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I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Stella Maris: chaplaincy to seafarers

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ABSTRACT

An important form of chaplaincy is the mission for seafarers. Since the 19th century, various charitable organisations have provided physical and spiritual support for seafarers when their ships are berthed. This article examines the history and contemporary work of the Catholic organisation, Stella Maris, the largest ship visiting network in the world. The history begins in 1920 in Glasgow and the foundation of the Apostleship of the Sea which grew quickly into a major international organisation. Over the years the invaluable work of the chaplains and volunteers has been perceived to be integral to the mission of the Catholic Church to protect the dignity of the worker, and aid migrants and displaced and vulnerable people in need. A Stella Maris chaplain and a volunteer, based in Glasgow, recount some of their experiences in supporting seafarers and this provides insights into the scope of their duty of care.

KEYWORDS

Stella Maris; chaplains; seafarers; Apostleship of the Sea; Glasgow; catholic social teaching; modern slavery; ecumenical action

Introduction

Stella Maris was founded in Glasgow in 1920 and grew and developed to become a well-resourced organisation and the largest ship visiting network in the world. In the 21st century Stella Maris provides seafarers with practical and pastoral support, information, and a friend in times of need.¹ There are 1,000 chaplains and volunteers in 353 ports across 57 countries that range from the site of the original Apostleship to the Sea in Glasgow to the United States, Australia, The Philippines and many other parts of the maritime world. The global mission of Stella Maris is described on the website as follows:

... to support seafarers and fishers spiritually, practically, and emotionally. Our Catholic faith is at the heart of Stella Maris, it inspires, enlivens, and motivates our work, and is expressed through a loving care of the people of the sea of all faiths and none.²

The term seafarer describes anyone who works on a seagoing ship and this can include different types of people, for example: the masters and crew, self-employed contractors, shopkeepers and hairdressers and entertainers.³ The bulk of raw materials, food and

¹Turgo and others, 'Relying on the Kindness', 196.

²Stella Maris, 'About us'.

³GOV.UK, 'Seafarer Working and Living'.

manufactured items are transported by sea in the 21st century. There are over 50,000 commercial ships operating in the world and around 1,892,720 seafarers. The following countries provide the largest number of seafarers: The Philippines, Russian Federation, Indonesia, China and India.⁴ The recent conflict in Ukraine has had a significant effect on the 77,000 Ukrainian seafarers (one in seven of the seafarers in the world are Russian or Ukrainian) and their families.⁵ Some Ukrainian seafarers have returned to fight while others have returned and they, and their families, face the effects of unemployment. Many of the Ukrainian seafarers who did not return home are now ‘trapped in a cycle of extended contracts’.⁶ The plight of many Ukrainian seafarers and their families will be highlighted in some of the vignettes that focus on the challenges faced by seafarers.

Seafarers are often working as migrants who operate outwith the boundaries of their own countries.⁷ During the pandemic, there emerged a greater public awareness of the invaluable work undertaken by these seafarers and a recognition of their role as key workers.⁸ Nevertheless, commercial shipping berths are usually confined to ports, or sections of ports, that are not often accessed by the general populace who know little about this way of life and the challenges faced by the seafarers.⁹ These shipping berths can be described as an invisible world that is constantly changing.¹⁰

The seafarer’s rights are protected under the Maritime Labour Convention, which was designed to ensure safe and secure workplaces, fair terms of employment, decent working and living conditions on board ship, health care, medical protection and welfare and social protection.¹¹ The Maritime Labour Convention came into force in the UK on the 7th of August 2014.¹² It is instructive to note that as recently as 2007, the XXII World congress of the Apostleship of the Sea raised serious concerns about the medical care for seafarers and highlighted the dangers of tropical malaria and the need to ensure proper preventative measures.¹³

This article examines the work of the ship visiting network, Stella Maris, an international Roman Catholic organisation. The article will begin with a concise history of the organisation and an overview of the aims and work of Stella Maris within the Catholic Church, arguing that Stella Maris is excellent example of Catholic social teaching translated into Catholic social action. There will then be a short section on contemporary working practices for seafarers which will include a discussion on modern day slavery and how this contravenes the maritime convention and Catholic social teaching. This will be followed by some examples of different types of support for seafarers in the United Kingdom. This will be provided in vignette form by the Reverend Joe O’Donnell, a Roman Catholic deacon, who is the Stella Maris senior area port chaplain for many of the major ports in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and Mary Wheeler who has been a volunteer with Stella Maris for six years. This article is unique in the sense that it blends

⁴International Chamber of Shipping, ‘Shipping and World Trade’.

⁵Stella Maris, ‘Annual Review’, 4.

⁶Stella Maris, ‘Life at Sea Report’, 3.

⁷Sampson and others, ‘Harmony of the Seas?’ 288.

⁸Turgo and others, ‘Relying on the Kindness’, 193.

⁹Pracz, ‘John Paul II’s Contribution’, 96; and Montemaggi, ‘Hospitality and compassion’, 504.

¹⁰Silf, ‘With God’.

¹¹International Labour Conference, ‘Maritime Labour Convention’, 4.

¹²See note 3 above.

