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Globalisation in cruise industry: pastoral challenges

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The transformation of passenger transport industry

The transport of passengers by sea is one of man's oldest mobility systems since he became skilled at seamanship. As its main purpose was, and still is, to connect countries throughout the world via the sea, it can be considered the first act of globalisation in the history of mankind.

Only with the advent of the 18th century, some social classes thought of combining transportation with mere pleasure, using mixed nautical crafts (goods-passengers). Then the following century saw the birth of smaller vessels, entirely destined for pleasure boating of the moneyed classes, namely yachts. As a consequence, one spoke for the first time of the *cruise*, intended as a sea journey made only for sheer pleasure and tourism purposes.

With the discovery of new worlds and their development, larger and larger groups of people could be witnessed to gradually move from Europe to the new lands. In particular, the economic growth, the enormous wealth and vast spaces of the American continent attracted masses and masses of underprivileged and needy who, in the 19th century, took the so-called "way of the Americas".

In such a situation, the nautical means for passenger transport grew both in number of and in size, creating, among other things, the phenomenon of gigantic ships, above all those crossing the Atlantic (hence the name *transatlantic ships*).

Passengers' needs on board grew as well – let's remember that a sea voyage took a very long time (several weeks for the Americas) – and this required a differentiation, which, in the society of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, coincided with social classes. One therefore tried to reproduce on board the same privileges and attentive treatment of everyday life standards.

The outcome was that crews grew more and more numerous and included professional qualifications going from specific nautical ones to typical hotel ones.

In the sixties, the phenomenon of mass emigration ceased while air transport registered an ever-increasing development. As a consequence, passenger mass transportation underwent a serious crisis that resulted in the search for a new utilisation of nautical crafts.

The growing social welfare suggested the opportunity to create cruise holidays, not only for the few owners of private boats, but for growing numbers of people, till one reached the present mass tourism, where the formula of the holiday village has directly shifted into the traditional cruise formula.

Tourism industry and Cruise industry

Nowadays, cruises can be considered an integral part of tourism industry. Large masses of people chose for their holidays this recreational formula, which is getting cheaper and cheaper and ever more within everybody's reach. In this scenario, a number of giant multinational companies invest millions of dollars every year for the construction of ever larger and automated vessels. In the world free market system it is therefore necessary to contain costs in such a way that it often harms work and safety standards. As in any other industries, entrepreneurs try to optimise costs in relation to profits, and this often bypasses the dignity of men and women working on board these floating

factories. Here, too, they try to find low-cost personnel coming from third world countries and, using flags of convenience, seek to elude the regulations set by international bodies, both on protection of human life at sea and on the dignity of workers' minimum wages.

Passengers

It has already been said that, from the emigration years to the present day, the typology of passengers has greatly changed. I would venture to say that, with the advent of the cruise phenomenon, one cannot talk of passengers any more, but rather of tourists or, popularly, of holiday makers. We can say for certain that, with the due exceptions, people patronizing cruise ships are altogether similar to those visiting the beaches of Rimini, Miami or Rio. The high number of cruise passengers (for the larger ships we are by now talking about two/three thousand) makes this environment anonymous and chaotic, where rather than resting and relishing the beauty of nature and/or of artistic sites one visits, people seek fun for fun's sake. Next to senior citizens, who occupy their ample leisure time with more than one trip a year, we find groups of young people looking for something different, honeymooners who will find everything but some romantic privacy, families who, for once, substitute their usual seaside resort with a more exotic holiday. So it often happens that large ships turn into a noisy bedlam of people looking for something different, exciting, unique to tell friends and relatives about, or to secure on film or a photo. Often people on a cruise take in everything but their journey or the sea surrounding them ...!!

Crews

By now, crew members making up a cruise-ship staff are numerous and of different races. Deck, engine room and cabins: the traditional sectors of the ship are flanked by a great many hotel and holiday village qualifications. These crews really do symbolise work globalisation because they are made up of different races and nationalities set side by side, with their different cultures, languages, religions, food habits and practices. One can therefore understand how many and what kind of problems of coexistence, understanding and harmony working at sea can produce. On average, on a ship carrying about one thousand passengers, crew members are about six hundred, of which at least fifty percent come from third world countries. Normally third world citizens carry out the lowliest chores, but one must point out that some countries have recently instituted professional qualifications allowing their workers to undertake roles that are normally the prerogative of seafaring workers of industrial countries.

