

Seafarers – physically, legally and sometimes spiritually – are in every sense on the margins. And the coronavirus pandemic has exposed new problems for people largely unnoticed by those who benefit from their labour / **By MADOC CAIRNS**

# Weathering the Covid storm

*Qui nescit orare, discat navigare.*

He who will not pray, let him go to sea.

**T**HAT'S A quip from the seventeenth-century Anglican divine, John Trapp, and it's another way of saying: "There are no atheists in foxholes." It's not always true of course, but the Church has had a long – and often intimate – relationship with seafaring. Four of the apostles, including Peter, were fishermen. Early Christians depicted the Church herself as a ship; tossed by the waves of the world (according to Clement of Alexandria) but never sinking.

That nautical symbolism has enjoyed – as anyone who's had a look at the design of large churches will know – an abiding appeal among Christians. During the Middle Ages, one of the duties of monks in coastal communities was to light beacons at night for the benefit of those lost at sea. And there have been several

seafaring saints: Elmo, Christopher, and Brendan among them.

But sailors as a distinct group were only rarely the object of missionary or charitable work for most of the Church's history. A hundred years ago that changed with the foundation of the Apostleship of the Sea. Established as a port ministry in Glasgow, the Apostleship was the initiative of a group of Catholics concerned that the Church was absent in the lives of seafarers. With thousands of seafarers travelling the world and often being stranded in foreign harbours for weeks or months between voyages, those founding members were responding to widespread spiritual – and physical – hunger.

The Apostleship – now known as Stella Maris – has continued to provide moral and material support to seafarers ever since. A lot has changed since 1920. With the rise of "containerisation", and ultra-long-haul cargo

shipping, the sailors' hostels that Stella Maris used to specialise in are long gone. Instead, chaplains and volunteers work out of seafarers' centres to help give sailors warmth, rest, and access to the internet in the hours they spend between contracts.

Stella Maris' work isn't as evocative as monks lighting beacons in the night. But it's no less indispensable for those to whom they minister. Given the long contracts that many seafarers are on – some up to 12 months – access to Wi-Fi can be a lifeline for them and their families. One service that Stella Maris provides is "MiFi" units; portable Wi-Fi kits that, transported on to a vessel, can provide internet access to multiple seafarers. This can allow those on long voyages to contact their families, sometimes for the first time in months. There's one moment that Joe O'Donnell, a Stella Maris chaplain, will never forget: when he was able to help one sailor see his infant child for the first time.

**O'DONNELL** – a native of Glasgow – told me that, for the people he ministers to, "every day is like Monday". Ships transport 90 per cent of goods internationally: but it's an industry hidden from the sight of most of us. In that world – employing around 1.6 million people – Stella Maris chaplains and volunteers bear witness to suffering that rarely makes the headlines. Long hours, bad conditions, poor wages, sickness, death, the wholesale abandonment of crews by their employers – Joe and other chaplains I spoke to had seen it all.

Chaplains told me that sailors are often reluctant to speak out about mistreatment out of fear. And those who do might not know what their rights are, or who they can contact to help enforce them. In those situations, Stella Maris – lay and ordained chaplains and volunteers – can make a life-changing difference. The spiritual work that Stella Maris does is no less important. Joe told me that the experiences that sustain him in his work are when, after four or five weeks at sea, a sailor will get in touch simply to ask that a chaplain visit, and "kneel down and pray with them".

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, seafarers – once again largely unnoticed by the people who benefit from their labour – have experienced new problems. Many crews have been stranded between countries, unable to land in their destinations, and forbidden from returning home. Seven Filipino crew members on a container ship, *APL Norway*, found themselves away from home for 14 months

in total. According to Anne McLaren, a former solicitor, and now Stella Maris' senior area chaplain for north of England, even when some crews reached port, they weren't able to disembark for weeks.

After the usual religious services and physical centres were shut down in the early stages of the pandemic, the old conventions of ministry no longer applied. But Stella Maris adapted quickly to the new normal. One chaplain delivered SIM cards to crews through the ingenious (and socially distanced) means of a rope and bucket. Others have delivered face masks, food, vitamins and rosaries to crews trapped on board their ships – as well as meeting some more unusual requests: Doritos and Polish sausages.

Like the rest of the Church, religious services, such as Mass and evening prayer, were shifted online. The transition wasn't easy – many onshore centres had to close, and physical visits had to stop.

Anne McLaren told me that the work of Stella Maris – bringing practical and emotional support to those in need of it; offering a sacramental presence on board; and building real relationships with seafarers, whether believers or not – seemed to her to exemplify Pope Francis' call for Christians to be "missionary disciples". The close community Anne finds in Stella Maris, with lay and ordained Catholics working closely together, is reminiscent, she says, "of the earliest Christian



Anne McLaren, left, a former solicitor now Stella Maris' senior area chaplain for north of England and, above, Joe O'Donnell, a Stella Maris chaplain

communities". The hybrid mission – spiritual and material – of Stella Maris' ministry to those in need is a witness to the world; but it might also be a witness to the wider Church.

Seafarers – physically and also often legally "on the margins" – face risks and problems every day. But the chaplains are palpably optimistic and enthused about their ministry. "Stella Maris", the Apostolate's new name, means "Star of the Sea": it's an ancient title

for the Virgin Mary. The hymn it's drawn from, "Alma Redemptoris Mater", asks Mary to "aid a fallen people / trying to rise again". As the world struggles to rebuild in the wake of the pandemic, that prayer has a new significance – for seafarers, for Stella Maris, and for the whole Church.

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