



Bishop Jurij Bizjak celebrates Mass and blesses an Apostleship of the Sea pastoral Center 13 July 2019 in Slovenia

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The Church on the periphery: at sea with maritime workers

Maritime workers are close to Pope Francis's thoughts because "it is one of the peripheries" and they face "a series of issues that are dear to the Holy Father."

By Sr Bernadette Mary Reis, fsp

The Pope's monthly prayer intention for August released by the Apostleship of Prayer on Tuesday focuses on those hard at work on the sea.

"Let us pray for all those who work and live from the sea, among them sailors, fishermen and their families," Pope Francis says on the recorded video.

This is the third time this year that Pope Francis has placed maritime workers before our attention.

In an interview with Sr. Bernadette, Father Bruno Ciceri, the International Director of the Apostleship of the Sea, explains what it is about our brothers' and sisters' experience that has so touched the heart of the Pope, the consequences they face due to the covid-19 pandemic, and a bit of history of the ministry of the Apostleship of the Sea.

Pope Francis prays for maritime workers

Fr Ciceri says Pope Francis is not the first pope to mention maritime workers in prayer. Leo XIII proposed them for the Apostleship of Prayer intention in May 1880. Regarding Pope Francis, Fr Ciceri says there are various reasons why he has drawn attention to them three times already this year.

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Ships were never locked down

The first time the Pope addressed seafarers on 12 June was to thank them "for the continuous work they were doing during the lockdown. The ships never stopped sailing. They were transporting goods, and they were also transporting medical equipment from one part of the world to the other."

The Pope also prayed for them on Sea Sunday, an ecumenical celebration dedicated to inviting Christians to pray for maritime workers and to be aware of the precious service they provide. This third time is in the form of his monthly Apostleship of Prayer intention and marks the centennial of the foundation of the Apostleship of the Sea. There is a connection between these two 'Apostleships', Fr Ciceri explains: "The first seaman's branch launched in 1895 was called 'Apostleship of the Sea' because it was connected with the Apostleship of Prayer."

Church on the periphery

The main reason why Fr Ciceri thinks "Pope Francis is close to the maritime world is because it is one of the peripheries where he likes to have the Church present." Those who work on board ships are faced with "a series of issues that are dear to the Holy Father," Fr Ciceri continues: exploitation, forced labor, slavery, trafficking.

Covid and maritime workers

Our brothers and sisters working at sea have had to face a particular consequence of the covid-19 pandemic: no way to get home. With the sudden closure of borders and suspension of air travel, many of them due to return home were stranded on board ship. This problem still has yet to be resolved as around "200,000 seafarers are trapped on their ships" and their 8-10 month contracts have been extended to between 14 and 16 months. "You can imagine the fatigue. You can imagine the stress," Father says. This has led to the unfortunate reality of some seafarers taking their own lives who "could no longer take that kind of pressure."

Listen to our interview with Fr Bruno Ciceri, International Director, Apostleship of the Sea

An appeal

Due to this dire reality, "I would like to make an appeal", Fr Ciceri says.

"Seafarers are key workers. They are important not only for the economy of Italy but they are important for the global economy. And so, we have to create a specific channel where seafarers can have the possibility to return home, to have crew changes."

Fr Ciceri lauds those companies who provided their crews with passage home onboard cruise ships. "At a certain point, in the past few months, there were something like 25, 30 cruise ships in the Manila Bay because they couldn't bring their crew home, so they brought them home by ship. But this is not normal."

"Seafarers must go home, and they must go home by plane."

History of the Apostleship of the Sea

The Church has always ministered in different ways to those working at sea, Fr Ciceri says. The Apostleship of the Sea was first organized in Glasgow in 1920 when four people got together and gave structure to the many different organizations active in maritime ministry. Pope Pius XI in 1922 gave the organization his blessing, hoping that it would become international. It was then placed under the Congregation of the Bishops in 1942 by Pius XII. Only in 1953 was it possible for the secretariat to move from London to Rome. In 1970, it was placed under the auspices of the newly formed Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants which in 1988 became the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerant Peoples. Since 2017, with the merger of several Pontifical Councils, the Apostleship was placed under the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

"The organization grew naturally, like a small seed it became a big tree." In 1927, the first Maritime Apostolate Congress was held in France. Generally such a congress takes place every five years. The twenty-fifth congress would have taken place this year.

Changes in ministry

"The ministry has grown and changed also following the changes of the maritime industry." At first, the Apostleship had large centers that provided accommodations to seafarers. Those centers became smaller as it was less necessary to provide accommodations. However, the need to contact family has always been a primary way the Apostleship reaches out. Telephones, then cell phones were made available for that purpose, and now they provide access to internet. The Apostleship also began "cooperating with other Christian denominations. At times centers are run together."

"Our ministry is a ministry of presence on the periphery, on one of the peripheries of the Church."

