

New director, home for seafarers

With the retirement from active ministry of Monsignor John FitzGerald, the Apostleship of the Sea (AOS), a Catholic ministry for seafarers, has its first lay director. Andy Middleton is hardly new to the ministry, having served as its right hand man for more than a decade.

Monsignor FitzGerald established the AOS in Baltimore in 2003. Middleton, a former Baltimore City police officer, began volunteering in 2006. He has held various positions in the ministry, and was most recently deputy director. As his retirement neared, Monsignor FitzGerald asked Archbishop William E. Lori to appoint Middleton as the new director.

“I have all the confidence in the world Andy will move this ministry forward,” said Monsignor FitzGerald, who continues as the ministry’s chaplain. “He’s committed, and he knows more about the port than I do.”

In addition to a new director, the AOS Stella Maris International Seafarer Center has a new location in the former rectory of St. Rita Parish, across Dunmanway from its former storefront location in Dundalk.

According to Middleton, the new building has more useable space and includes offices, a library, computer stations, a conference room and a lounge, all of which help better meet seafarers’ needs.

“When I first started here, a lot of seafarers came to use the computers and phones,” Middleton said. “With the price of technology decreasing and with more phones having SIM cards that can work in the U.S., they are not coming in to use our equipment as often.

“Now the big draw is WiFi, and we will have a lounge where they can sit and FaceTime with their family and friends back home. This will give them privacy, something we didn’t have in the old space.”

According to Middleton, seafarers have contracts ranging from four to 10 months,

and don't get vacation or bereavement leave. While many ships have satellite service, it is cost prohibitive for anything other than business.

"If there's a birth or a death in the family, there's no going home for a week," he said. "Our job is to create that link, to help them communicate back home."

AOS's 12-15 volunteers, many of whom are Knights of Columbus, currently visit ships Monday-Saturday, dropping off rosaries, scapulars and prayer cards, along with secular magazines and fiction books. Most international seafarers come from the developing world; about 65 percent are Catholic.

"If you would like to travel the world and never leave home, this is the place to do it," Middleton said. "I've met people from all over the world and I'm only 10 minutes from home."

Ship visitors are also authorized to escort workers to the Seafarer Center and destinations such as Arundel Mills, a popular choice where they can purchase clothes, bikes and electronics cheaper than they could at home.

Middleton's goals include starting a prayer group. Ship visitors will gather intentions from seafarers, which Middleton will share.

"Think how comforting it would be to be away at sea and know that people in Baltimore are praying for me and my family," he said.

Middleton often refers to a quote from Pope John Paul II, who called seafarers "the invisible strangers in our midst."

One of his most memorable moments as a volunteer came when a vessel was detained by the Coast Guard for safety violations, and seafarers' shore passes were expired. Middleton and AOS volunteers got wish lists and money from the crew, ran their errands and returned the next day with their purchases.

"One of the crew members," Middleton said, "walked up to me almost crying and said, 'We appreciate this so much. It helps us to know we are not forgotten.' This is why we do this. This is why this ministry exists."

AOS list of needs:

- Religious/secular magazines
- small paperback books
- rosaries/scapulars
- prayer cards
- travel sized toiletries
- playing cards
- note pads

For more information, email aosbalt@gmail.com