

# **‘Globalized’ families of seafarers and fishermen and the corresponding pastoral responsibilities, achievements and challenges**

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Our country, Philippines is an archipelago of over 7,000 islands. We Filipinos normally sail from one island to the other because of livelihood, the need to contact family members or travel for holidays. I should say that among our nature as Filipinos is to sail. This could be the strong factor for Philippines to become a common fixture in international shipping especially in terms of maritime manpower. The Philippines is the world’s top source of seafarers. Out of the total population of seafarers worldwide which is 1.2 million, over 20 percent are Filipinos. Currently, the number of Overseas Filipino Workers is over eight million. The sea-based Filipino contract workers comprise a good percentage of this figure.

During the mid-1990’s, our country started to embrace the labor migration. Since then, over half of the Filipino populace has been affected by the challenges of migration to Filipino families. Thus saying, how are our seafarers’ families affected by this “monster” or angel, if you want to call it as such called globalization?

Let me present to you some cases:

- 1) The fishing village of Bucana in Lasang, Davao City surely captivates local tourists. *Bucana* is a Filipino term, which means opening to the sea. The fisher folk of Bucana are followers of acceptable fishing practices that are within the bounds of the law. Most of them are poor. They could not even afford to purchase a motorized boat. A motorized boat would cost about Php 80,000 or US\$ 1,600. To assure mobility, each of the fishing boats is equipped with a paddle rather than a motor. Somehow, the issues of poverty, lawlessness and free trade have crippled this community. Thus, they have been swiftly affected by the influx of other fishermen from nearby areas, which employed illegal fishing practices such as dynamite fishing, trawl fishing, and indigenous approaches known in Filipino as *liba-liba* and *pakagot*. The latter is method that traps the fish by scraping the seabed with the use of the net. Even the corals are destroyed.

The chemicals from nearby banana plantations also pollute the fishing ground. Not less than five multinational companies own these plantations. In addition to the chemical pollution, the water in the gulf contains mercury. The mercury is wastage of the mining operations in the hinterlands. The pollution has significantly contributed to the decrease of quantity and commercial quality of catch in the fishing area. The volume of fish could only be found in the deep sea where no fisherman who relies only on a paddle, can go. Even if a poor fisherman with his paddle has to be at sea from 0400 to 1100 hrs, he would usually yield a catch of only about three kilos. In some instances, he would even go home empty handed. If sold to a comprador, the cost of the fish per kilo would range from Php 20 to 40. In a day a poor fisherman would yield an income of about Php 60 to 120. [or only about US\$ 1.20 to 2.40]. Such amount would not even be enough for food. The case of Bucana is just a miniature of the plight of fishermen all over the country.

- 2) A distinct situation plagued the poor fisher folks in General Santos City, a neighboring city of Davao. There are about 80,000 fisher folks residing in the city. They work in commercial fishing boats that are owned by the big fishing magnates in the locality. These fishing boats

supply the needs of the export processing plants in the city and the local needs of six surrounding provinces. The boats catch fish even in the international waters and the seawaters of neighboring countries. The fisher folks have to be onboard for six months to one year and earn a monthly income of about Three Thousand pesos only (or US \$60.00). These fisher folks have no fixed monthly rate. Their earnings depend solely on the volume of catch. They have no social security benefits and medical insurances. Most of them do not even have legal document to cruise international boarders. At the moment, many of them have been arrested in the neighboring countries for illegal entry. A good number of those who are imprisoned in foreign land have been abandoned by their employers. With the standing critique that the Filipino seafarers onboard ocean-going vessels are generally underpaid and even abused, the fate of these fisher folks is the worst.

- 3) There were two seafarers, a man and a woman. Both of them worked as waiters. They have found their marital destiny on board. Placed in an environment wherein illicit relationship is a rampant practice, the couple became the model of a sustained marital relationship. The couple worked so hard hoping that they would be able to save for the family, which they have just started to build. The wife continued to work even prior to bearing forth her first baby. Unfortunately, the baby died 17 hours after the delivery.

Indeed, Cueva of ITF Philippines, (2001) accounted that seafaring is one of the country's high-earning industries. In last year's government figures, seafarers have contributed over US\$ 800 million in remittances. This is approximately 13 percent of the total remittances of land- and sea-based overseas Filipinos, which is over US\$ 6 billion. This has been a big help to the country's foreign reserves. In a country where high paid job is very scarce, seafaring is considered as lucrative work. This compels more Filipinos to try their luck. Last year, the deployment of Filipino seafarers has reached over 203,000. So far, this is still the biggest merchant shipping labor stock in the world. The fact that the globalization and liberalization of world trade depends so much on the ability of the shipping industry to transport freight at high volume but at lower cost would mean that the market for the Filipino seafarers will even continue to soar. Enthralled by these economic benefits, the country and its labor force became the prey of a globalized network. Currently, there is a whole bureaucracy that has mechanisms for the deployment of seafarers in ocean-going vessels alongside with the institutions that surround the industry.