¹³Jaremin, ‘The XXII World Congress’, 206.

the history and aims of *Stella Maris* with the voices of a chaplain and a volunteer who explain their roles and reflect on their experiences as Christian ministers to the seafarers.

History of *Stella Maris* within the Catholic Church

Stella Maris was originally known as The Apostleship of the Sea and was founded within the context of the philanthropic concern for the welfare of seafarers in the 19th to 20th centuries. Various Organisations were founded such as the non-denominational British and Foreign Sailors' Society (1833), the Anglican Missions to Seamen (1856) and the American Seaman's Friend Society (1826).¹⁴ Roman Catholic interest in providing support for seafarers can be traced to the role of the Society of Saint Vincent De Paul in the early part of the 19th century and the Société des Oeuvres de Mer which was established in France in 1894. In Britain, the Apostleship of Prayer was initiated in 1899 by Father Egger in Glasgow and this would, in time, lead to the Apostleship of the Sea.¹⁵

The Apostleship of the Sea was founded in Glasgow in October 1920 by Archbishop Donald Mackintosh, Arthur Gannon and Peter Anson. The aim was to provide aid and support for seafarers who were in some form of need and demonstrate the witness of the Church in this work.¹⁶ The first constitution was formally approved by Pope Pius XI on April 17th in 1922 and the Apostleship received his blessing. Thus, the Apostleship of the Sea was conceived and formalised by the Catholic Church to provide spiritual and social welfare to seamen in the Merchant Navy. In the 1920s, Great Britain had one of the most extensive merchant fleets in the world, employing 278, 593 British seafarers.¹⁷ King George V formally granted the term 'Merchant Navy' in 1920.¹⁸ During the 1920s, being a merchant seaman was probably the most hazardous occupation in Britain.¹⁹ Despite a fall in annual mortality rates, due to improved safety, food and conditions, the mortality rate remained higher than that of the Royal Navy.²⁰

The Apostleship of the Sea established seafarers' hostels in all the major port towns. These hostels were often quite large and provided seafarers with somewhere to stay while their ships were in port. The seafarers were offered a variety of services such as sleeping accommodation, dining areas, libraries, games rooms and a shop.²¹ There was often a chapel on site for services and prayer and, if there was no chapel, there would be close links with a local Church. Sometimes the stay could be lengthy and extend to weeks rather than days. The hostels were generally fully occupied, and the seafarers were supported by volunteers from local Catholic parishes who provided hospitality and entertainment.

The original papal link and support for the Apostleship of the Sea from Pope Pius XI would continue and be consolidated through subsequent papacies and through the growth and development of the Apostleship of the Sea. On 22 September 1938, Archbishop Donald Mackintosh of Glasgow read out a letter from Cardinal Pizzardo at a reception for delegates at the International Congress of the Apostleship of the Sea

¹⁴Kennerley, 'Writing the History', 12.

¹⁵Ronson, 'For those in Peril.'

¹⁶*Stella Maris* Australia, 'History and Organisation'.

¹⁷Roberts, 'Fatal Work-Related Accidents', 130.

¹⁸Wilton, 'The Royal Fleet', 153.

¹⁹Roberts, 'Fatal Work-Related Accidents', 129.

²⁰Quinlan, 'Precarious and Hazardous Work', 282.

²¹See note 15 above.

which was held in Glasgow. The letter contained a message from Pope Pius XI who sent his blessing to the conference and praised the work of the many priests, religious and laymen who were cooperating in this work.²² There were over twenty different nationalities represented at the 1938 conference and it was reported that the Apostolatus Maris had grown from support for seafarers in six countries in 1920 to sixteen of the sixty maritime countries, and by 1938 there were twenty-two full time chaplains and almost 300 part-time chaplains.²³ On 30 May 1942, the Apostleship of the Sea was put under the jurisdiction of the Consistorial Congregation in the special office for the Spiritual Care for Migrants. In 1952, a new agency was established by Pope Pius XII to direct the work of the Apostolate: The General International Secretariate.²⁴

One of the documents produced in the latter stages of the Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus*, devotes some attention to the pastoral responsibilities of the bishops.²⁵ This document contained a reference to the special pastoral responsibilities required for those groups of people who are unable to engage or fully engage with the pastoral care provided under normal circumstances.²⁶ This included pastoral care for seafarers:

Special concern should be shown for those among the faithful who, on account of their way of life, cannot sufficiently make use of the common and ordinary pastoral care of parish priests or are quite cut off from it. Among this group are the majority of migrants, exiles and refugees, seafarers, air-travelers, gypsies, and others of this kind. Suitable pastoral methods should also be promoted to sustain the spiritual life of those who go to other lands for a time for the sake of recreation.²⁷

In more recent years, the work of Stella Maris has been praised by Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis. Pope John Paul II issued an Apostolic letter on Stella Maris in 1997 which updated the norms governing the pastoral support for seafarers in commercial shipping and fishing.²⁸ Interestingly he identified three categories of people connected to the sea. First, 'seafarers' which refers to those who actually work on board ships. Second, 'maritime personnel' which includes seafarers, workers on oil rigs or platforms, those retired from the seafaring and oil work on the sea, students at nautical colleges and port workers. Third, 'people of the sea' which includes seafarers and maritime personnel. The spouses and dependent children of those who are seafarers or maritime personnel and those who work in the maritime Apostolate. At this point Stella Maris was under the jurisdiction of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People. The contents of the Apostolic letter on Stella Maris (1997) would help to inform the practical Manual for Chaplains and Pastoral Agents of the Apostleship of the Sea in 2007.²⁹

In 2016, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (and the responsibility for Stella Maris) was merged into the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.³⁰ On the 2nd of October 2022, Pope Francis sent a special message to

²²The Scotsman, 'Apostleship of the Sea', 7.

