



Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People

## XV Plenary Session The Professionals of the Sea

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The real situation of the life and work of the professionals of the sea is very complex, and although there is an abundance of topics, it is basically unknown. This is an area that requires a very specialized pastoral care and for this it is obviously necessary to know the characteristics of this reality and the problems derived from it.

We are going to try to make a schematic presentation of what the life and work of the people of the sea are like, that of their families, and what the Church's response ought to be.

For this purpose we will follow this outline:

1. The merchant marine
2. Marine fishing
3. The families of the people of the sea
4. Maritime pastoral care

### 1. The Merchant Marine

#### Merchant Seamen and Ships

##### **I. Seamen**

According to a study by the BIMCO [1]

1) In the year 2000 there was a total of 1,227,000 merchant seamen in the whole world: 404,000 officers and 823,000 ratings.

2) The distribution of the seamen by regions of origin was:

37% Far East (excluding Japan)

28% Developed countries (North America, Western Europe, Japan and Australia)

14% Eastern Europe and Northern Asia  
11% Middle East  
10% Latin America and Africa.

3) The predictions for a 5-10 years period are:

The majority of the officers will be Asians.

The majority of the ratings will be from developing countries.

The salaries of crews of different nationalities will continue to be very different.

The periods on board for officers of different nationalities will decrease, but not for the subordinates.

The vacation periods for officers will increase for officers of different nationalities, but not for the ratings (subordinates).

No substantial increase in the number of women crew members is expected.

The general conditions of embarkation will have to improve in order to recruit the necessary seamen.

The money for the shipowners to recruit and train their crews will increase.

On the other hand, according to data from the International Transport Federation [2]

In 1998:

The highest salary for a First Officer was \$9,900 (US)/month, while the lowest salary was \$1,400 (US)/month.

The highest salary for a seaman was \$6,400 (US)/month and the lowest \$260 (US)/month.

## **II. Ships**

Flags of ships on December 31, 1999

<b>Country</b>	<b>Millions of Tons</b>
Panama*	105
Liberia*	54
Bahamas*	29
Malta*	28
Greece	25
Cyprus*	24
Singapore	22
Norway (I)	20
Japan	17
China, PRC	16

(\* ) = Flag of convenience

### **Comment**

1) At present, 72% of the seamen in the world come from developing countries, and it is predicted that this percentage will increase over the coming years.

2) An improvement is foreseeable in the contract conditions (salaries and vacations) for the officers, but not for the ratings who represent 67% of the total.

3) For the same professional category, there is an abysmal difference in the salaries according to the seaman's country of origin. Over the next years this is expected to level off for the officers, but not for the ratings, and so a good part of the seamen will continue to get miserable salaries.

4) The long periods at sea, and thus the period of absence from home, will continue to be long for most seamen which, together with the growing phenomenon of multinational crews, will imply a high level of loneliness for these seamen.

5) Out of the 340 million tons that the ten flags with the greatest tonnage on a world scale add up to, 240 million (70.5%) correspond to the so-called flags of convenience, among which we find the greatest number of ships with irregularities. However, it should also be said that there are some very serious companies that fly these flags.

Problems derived from the living and working conditions on board the merchant ships:

#### I. Loneliness

##### **The absence of the family**

Seamen are affected by the distance from home. They miss the ones they love, the relations as a couple with their wives, the affection of their children...

For this reason communication with the family will continue to be a priority theme. Certainly the great spread of mobile phones makes this easier although, because of costs, telephone cards with reduced rates play a leading role.

In the light of the predictions mentioned earlier, the long separations from the family will continue in the coming years to be one of the main problems for most seamen and their families.

##### **Isolation on board**

On the other hand, from a personal viewpoint, loneliness tends to increase because of:

- a) Reduced crews, especially on coastal trading boats (6-7 crew members).
- b) Multinational crews. The problems of linguistic and cultural understanding can be a cause of further isolation.
- c) The brief stays in port which sometimes impede the seamen from access to land.

#### II. Lack of Safety

##### **Lack of Physical Safety**

Many of the boats that sail are considered “substandard”. They barely fulfill the norms of the classification companies and sometimes they even pass local inspections in the ports, but these are often not rigorous. Therefore, we find boats that split in two because the bottomplates lost their original thickness, or depths of hold that fall causing accidents because their base was eaten up by oxide. In other cases the kitchens and toilets lack a minimum of hygiene, the refrigerators do not work and the food perishes.

