

Nova et Vetera LXXV: The Apostleship of the Sea

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Holiday highlights are often found in the unexpected. Last year, I visited the Breton town of Vannes, mainly to see the shrine of St Vincent Ferrer, a fiery Dominican preacher who was descended from the English Ferrers and the Scottish Stewarts. As Solemn Mass was concluding at the fine Cathedral, roads started being cleared and crowds began to gather. A local told us that the annual ceremony of the blessing of the sea was about to take place. And, sure enough, a small procession soon emerged from the church, comprising of a statue of Our Lady, clergy, the mayor and some women dressed in local costume. They made their way through the town gate to the little harbour, where prayers were said, a floral bouquet was energetically thrown into the sea by the mayor and a charming hymn was sung. Then, like most of the crowd, we retired to a brasserie for *moules frites*, washed down with Breton cider.

Such ceremonies of *Bénédiction de la mer* are repeated across the French coast and, indeed, around the Christian world, highlighting the importance of the sea and its fruit for those who live nearby. Moreover, ever since the Lord called Galilean fishermen to be His disciples, there has been an intimate connection between the Church and the sea. Maritime images were frequently used in Scripture and the writings of the Fathers. There have been many seafaring saints, such as St Brendan the Navigator, who may have crossed the Atlantic in the sixth century, and St Nicholas, who once calmed a storm when his ship was in danger and was henceforth invoked as a patron of travellers. In more recent times there was St Francis Xavier, who spent much time with sailors on his extensive missionary voyages, and St Vincent de Paul, who ministered to convict and slave ships. There is also a strong Marian dimension: ships were often named after Our Lady and shrines to *Stella Maris* (Star of the Sea) were often found in ports – in the middle ages, for example, there was such a sanctuary at Broadstairs, Kent, perched on a cliff edge and assisting sailors not only spiritually but by means of the navigational lamp conveniently situated on the church tower.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that the organised pastoral care of those working on the seas is a relatively late development. 'While missionaries were being carried across the oceans in the ships of every nation', wrote Joseph Marmion SJ in *The Irish Monthly* of 1949, 'to bring the Gospel to Mandarins and Pygmies and Eskimos, no one seems to have done anything permanent to ensure that the Gospel would be preached to the crews of the ships in which they sailed.'

Not, at least, until the late nineteenth century. In fact, here in Great Britain the Protestant denominations were the first to set up Port Chaplains, Seamen's Clubs and other institutions; as early as 1818, for example, a group of evangelicals had founded the British and Foreign Sailors' Society. Catholic interest in seafarers in this country only revived around 1890. Canon Archibald Douglas, son of the Marquess of Queensbury, wrote an article in the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart* arguing that 'if something isn't done soon, the Catholic bluejackets will go to the dogs'. The magazine was the organ of the Apostleship of Prayer, a popular league of prayer in union with the Sacred Heart that had been founded in France in 1844 and quickly spread around the world, under the guidance of the Jesuits. In May 1890 the League

asked its members to pray especially for sailors. Parcels of pious books and papers were soon being sent to ships and ports from the Apostleship's headquarters at Wimbledon and a Seaman's Branch was started in 1895, known as the 'Apostleship of the Sea'.

Around the same time a special Seamen's Committee of the Catholic Truth Society was formed, also sending pamphlets and other publications to those who worked at sea. There were other developments: the SVP started working among seamen in 1893 and the same year Cardinal Vaughan opened a modest Sailors' Club in Wellclose Square, near Tower Bridge, with the help of the Guild of Our Lady of Ransom.

It was a good start but interest died down in the second decade of the twentieth century. Although the First World War led to an expansion of naval chaplains, little was being done for the Mercantile Marine. That was to change with the appearance on the scene of Peter Anson, a writer, artist and passionate lover of the sea, who had been a monk at Caldey under that 'Abbot Extraordinary', Aelred Carlyle. Because of its location on an island off the Pembrokeshire coast, Caldey had had a great interest in the sea ever since its foundation and since 1917 directed the Apostleship of Prayer's 'Work for Catholic Bluejackets', producing an up-to-date *List of Catholic Naval Officers*. Anson wrote an article in *The Universe* (30 April 1920) indicating that there was an urgent need for an international organisation for promoting the spiritual welfare of Catholic seafarers. Up until then, he noted, the small collection of Catholic Clubs and Institutes worked in isolation from each other and had a limited impact. The earlier Apostleship of the Sea was revived, starting in Glasgow with the help of a Jesuit brother, Daniel Shields, and soon spreading to other ports. In 1922 its Rules received the blessing of Pius XI.

The Apostleship devised many ways to aid seafarers: not only through prayer and Masses, but ship visiting, running Seamen's Clubs and arranging for religious communities, schools and individuals to 'adopt' ships. They would then pray for those on board, correspond with them and send religious literature. As well as sponsoring chaplains, the Apostleship trained 'Ships' Leaders' who would identify Catholics on board, distribute literature, organise discussion groups, exhort the lapsed and contact Port Chaplains on arrival ashore. It was a most effective example of the 'lay apostolate'.

The Apostleship of the Sea, then, evolved from several late Victorian initiatives to give spiritual sustenance to seafarers and was revived in its current form following the First World War. The sea, of course, has always had an international dimension and it is not surprising that the Apostleship developed on international lines, with other national organisations emerging; in 1925, for example, most of the fifty or so French Catholic seafaring organisations were united in a Federation. In 1927 the first Catholic Maritime Congress was held in Normandy and three years later an International Council of the Apostleship of the Sea was set up. Today the Apostleship is part of a network of agencies working in 89 countries and its international office is part of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples.

Last Sunday your local parish would have had a collection for the Apostleship's ongoing ministry with 'the people of the sea'. Its work has changed beyond recognition since its foundation: ports have moved from city centres, ships have increased in size and decreased in number, seafarers now come from predominantly poorer countries due to the cost of labour and are often an 'invisible' presence, locked behind dock gates and only fleetingly on shore. The Apostleship has had to change its strategy over the last decade, seeking out sailors rather than waiting for them to walk through the doors of chaplaincies and hostels. But the essential mission has remained the same, still echoing the call of Christ on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and still placed under the patronage of Mary, Stella Maris, who guides twenty-first century sailors just as she assisted their forebears.

To enable AoS (Great Britain) to continue its vital work, donations can be made either by post to: AoS, Herald House, Lamb's Passage, London EC1Y 8LE or online at www.apostleshipofthesea.org.uk.

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