

Communication challenges, human trafficking plague seafaring industry

VATICAN CITY - Seafarers worldwide have always faced a difficult life marked by long periods away from loved ones, but increased globalization has given rise to new challenges, including difficulty with communication and human trafficking.

These were some of the issues that regional directors of the Apostleship of the Sea discussed Feb. 14-16 during their annual gathering at the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers.

Globalization has led to the development of more ports, and existing ports are seeing an increase in traffic.

The growth in the shipping and fishing industries has led to a greater demand for mariners, and the demand for manpower is so great in some parts of the world that personnel can be victims of human trafficking, said Father Romeo Yu Chang, regional coordinator of East-Far East Asia.

For example, in Thailand, many people do not wish to take on the strenuous and risk-filled job on fishing boats, so laborers are being trafficked in from other countries, he said in the region's annual report.

Undocumented laborers are often victims of abuse and exploitation, and many of the workers "are enticed or lured or kidnapped to work as sea fishermen," he wrote in the report.

The greatest problem historically faced by seafarers, who might spend 9-10 months at sea, has been the difficulty in communicating with family back home.

The Apostleship of the Sea helps seafarers by offering phone cards and Internet connections at port centers, and port chaplains often go onto the boats with laptops and cell phones for workers to use, said Deacon Albert M. Dacanay, regional coordinator for North America and the Caribbean.

A growing number of seafarers have access to new technologies that make it possible to reach home frequently and cheaply, he told Catholic News Service Feb. 15.

Because many seafarers now have access to Wi-Fi and smart phones, the apostleship is launching a beta test system for a social networking site that would allow seafarers and chaplains to keep in touch with each other.

The website would be a tool for communication between seafarers and their families, seafaring families with other families, and a method of relaying information about apostleship services to seafarers on the go. An iPhone application is also in the works.

The site would also help chaplains easily track ships and their crew to better serve them.

Connecting chaplains directly with seafarers in need is a hallmark of what Deacon Dacanay calls their “networking ministry.”

“The first thing you do when they come (is ask them) how long are you staying and where is your next port?” he said.

That way if the chaplain is unable to help the seafarer immediately, he can alert the

chaplain at the next port of call to visit the crew member in need of continued assistance.

“We try to make it a very close family network for chaplains” so they can all look out for crew members in need, he said.

The increased ease of being in touch with family members has brought a greater demand for counseling and crisis intervention, said Redemptorist Father Xavier Pinto, regional coordinator for South India and the Gulf region. One-on-one time with members of the pastoral teams is becoming progressively more critical and important, he said.

Apostleship regional directors see this as an opportunity to expand their network, but because of a lack of resources, they worry that they will not be able to meet the demand, some said.

A globalized workforce also means crew members on one ship might be from many different countries. The multiethnic crews often have no way of communicating with one another, if only for companionship, and that can cause problems, said Deacon Dacanay.

Staff members at apostleship centers speak the language native to that region, and sometimes English, but many mariners that come to them are immigrants who do not speak either language, he said.

Another problem the apostleship works to alleviate is protecting the rights and living conditions of seafarers who are stuck on ships that have been abandoned by the captain due to bankruptcy or legal issues.

In his opening address Feb. 14 to the regional coordinators meeting, Scalabrinian Father Gabriele Bentoglio, undersecretary of the pontifical council, said ships

abandoned at port with crews left on board “is one of the most visible effects of the global economic crisis in the maritime industry.”

The apostleship tries to provide for their basic needs, such as food and water, and assists with repatriation and efforts to recover unpaid wages, he said.

The Apostleship of the Sea, which provides spiritual care to seafarers and anyone whose livelihood depends on the sea, has set up centers and chaplaincies across the world to help seafarers wherever they may be.

For many people who are strangers in a strange new place, “the first place you visit is the church” because it’s someplace that makes you feel comfortable and welcome, Deacon Dacanay said.

When there is a chaplain at a port, “sometimes we take a picture with the sailors and we send it to their families and it keeps them assured that their husbands and their family members are kept safe and in good hands,” he said.