There are boats with deficient safety conditions that are sent out with the commitment to make repairs in the next port. At other times the certified decrepit boats are prolonged by the consulates of some countries without submitting the boat to the necessary inspection.

The number of crew members is insufficient especially when a boat continuously enters and leaves a port whereby the maneuvers are added to the normal working hours, thereby overtiring the crew with the resulting decrease in safety.

On the other hand, most countries around the world lack efficient salvage services that can make a quick and safe rescue possible in the event of danger.

### **Lack of Safety in Work**

#### a) possibility

Most seamen do not have an indefinite contract that guarantees their job. Although they return several times to the same company, and even to the same ship, their contract is always for one campaign. Any demands for their rights can be turned against them and mean not being accepted in the company where they were, or even not being accepted by anyone because of the existence of black lists.

#### b) Maning agencies

The companies usually embark their crews (especially those of the Third World) through maning agencies.

The contracts signed before the intermediary agency many times do not correspond to the conditions on board the ship. Agreements are often made verbally and when protest is made, there are no supporting documents.

Moreover, the relationship between the firm and the worker is lost.

### **The abandonment of crews**

In 1999, 1,684 ships were seized in the whole world.

The flags that were seized most were:

Malta*	167
Panama*	157
Turkey	163
Cyprus*	145

(\*) = flag of convenience

This is a phenomenon that affects personal safety on all levels and is very frequent in our days: a shipowner with solvency problems starts to pay the crew's salaries late. Then he extends his debts to providers, consignees, port bodies, etc. and in the end they seize his ship. If he cannot settle his debts, he abandons the ship and with it the crew who from that moment on are at the mercy of the charity of people in the port where they find themselves. The crew takes the ship, because this is the only guarantee of covering all or part of what is owed to them, but they have no money for food or fuel. An odyssey begins that can last more than a year. The crew will need a lawyer to represent them and present an additional request for seizure to defend the crew's salaries. The judge may ask for a surety (bond) which the crew cannot pay, or ask a labor union, such as the ITF, or an organization, like the Apostleship of the Sea, to cover the expenses.

During this process, efforts will be made to repatriate the crew members.

### **Put to land for sickness**

When a crew member gets sick and needs an operation or even a period of rest on land, if this is eventual, and especially if he comes from Third World countries, his contract may be ended and he is then sent home; he will not get his salary during the illness or convalescence, and he will also have to cover the costs of the medical services.

## **2. Marine Fishing**

### **Fishermen and Ships**

According to the FAO

#### **I. Fishermen: [3]**

In the 90s, it is estimated that there were some 15 million persons around the world working in maritime fishing vessels.

#### **II. Boats: [4]**

In 1995 there was a total of 1,258,000 fishing boats (covered) with a total of 27,990,000 tons of gross registry.

In decreasing order, the 20 countries with the greatest tonnage were:

Russian Federation, China, Japan, United States, India, Republic of Korea, Taiwan, China, Ukraine, Democratic Republic of Korea, Spain, Canada, Indonesia, Mexico, Thailand, Panama, Norway, Italy, United Kingdom and Malaysia.

Approximately 90% of these boats did not reach 25 tons of gross registry.

In 1995, 46.1% of the world fleet was more than 20 years old, with a tendency to increase.

This data corresponds to high and low sea fishing vessels, excluding uncovered boats, which are common in artisanal fishing.

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We will now make a presentation of fishermen's problems, according to the following classification:

High sea fishing, low sea fishing and artisanal fishing

However, even within this classification, there are some great differences according to the countries and geographic areas.

### 1. High sea fishing

This is made up by vessels that spend long periods of time at sea. In some places this can be from several days to weeks, but there are also some that stay six months or more toiling far from their place of origin and often passing their catch on to refrigerator boats.

These fishermen are similar to the merchant seamen who spend long periods away from home. However, their life is even harder: they do not usually go into port and if they do it is sporadically, the space on board is very limited, the work is particularly exhausting with little rest and many discomforts, and national and international legislation is usually more deficient than in the merchant marine.