Passengers' needs

What tourists going on a cruise feel is just the need to enjoy themselves, nothing more. It should perhaps be the Church's duty to remind them that even while having fun and resting one should not forget the values of one's existence. This is no doubt a hard mission. It is already difficult to bring the presence of Christ and Sunday Mass to people in holiday resorts ashore, but one way or the other local churches manage to fill this gap and willing priests and parish priests move their activity and celebrate Mass in holiday facilities (hotels, beaches, etc.). But on board a ship? During crossings there often were priests who followed emigrants or clergymen who dispensed their services on board. Today, the figure of the priest on board has gradually disappeared. I know that in the whole world only one cruise company has a resident chaplain on board: the Italian Costa Crociere.

Crews' needs

Nowadays, multiracial crews suffer both predicaments which afflicted every age, as well as the ones resulting from this new kind of cruise work. The difficulties of the past are no doubt the absence from their home and loved ones, the risk of exploitation, insufficient safety measures. The new ones are the want of privacy, the lack of understanding on the part of their colleagues who are

so different as far as language, culture and traditions are concerned, and the ever more pressing working pace.

Let's see these aspects in detail.

Home, country and social context

To be periodically away from where one grew up, was born, where social connections and friends live, makes the seafaring worker a sort of stateless person, a citizen of a country where he can hardly exercise his rights. Seamen are easily excluded from taking part in associations and public office, they cannot enter politics or carry out social functions, because their constant going away makes them strangers in their own country. In some countries, among which Italy, seafaring workers cannot even exercise a basic right such as the right to vote. All this intensifies their sense of isolation which often turns into a pessimistic attitude towards the structure of society itself. Here is the first difficulty of seafaring workers, no matter what their race: being strangers in their own country as well as strangers at work.

Family and loved ones

What does it mean to see a child every six months, what does it mean not to share the days of his growth and development with one's child, what does it mean to be away when our loved ones need us?

The seafaring worker lives with a constant longing for the loved ones he does not see for months on end, with whom he does not share day-to-day life; yes, that very same daily life we find so obvious, the things we take so much for granted as to discount their value. True, the modern means of communication enable us to get in touch and talk with our nearest and dearest even very often, but it is not like getting home for dinner every night after work. It isn't like spending holidays, birthdays and anniversaries with our family. Confiding one's problems, one's fears to our beloved, sticking together ... All this the seafaring worker has to do from far away, possibly relying on a mobile. To stand all this he and his family must often have an extra gear.

Labour law

Being a seaman is one the most precarious employments, they have hardly ever the certainty of being re-embarked and are often underpaid. Laws and contracts vary from country to country and when the international trade union began to deal with the matter it had, above all, to guarantee minimum wages through the international bodies of the sector. Nowadays, thanks to the introduction of ITF (International Transport Federation) minimum wages, every seafaring worker of any nationality can expect a decent minimum pay. In fact, an international network of inspectors can control every ship as well as workers' wage conditions and, in case of infractions, they can even impound the ship itself. However, here again, for the seafaring worker it isn't as easy to get in touch with his labour organisations or other organisations in defence of his rights as it is for an ordinary worker ashore.

Human life safety at sea

For cruise ship workers this most important aspect of the maritime world is less critical than for other seafaring workers on board merchant ships.

The presence of passengers – I am sorry to say – and the number of lives carried by a large cruising ship, lead to a greater control and care than on other boats. Nevertheless, here too, there still is a long way to go to raise the safety level. The notion that seafaring staff must have some basic knowledge on rescue, fire-fighting, survival at sea and first aid measures has been tackled only in the last twenty-five years, just as the fact that they should learn the basics of a common language (English) in order to understand the indications of the captain and of their direct superiors in emergencies.

Privacy

The environment on board is of a promiscuous kind in itself. Most seafaring workers (with the exceptions of officers) sleep with other people in limited spaces. In fact, large cruising ships construction projects do not take into account large enough crew spaces, because these areas do not produce any profit. Available space must be utilized as much as possible for passengers' cabins (which produce profits) and common spaces must be mostly destined to the tourists' comforts and certainly not to the workers'. We have seen ships getting gradually bigger and bigger and crew spaces getting gradually smaller and smaller. Often, in this situation, the worker cannot find a place where to be alone for a while or where to rest. Finally, entertainment is minimal and shore leaves are frequently spent resting after an often exhausting job. Let's also remember that low rating workers are allowed in passenger spaces only for service reasons; it goes without saying that on a ship packed with fun and games, it's quite possible that common spaces for a crew of 600 are just a coffee bar and a table tennis.