²³The Scotsman, 'Apostleship of the Sea. Glasgow', 7; and The Scotsman, 'Work for Seamen. Apostleship', 13.

²⁴Pope Pius XII, 'Apostolic Constitution Exsul Familia'.

²⁵Alberigo, 'The Conclusion of the Council', 549.

²⁶Ferre, 'The Decree on the Bishop's', 195.

²⁷Pope Paul VI, 'Dominus', article 18.

²⁸Pope John Paul II, 'Apostolic Letter on Stella', article 2.

²⁹Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 'Manual for Chaplains.'

³⁰Pope Francis, 'Apostolic Letter'; Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 'Apostleship of the Sea'.

the XXVth World Council of Stella Maris which was held in Glasgow.³¹ Due to the restrictions and lockdowns caused by the effects of Covid-19, this was the first opportunity for a major face-to-face celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Apostleship of the Sea in Glasgow in 1920. This also marked the 25th anniversary of John Paul II's Apostolic letter on Stella Maris of 1997. Pope Francis recalled the blessing of Pius XI for this new venture in 1922 and gave thanks to God for the work that had been undertaken by the chaplains and volunteers. He commented on the growth of the Apostleship from 'humble beginnings' to the global organisation that exists in the contemporary world. He drew a comparison between the work of the chaplains and volunteers and the ministry of Jesus:

Such a global presence reflects your own particular response to the Lord's command to 'go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation' (*Mk* 16:15). In this regard, one cannot help but think of the fact that much of Jesus' ministry took place on and around a small yet vital stretch of water – the Sea of Galilee – and that some of his first disciples were fishermen, who in turn became fishers of men (cf. *Mt* 4:19).³²

The Pope praised the work of the chaplains and volunteers of Stella Maris who offer support to seafarers. Many of these seafarers live and work under unjust conditions and deprivations. Near the end of the message, Pope Francis returns to the close alignment of the work of Stella Maris to the teaching of Jesus:

I trust, then, that *Stella Maris* will never waver in drawing attention to the issues which deprive many within the maritime community of their God-given human dignity. In this way, the Apostleship will continue its noble service of putting into practice the words of Jesus, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (*Mt* 25:35).³³

This care for the seafarers is a response, as Pope Francis has stated, to the fundamental message of the gospel to care for our neighbour. Interestingly, Stella Maris has continued to operate effectively for over one hundred years within the Church through different capacities and eras of Church history with their different ecclesial agendas and priorities.

Contemporary working practices for seafarers

In the post-World War II period, there were changes to working practices in merchant shipping. Ships became larger and there were shorter turnarounds in ports. Crews became smaller and a typical crew for container vessels, tankers and bulk carriers is now between thirteen and twenty-five people (usually mainly men).³⁴ The Stella Maris review for 2022 reports that Stella Maris is based in 353 ports in 57 countries.³⁵ There are currently 22 chaplains and 79 ship visiting volunteers in the UK who undertook 6,222 ship visits and helped 136,884 seafarers and fishers in 2022. The chaplaincy work has changed from providing hostels to visiting the seafarers onboard the ships and providing drop-in centres inside the docks.³⁶ The seafarers spend long periods of time separated from their families and can often suffer from acute loneliness.³⁷ Drop-in centres offer the

³¹Pope Francis, 'Message of His Holiness'; and Mayaki SJ, 'Pope Encourages Stella Maris'.

³²Pope Francis, 'Message of His Holiness'.

³³Ibid.

³⁴See note 7 above.

³⁵Stella Maris, 'Annual Review.'

³⁶Stella Maris, 'Our History'; and Zuidema and others, 'Port-Based Seafarers' Welfare', 2.

³⁷Pracz, 'John Paul II's Contribution', 96.

crews a place to relax and, importantly, have access to computers and phones to contact loved ones. Sometimes the seafarers have been hospitalised, or are due wages, or are not allowed ashore because of administration difficulties.³⁸ In more extreme cases, there are times when seafarers are abandoned in foreign ports.

There are occasions, which are becoming more frequent, when the conditions of service (or lack of) for seafarers constitute one of the forms of modern-day slavery. Modern day slavery refers to the extreme exploitation of people that incorporates forced labour and forced marriage and has become a world-wide cause for concern in the 21st century.³⁹ The estimates for modern day slavery for 2021 were that 49.6 million people were living in slavery: 27.6 million in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriage.⁴⁰ There are different forms of modern-day slavery and a useful typology has been generated by research commissioned by the UK Home office: labour exploitation, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation.⁴¹ Forced labour takes different forms and includes many seafarers who can be subjected to a life of slavery. This means a denial of working rights, working for very low pay, and living and working in unhygienic and unsafe conditions.