### 2. Low sea fishing

This is made up by boats that operate near the port of origin that usually go out and back in the day or at most spend a few days out. The fishermen are at home almost every day. Their work is hard and uncertain because they depend on what they fish. The bosses are usually the owners of the boat and there is often a family unit (fathers and sons, nephews, etc.) that dominates and a group of contracted fishermen who live from day to day.

There are no higher officers; at command there is a boss and for the machine a mechanic.

### 3. Artisanal fishing

In principle the term "artisanal fishing" refers to small-scale fishing. Just as the two previous groups are usually made up by duly registered boats that go out to sea with the certificates and documents required by law, artisanal fishing is made up by a very disparate variety of boats: in developed countries, small boats equipped with the most modern technology, and in poor countries, rudimentary and primitive boats. Most of the fishermen in this sector live in remote coastal areas and are found on the lowest social

scale. In these countries there is normally a total lack of control over these boats whose crews are usually made up by its owner and a small group of relatives or friends. In artisanal fishing there is a particular abundance of child labor.

Problems derived from the living and working conditions on board fishing ships:

### 1. High sea fishing:

The absence of the family, as in the merchant marine, is a grave problem, and even worse. Their almost continuous stay at sea makes the possibility of communication with the family minimal. Sometimes they do this through the ship radio, but this is expensive and not always at the crew members' disposal. The periods at sea can last nine months or more.

Since they are at sea almost the whole time, in the event of a family emergency, it is not possible to disembark and fly home.

Moreover, their vacations are irregular and usually less than they should have. This significantly limits the fisherman's relations with his family.

On the other hand, the loneliness on board is accentuated through the incorporation, also on fishing ships, of multinational crews and with this the increased difficulty in communications and understanding among the persons.

### **Lack of safety**

#### a) Lack of physical safety

Fishing in general is one of the most dangerous industrial activities. In high sea fishing, the days are very long, sometimes as long as eighteen hours without interruptions. It is hard to rest because the ships move so much, especially in bad weather. The work done on board is hard because of the noise, the lack of space to move, as well as the continuous physical efforts. All this makes it a high accident sector.

#### b) Lack of safety in work

The salaries depend to a great extent on the result of the campaign. This can imply a motivation but, on the other hand, it favors accepting work in poor conditions and with excessive hours. Moreover, the families do not know with certainty what they are going to receive, especially when a minimum salary is entirely lacking.

Art. 13 of the Convention on the safety and health of workers, 1981 (No. 155) of the ILO proclaims the fisherman's right to refuse to do unsafe work, but if he is not duly protected by a labor union or an efficient juridical and administrative system of the country of the flag, the fisherman can be dismissed.

At present, the contracting of cheap labor from poor countries gives rise to increasing abuses and a lack of social protection.

The Governments stay very much away from the area of legislation applicable to fishing.

## 2. Low-sea fishing:

In low sea fishing, separation from the family does not take place as such because they see one another almost daily, but the fishermen's hours and those of the family do not coincide and for this reason their life together usually has shortcomings.

As to safety, we can repeat what was said about high sea fishing and add that controls on the boats' security features in this sector are generally worse, and that there is a high rate of alcohol consumption with the resulting negative consequences for labor risks and family stability.

Work on board is often done without the necessary means of protection.

There are many cases of illegal embarkation, without the corresponding enrollment, as well as the embarkation of minors. The salaries are even more irregular than in high sea fishing.

On the other hand, as has already been said, in this type of fishing there are many family clans and so the crew members who do not belong to the group are usually subjected to more precarious working conditions than the others.

## 3. Artisanal fishing

This sector is marked by anarchy, especially in underdeveloped countries where there is a total lack of control in every sense. This is typically family fishing, highly dangerous, in which there is much child labor, and in which it is practically impossible to do any statistical study.

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In general, fishing represents a very small percentage of a country's gross internal product and so when the moment comes to defend the fishermen's interests, the governments barely get involved.

The national and international aid and subsidies go to the shipowners, but they usually do not go to covering fishermen's salaries when the ships cannot go out to sea.

## 3. The families of the people of the sea

In the traditional sociological pattern of the family, the roles of the father and the mother in the different cultures are very well defined. When one of them is missing and the other tries to fill the his/her role, problems arise.

Normally we are confronted with the lack of the male figure: the husband and father. The woman has to assume all the organizational and administrative functions of the

home as well as those regarding the children's upbringing and care. The husband is the one who brings the money.

