

The Stella Maris sailing Chaplains Experiences

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Introduction

We will share with you the excerpts of our diaries from the inter-island voyages in the Philippines and the overseas voyages in Europe.

My colleague and I have sailed with the inter-island together. We sailed separately with the overseas ships. Altogether, we have gone onboard 14 ships, and have sailed along with 424 crewmembers. The length of our stay onboard per voyage ranges from seven to thirty days. So far, we have sailed with freight carriers, passenger, bulk and container ships. The diaries that we shall read to you are excerpts from these voyages.

We believe that we are morally bound to protect the identities of the seafarers who are involved in these diaries. Hence, in this report, we assigned code names and pennames to them and conceal the dates and places. The names that you shall hear, therefore, are not their real names and the diaries do not bear the dates.

We will deliver the sharing simultaneously. My colleague and I will take turns in reading our respective diaries. Our sharing will have two parts. The Part 1 of the sharing comprises our diaries from the overseas voyages and Part 2 is the conclusion and recommendations.

Part 1 Excerpts from Overseas Voyage Dairy

(Eddie) **Dear Diary,**

I sailed in this ship as an Ordinary Seaman. As such, I am assigned to work with the crew at the deck. The ship is new. I should say that it is equipped with the state of the art facilities onboard.

The European officers and Filipino ratings man this ship. Most of the officers are young. I guess that they are immediately assigned as officers from the first day of their profession in seafaring. Many of the Filipino ratings have been sailing for more than 10 years. A few including the boatswain have been on the ship for over 25 to 30 years. Within about two years, the ship principal has successively contracted two manning agencies from the Philippines to supply the ratings to this ship. The ratings who are currently onboard belong to the second batch of the manning agencies. Under the current manning agent, four Filipino crewmembers have been sent home. The cook onboard is the third; the first two never finished their contracts.

The situation onboard was very stressful. The chief officer and the 2nd Engineer have been bullying the ratings of the deck through very harsh words. Specifically, the boatswain has been nagged almost everyday by the chief officer. In one instance, the chief officer accused the boatswain as inefficient. He said that the wall of the ship was poorly painted by the ratings. The paintings on the wall drifted. The boatswain reasoned out that the paint would certainly drift before it dries because the temperature was almost freezing while painting. The chief officer refused to listen. In another instance, the chief officer accused the boatswain of poor performance because of the dusts all over the ship. The boatswain reasoned out that the crewmembers have been cleaning the ship based on the job orders. The dust would always be there. These are emitted by the trucks during loading and unloading. One of the ports of call is an industrial zone. Dust is everywhere. However, the boatswain was accused of answering back. In another occasion, the chief officer

confronted a rating while they were in the galley. From the crew day room, we could hear the loud voice of the officer as he shouted to the rating. The rating tried to reason out to explain himself. He was accused of fighting against the officer. He was sanctioned to be sent home earlier than the terms in the contract.

There have been still many more unpleasant encounters between the officers versus the boatswain and the crew that happened almost every day. The crew kept confiding to me. I tried to be objective as much as I could. The way I understood, the argument revolves around job orders, performance, work aptitude and management skills. On the one hand, I could sense how the officers support each other. The captain told me once that he would always stand in behalf of the officers no matter what the reason is. On the other hand, I could hear a unanimous impression from the crew that these officers are very authoritarian and inexperienced. Generally, the ratings tried to absorb the tension as they kept searching for new possible ways of dealing peacefully with the officers. Once, the boatswain confided to me his struggle and amidst his desire to restore harmony onboard. The ratings said that they come onboard to work, not to find trouble.

The rift between the chief officer along with the 2nd Engineer and all other officers against the ratings continue to flare up. The decision that one of the ratings will be sent home earlier than the terms of the contract is final. The boatswain has been trying to hold his temper until the end of his third month onboard. As he banks on his over thirty years of seafaring experience, he is deeply convinced that what he has done so far were just right and proper. He found this very contrary to the fact that the officers kept running after him. He feels that he is no longer productive onboard. Hoping that his departure might mean peace onboard, he has decided to terminate the contract earlier or be reassigned to another ship.

While I tried to maintain an objective and independent position, the work experiences and camaraderie onboard somehow influenced me to develop a feeling of affiliation with the crew. I could see how the boatswain has struggled to meet the expectation of the chief officer. I could perceive how he has grown in wisdom and knowledge after his over 30 years of sailing. Now I felt deeply affected by the situation. Every time, the chief officer complained about the poor performance of the ratings, I felt included, the fact that I worked with them.

The ratings have been confiding to me their worries. There have been instances when some of the officers attempted to open up as well. I have been absorbing the burdens and tensions of the crewmembers onboard. I have proven through my limited stay onboard the effectiveness of my presence to the morale and spirituality of the crew. However, I am aware that I would not sail longer on this ship.

