

Globalisation, perspectives

*Mr. Antonio Rodriguez Fritz
ITF Interamerican Regional Secretary*

First of all, I would like to bring you all a warm greeting from Bro. David Cockroft, General Secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation, who has passed on to me the honour to address you today, at this event which is so important for the seafarers' welfare, and in which Apostolatus Maris plays a major role

There is a saying in Spanish that says: there are three kinds of men, the living, the dead and the Seafarers, who are neither dead nor alive.

The real fact is that Seamen, or generically speaking the Seafarers, are at the mercy of dangers and tribulations, including, among others, their forced absence from their families for long periods of time, which may vary from two weeks for workers in the Offshore service, six months stipulated in most of the collective bargaining agreements or up to periods of 12 to 24 months for those who are obliged to work in substandard vessels property of shipowners who size their earnings out of the exploitation and killing of the human dignity.

In his address to the 15th Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Council, the Holy Father John Paul II said that: "The increase in human mobility and the process of globalisation have had a notable effect on the flow of migrants and tourist and on the activity of the people who work at sea". His Holiness continues: "However, along with the remarkable advantages, one must also observe the negative, which include painful separations and complex, difficult situations. I am thinking, for example of the Seafarers who are obliged to live long periods far from their families; of the stressful pace of work to which all sea people are subjected, interrupted only by brief calls at ports."

This reflection really summarises the reality. The so-called globalisation has contributed to improve some aspects of human life, for example, the communication.

Emigrants, when leaving, had to say goodbye to their roots, their people and their family, in the hope of a better life and in the despair of never returning back to their homeland, nor talking again to their parents or grandparents. Today, telecommunications link them up across thousands of miles to their families, shortening distances.

Nevertheless, this same globalisation has brought a variety of negative repercussions, including an increasingly wider gap between the poor and the rich, and regarding Seafarers, its impact has been no less devastating.

The phenomenon known as flags of convenience has flourished, now allowing for the creation of networks of corruption: issuing, on behalf of national authorities, certificates of competence to people who do not have the necessary skills nor training, for money. This situation was exposed through the issue of a First Officer Certificate of the Republic of Panama in the name of our General Secretary David Cockroft, in

exchange of four thousand dollars. Networks of corruption, which allows the register of vessels by merely sending a fax or e-mail, as in the case of Ship registries like Bolivia, or without undertaking an inspection to ensure the seaworthiness of the vessel, as in the case of Belize. These vessels sometimes become actual floating coffins and even create a state of impunity, protecting the identity and real purpose of some shipowners, as in the case of vessels allegedly operated by terrorist networks under the Liberian flag.

The creation of manning agents or employment agencies has become a real nightmare for seafarers, who see themselves forced to pay for their right to work and when, after months of suffering, humiliations and abuse, they claim their rights, they are blacklisted and their names speedily distributed by fax or e-mail. The above situation is described in further detail in the statement by Father Jack Walsh about one of the countries where the sale of workers, often in deplorable and unsafe conditions, has become a commercial activity by both the government and innumerable manning agencies operating with total impunity, namely the Philippines.

The growing desire for competitiveness, on the other hand, has caused a rush to achieve more efficient cargo handling schemes so that vessels stay in port for even shorter periods, sometimes one or two hours, as is the case of car carriers and some containerships.

In this situation, Seafarers are generally defenceless and isolated, enduring exploitation and abuse, such as, for example, the case of M/V "Juliet" under the flag of Belize, which my Bro. Timo and I visited last week. Twenty-five miles after leaving Puerto Cabello harbour in Venezuela, the generator of the ship caught fire and it spread throughout the casing. Fortunately no human lives were lost and the crew, with light burns and injuries, were towed back to port where they have waited for one month without receiving their wages and right now they are about to lose even the little that they saved, including their wages.

There are almost 90,000 registered vessels in the world, operating in different conditions, some of them in such a deplorable state that they pose a risk to human lives and an attempt to dignity.

These are the reasons why ITF felt obliged to start a strong campaign against the flags of convenience in order to re-establish national fleets and protect the rights of seafarers all over the world. Moreover, it would be fair to say that the Seafarers' Unions affiliated to ITF are convinced that only by establishment of fair national shipping companies, competing within a framework of fair competition and in a regulated industry, will it be possible to adapt seafarers needs with the necessity of having productive, competitive and profitable companies in benefit of the international shipping industry.

ITF, affiliates the vast majority of unions representing seafarers and who jointly, intend to mitigate the harmful aspects of a deregulated shipping industry, creating to that effect a network of 129 ITF inspectors worldwide, whose task is to inspect the social, labour and general conditions onboard flag of convenience and substandard vessels in order to identify anomalies and abuse situations with the aim to enforce

minimum conditions stipulated in the ITF approved Collective Bargaining Agreements.

Furthermore, a number of departments have been constituted to provide assistance to seafarers, such as the Actions and Agreements Units, and the Legal Department that provides free legal advices to seafarers regardless of their nationality nor if they are members or not of a union.

Considering that the working conditions and the overall environment are only one aspect, albeit important, in the life of Seafarers, ITF has established the Seafarers' Welfare Fund, about which Bro. Timo could talk in more detail, but which assures one aspect of vital importance, which is the promotion of the seafarers' physical, mental and, mainly, spiritual welfare.

It should be mentioned that ITF is not alone in this titanic task but, on the contrary, several lay and religious institutions, mainly including the Apostolatus Maris, have placed their grain of sand to be able to give seafarers a moment of peace and rest. Another major ally is undoubtedly the International Committee on Seafarers' Welfare, which has 25 contributing members, including the ITF, the International Shipping Federation, the UK Merchant Navy Welfare Board, International Christian Maritime Association, United Seamen's Service, government agencies at the service of seafarers from Scandinavia, national welfare associations from France, Japan, Cameroon, Poland and Iceland, Russian unions and independent welfare agencies from Antwerp, Gydnia and Rotterdam, and the International Labour Organisation and the ITF Seafarers' Welfare Fund as observers.

Globalisation has certainly brought some advantages to human development, but it is also true that seafarers, although having been the first globalised industry, are among those who have suffered the most. This is why it is necessary for all of us, from the social, labour and spiritual point of view, joint our efforts to mitigate the above mentioned harmful effects and offer the seafarers a safe and spiritual haven where they can renew their faith and hope, before returning to sea in fair, safe and, above all, decent conditions.