DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Sea Sunday Message 2021
(11th July 2021)

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

We are celebrating the second Sea Sunday against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. The world may have come to a standstill but the ships have never stopped sailing from port to port delivering critical medical equipment and medicines to support the fight against the spread of the virus. This emphasizes that the maritime industry is a vital part of the world's economy. Some 90% of the world trade is carried by ships or, more accurately, by the 1.7 million seafarers who work on the ships.

We thank the People of the Sea for their work, and our gratitude is transformed in our prayer that the Lord grants them strength in moments of weakness, unity in diversity, safe and smooth sailing and, at the end of their contract, happiness to be reunited with their loved ones.

There have been repeated appeals from international organizations (UN, IMO, ILO), unions, ship owners, and faith-based groups to recognize seafarers as "essential workers" so that crew changes are expedited, and vaccinations are prioritized. But very few countries have facilitated these movements and implemented a clear policy for seafarers' vaccinations. This has exposed a deep contradiction in the maritime industry. One on hand, it is highly globalized but, on the other, seafarers' rights and protection are fragmented between several players who are often not accountable to any higher regulation or authority.

Because of this pandemic, we would like to invite the maritime industry to learn to act as one by facilitating crew changes and vaccinations and strengthening the implementation of international standards to enhance and protect the human and working rights of the People of the Sea.

It was estimated that in September 2020 some 400,000 seafarers who ought to have been repatriated were in fact stranded at sea because of COVID-19. In some cases, seafarers have not been able to go home for 18 months. COVID-19 has exacerbated the working and living conditions of hundreds of thousands of seafarers who have been stranded at sea and required to work for many months longer than usual. This affects not only the seafarers themselves but also the daily lives of their families. The problems of isolation, loneliness, separation and anxiety about family and loved ones, thousands of miles away, together and uncertainty over their future, has increased the physical and psychological stress on board ships, sometime with tragic consequences.

We appeal to ships owners, management companies, agents and recruiters to regard crewmembers as more than "labour force" and remember that they are human beings. We urge the development of working practices, which are based on human dignity rather than profit, and so provide everything, which is necessary to improve the mental, physical and spiritual well-being of seafarers.

Since January 2021, 38 piracy incidents have been reported including 33 vessels boarded, two attempted attacks, two vessels fired upon, and one vessel hijacked. The number of reported piracy incidents may have decreased but violence against crew is increasing. These are sad reminders of the fragility of a maritime industry, which has already been tested by the pandemic. Seafarers have the right to perform their work without running the risk of being kidnapped, injured or even killed. Furthermore, piracy disrupt the global economy and the constant threat of danger and harm places considerable stress on seafarers and their families.

We request all governments and international organizations to determine long-lasting solutions to the scourge of piracy, mindful of the need to address the fundamental problem of the inequality in the distribution of goods between countries and the exploitation of natural resources. Moreover, ship-owners should adopt all requisite preventative measures to ensure the safety not only of ships and their cargo, but especially that of seafarers.

The International Transport Worker's Federation (ITF) has reported a doubling of ship abandonments from 40 in 2019, to 85 in 2020. Abandonment at sea happens for a number of different reasons. The most common reason is the deliberate decision of a ship-owner to dispose of a vessel they no longer deem valuable, crew included. Stranded in a foreign country, with wages unpaid, no prospect of immediate income and deprived of food, the abandoned crew are faced with inhumane conditions and their families suffer immediate devastating financial consequences.

In order to prevent the tragic consequences of abandonment at sea, we demand the full implementation of the new obligations under the Maritime Labor Convention (MLC 2006), which were adopted in 2014 and entered into force in 2017. Ship-owners are required to have compulsory insurance to cover abandonment at sea, to pay for expenses including food, drinking water, medical care and repatriation costs.

The number of shipwrecks and marine accidents is declining but one is too many, especially when seafarers are injured or die, go missing at sea or are unjustly criminalized and detained indefinitely. Sometimes these happens due to the forces of nature, but there are too many instances of negligence by those who prefer to prioritize profit over safety and security. Every tragedy results in families in despair, children without parents and nowhere to lay a flower and say a prayer.

We lift our prayers to Mary Star of the Sea, to accompany those who are no longer with us to the safe harbour of heaven and comfort the devastated relatives and friends who are left behind.

Throughout the pandemic, Stella Maris chaplains and volunteers have always been at the service of seafarers and fishers. They are present in their lives, constantly adapt their ministry to changing circumstances and address seafarers' spiritual and material needs.

We pray that all Stella Maris chaplains and volunteers continue to: "Be apostles faithful to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel, show the loving face of the Church which also welcomes and makes herself close to this portion of the People of God; respond without hesitation to maritime people who wait for you on board to appease the deep longing of their soul and make them feel active members of the community."[1]

We entrust to Mary, *Star of the Sea,* the well-being of the People of the Sea, the commitment and dedication of chaplains and volunteers and we entreat Our Lady to continue protect us all from every danger, especially from COVID-19.

Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson
Prefect

Mons. Bruno Marie Duffé
Secretary

[1] Pope Benedict XVI, Rome, XXIII AOS World Congress, November 23, 2012