

My talk today takes me back to a time when I worked for 11 years (1999 to 2010) for Costa Cruises. I started life onboard as a dancer and later progressed to Dance Captain and Production Manager. It was a wonderful career, and I miss it greatly, but I have so many wonderful memories of the places I've been most fortunate to visit and the many friendships I've made along the way.

I have worked on 5 different Costa ships of varying size. Ships where it was possible to know the name of every crew member and those so vast you wouldn't see some people for weeks and could be easily forgiven for thinking they had disembarked. The lengths of my contracts were generally around 6 months long. As a member of the Production Cast if you wanted to extend your contract you would do so for an entire season with my longest stint at sea totalling 13 months.

Costa Chaplains are resident throughout a ships' period in navigation and it would be impossible to imagine one of my contracts on board without their presence. In addition to Mass and pastoral services to passengers and crew, Costa Chaplains also serve as crew welfare officers. They will safeguard money, organise crew outings ashore, sports competitions, raffle draws and their offices usually house a library of books and DVDs that are available to hire. They also plan and host monthly crew parties which, as you can imagine are always well attended! This is by no means an exhaustive list of their duties but it proves they are an integral part of life on board and a highly valued member of the cruise ship family.

For those working for long periods at sea Chaplains provide much needed support in the absence of friends and family. They can comfort, reassure and offer spiritual guidance to those in need or to those simply maintaining their spiritual life.

While most passenger Masses are celebrated in the larger lounges or theatres in passenger area, Costa ships also benefit from a small Chapel. I took great comfort in sitting in the peace and quiet of the Chapel on several occasions, particularly on my very first contact when my Grandma passed away and I was unable to go home. Knowing that there was always someone I could talk to, who wasn't someone involved in my work was very important to me, as it is to everyone.

I cannot be here today without a mention of those passengers and crew of the Costa Concordia who on the night of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2012 had to endure the most frightening of experiences. To those who died and to those who are still to be found, may they Rest In Peace. My most lovely friend Ian Fraser was the singer of the production team onboard and I've spoken to him several times about that night. His life raft station was on the starboard side of the ship, the side which ended up submerged in the water. He said he became transfixed, as he stood waiting at his muster station, by the brilliant beautiful sapphire blue colour of the sea as it began to rise and flood the deck illuminated by the lights and the white paint of the ship.

After a time it became apparent that no one was coming to launch their life raft, an operation in any case made impossible due to the tilt of the ship, so he had no choice

but to jump into the freezing January water and swim for the shore. Ian told me how ridiculously annoyed he felt at losing a new pair of trainers which fell off his feet as he swam to the rocks. He remembered telling one of the other dancers with him, who was trying to swim with her laptop held out of the water above her head, to just let it go and that it didn't matter. I don't think the trainers and the laptop were necessarily items of great importance but just something familiar for them to cling to while their lives hung so precariously in the balance.

Thankfully Ian, and those who were with him, scrambled onto the rocks in the bay and managed to make their way into town. Someone even made Ian a new pair of shoes out of a discarded lifejacket. He cannot remember who it was but he'll always be grateful to that person who took the time to carve them out for him remarking that his new bright orange shoes were better than any pair of fancy trainers.

Like most people arriving ashore Ian went to the Church of San Lorenzo and Mamiliano where passengers and crew alike had congregated to seek immediate refuge, pray and try to make sense of it all. Father Raffaele Malena, the AoS Chaplain onboard the Concordia worked tirelessly to assist those in need that night and everyone took solace from his presence. The church now houses, in memory of the tragedy, a statue of the Madonna which was recovered last year from the ship's chapel by fire department divers.

At times of crises and struggle even those with little or small faith will turn to God and God will always be there. But it's soothing to know that even in everyday life when the sea is calm, that for those living and working at sea, having access to a Chaplain who can provide spiritual guidance, alleviate worries, calm fears and provide friendship is something truly invaluable. In fact I used wonder who was supporting the Chaplain? But now I know it's the AoS.

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