



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Sea Sunday Message 2020 (12th July 2020)

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

the celebration of this year's Sea Sunday should have been a joyous one in view of the October centenary celebration in Glasgow - Scotland (now postponed to 2021). Rather it is going to be celebrated in an exceptional and challenging time, which Pope Francis has expressed in these words: *"Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us"*¹.

Our heart is going out to the relatives and friends of the countless victims (among them many seafarers) of the coronavirus and we feel distressed and disoriented for the uncertainties about the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many countries to a complete shut down and to enforce an extended lockdown for many businesses in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus. However, the maritime industry continued its operation, adding a multitude of challenges to the already problematic lives of the seafarers, and putting them on the front line in fighting against the coronavirus.

Vessels that are transporting almost 90% of products that are badly needed to carry on our normal lives in these taxing circumstances such as medication and medical equipment, remain at seas. Before it came to a complete stop, the cruise industry struggled to convince governments and port authorities to open their ports where they could safely disembark their guests. At the same time, they frantically tried to find ways to contain the spread of infections among passengers and crew in ships that became incubators for the COVID-19.

Despite the fundamental role that seafarers play for the global economy, a role whose great significance and need organizations and institutions tried to uphold during the COVID-19 crisis, current and prevailing legislations and policies simply glanced over them. That is why Sea Sunday is an opportunity for us to revisit the role of seafarers, and to recall some of the issues that negatively affect the seafarer's life and which are aggravated by the suspicion and fear of contamination.

¹ *Extraordinary moment of prayer*, 27 March 2020

In this unprecedented situation crewmembers, who had already spent between six to ten months on board, had to suffer the great inconvenience of having their employment period extended, with the consequent increase of personal fatigue and prolonged absence from loved ones and the comfort of homes. Estimates suggest that, every month, 100,000 seafarers who finish their contracts and look forward to flying home were prevented from doing so by the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent closure of borders and flights. Accordingly, thousands of seafarers who were ready to leave for a new contract were stranded in hotels and dormitories around the globe, reduced to beggarly dependence on charitable institutions for their basic needs such as foods, toiletries, sim cards, etc..

Because of the absence of shore leave, and restricted port entry for ships visiting, seafarers on board the vessels suffer isolation, severe physical and mental stress that brings many crews on the verge of desperation and, unfortunately, committing suicide.

We have reports of many seafarers with serious and potentially life treating medical conditions which are unrelated to COVID-19. These still need emergency medical care in land-based national hospitals, which unfortunately were denied them or delayed until they had to be carried on stretchers. Furthermore, seafarers who returned home after a long and dramatic journey have to undergo quarantine or suffer discrimination or stigmatization in their own country, because they are considered as carriers of the corona virus.

Regrettably, we have also to deplore the fact that while seafarers endeavor to keep the supply chains moving with dedication and at the cost of huge personal sacrifices, some unscrupulous ship-owners, crewing agencies and managers use the excuse of the pandemic to dismiss their obligations to guarantee their labour rights, including proper wages and the promotion of safe and secure working environments for all them.

According to a report the first three months of 2020 have seen a 24% increase in piracy attacks and attempted attacks over the same period in 2019. Apparently, the coronavirus is not stopping armed robberies who continue to be a threat for seafarers, adding further anxiety and apprehension to lives, which are already lived under the pressure of uncertainties, caused by the corona virus.

To all of the experiences above of the seafarers, which describe a dangerous form of livelihood, we must now consider the real threat of losing even this precarious livelihood, because it will mean for many the total loss of income and inability to assume social and domestic responsibilities, such as, payment of utilities bills, education of dependants, welfare of family.

In the light of the above, the celebration of Sea Sunday especially by Christians should invite us all to exercising a "preferential option for the poor" seafarers, a pledge to live in solidarity with them. Pope John Paul II called *solidarity* a "virtue", and defined it as an "unfailing commitment to the wellbeing of another". This should be our attitude towards these seafarers; for, people who are not poor, just because they constantly expose their lives to danger, but do so, precisely, to ensure the movements of goods for a healthy global economy, really deserve our esteem and gratitude.

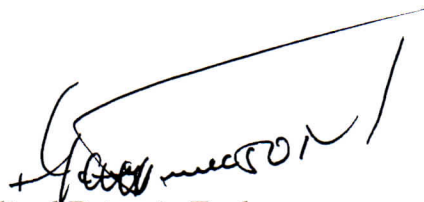
For this reason, we would like to re-launch the message of the IMO General-Secretary Kitack Lim: "*You are not alone. You are not forgotten*".

You are not alone: the Stella Maris Chaplains and volunteers are with you wherever you are, not necessarily at the top of the gang way but with a “virtual chaplaincy” keeping in touch with you through social media, always ready to answer your call, to lend you a compassionate ear and praying for your wellbeing and the safety of your families.

You are not forgotten: the Stella Maris Chaplains and volunteers will be with you in the next months when your resilience will be put to test and we will try to respond to your material and spiritual needs. We will be always at your side, raising your concerns, upholding your labor and human rights and preventing discrimination

You are not alone. You are not forgotten: because this coming month of August the universal prayer intention that expresses the great concern for humanity and the mission of the Church of Pope Francis, is dedicated to *The Maritime World*. All the Catholic communities around the world will be invited to *pray for all those who work and live from the sea, among them sailors, fishers and their families.*

We entrust to Mary, *Star of the Sea*, the wellbeing of the people of the sea, the commitment and dedication of the Chaplains and volunteers and we pray Our Lady to protect us from all dangers, especially from the evil of COVID-19.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Turkson', with a large, sweeping flourish above it.

Cardinal Peter A. Turkson
Prefect

Generally, Sea Sunday is celebrated on the second Sunday of July. It is a day set aside to remember and pray in a special way for the people of the sea who work at sea, far away from their countries, loved ones and local Churches. We are aware that, because of the difficult situation created by the global spread of COVID-19, some national Stella Maris have decided to postpone the celebration of Sea Sunday to a later date. For this reason, this message can be used anytime.