Some ship owners register their ships under so-called flags of convenience to avoid stringent regulatory controls. One recent and very pertinent example is the ban for thirty-six months of the MV Maryam by the Australian Maritime Safety authority.⁴² This was the longest ban on a ship and exposed the inhuman and unbearable conditions that were experienced by the seafarers: no electricity; no running water; no sanitary facilities and no ventilation. Cecil and Long (2021) report that the ship was unseaworthy and the living conditions for the crew breached the Maritime Labour Convention.⁴³ This also contravenes Catholic social teaching on workers' rights, as will be discussed below. The chaplains and volunteers of Stella Maris help and support the seafarers in all of the situations described above.

While this forced labour and modern slavery contravenes working rights in many parts of the world, it is also condemned by the contemporary tradition of Catholic social teaching. Catholic Social teaching has clearly identified the rights of the worker with the 'nature of the human person and on his transcendent dignity'.⁴⁴ The Catholic social magisterium has listed some of these rights:

... the right to a just wage; the right to rest; the right 'to a working environment and to manufacturing processes which are not harmful to the workers' physical health or to their moral integrity'; the right that one's personality in the workplace should be safeguarded 'without suffering any affront to one's conscience or personal dignity'; the right to appropriate subsidies that are necessary for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families; the right to a pension and to insurance for old age, sickness, and in case of work-related accidents; the right to social security connected with maternity; the right to assemble and form associations.⁴⁵

³⁸Cundy, 'The Fishermen'.

³⁹Caruana and others, 'Modern Slavery in Business', 252.

⁴⁰International Labour Organisation, 'Global Estimates of Modern', 2.

⁴¹Cooper and others, 'A Typology of Modern Slavery', 10–12.

⁴²Cecil and Long, 'Modern Slavery Risk'.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 'Compendium of the Social', 301.

⁴⁵Ibid.

It is clear that many of these rights are not being upheld in unjust employment practices for seafarers and, in some cases, in the imposition of modern slavery on seafarers. The denial of the rights of seafarers such as very low pay and living and working in unacceptable conditions reduces these seafarers to poverty and makes them very vulnerable. The care for the poor and vulnerable, or the preferential option for the poor, mandated in the scriptures, is another of the main themes of Catholic social teaching and there is a long tradition of this care for the poor.⁴⁶ John Paul II, in a very recent example, commented in *Centesimus Annus* (1991) that the love of the poor of the Church 'is essential for her and a part of her constant tradition'.⁴⁷ He also emphasised, again in keeping with the scriptural mandate and Catholic tradition, that the care for the poor must not remain at the level of theory but must be translated into concrete action. In other words, Catholic social teaching must be translated into Catholic social action.

Catholic social action demonstrates the active presence of the Church addressing the very real pastoral needs in contemporary society. This is explained in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church:

The Church exists and is at work within history. She interacts with the society and culture of her time in order to fulfil her mission of announcing the newness of the Christian message to all people, in the concrete circumstances of their difficulties, struggles and challenges . . . The Church's social pastoral ministry is the living and concrete expression of the full awareness of her evangelizing mission in the social, economic, cultural and political realities of the world.⁴⁸

The work of Stella Maris is an excellent example of the Social teaching of the Catholic Church translated into concrete social action. Having completed the overview of the historical and ecclesial context of the work of Stella Maris, the next section presents some vignettes which are short evocative examples or scenarios.⁴⁹ These will help the reader to understand the varied needs of the seafarers and the response from the chaplain, the volunteer, and other members of Stella Maris.

Vignettes

The next part of the article will be devoted to an overview of the work of Joseph and Mary and the reflective vignettes that they have provided. Joseph is a married deacon of the Archdiocese of Glasgow. He was ordained in St Andrew's Cathedral, Glasgow on the 27 June 2014. The diaconate can be traced back to apostolic times and is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6:1–6), the Epistle to the Philippians (Phil 1:1) and the first Epistle to Timothy (1 Tim 3:8–13).⁵⁰ It is not always clear from the scriptures and early Christian writings where the duties of the deacon lay, but by the beginning of the second century there were deacons in all the Churches.⁵¹ The diaconate flourished till the fifth century when it entered into decline. Attempts to restore the permanent diaconate by the Council of Trent were to prove unsuccessful and it would be the Second Vatican Council

⁴⁶United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 'Option for the Poor'.

⁴⁷Pope John Paul II, 'Centesimus Annus', Article 57.

⁴⁸Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 'Compendium of the Social', 524.

⁴⁹Barter and Renold, 'The Use of Vignettes'.

⁵⁰Congregation for Catholic Education Congregation for the clergy, 'Basic Norms for the Formatio', 2.