Separation

Two possible developments can issue of an environment where cultures, traditions, and languages are different: the first one is that diversity creates riches, the second is that it creates separation or, at worst, conflict.

On cruising ships we often witness the second hypothesis. Workers group by nationality, by religion, by job titles and the groups, at best, tend to reduce contact with one another and, at worst, to come into conflict. All this results in small mafia groups or in a situation of dominance of the strongest or the most cunning within the group itself; when the arising of these separations does not also result in misdemeanour, or forms of foremanship and paid protection.

Working pace

On a ship one usually works 11 hours a day and often up to 14, of the remaining 10 hours two are used for meals and eight for resting. There are no holidays or weekly days off – sometimes for six months running - for which workers get then paid at the end of the trip. The resulting strain is, according to most, extremely high and it helps create the above-mentioned problems. International organisations have set lower working hours limits also for seafaring workers, but the requests of the companies and the thirst for money of the workers themselves produce an almost complete disregard of the rules.

THE PASTORAL CHALLENGE

In the above-described scenario, the Church's pastoral interventions are, no doubt, difficult and quite particular. They will have to assess such aspects as local Churches responsibility, the amount of human resources and materials to be used, the enhancement of awareness of laymen as well as of Christian and non-Christian entrepreneurs, and the diligent application of the Church's social doctrine.

Local Churches responsibility

It is extremely difficult to make the structures of local Churches understand that the nautical craft arriving in their diocese is like a travelling parish temporarily joining their community.

While it is absolutely normal to pray and take an interest in the various resident groups, or pray for those who have no Faith or for third world peoples, almost no parish priest or bishop remembers seafaring workers in his pastoral interventions, save in places where their families live.

A strong action is therefore necessary to make them aware that these Christian brothers are to be considered as members of the community they visit, and regarded as a travelling community in need of prayer, consideration and pastoral intervention.

Pastoral resources

The natural consequence of making local Churches aware must be a strong intervention in the sector. One must, first of all, invite all the priests of the communities close to any port to visit seafaring workers arriving in their parish, and offer them their comfort and presence. Then dioceses, particularly seaside ones, should assign clergymen to the maritime pastoral, just as if it were an integral part of the Church's traditional one. These resources could be employed by assigning chaplains to the various shipping companies or a clergyman to the functioning of the local Seamen's Club. All this requires also a commitment both of finances and of time which should not be underrated. But on the other hand, this kind of attention is often given also to other sectors that are definitely in a lesser pastoral emergency. One can, no doubt, understand that the limited number of clergymen – which poses serious problems to the Dioceses' ordinary pastoral – does not allow significant interventions, but this could be obviated by assigning to this kind of pastoral permanent deacons or nuns, promoting the calling to diaconry also among seamen themselves. This could result in a constructive presence, offering great comfort to seafaring workers.

Laymen

Such an approach on the part of the hierarchy should also produce a keen voluntarism among laymen. Our communities often lack an ample breadth on the front of being catholic Church, and therefore universal. We know that the presence of voluntarism and practical commitment among seamen makes the awareness of the Church's wide embrace grow, and it puts in contact with different cultures and religions, promoting also the ecumenical spirit so important for the Second Vatican Council. It can, in short, shake our lay faithful from the reduced extent of minor pastoral and from narrow local projects. For those who want to live the Church beyond vestry and weekly meetings.

Companies

How many christian shipowners and agents can there be? No doubt, among them too, there are practising, half-hearted, or disheartened christians, christians or believers. Perhaps nobody ever thought of a pastoral intervention for shipowners and their staff. Seafaring workers, chaplains, nautical colleges, seamen's families, Seamen's Clubs have always been a concern of the maritime pastoral, but nobody ever raised the problem of a pastoral intervention on shipping companies and their ground staff who rule the life of personnel at sea. Here too, it is the Church's responsibility, because it should intervene within the workers' pastoral, identifying – as I already said, in maritime dioceses – workers' and entrepreneurs' groups of this sector, promoting pastoral encounters on on-board life and scenarios.

The Church's social doctrine

Here too, as in other sectors, the Church's social doctrine must act as the catechistic and planning landmark. Many of the above-mentioned malfunctions, if compared with what the Church's documents say about social and work problems, are addressing us and asking for urgent pastoral, social and human interventions.

In no other case, as in the case of the sea, documents should emerge from conventions and seminars and turn into a live and productive reality. Because the Lord will call all of us to account also for these brothers He put under our charge. I therefore close my short intervention asking the Stella Maris Madonna to protect and guard those who go to sea.