



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



STELLA MARIS

Sea Sunday Message 2022 (10th July 2022)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, beloved chaplains, volunteers, friends and supporters of *Stella Maris*:

On the second Sunday in July every year Christian communities celebrate Sea Sunday. Today we call to mind the essential work of more than a million seafarers who work on ships transporting goods around the world every day of the year. Those who live inland rarely see ships or the seafarers who work on them. Even those who live on the coast usually only see a ship 'out there' on the horizon. No-one can see the thousands of ships sailing over the horizon. They are invisible. But they are there. And so are the seafarers who work on board, not only keeping the world economy moving but also directly impacting upon the daily life of every one of us. Day in, day out, they provide the goods we use and consume, and without them the quality our lives would be considerably poorer. To understand how essential they are, we need only bring to mind the possessions in our homes and workplaces, and the food on our tables. Let us ask, '*Where does it come from?*' It is seafarers who enable us to enjoy what we have. And we must remember that seafarers work every day of the week, every week of their contract, to provide everything we have. How much we want to say, '*Thank you!*'

Now is the time to try and imagine seafarers' life and the daily challenges they endure for us. Over recent years the maritime world has been hit by a series of crises. Increased demand for goods has led to more ships being held at anchorage for longer periods of time. The war in Ukraine means that ships now face the impossible task of navigating through the mines in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Many vessels have been sunk and human lives have been lost during this unjust and immoral war. The global pandemic meant that over 400,000 seafarers have been stuck on board, unable to leave the ship at the end of their contracts and return home to their families. Instead, they continue to work every day becoming increasingly exhausted. Replacement crews have been unable to join ships which has spelled economic disaster for some because they have been unable to provide for the daily needs of their loved ones. In every case, seafarers have no choice.

Some shipping companies appear to be the only ones who have profited financially from the series of crises which have disrupted the global supply chain. It is regrettable, to say the least, that companies have only shared a tiny fraction of the exorbitant revenue they have enjoyed with seafarers or spent on improving welfare facilities in ports for the short period of time they are alongside.

Companies may receive the money, but it is seafarers and their families who pay the price. It comes as no surprise that enforced extended contracts result in physical and psychological exhaustion which can lead to human error with dangerous consequences. Longer periods on board, enforced separation from their loved ones, and not being allowed to go ashore has led to seafarers feeling even more isolated and depressed than normal. We must remember that they, too, are human beings. They have the same needs as everyone else. The difference is that, being 'invisible', they are easily ignored.

But we must not ignore them because we rely on them. We need them. Safe navigation, security and protection of the marine environment rely on seafarers enjoying good mental health. The Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC) requires companies to provide decent and clean accommodation, nourishing food, a safe working environment, proper hours of work and shore leave. Sadly, the significant gains made since MLC came into force in 2013 have been seriously undermined. Let us take the issue of shore leave. The ability to leave the vessel and go ashore, if only for a short time, is crucial for seafarers' wellbeing. Most of us take for granted the freedom we have to go outside, enjoy open spaces, place our feet on firm ground or soft grass and see different people. But seafarers have no such freedom. They cannot leave the ship, and every day they walk on metal floors and see the same faces. The only way they can share in the freedom we enjoy is to have access to shore leave. They may only have a couple of hours but that can make all the difference.

At the height of the pandemic and before the vaccination campaign for seafarers began, governments and companies understandably cancelled all shore leave. Seafarers were required to stay on board to avoid infection and spreading the virus. But as the situation continues to improve around the world, countries are opening their borders and lifting restrictions. Most people are now able to move freely again. But not seafarers. And this is a **gross injustice**. Even though they are fully vaccinated, seafarers are frequently denied the free movement we enjoy. Why? Because several governments and shipping companies still refuse to allow seafarers to go ashore. To add insult to injury, some seafarers are allowed to go ashore if they are the 'correct nationality'.

This discrimination is as unjust as it is immoral. Everyone needs to remember that seafarers' innate dignity as human beings must be respected. They must be treated equally, without any discrimination, and afforded the same opportunity to leave the narrow confines of the vessel and go ashore, if only for a brief time, to unwind and relax, wherever they are in the world.

The pandemic must no longer be used as an excuse for banning the crew from going ashore. As long as they take the necessary precautions, seafarers have the right to put their feet on dry ground and meet people other than their colleagues on board. Chaplains and volunteers of Stella Maris make an urgent appeal to governments and shipping companies around the world to ensure that seafarers have the right to go ashore!

Today, on this Sea Sunday, we thank seafarers for their hard work. We pray that they remain strong in the face of difficulties and challenges in life. And we entrust to Mary, *Star of the Sea*, the commitment and dedication of the chaplains and volunteers around the world who serve them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Michael Czerny S.J.", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Card. Michael Czerny S.J.
Prefect