⁵¹International Theological Commission, *From the Diakoni*, chapter 2, III.

that initiated the restoration. The deacon is a sacred ordained minister and member of the hierarchy and, as a deacon, Joseph is called with priests and bishops to the pastoral care of the community. In his case, this is the pastoral care for people who belong to a series of small transient communities. There are three forms of service or functions of the deacon. First, he is called ‘to proclaim the Scriptures and instruct and exhort the people’.⁵² Second, he is called to serve at the altar. Third, the deacon is called to be dedicated to acts of charity, especially to the sick and the poor. At the ordination of the Reverend Joseph O’Donnell, Archbishop Tartaglia summed up these three forms of service as ‘word, altar and charity’.⁵³

Mary Wheeler is a wife, mother and grandmother and has had a variety of jobs over the years. She joined Stella Maris six years ago and they invited her to undertake the intensive two-year Catechist programme operated jointly by the Archdiocese of Glasgow and the University of Glasgow. This course was established in 2007 and aims to engage the student in a deeper knowledge and understanding of scripture and theology and to prepare them for catechetical work in the archdiocese. All who successfully complete the programme are commissioned as catechists by their bishop (some of the catechists who are trained are resident and work in adjacent dioceses and are commissioned by their own bishop). While the majority of the students are prepared for parish activities, some students are prepared for more specialised work such as Stella Maris. The importance of the vocational role of the lay catechist in the Catholic church was emphasised by Pope Francis in 2021 when he formally established the lay ministry of catechist.⁵⁴ The pope exhorted all episcopal conferences to determine admission procedures, processes of formation and formal institution of catechists (these had already been put into operation by the Archdiocese of Glasgow).

The following vignettes have been collected in sections under headings and sub-headings, with the acknowledgement that there will be some overlap between the sections. First, there will be overviews by Joseph and Mary about their roles in Stella Maris. These will be followed by a section on practical help for seafarers which is divided into support with equipment and support for seafarer’s families. The next section is focussed on the spiritual support for seafarers: supporting bereaved seafarers and providing spiritual resources and opportunities for prayer and liturgy. The following five concise sections will address: ecumenical support; emergency support; medical assistance; advocacy and remembrance. Some of the challenges faced by Ukrainian seafarers and their families will be highlighted in the following sections: spiritual support for seafarers and advocacy.

The work of the chaplain and the volunteer

Joseph: In the shipping world it is estimated that ninety-five percent of household goods are transported by sea. One of the most important needs for seafarers are seafarer’s welfare centres which offer recreational facilities and most importantly the internet to communicate with their families during shore leave. As some ships are berthed quite far away from the main terminals, Stella Maris personnel and other welfare agencies provide transport on a daily basis and this is carried

⁵²Congregation for Catholic Education Congregation for the clergy, ‘Basic Norms for the Formation’, 9.

⁵³St Mungo Music, ‘Diaconate Ordination of Joseph’; and O’Donnell, ‘Called to Serve’, 2.

⁵⁴Pope Francis, ‘Antiquum Ministerium’.

out to provide, even for a short period, some respite from their working environment. As a chaplain for Stella Maris, we offer both practical help and spiritual support. In my work in Stella Maris, I exercise the three forms of service of the deacon. I have opportunities to proclaim the gospel and preach, serve the altar and to address the pressing need to perform practical acts of charity for seafarers who require help.

Mary: My work involves me in a variety of tasks among which are: ship visiting; researching; assisting with the administration of cruise ship visits and assisting with port side services and activities. Being a ship visitor, especially, has taken me on a journey of self-discovery and spiritual and religious growth and I have come to realise that spirituality and religion can be different but, for me, they remain inseparable. In meeting seafarers from other countries with different faith beliefs and world views, I was prompted to look for a greater understanding of my own faith, and how I could share what I found with others, I embarked on a two-year Catechesis and Theology course offered by my diocese and sponsored by Stella Maris. As a volunteer ship visitor with Stella Maris and, after a comprehensive training programme, my colleagues and I make on-board visits to ships and spend time with the crews, chatting to them about their jobs, their families, and offering support and friendship in what is a difficult and challenging job. The work of a crew member on a ship is hard, the shift patterns are rigorous and demanding and, yet these men and women welcome us with a courtesy and optimism that never fails to amaze me.

As Stella Maris volunteers we also believe that we are taking, not only ourselves to the seafarers, but also our parish communities which are open to the needs of the crews and are ready to help in any way they can. Wanting to widen my horizons, I am currently studying towards a post graduate qualification in Chaplaincy, with a multi faith group of students, that is proving to be both spiritually challenging and enlightening. I have learned about the various models of chaplaincy and have appreciated how they are informing the work that I do and how I do it.⁵⁵

Practical help for seafarers

Practical support takes a number of forms including support with equipment and support for seafarers' families. The equipment can help the seafarers in their work or can be technological equipment that can help the seafarers contact their families. The support for seafarers' families is part of the ministry of Stella Maris to the larger group of the 'people of the sea', as identified by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

Support with equipment

Joseph: One example of practical support is that we assisted seafarers who requested help in getting the proper PPE (Personal Protective Equipment). They needed this to

⁵⁵Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt, *Being a Chaplain*.

carry out their work onboard with safety. Without the proper equipment the crew could be exposed to hazards.

Joseph: In the shipping industry, seafarers can be away from home for up to twelve months at a time, and even longer, and I came across an O/S seafarer who had been onboard for nearly fourteen months. During that time, he had become a father for the first time and had yet to hold his son in his arms. It's hard to imagine what was going on in his mind. The only way he could see his son was via the internet and this is where we could offer practical help by leaving a MI-FI unit onboard to make this happen.

