands are being converted into bank accounts". "Life in common is difficult when the stay is too long". Some of these statements are very hard and speak for themselves.

Concerning the relations with the children, we have a few comments from Vigo and Barcelona: "When father is not here, we spend Sundays at our grandmother's, when he comes home, we go for a walk". "When he is at home, he is the only one who watches me playing football". "I ask my father's advice on important matters, but I discuss everyday things with mother". "You have confidence with your mother". "When he is at home, I tell him a lot of things, but actually, I talk more to my mother, as a habit". "When father scolds me, I soon forget it, but mother gives punishments that you have to do".

These and other comments show that the father's presence is something occasional and festive, while his absence is the norm. The children with whom we spoke show admiration and affection for their fathers, and the desire that he come back, but they admit to have more confidence in their mothers.

All these inquiries, conversations and personal experiences are obviously simple approximations of the reality, which is actually different in each case, for there is an important and crucial factor besides the circumstance of the seaman's life: every individual's capacity to relate to others. Families of seagoing people are as different as those of people on land, for not everybody has the same requisites and human

preparation for the formation of a family. I think that this is an important aspect to be considered before devising a plan: What can the Apostleship of the Sea do to help the seaman and his family when they face this problem?

It seems to me that three fundamental aspects have to be considered:

- the holiday period,
- communications during the period at sea,
- human formation.

Generally speaking, Third World crew members have no holidays: they have a one-year contract, then they stay home until they find a new embarkment. But industrial fishermen of Western countries have often only twenty days leave after six or seven months at sea.

Communications are not always as frequent as they should be. Depending on the sea routes, one may remain without receiving correspondence for several weeks. Usually, industrial fishermen receive their mail every forty-five days only; telephone calls are expensive, and not all seamen have the possibility to make one.

Regarding these two issues - holidays and communications the Apostleship of the Sea, through the various bodies of the maritime world, should continue to ask for more holidays on behalf of those who have less, and for better communications. The latter require an effort by the shipping companies and maritime agencies, especially in the case of fishing boats that stay weeks without calling at a port, and depend therefore on other ships or on helicopters to get their mail. It could also be suggested that workers being at sea for more than one month without calling at a port of his country are entitled to a free telephone call every month.

As to the human formation, there are several possibilities: One is no doubt the seamen's wives groups. In Vigo, Spain, they work very closely with industrial fishermen's wives. It is more difficult in the merchant shipping, where families are widely scattered.

Another possibility could be the distribution of pedagogic material by the ships. Basic material could be prepared. at international level by psychologists and pedagogues familiar with the maritime world. This material could then be translated and adapted according to the different languages and cultures.

In Spain, our "Singladuras" bulletin dedicates a few issues to family themes. Of course, a publication does not solve the problem, and one is aware of the fact that only a minority of people will read these articles. But even if we succeed in helping only one seaman with that article, it is worth doing it.

Finally, I would like to call the attention on the opportunities offered now by the video trade. Video cassettes can be hired for movies as well as for interesting human subjects, such as family life, marriage, children, etc. It can be a useful way to help the seaman, at least when he asks himself questions. Here also, an internationally co-ordinated action would be necessary, at least when one is looking for the appropriate material.

The duration of calls at port is getting shorter. For this reason, it seems important to look for ways to reach the seaman when he is at sea.