This raises problems for the wife and the children. The wife misses her companion, she feels alone and has to make decisions she would like to share. The children seek not only the affection but also the male reference point which the father represents.

This leads them to feel different from the others. Naturally, the surroundings and the general social support they receive will play an important role here.

Unfortunately, especially in fishermen's families, they occupy a very low place in the social scale.

These problems will be worsened by the fact that the lack of living together regularly will probably affect the family as a whole when they are back together again. Both the seamen and their families can have problems of adaptation when they are together again after a more or less lengthy period of time. Sometimes this is a cause for frustration because of unfulfilled expectations. Years later, when the seaman returns and is definitively re-incorporated into the household, some grave adaptation problems can arise which will depend on: the number of years at sea, the time he stayed at sea each year, the duration of the voyages, the nature of the community he lives in, education, etc.

Women's inclusion in the maritime world would also require reference to be made to the possibility that the wife or mother would be missing at home. However, in most cases this involves single women or married women with no children and, in any case, I do not know of any documented experiences that would make it possible to carry out a study in this regard.

#### 4. Maritime Pastoral Care

The Apostleship of the Sea must be the herald of the "GOOD NEWS". This means being the "Good Samaritan" towards seamen, being "the voice crying in the desert" before a world that is ruled by commercial interests, and being the instigator of the seamen's own activity ("Go forth and preach").

##### **Merchant Marine**

The Good Samaritan: This means hospitality, having a spirit of service, being willing to try to help the seamen in what they need for their welfare as a person.

For this purpose, the traditional services are carried out of visits to ships, clubs and Stella Maris residences, cultural and sport activities, social and legal assistance, and, of course, religious assistance. But religious assistance must also contemplate the reality of a plural, ecumenical and inter-religious world. Being at man's service means helping him to find what he may need as a person.

"The voice crying in the desert": The Apostleship of the Sea must make known to society what is lacking, the injustices and the problems that the people of the sea suffer;

it must remind the firms and organizations in the maritime area that there are persons aboard ships who deserve respect and living and working conditions, from which they sometimes suffer.

The Apostleship of the Sea must be a mediator with the administrations regarding the lack of controls and the application of conventions, and it must raise its voice in the international organizations so that they will take awareness of the lack of protection for the people of the sea.

“Go forth and preach”: The Apostleship of the Sea must send forth its own seamen to bring the Good News, to be the voice crying in the desert for their companions and in their own society. The seamen are not passive subjects either in the struggle to defend their interests and their welfare or in evangelization. At times they discriminate against their companions, they commit injustices. The seamen themselves must be apostles of the sea.

## **Fishing**

The maritime pastoral care of fishing is basically pastoral care of a maritime parish. In principle, high sea fishing would be an exception, but the fact that these ships do not touch the port and that the fisherman usually live in maritime settlements makes their families the basis for all contact and communication with them.

This appears even more obvious in the case of low sea and artisanal fishing.

The work of the Apostleship of the Sea among fishing peoples, through the parish, means taking care of those families and supporting them in their claims.

We find the same axes of pastoral care as in the merchant marine:

“The Good Samaritan”: The pastoral care dedicated to fishermen requires an effort to know their reality and their problems, and to offer fishermen and their families hospitality, special attention, and to keep a careful eye on what they need, taking these persons’ special circumstances into consideration when organizing catechesis activities, celebrations of Baptisms, First Communions, etc.

“The voice crying in the desert”: We see here again that one of the important tasks of the Apostleship of the Sea is to be, directly or indirectly, the voice crying in the desert, and to bring together fishermen and their wives and coordinate and support any demands before the authorities. The movement in Europe of fishermen’s wives is well-known and one of its motors is the “Rosa dos Ventos” Association of Spain. Through it the fishermen’s wives plan their struggle for improvements in their working and living conditions before the national authorities and those of the European Union.

“Go forth and preach”: Here too the Apostleship of the Sea must encourage the fishermen and their wives to take action in defence of their rights and foment a spirit of honor and camaraderie on board ships. On a fishing boat where the boss is also the owner, solidarity is frequently lacking, and the distributions of benefits is not fair because there are many ways to disguise the figures.