In Taiwan and some other Asian countries, the Filipino seafarers seemed to have been affected by the downsizing and even closure of companies. This is a byproduct of globalized free trade. The open market system causes the countries to pit against each other. Because of competition, many shipping companies abroad close down or downsize their operations. Consequently, many Filipino seafarers have been retrenched. Some of them had to go home empty-handed.

Similarly, the ship-owners chose seafarers from other nationalities aside from the Filipinos. This is because the other nationalities are willing to work on much lower rates than what the Filipino seafarers receive. They also elude the frequently complaining Filipinos, who utilize their proficiency in English to assert their dignity and rights.

In varying degrees, the People of the Sea and the families that they either live with or leave behind are being dwarfed by the different manifestations of globalization. "For many thousands of today's international seafarers, life at sea is modern slavery and their workplace is a slave ship" (*Ahoy!*, April-June 2001). "The global shipping industry has been achieved at the cost of lives, wrecked lives and damage to the environment" (ITF, 2001). Apparently, many of the seafarers still

do not know what “globalization” really means, or what is it for them. All they knew was the experiences they had like catching fish, or doing their work aboard ocean-going vessels.

Let us go deeper into how these situations affect the family lives of Filipino seafarers and learn from how the families of Filipino migrants are facing the so-called “social costs of migration.”

- 1) The biggest threat, of course, is the feared break up of stable family relationships. The families of Filipino migrants are facing troubled relationships. The children learn delinquent attitudes (e.g. early marriages, drug addiction). The families become dependent to the remittances of the family member who happen to work overseas. The family life of migrant families have been ruptured due to absentee or single parenting. Whatever amount of savings could never replace or equate these ruptured family lives. Battistella and Conaco, (1996) cited a study that was conducted by the Scalabrini Migration Center on the impact of labor migration to the children who have been left behind. This study cited that: “overseas work is considered by many as **not** a transitory phenomenon but as a problematic feature of the Filipino society”. There is an exodus of workers from the country, which causes long-term effects to the Filipino culture and values. Recently, the ITF published an excerpt of a study by of Dr. Kahveci of the Cardiff Seafarers International Research Center (SIRC) on the families of seafarers in the Philippines. Despite questions concerning the methodology, some quotes from seafarers families themselves can give us thoughts to ponder (Kahveci, in IT Seafarers’ Bulletin, 2001):
  - a. A seafarer’s wife said: “Marrying a seafarer changed my personality. I have to kill my human nature, the woman in me, because I have to be a man. My children need a father figure, so I should project the image of a man. I should be strong for them.”
  - b. Another case features a wife who is visibly affected by the lengthy absence of the husband. The wife recalled: “During my six years of marriage, I haven’t been with my husband (for) more than a year. I really don’t understand the attitude of my husband until now. Maybe because we’re not together always so I don’t really know him.”
  - c. One more case presents the children of a seafarer who truly felt the absence of their father. One child testified: “When my mother gave birth to me, my father was at sea. I never saw a picture of him carrying me when I was a baby. It’s the pain of having to grow up without a father, without the figure of your father being there...”
  - d. In a similar case, a daughter, who has witnessed a stereotype approach of her mother doing the chores for the family, said: “I can describe my mother’s life as boring, tiresome, lonely, and complicated. Every day, for ten months, she has to face the same problems and do the same things over and over again... I know there are problems she’s facing that she wants to share with our father, but she can’t because if she shares those problems with my dad, then it would affect my dad’s work.”

From these qualitative cases, Kahveci concluded that: “the entry into the global seafaring labor market brings these families economic opportunities that would be hard to find within their own society. But the social cost of these economic opportunities is disturbing.”

