



SOLIDARITY WITH SEAFARERS AS KEY ESSENTIAL WORKERS

Each year, the Coalition of Catholic Organizations Against Human Trafficking (CCOAH) launches a Campaign that begins during Lent to raise Catholic awareness of forced labor in the fishing industry. This year, due to the global pandemic, a new humanitarian crisis has emerged that is severely impacting all men and women who work at sea. Thus in 2021, CCOAH - together with Stella Maris and the Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America (AOS-USA) - are urging Catholics and all people of good will to pay witness to the life of the seafarer and to leverage their voices as community members and consumers to uplift the safety and wellbeing of one of the world's most invisible group of essential workers.

What Importance do Seafarers Play in Our Lives?

Have you every stopped to reflect upon the ease with which we have access to our favorite morning coffee from Brazil, grapes from Chile, or wheat from Turkey? What about our prescription medicine produced in Germany or the gasoline that fuels our cars made with crude oil from Saudi Arabia? 90% of global trade is moved by the sea and it is our fellow seafarers who work tirelessly to transport this cargo to and from the world's 6,000 ports, including the 360 ports that line our own U.S. coasts.



Why Should Seafarers Be Considered Essential Workers?

Due to the risk that the current pandemic imposes on human life, essential workers are the men and women whose jobs help protect our wellbeing, safety, and access to basic needs. While much of the world has come to a halt, seafarers continue to transport products essential for our survival (vaccines, face masks, hygiene items, and staple food items) to our shores. Pope Francis also stresses that, "without the people of the sea, many parts of the world would starve."

What are the Risks that Seafarers Face at Sea?

Turbulent seas made worse by climate change, modern day piracy, long and grueling workdays, constant exposure to the elements, and lack of medical attention while aboard a vessel are common aspects of what Pope Francis describes as one of the most dangerous occupations in the world. Those who work on vessels also face risks of labor exploitation, which at times rises to the level of human trafficking.

CCOAH encompasses over 35 national and international Catholic agencies working together to end human trafficking

How has pandemic exacerbated these Risks? What is the Crew Change Crisis?

A crew change consists of replacing one ship's crew members for another every 4-10 months to protect seafarers from exhaustion and allow them to return to their families until their next contract. In an effort to contain the virus, many governments are refusing travel into or through their countries, proving it next to impossible for seafarers to disembark their vessel to travel home. This has left more than 400,000 seafarers trapped on ships long after their original contract has expired. Many are experiencing severe mental and physical health issues, as well as trauma. The crew change crisis also brings with it risks of labor exploitation from being compelled to work at sea without a valid contract and in many cases past the 11-month limit mandated by international law. In addition, some shipowners and crew agencies are leveraging the virus to disregard worker's rights. At the same time, seafarers on land waiting to board a vessel with a new contract find themselves stranded in hotels and dormitories without a way to provide for themselves or their families. This situation is being called a humanitarian crisis at sea and should be of concern to everyone, including all of us.

What is our Church Doing to Support Seafarers?

[Stella Maris](#) - founded by the Catholic Church - is the largest global maritime ministry serving seafarers, fishers, and family members in the world! In the United States, Stella Maris is present in 53 maritime ports in 26 states and in 48 dioceses. Port chaplains and lay volunteers minister to seafarers by offering pastoral care, friendship, transportation to purchase basic needs, internet connection/phone cards to communicate with family members, and more. In addition to offering welcome and hospitality on ship visits, Stella Maris staff assists seafarers in distress, whether due to unsafe/exploitative working conditions or long periods of isolation onboard the vessel.



[Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America](#) (AOS-USA) is the official professional association of the Catholic Port Chaplains, Mariners, and Cruise Ship Priests Program with 500 priests from around the world serving onboard over 650 cruises each year.

During the pandemic, AOS-USA and Stella Maris chaplains and volunteers have worked tirelessly to find ways to minister despite seafarers' inability to disembark their vessels at port. Many are offering "virtual chaplaincy" to lend a listening ear via email or Facebook. Others are running errands for seafarers in need of basic necessities such as cleaning wipes and fresh water. Still others are preparing care packages for crew delivered with the assistance of shipping agents. AOS-USA has also provided pastoral and support care for cruise personnel online and via phone, as well as access to the Holy Mass.

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How Can I Help Our Brothers and Sisters at Sea?

Join CCOAHT, AOS-USA, and Stella Maris this Lent and Spring as we elevate the visibility of the seafarers' plight and call for an end to the crew change crisis. Throughout the month of March, we will provide you resources to engage in our Solidarity with Seafarers Campaign comprised of three main pillars: Education, Prayer, and Advocacy.

Education: Get ready for materials to help you spread word to family, friends, and the community about the importance that seafarers play in our own lives, how their work fuels the global economy, and the impact of the pandemic on their safety and well-being.

Prayer: We all know the immense power of prayer. We will be providing you with moving ways to ask our Lord and Mother Mary to protect and care for seafarers, fishermen, and family.

Advocacy: There is also much power in numbers! Prepare to help us in the coming weeks to call greater attention to the crew change as a humanitarian crisis and for seafarers to be designated as essential workers with priority access to vaccines. Actions include a.) expressing our support for the Neptune Declaration – a global compact signed by hundreds of organizations around the world that lists specific action items to ensure that seafarer safety is prioritized and b.) urging Walmart, one of the most influential retail stores in the U.S., to acknowledge their reliance on seafarers for the healthy functioning of their business model and to show concern for their wellbeing by signing the Neptune Declaration.



THE MARITIME WORLD
We pray for all those who work and live from the sea, among them sailors, fishermen and their families.

STAY TUNED!

A collage of shipping containers in various colors (red, white, yellow) stacked on a ship's deck. A worker in a blue uniform and yellow hard hat is visible on the deck. Overlaid on the image is a white text box with blue text and a blue banner with a white logo and text.

We have a shared responsibility to resolve the crew change crisis. Join us.
#NeptuneDeclaration

 **The Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing and Crew Change**

Joseph Furness
Project: Still at Sea

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