At this time, on the one hand, like any of the crew, I felt the need to pour out thoughts and anxieties and gain somebody's assurance and support. On the other hand, as a minister, I likewise felt the need to introduce the situation to somebody who would be able to meet the crew regularly onboard and enhance the ministry in whatever way possible. I knew that I won the trust and confidence of the crew, the fact that they told me even of the most secret and sensitive events in their lives. I know however that my presence onboard is very transitory. I guess that the AOS ship visitor could be the person who could continue the ministry of listening onboard that I have started.

Thursday 1200 – 1300 hrs, the AOS Ship Visitor and MTS Chaplain came in for a visit. I asked the AOS Ship Visitor if I could talk with him privately.

I found out that the moment I could have with the AOS Ship Visitor was so short so that before I could finish confiding my concerns, the schedule reminded me that I had to go back to work again. Should I had been an ordinary seafarer onboard, I would not have the luxury of time to

talk further with the AOS Ship Visitor. Now, I was able to feel how a crew usually does: that the time allowed for them to interact with the ship visitor onboard is so short. Now I understand why a crew find a chance and talk with me even while we are at work. At this time I was able to appreciate the significant advantage of the design where in the chaplain sails with the crew.

How long should be a minimum time frame for the chaplain to respond properly to the needs of the crew onboard? My colleague and I kept conferring our observations and experiences. We share a common impression that a period of 15 to 30 days of sailing in one ship is not enough. Our experiences would tell us that much of the need of the crew onboard that a sailing chaplain can respond to are guidance and counseling intervention and liturgical celebration for the nourishment of their morale and spiritual life. We need to spare adequate and quality time with the crew for them to know us and for us to win their trust. The process of knowing and winning of trust does not happen overnight. Rather it grows and matures with time. Then the crewmembers come us to confide their problems and anxieties. The content of their sharing ranges from emotional to spiritual woundedness. Amidst their woundedness, they hope to be understood and expect for somebody to journey with them as they struggle to accept the wounds and as they search for solution to grow from it. To our dismay, however, because the limited period of sailing, there have been many instances when the crewmembers have just opened their wounds and yet by then we had already to disembark so that it would be difficult for us even just to help them close these wounds back.

Sincerely, Eddie

(Rey) **Dear Diary,**

Saturday 1700 – 1830 hrs. I helped the Joel (not his real name) clean the officers' mess room.

Joel has been confiding to me his anxieties in life. Few days ago he recalled to me how he struggled from drug addiction through the inspiration of his girl friend. He also uncovered to me an unhealed pain when he was so excited to go home for a wedding ceremony with his girl friend but only for him to discover that his girl friend had left him. I recalled how he cried as he narrated this incident. At one moment, he likewise told me of his hopelessness in seafaring because of his color blindness that he found out only after he graduated. Onboard, he has been grappling from the sense of anguish by doing gainful activities. I remembered that there was one afternoon when he talked with me in his cabin about his struggles in life and showed me a cross stitch as his way of averting his sense of aloneness. Currently one officer spread an allegation that Joel was a gay.

As we wiped the wall of the officers' mess room, I kept observing the behavior of Joel relative to the issue that has just cropped up against him. He was silent and he looked bothered. At one moment I asked him if he was okay. He nodded. After a while, he said (and I quote), "They are officers. They can do anything against me. I am helpless (unquote)." Then, he continued to work. Deep inside, I could sense his discomfort and worries. As we were about to finish, he smiled to me and said (and I quote), "Chaplain, I am happy of you here" (unquote).

The word of Joel touched me. I am deeply aware that I did not come onboard to provide solutions to people's problems. Neither do I come to resolve conflicts onboard. All I did was to provide a listening ear and to journey with each crew as he confronts the problems and anxieties that beseeched him while onboard. This is exactly what I did to Joel. It has been for several days that I kept on reflecting whether my way of life onboard is effective or not. I remember that in one of my evening prayers, I asked the Lord if he could show me the sign. At the end, I felt confirmed when Joel told me that he was happy that I was there.

Yours, Rey

(Eddie) **Dear Diary,**

Saturday 0600 – 0640 hrs. Six of the crew attended the Morning Prayer in my cabin.

The prayer has been improving. This morning, a crew led the prayer. The music was very good. One of them played the guitar and all of us sang. The beautiful prayer for petition of AB2 touched me. He asked the Lord for enlightenment so that the relationship onboard between the ratings and the officers will be improved.