Locally, the researches on the plight of fishermen’s families are very scarce, but there are significant events from which, data can be produced. In Davao City, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources accounted some 41 foreign fishing ships that dock the fish port of the city regularly. These ships are mostly from Taiwan. There are Filipino crew onboard most of these ships. The Regional Director of Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) in Region

X1, Philippines testified to the fact that many of the Filipino crewmembers onboard these ships do not even have proper working documents. The Regional Director said further that the POEA felt helpless to pursue the plight of these fishermen because under the IMO regulations, the fishermen are not treated as seafarers. The Regional Director also said that those Filipino fishermen who were properly hired by the Taiwanese fishing ships are then governed by the rules of Taiwan concerning the land-based migrant workers. Those who were hired illegally are susceptible to the abuses of their employers.

The testimonies of the Regional Director coincide beautifully to the account of the AOS chaplain in Taiwan. The chaplain said that the Filipino fishermen are the forgotten seamen. The reasons that prompted them to migrate are poverty and unemployment in their home country. In many cases, however, these fishermen became the prey of illegal recruiters. Related to illegal recruitment, these fishermen are even victims of contract substitution. While they risked their lives from accidents and death, many of them do not receive their salaries or are being underpaid. A good number of them would even get arrested for crossing territorial boundaries illegally. While it is a fact that those who remain in the country have helped keep the country's agricultural and fisheries produce alive, yet it is sad to know that on the contrary, many of them became victims of social exclusion. They are kept out from the reach of government services and political involvement. Despite frequent complaint of the Bucana Village Association president to concerned government authorities, it was only a few years back when one school was set up in their vicinity. The social exclusion of these fishermen further drags them below what the World Bank calls as the poverty trap (World Bank 2000/2001). The plight of the families of these fishermen leaves much to be desired.

- 2) Return migration is a challenge for Filipino migrants who wish to come back to their places of origin in the Philippines. Most of the contracts of Filipino seafarers range from 6 to 9 months. Many of them would extend the contract to 12 months. These seafarers return home at the expiry of their contracts. Unless the seafarers and their families have prepared for the return of the seafaring family member, then the seafarer himself and his/her family will enjoy only short-term benefits from the contract. The study conducted by Kahveci (ITF, 2000) cited a case of a seaman's wife: "Near the end of my husband's contract I get excited because he's coming home. But I am also worried about what will happen next. For over the last 14 years of comings and goings, when he comes home we were very happy for about one or two months. Then comes chaos because he would be looking for his next contract. And all our savings last about two months only." "The migrants in Asia face bleak possibilities when they return to their countries of origin" (United Nations Economic and Social Council in Asia-Pacific). This is because of the lack of employment opportunities here, or lower salaries compared to their overseas work. Because of the exhaustion of their savings, many returning migrants are forced to go back and work abroad.

There are many other discussions, which surround the toll that globalization, or international labor migration be it sea-based or land-based brings to families of migrant workers, or seafarers. This is where our pastoral responsibilities as agents in the worldwide maritime apostolate should be furthered.

May I cite specific gains from the Philippines in answering the challenge of install a network among the families of seafarers and of connecting the seafarers and their families. Please allow me to present to you the significant accomplishments of the AOS in the country so far. The AOS centers have increased to 7 from 3 in 1997. The seafarers' family organizations are being put up nationwide. These organizations hope to "build a community of seafarers' wives through an alive Christian faith and unselfish service" (*Ahoy!*, January-March 2001). Taking off from the formation

of these so-called social institutions, the AOS has also initiated programs for the families of seafarers. Leading this is a peer-counseling program for seafarers' wives. This is installed by various centers nationwide. The seafarers' families have likewise provided spiritual activities such as recollections and retreats to incoming seamen particularly the graduating maritime students, to the children of seafarers' families, and to returning seafarers. In fulfillment of the mandate of the Chaplain's Manual to make the seafarers' families as "hosts," the seafarers' wives help the AOS visit the ships. Another relevant approach that the AOS in the Philippines does for the seafarers' families is the setting up of parish-based ministries for seafarers and their families.

I would admit however, that so much of our effort has been focused to the seafarers on board ocean-going vessels rather than the fisher folks. With this, let me recall one of the resolutions made during the AOS 20<sup>th</sup> world congress:

"The livelihood of most local fisher folk depends on traditional forms of fishing. In order to bring about more justice and solidarity, fisher folk must be helped through raising of awareness of their plight, creating forms of associative power, and encouraging them to participate with local organizations."

Animated by the standing resolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> World Congress, and inspired by the pastoral message of our National Bishop Promoter during the latest AOS East/South-east Asia Regional Congress, the Philippines remains with a challenge to transform the negative effects of globalization into something positive to "connect land and sea in solidarity" and to "teach and lead seafarers to build the spirituality of communion" (Cantillas, in *East/Southeast Asia*, January 2002).