Support for seafarer's families

Joseph: Practical support for seafarers can also extend to supporting their families too. This was the case with an engineer who was badly burned while working in a confined space and, after what appeared to be a short stay in hospital for the seafarer concerned, his stay in hospital extended to a lengthy admittance. His wife had planned to stay by his side but was faced with financial difficulties. She realised she would need to visit him for the foreseeable future and explained this to the accommodation people. She was informed that it was high season and consequently her accommodation charges had doubled in price. She knew she could not sustain the increased costs.

After speaking to my CEO, he instantly gave the go-ahead for Stella Maris to cover all the costs involved. The next issue faced by the seafarer was that he was from another country and, for some reason, his body was rejecting the hospital food. There were concerns that this would slow his recovery. It was then suggested that, if possible, his wife could cook his meals for the time being. With the help of the local parish priest, we arranged that she could use the kitchen in the parish hall to cook her husband's meals.

Joseph: One of my first experiences as a chaplain was when I received a phone call with regards to a seafarer who had been in hospital for almost two weeks with no one enquiring about his well-being. After visiting the hospital, I was informed he had been dropped off in a taxi and within twenty-four hours of being admitted he became seriously ill. After contacting his wife and young daughter to offer support there was the added problem of trying to obtain a visa for her to be at her husband's side. I was not initially aware that it would take a further twelve weeks before she was allowed to fly to the United Kingdom. During that period, I would contact her regularly just to let her know that her husband was being cared for by dedicated staff and he was not alone in a room. Very often I would just sit by his bedside praying.

The remarkable thing is that the seafarer didn't say anything for twelve weeks because he was mostly sleeping. When his wife arrived at the hospital, she entered his room and held her husband's hand. He woke up and asked her not to leave him, but sadly three days later he passed away. He was only thirty-six years of age. May he Rest in Peace.

After his death, his wife explained to me that she wanted to go home and explain to her nine-year-old daughter that her daddy had died. However, there was no agent in the UK to deal with registering the death, the post-mortem and the repatriation of the seafarer's remains to his homeland. I agreed to undertake all this, and the family were very grateful for the assistance from Stella Maris. I still receive a Christmas card from the deceased seafarer's wife. I learned very quickly in my own role as a chaplain that I had to be equipped with the tools to deal with any unexpected situations in my line of work.

Spiritual support for seafarers

Understandably, spiritual support for seafarers is one of the main functions of Stella Maris. This includes being a compassionate listener and supporting bereaved seafarers, grieving for fellow crew members or family members. Other ways in which spiritual support is provided includes opportunities for prayer and liturgical services and the provision of religious artefacts such as bibles, rosaries and prayer cards.

Mary: A more traditional concept of chaplaincy is of the chaplain exercising care, attention and sharing God's unconditional and infinite love. Just at the start of the Ukrainian/Russian war my colleague and I offered a Ukrainian captain a lift to the shops to pick up some supplies. On the way we chatted about the weather, the nature of his job and then our conversation moved onto our families. This prompted him to share that his wife had passed away a few years previously and that his sons were still in Ukraine. He knew they were alive but had no idea where they were. Yet with his contract having several months to run, and being the family breadwinner, he quietly accepted his responsibilities with no feelings of rancour or a sense of injustice. Stella Maris was there for him, when he needed a friend to chat with and, despite the short time we spent together, this meeting encapsulates the role of a ship visitor for me: to be compassionate by simply being there and listening.

Supporting bereaved seafarers

Joseph: I had a request regarding a seafarer who lost his life while working onboard a cargo ship and was asked if I could conduct a service for all the crew of the ship. Along with a colleague we held a service onboard in remembrance of their deceased colleague and we talked with the crew and listened to them with regards to what happened.

Joseph: A cargo ship sank off the North Sea with the loss of several crew members and we were requested to hold services on the remaining sister cargo ships. As can be imagined, these seafarers all worked together at some point and it was very distressing for the crews, who had continued working, to know that their colleagues were still missing at sea.

Mary: We respond in specific places and locations and establish ‘the parish’ on-board. After receiving a call from a local shipping agent, regarding the death of a crewman, I was contacted and informed that a request had come from the seafarer’s ship for chaplaincy support. In liaison with my senior port chaplain, I was able to gain the co-operation of two volunteers, local to the ship, who responded immediately and subsequently spent the whole day aboard the vessel before it set sail for its next destination. While on board they spoke with close friends of the deceased, set up a place of memorial for staff to pay their respects and offered spiritual and practical help as appropriate. Our ship visitors reported that there was a constant stream of mourners on board the ship, all wanting to pay their respects, talk about and remember their friend. They were also asked to participate in the ships’ senior management meeting to discuss how best to support the crew and move forward. Further to this, I contacted a local priest who offered to celebrate mass on board if requested, and our port chaplains were initiating contact with their colleagues abroad to ascertain what assistance *Stella Maris* could offer the seafarer’s family.

Joseph: On one occasion I received a phone call to inform me that a Ukrainian ship captain who was sailing to the next port in my area had been informed by his twelve-year-old daughter that her mummy’s car had exploded. The mother was leaving her hometown with her family when she drove over a landmine. Her daughter who was in the car behind witnessed the tragedy. The captain was still onboard, and he didn’t even know if he was allowed to enter the city due to the current situation. It was hard to adequately express words of comfort to the captain regarding this catastrophe, but his appreciation of the chaplaincy support was very touching.