I could still remember one early morning 23 days ago when AB2 knocked at my cabin and asked me if he could pray with me. Nobody else was with him. That was the time we started to pray together. Along the days, the participants increased until I saw about three to eight of them praying with me regularly. I remembered that all I did was to inform them that I pray every morning and anybody is welcomed. The regular attendance of the crew in our morning prayer tells me that these seafarers must have felt the need to pray and that they must have appreciated the value of praying together. In fact, most of them have already welcomed the group to hold the prayer in their respective cabins. How I wish that they would continue to pray even after I disembarked.

As I continuously met them at work and in prayer, the skills of each one become more transparent to me and natural leaders have started to emerge. Perhaps, at this time I could start training one or a few of them to become prayer leaders onboard. To my dismay, when I look at my calendar I realized that in two days I have to disembark. By then I will have sailed for 30 days. Is a sailing schedule of 30 days long enough? If I have to answer this question, then I would rather say that towards the 30th day, I felt that I have just started.

Sincerely, Eddie

(Eddie) **Dear Diary,**

Friday 1900 –1930 hrs. I asked permission from the captain to go to a church on the incoming Sunday because it would an Easter Sunday. The captain replied that he would declare the Easter Sunday as a non-working day and I could bring the crew to the church. He said further that there would be no work except watch keeping and safety round and that the cook should work only until lunch. The cook should ensure, however, that the food for dinner is cooked before they leave. The captain said further that the officers should be served cold cuts only. I explained to him that I do not force anybody to go to the church but only those interested. In fact, I asked permission only for myself. However, the captain insisted that the Easter Sunday is a glorious day and he respects the tradition and faith of the crewmembers. He checked with me if all the Filipinos onboard are catholic. Then he informed me that he belongs to a Christian church and asked if there is a Christian Church in the locality. I promised to find it out for him. He asked me if I have already contacted a ride from the Seaman's club.

We continued talking with each other about the Lenten season. At one moment he said to me: (and I quote) "Can I ask something personal? Last Thursday and Friday, we eat meat. It is a sin? What is really the meaning of abstinence? In your country do you follow this tradition?" (unquote). I told him that we follow this tradition. Then I explained to him the theology and morality of abstinence.

Sat 1800 – 2230 hrs The Filipino crew expressed unbelief about the fact that the captain declared the Easter Sunday as holiday. "This is the first time it happens," remarked one of them. All of them signified to attend the mass ashore. I organized them into two groups. One group would attend the mass in the morning and the other in the evening.

Sunday 900 – 1400 hrs. Five crewmembers went with me. The Stella Maris ship visitor provided us a ride to the church. Inside the church, I was amazed of the faith of the boson as he went straight to the front seat and knell. I could see how he prayed intently to the Lord.

After the mass, the priest and the parishioners welcomed us. I appreciated the warm spirit of the parishioners as they welcome me said the fitter. "It is really different when I am able to attend the mass," remarked the boson. The AOS ship visitor brought us to the city center. We strolled around the city to break the monotonous atmosphere onboard. There was not much to see. The establishments were closed because it was a holiday. At about 1330 hrs, we telephoned the AOS ship visitor so he could bring us back to the ship.

1500 – 2230 Another batch of crewmembers went out. Likewise, I accompanied them. The AOS ship visitor brought us to a place by the seashore. It was a tourist place. There were plenty of people moving around. We entered a museum and stroll around the place. Some of the crewmembers bought some basic things they needed onboard.

The ship visitor brought us to the church so we could attend the mass. Before the mass started, the main celebrant requested any of the crewmembers to give a sharing during the mass about his seafaring experience. One of them volunteered. I could not forget the word of the sharer when he said that his life as a seafarer is a like a journey with the Lord. He said that while he is onboard, he needed to nourish his faith in order to sustain himself along the journey. After his sharing, the faithful applauded. Then, the priest told the faithful that what he heard was a true-to-life experience and that it was the best sermon he ever heard.

I like the warm spirit of the parishioners as they welcomed us. The parish priest gave centennial pins to each of the crewmembers. Then we had a picture taking with the priest. The crewmembers cherished the experience so much. We proceeded to the seaman's club where we met other crewmembers from different ships.

Yours, Eddie

Part 2: Conclusion and Recommendation

We have been convinced that even the sea is now the vineyard of the Lord. Somehow, we felt called by the Lord to serve his vineyard. Our involvement to this project is a matter of personal commitment. Every time we were confronted with the difficult situations while at sea, we used to call upon the intercession of St. Paul whom we recognized to have been the most prolific itinerant preacher soon after the death of Christ. His commitment and success in sailing to preach the risen Lord has been our inspiration.

Conclusion: We found the project relevant and timely to meet the needs of the crew for pastoral care.

Recommendation: - that, the Apostleship of the Sea may consider the Sailing Chaplain Ministry among its apostolate; - that the port chaplains and ship visitors alike may also sail once in a while to experience the life onboard and deliver the ministry.