

Pastoral Care of Seafarers

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Our Holy Father has, over the years, given us many words of wisdom, guidance and love. In his message to us in the International Meeting “Univ 2001”, April 9, 2001, Pope John Paul II said in part:

“To promote a global culture of those moral absolutes which are the rights of the person, it is necessary for each Christian to begin with himself, by striving to reflect the image of Christ in all his thoughts and actions. It is with holiness that the world is changed.” (O.R. no. 17, April 25, 2001, page 5).

Faced with the ever changing world of the maritime industry it can become exhausting and frustrating and sometimes I can feel like I am not getting anywhere with the seafarers. As soon as I adapt my ministry to one change, along comes another causing me to immediately re-evaluate. Easily I can find myself outside of ministry and more into administration and evaluation. Pastoral care of the seafarers threatens to fall to the wayside in my priorities.

Taking the Holy Father’s words to heart: that the world is changed by holiness, I feel that as a Catholic pastoral associate I have a personal call to holiness. Publicly I represent the Church as I visit the ships. Publicly I represent Christ in the world. As an ambassador for Christ I must have in my own words and actions the image of Christ, not only when I am on duty but at all times.

Jesus’ ministry, not unlike ours, was ever changing as well. He and his disciples had to adapt to different situations such as large crowds, hostile authorities, cultural differences, need differentials, etc. Amid all of these changes there was a common thread. Jesus, regardless where He was ministering and who He was ministering to, always made time for personal conversations with the Father...prayer. As an ambassador for Christ I feel a need to often enter into a dialogue with Jesus to ask for an ever increase in my own personal faith. And of all the things I do for the seafarers the first and most important must be to pray for them daily.

As I enter into a dialogue with God and deepen my faith, I open myself up to Jesus dwelling within me and the Spirit working through me. Then it should happen that without even mentioning the name of Jesus, the seafarers will feel the warmth that can only be the love of God. Imagine, then, how great the sound of Jesus’ name to them once they have felt His love!

We are all familiar with the pastoral care of seafarers. We try to meet their needs while they are with us in our ports on an ever shortening time schedule. We help them to call home, mail their letters, listen to their problems, advocate for them, and the list goes on and on.

At the IXX World Congress in Houston, 1992, we addressed the theme of “Christian Living Aboardship.” It has been ten years since that Congress and what has been done a global scale to promote Christian Living Aboardship? There have been pockets of successes in a few ports, but on a global level within the Apostolatus Maris as a whole it is still only the theme of the IXX World Congress.

Going back to the Holy Father and his look at a global culture that is moral living and his call to holiness, I cannot ignore the fact that I have not met his challenge.

Speaking about the pastoral care of seafarers, I feel I must look to the whole seafarer to meet his needs properly. The whole seafarer is body, soul, and family. I believe I do very well in caring for the needs of the seafarers' bodies in that I feed them, clothe them, visit them, help them when they are in trouble. When they desire to attend Mass I invite a local parish priest to come with me or, if he is not available, I lead a communion service to care for their souls. And I do have some contact with seafarers' families, via mail, telephone or email. Where I believe I fall short is in the teaching and encouraging of seafarers to pray together while at sea and I know I could be doing much more with the families.

Who are these seafarers we serve? They are Christ! I must take you to the third letter of St. John in the New Testament. I found this scripture passage while writing a talk for the Apostleship of the Sea National Conference, Australia. John wrote:

"Beloved, you are faithful in all you do for the brothers, especially for strangers; they have testified to your love before the church. Please help them in a way worthy of God to continue their journey." (3 Jn 5-7)

This piece of Scripture is a treasure to me, especially the phrase: *"help them in a way worthy of God to continue their journey."* They are Christ coming to me in the stranger! **Help them in a way worthy of God!**

If I have centered myself in prayer and approach the seafarers with St. John's words in my heart, there is no doubt as to how I am going to minister aboard ship. I will be able to meet the needs of the seafarers' bodies, souls and families. How, then, could the world not be changed by holiness?

In the second Eucharistic prayer for Masses of Reconciliation we hear the words:

"In that new world where the fullness of Your peace will be revealed,[God will] gather people of every race, language, and way of life to share in the one eternal banquet."

That's a beautiful thought; all of us together eternally at peace. I do not see this call to holiness as an exclusive call to me as a minister, but also to those I minister to! Why wouldn't a seafarer be called to holiness? Part of my pastoral care, then, must be to nurture his call.

The disciples of the early Church preached the gospel with an urgency and an energy that caught the world on fire. They believed that the second coming of Jesus would happen in their lifetime. As they grew older and many were killed by enemies, they realized that maybe they miscalculated this second coming, giving us the gift of the New Testament. They believed the second coming was going to happen in their lifetime. Here we are 2000 years later and I found myself believing it will never happen in my lifetime. How dare I assume I know God's plan! So where's my urgency? Where's my energy?

Let's look again at Jesus' ministry peeking into a small window in the gospel of Mark (8:1-10), where Jesus, seeing the multitudes of people before Him told the apostles to go and feed the people. I know from hearing this gospel story countless times in my life that it was impossible for the apostles to feed all the people without Jesus making it possible through the miracle of the loaves and fish. In this ministry I, like the apostles, can feel overwhelmed by the thought of the mere masses of seafarers out there. How am I ever to reach them all? I can't. But through me Jesus can. It is only through Him making it possible that we will be able to feed them all.

Go and feed the people. The gospel can be words on paper or actions in my life. If I truly believe the gospel then I have no choice but to live it. There is no other option. By living the gospel I then answer my personal call to holiness. By believing the gospel in the depths of my heart I must also believe that the world is changed by holiness. If I believe the world is changed by holiness I have found again the fire of the early Church. And in that fire I am once again amazed that, through me, Jesus is feeding the multitudes.

They have found a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. Let us go and feed the people for the Lord has blessed the food.