Providing spiritual resources and opportunities for prayer and liturgy

Mary: Recently, after having made a ship visit, several of the crew asked me if I could provide rosaries, bibles, and prayer cards on their return visit, The Catholic seafarers treasure having devotional resources to support their prayer life in the absence of celebrating mass, so I asked my own three local parishes for donations of such religious items. The response was completely overwhelming, with people eager to share their own faith while supporting others in theirs.

Joseph: At Christmas we will distribute gift bags to crew members and ask supporters to knit woolly hats and write Christmas card messages just to let the seafarers know they are not forgotten, especially when they are so far away from home on Christmas day. We normally hold carol services and invite seafarers to attend. At Easter time we hold Easter services and distribute chocolate eggs. It’s important to point out that this could not be done without the aid of our many supporters and volunteers.

Mary: Chaplains are tasked with ‘bringing the gospel to the people in whatever ways suit the context’. It is known that most seafarers are from The

Philippines and, in my experience, predominately Catholic.⁵⁶ Their piety and commitment to their faith leaves me humbled as they seek to celebrate mass and the sacraments on board, whenever possible. However, due to owner demands for increased profit margins and quicker port turnaround times, these opportunities are decreasing and increasingly require Stella Maris chaplains and volunteers to bring the parish to the ship.⁵⁷ One such instance presented itself while I was sharing Holy Communion on board a cargo vessel. Some crew members were sitting down to lunch, and we managed to share a prayer in preparation. However, the cook could not leave what he was doing, and he simply set down his soup ladle, received the Eucharist with true devotion and reverence and went back to his primary task of feeding his ship mates. On reflection I thought through what he and I shared together in that short moment, and it was clear to me, in a way that it had never been before, that Christ was truly present in that kitchen.

Ecumenical support

As has been seen above, Stella Maris is not the only Christian ship visiting network that operates within the world and in Scotland. The close collaboration with the Mission to Seafarers Scotland, an Anglican foundation, is testament to the ecumenical commitment to collaborative ministry to the seafarers.

Mary: In some ports we work closely with The Mission to Seafarers Scotland and, working together as Christians, we find that our joint values and aims facilitate greater strength and unity giving our seafarers access to a wider network of support. Our three chaplains liaise closely and share issues that arise beyond the scope of a ship visitor, e.g. ensuring the payment of correct salaries and provision of visas, visiting a sick seafarer in hospital while maintaining contact with their family or ensuring crews are respected and well looked after while on board. It is in this alliance with The Mission to Seafarers Scotland that the mission of Stella Maris continues to develop and evolve, remaining a dynamic and responsive charity dedicated to sharing and living the gospel.

Emergency support

There are times when seafarers find themselves suddenly abandoned by shipping companies. These are very difficult circumstances, and the seafarers require urgent help. Joseph provides two examples of seafarers being abandoned and the help they received.

Joseph: On a Friday evening in November, I received a phone call from a seafarer in the North of Scotland who informed me that he was left abandoned with his

⁵⁶Galanakis, 'The Filipino Market Supply'.

⁵⁷Sinay Maritime Data Solutions, 'Port Efficiency and Vessel.'

belongings after being in hospital for three days. He asked if Stella Maris could assist him as he had nowhere else to turn. I contacted my colleague in Fort William who drove to his location and took him to local accommodation, and then brought him to Glasgow where we arranged a flight for him to return to Riga to be reunited with his family. Once he had returned, the seafarer sent an email thanking us for helping him and stated that if he hadn't been helped that night, he was contemplating suicide. It is sobering to think what would have happened if his phone call had been unanswered.

Joseph: I received a distressing call regarding two fishermen who had been dumped with their belongings at an airport and they had no passports. We were concerned about securing accommodation and food for them until their situation had been resolved. Stella Maris provided the necessary assistance to help them until they were allowed to fly home. It was important to listen to them and advise them. This was a reminder that our pastoral care is concerned with the whole person not only their spiritual care but also their physical health and their emotional well-being.

Medical assistance

Stella Maris works hard to support seafarers who require medical assistance and, as will be seen in the second vignette below, have supported a seriously ill relative of a seafarer – responding, once again, to the needs of one of the ‘people of the sea’.

Joseph: Stella Maris is currently supporting a seafarer who is receiving medical treatment for a serious illness but indicated that if he had gone home there would be no opportunity of treatment in his own country. In his own words he stated that he would certainly have died without the treatment necessary to combat his illness. He said Stella Maris had saved his life. Again, I would have to acknowledge the pastoral care given by our volunteers in this situation.

Joseph: During the pandemic there was three ships docked in Glasgow for twelve months with the crews still onboard. The captain requested that we support the practical and pastoral needs of the crews and arrange services onboard. A crew member who was attending one of the services explained he was very worried about his teenage daughter in the Philippines. She needed a heart operation and he had been saving for two years but was still far from having enough money for his daughter's operation. He suggested that he would be not working soon because of the pandemic and feared for his daughter's health. After sharing his fears with my CEO, he quickly said that Stella Maris would pay for her operation. Her father commented that it was strange that something good came out in a pandemic situation. He keeps me updated regarding his daughter who has made a full recovery.