## **What does maritime pastoral care require?**

The activity of maritime pastoral care is not identified with any of these actions in an isolated way, but rather by all of them together in order to achieve greater well-being for the people of the sea.

While we said earlier that governments pay little attention to fishermen because they do not represent much for a country's industry, except in highly fishing regions, we can also say that the Church also pays little attention to fishermen because there are not many of them compared to the rest of the population.

Maritime pastoral care is usually a great unknown and occupies an almost anecdotal place in the concerns of a local Church. It is a specialized and complicated area and when the bishop of a diocese is urged to name someone to take care of this area, a difficult problem is created for him that is hard to solve.

The usual solution is to give the charge to a priest who is not too busy or to the parish rector of a church near the port. Normally this person has no idea about what a boat is or about the seamen's needs, and even with the best intentions, his other occupations will limit his charge to something of an official nature but void in content.

This is an ideal pastoral care for lay persons, some of whom may be seamen. The bishops are very happy if a retired captain offers one day to carry out maritime pastoral care. But this is not always a panacea. Retired captains, especially in the developed countries, sometimes have an idea about the maritime world that is not exactly up-to-date and, on the other hand, they lack pastoral and welfare training.

For this reason, the maritime pastoral care requires a team of persons. Some will have the necessary knowledge about the maritime world, others about social activity and, of course, coordination and pastoral orientation will be necessary for which a counselor is in charge.

In line with what has been said earlier, the focus also depends on the kind of port. If it is a port with a typically maritime population, although thought must be given to the pastoral care of itinerant people, the work will be especially parochial and thus hospitality.

On the other hand, if it is a merchant port, especially among a great population where there is no nucleus of maritime dwellers, it will not be useful to call oneself an Apostleship of the Sea center and stay waiting in a parish. A place will be needed from where the services can be offered to seamen which they may need. The work has to be thought out every day and it is necessary to go to the seamen, to go on board the boats.

On the other hand, it is important for those who must dedicate themselves to this pastoral area to receive adequate training about what the life of the sea is, its problems and needs.

Similarly, it is necessary to envisage things beyond one's own port. The Apostleship of the Sea by principle is international. Relations have to be cultivated with centers of

other ports, with other countries, and the international maritime organizations must be known.

Another important aspect in the pastoral care of itinerant seamen, as in the case of the merchant marine, is ecumenism both from the viewpoint of the seamen and also of the centers. The work carried out in maritime pastoral care is a privileged terrain for encouraging ecumenism. The ecumenical spirit springs forth spontaneously. There are no doctrinal problems, just a feeling of brotherhood. The people of the sea have a natural religiosity. They know the sea is dangerous and that their families are far away, and they find comfort in a God who takes care of them and their families.

Seamen are receptive. They are grateful for whatever is offered to them, but they also think that the work done for them by the Apostleship of the Sea is something due to them. They are very critical about a society on land that marginalizes them and they know how to value the work of the Apostleship of the Sea when it makes efforts to aid them, but they also criticize it when they feel it does not carry out its mission and has lost what distinguished it from the rest.

#### Maritime Pastoral Care: A Privileged Pastoral Care

I would like to conclude by pointing out that in my opinion maritime pastoral care is a privileged pastoral care because in it the person is approached in his whole dimension. Although this seems obvious in any pastoral field, in practice it is not always the case.

In maritime pastoral care, a seaman has the opportunity to feel that the Church is not an entity that imposes norms and gives advice, but rather a friend who is willing to help, to welcome, to encourage, without asking if he is a believer or an atheist, and that by the mere fact that he is a seaman, he is the object of love.

A seaman at times will not understand the liturgy or writings, but he has a strong sense of the value of camaraderie and solidarity.

An evangelizing dialogue between a seaman and the Apostleship of the Sea could be summarized as follows:

“Why are you helping me? – Because you are my brother.

“What are you trying to do?” – To make you feel well as a person and for you to help those around you to feel well.

“Who are you?” – I am a Christian.

Notes:

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[1] BIMCO/ISF 2000 Manpower Update: The worldwide demand for and supply of seafarers: Main Report – April 2000, Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick.

[2] Flags of convenience. Campaign Report 1999, ITF, London.

- [3] Safety and health in the fishing industries. World Labor Organization – TMF/1999.
- [4] Statistical bulletin of fishing, No. 35 (Rome 1998).