

The Apostolate of the Sea - Stella Maris

We are encouraged to reflect on the lives and the experiences of all seafarers. They live on the margins of Society and in many ways are considered itinerant people. Being at sea for many months, their lives are lonely and their work is fraught with many and varied dangers. Added to this reality, being separated from family and friends only adds to the pressure and hardships which they experience. We generally do not see them so for many of us it is almost as if it is a reality of being “out of sight and consequently out of mind”.

The Apostleship of the Sea-Stella Maris, which is part of the Catholic Church’s Seafarer Ministry dates back to around 1920, when it was founded by the St Vincent De Paul Society in Scotland. The first Constitution was approved by Pope Pius XI in 1922 and in 1979, there was published an Apostolic Letter ‘Motu Proprio’ by Pope John Paul II. Importantly, Pope Leo XIV updated the Structures of the Apostolate of the Sea in November 2025. This included a newly unified central coordinating structure under the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and brought with it what is known as a canonical public juridical personality. **So long as there are ships and seafarers then the ministry of support and outreach will ever be.**

Reflecting on the current turmoil in the Middle East and surrounds, (Mr G) said that he had never had to face and fear with so much uncertainty in the 15 years he has been a commercial seafarer. As events have continued in the area, he and his stranded colleagues have watched for weeks as the projectiles from various countries have blown up in the air. Shrapnel has mostly ended up in the water, but the crossfire has prevented their usual rations from coming through. They have had to brave danger and even fish off the deck to survive. But none of this has deterred him.

“I have been able to save and buy a property after just 2 years of sailing. I have even been able to build a house for my parents.” Growing up in a fishing village in the Philippines and whilst he said that he has never been hungry, sailing in waters far beyond his homeland has changed him and his life forever.

Everyday, seafarers sail through regions that many of us only hear about on the news.

A Korean seafarer tells his story: “When I first came on board, an oil storage facility in Dubai was on fire. Even then, the war still felt distant. But the very next morning, a projectile landed just 40 meters from our ship. Rushing to the safe zone, I finally realized that we were standing right in the middle of the war. Drones filled the skies during the day, while missile trails were visible at night. All lights aboard had to be turned off to avoid being spotted. There is a common radio channel all ships must stay tuned to. There, we could

hear every warning, Iran threatening ships that didn't turn back, and the US sending other warnings back. Even without seeing it, I could feel the danger. I never thought it would last this long. If only I knew when it would end, I would have hope. Sleepless nights and stress, have become the norm."

What is happening is a timely reminder that the welfare of seafarers is inseparable from world events. Whilst ships continue to keep global trade moving, it is the men and women on board ships who often bear the personal cost of conflict, isolation and uncertainty.

Seafarers must never become collateral victims of geopolitical conflict and must have continued access to food, water, fuel, crew changes and communications for those affected by any regional instability.

Seafarers cannot remain the shock absorbers of geopolitical risk. They do not simply transport cargo. They absorb the consequences of an unstable world so that the rest of us can continue with our daily lives.

Through helping and supporting their spiritual and material needs, advocating for their dignity and human rights and also championing strengthen international relations, the Apostolate of the Sea – Stella Maris continues to serve our human family no matter the nationality, color, race or creed.

Finally, from our own waters!

The story of the MV Raider is a powerful reminder of why seafarer welfare matters – particularly when seafarers suddenly find themselves in circumstances far beyond their control.

There were 11 seafarers on board. Their vessel was in Sydney waters and needed repairs. The vessel had been intercepted by the Australian Federal Police. By the time Stella Maris became involved, the seafarers were in a very vulnerable situation. They were without food and water and were facing an uncertain future far from their families and home countries.

Through the extraordinary support of the Sydney Cutter Crews, a visit to the seafarers was made possible. The most necessities of food, water and even SIM cards were provided, and some were able to finally communicate with their families. At this stage, the hope was that these men would soon be repatriated and reunited with family and friends, but the reality was different. Whilst all were taken to the Villawood Detention Centre, some have since been sent home. Others remain. For these, there is the added difficulty of being separated from their families and, for some, trying to navigate an unfamiliar system without adequate support is a major difficulty.

The MV Raider experience demonstrates that seafarer welfare is not simply about providing a service to crew who come ashore. It is about **BEING THERE WHEN THINGS GO WRONG.**

These men were far from home. They were separated from home, caught up in circumstances that they could not control and facing decisions and processes they may not have fully understood. At a point like this, this is when food, water and even the ability to call home is enormously important.

BUT WELFARE IS MORE THAN PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE. IT IS ABOUT HUMAN CONNECTION AND DIGNITY. It is about seeing the person behind the seafarer. It is listening. It is offering reassurance. It is helping someone to communicate with their family. And sometimes it is simply saying: **“YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN”.**

The maritime industry relies on seafarers every day. Yet when a vessel is detained, a voyage disrupted or circumstances become difficult, seafarers can quickly become invisible.

This is precisely when **SEAFARER WELFARE BECOMES MOST IMPORTANT.**

We have to be reminded that behind every vessel are human beings – people with families, people with hopes, people with lives waiting for them at home.

We must continue to stand alongside seafarers – especially when they are at their most vulnerable selves.

Seafarer welfare matters!