Advocacy

Catholic social action provides support for immediate needs but is also focussed on striving to ensure that rights are promoted and protected. This is required in many

situations and contexts. The next three vignettes provide quite distinct insights into the promotion and protection of rights.

Joseph: In our work at Stella Maris as chaplains, we come across cases of modern-day slavery or forced labour, where a seafarer or fisherman has been exploited in terrible conditions. In some cases, along with other agencies, we support them both pastorally and financially in seeking justice for these individuals. We have recently appointed one of our colleagues, who has a degree in maritime law, to work full time in addressing these matters. This can also be viewed as upholding the rights of the worker as understood by Catholic social teaching.

Joseph: I was visiting a cargo ship where seven Ukrainian crew members informed me that they had not been paid for almost three months. A further issue was that their vessel would be sailing to waters in the areas surrounding Russia and they feared for their own safety. After liaising with other agencies, they were repatriated to a country of their choice.

Joseph: Frequently while speaking to others about the advocacy work being carried out by Stella Maris, some people assume that the cases of forced labour & modern-day slavery are mostly in other countries, but this isn't always the case. I have personally supported many working at sea who have been affected. This includes people sleeping in containers when not onboard a vessel, those being paid a quarter of the minimum wage and people working twenty-one hours a day for less than half the minimum wage. It also includes those who are affected by false contracts and injuries.

Remembrance

The final vignette is a poignant reminder of how some seafarers can be perceived by employers as dispensable workers who become anonymous in death. Stella Maris has kept the memory of some of these seafarers alive in Glasgow.

Mary: The following reflects another aspect of my volunteering that led to an unfortunate omission being corrected in the name of some deceased seafarers. In 2019, I was asked to conduct research on the founding and establishment of Stella Maris in Glasgow, in preparation for the Centenary World Conference in 2020. However, due to the pandemic this conference was re-scheduled for 2022. My research led me to discover that in the years 1944–1951, Stella Maris had paid for the burial and interment of several seafarers in a Glasgow cemetery. These men, who came from all over the world, died while docked in Glasgow and their deaths had never been represented in any way. Their graves were anonymous. Further research showed that they died in dire circumstances at a time when death benefits and insurances were not a composite part of the seafarers' contract. Subsequently, in 2021, Stella Maris arranged to have their graves blessed and marked with small plaques bearing their names. I feel we served those seafarers and their families by acknowledging their contributions and commending them, in prayer, to God and an eternal rest.

Stella Maris continues to meet new challenges in the maritime industry, and our belief in respect for the rights of the individual remains at the heart of what we do. Modern-day slavery and human trafficking are becoming more commonplace, and experience has shown that Stella Maris and other maritime charities are sometimes the only place left for the seafarer to turn. To be available, to listen and to serve the seafaring community, within the Stella Maris family is an honour and a privilege, allowing me to share my own commitment to actively living and sharing my Christian faith.

Concluding remarks

This article has examined some of the work of a chaplain and a volunteer based in Glasgow, the home of Stella Maris. Stella Maris is a large international organisation with a long history and an extensive track record of providing support for seafarers. As has been demonstrated this support has adapted over the years to the reconfigured logistics of shipping and the working practices of seafarers and the short time they are berthed or on shore. The work of the chaplains and volunteers is varied and touches on many important aspects of human experience and suffering: loneliness, absence from families, spiritual needs, physical needs, exploitation and slavery.

The vignettes have highlighted a very high level of practical, pastoral and spiritual care and attention in the way Joseph and Mary have addressed the needs of individual seafarers, their families, and communities of seafarers. There are the cases where Joseph and Mary have cared for individuals, exemplified in Mary offering pastoral support to the Ukrainian captain and Joseph helping the O/S seafarer who had never seen his infant son. Both Joseph and Mary offer spiritual and liturgical support for ship communities.⁵⁸ There are a number of accounts of Joseph and Mary providing advice and Stella Maris funding medical support for family members of the seafarers (people of the sea). Joseph and Mary continually offer hospitality, as in the example of Joseph arranging the accommodation for the seafarer stranded in the North of Scotland.⁵⁹

It is disturbing to note the many forms of suffering that have been identified in the history and contemporary scope of the large international organisation that is Stella Maris. Many of these forms of suffering have been experienced by the seafarers who have been supported by the chaplain and volunteer in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This includes concrete examples of exploitation and modern-day slavery. It is equally disturbing that, in some of the examples provided by the chaplain and volunteer, the seafarers had nowhere else to seek help and nobody to champion their rights. This work of caring for the seafarers who have nowhere else to go and championing the rights of the seafarer, undertaken by Joseph and Mary, exemplifies the commitment of Stella Maris to its hundred-year-old mission. The members of the organisation continue to attend to the practical application of the principles of Catholic social teaching on the rights of the worker and care for the poor and vulnerable. What is clear is that the work of Stella Maris, as has been stated by Pope Francis, is a response to the words of Jesus, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (*Mt 25:35*). These words have been understood to be a gospel mandate

⁵⁸Turgo and others, 'Relying on the Kindness', 196–197.

⁵⁹Montemaggi, 'Hospitality and Compassion', 506.

that requires a response of commitment and dedication. The response is interpersonal, practical and rooted in a deep understanding of a shared God-given human dignity.

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