



## **“Gospel tradition and reality of fishing”**

Your Excellencies,

Reverend Fathers and Sisters,

Dear friends of the Apostleship of the Sea,

I would like to express my gratitude for being invited and to speak to you during this twenty third World conference. It's an honor to do this on the 'World Fisheries Day'.

I would like to reflect on my pastoral work and its aspects of evangelization for the Belgian fishermen and their families which is /to a large extent /representative / for the North-Western European fisheries.

Belgium is a small federal state, situated in Western Europe. Brussels is our capital and also the political and administrative center of the European Union.

In my country approximately 2200 families earn their living in the fishery. We count with 520 active fishermen. Each fisherman creates 6 jobs in the upstream industry.

The fishing families are spread along the Belgian coast. Most of them live near the three fishery ports: Zeebrugge, Oostende and Nieuwpoort. The Belgian fleet consists mainly of beam trawlers dragging the nets along the bottom of the sea. From an ecological point of view a fiercely criticized technique.

Our target species are mainly sole and cod. We exchange most quota of the other species with the fishery authorities of other Member States of the European Union.

Our fishermen live and work on their Long Distant Vessels (sailing factories) for several days or weeks, because most of the allocated fishing grounds to Belgium are, with exception of the North Sea, far away from home.

To cut down on the expensive fuel consumption they land the catch in the ports closest to the fishing ground, where the fish are transported in containers to Belgium.

My situation as chaplain for the Belgian Fishery Sector is quite specific. The chaplain is an official of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Transport. It's a long and rewarding tradition that the chaplain is also a teacher in religion in the final terms at the Maritime Institute.

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My presentation consists 4 parts:

1. We start with a divine command and advice: 'Go into the world and proclaim the good news'.
2. We apply this on the popular piety of our fishermen.
3. We've a closer look at our catholic social doctrine as an instrument of evangelization
4. and we express our commitment by concrete action.

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**I. A divine order**

At the end of the Gospel of Marc, this is what Jesus orders us: "Go into the world and proclaim the Good News ...." (Mark 16, 15). In our Catholic Church we have no tradition in the field of direct evangelization in which we, with the Bible in hand, preach the Gospel. Let us be honest, many of us are not trained to put this into practice. We learned to make use of the existing social tissues of the church, through which faith has been spread for many centuries.



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Today we face the challenge to bring the gospel to the large growing group of searching believers who are estranged from the Church or barely have the habit of regular practice. It is no different in the fishery communities and families.

1.1. **'GO!'** - be on the road!

Today, we appear to be so weak and vulnerable in our church; we are so afraid to be intolerable or respect less, or to be imposing. We must overcome fear and be consistent in our pastoral approach.

If Saint Paul would have said, standing before the walls of Corinth: *"I want to respect their religious life, I don't want to influence anybody"*, we would not have any pastoral care for our so called 'strange folk' who are at sea for many days to earn their living.

As evangelizing chaplains we are "men on the road". We meet our fishermen going from quay to quay, from ship to ship, from man to man, from family to family, from meeting to meeting and even in the pub over a pint of beer.

Nowadays, we reach our fishermen on the maritime radio, by mobile phones, by satellite, by e-mail and in recent years more and more on Facebook and Twitter. We must go and take all the opportunities to meet even them even on a digital way.

Jesus says "Go!".

The best way to be respectful is to say who you are and what your mission is. It's impolite to conceal your name ... also in evangelization!

To touch the heart of someone, you should not necessarily be highly educated: Jesus does not say: *'Go, and study'*, or *'Go and be a skillful speaker'*. Let us be ourselves and use all the instruments we have at our disposal. Like Catherine of Siena says: *'You have the Scriptures, the church, and the tender Christ on earth'*.

Here we could add: *"you have a sustainable and very valuable Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the church, based on the whole Bible as an instrument of evangelization..."* (cf. Centesimus Annus, 54)

1.2. **'Go INTO THE WORLD** of people belonging to the fisheries sector!

As chaplains we come into the role of Christopher. We carry the child Jesus across the water to the opposite bank which seems so far away. We are as ferries between Christian doctrine and praxis, between God's commandments and God's mercy, understanding, between deep-rooted traditions and creativity or inventiveness.

Today as chaplains we move in a totally other world than the one of Jesus' disciples. We operate in a fisheries sector where profitability, profit and technology play a leading role. We must proclaim the same Christ, but then to a 'new' generation in a 'new' context and therefore with 'new' methods and means.

Fortunately, the church is a plant that always adapts itself to any soil.

We undergo apostolic suffering because it is so difficult to keep the flock together. Our fishing communities are not as closely knitted as before, but splintered. There is much individualism, competition, a sickly feeling of rivalry between the ship owners and even the crews. *'Every man for himself'*.

1.3. **'... and PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS'**

In this world, we face the task of proclaiming the good news of Jesus, and most important, to ensure that the fishing community do not cut their umbilical cord with God.



### 1.3.1. In the footsteps of Jesus

Let us go in the footsteps of Jesus, our outstanding example! He built constantly personal relationships with various figures from all walks of life, also fishermen. What he said was always related to the concerns of his audience.

Without having had training in management, he kept people a mirror. He questioned, listened, confirmed, and encouraged. Let us do the same in our approach to seamen.

Some examples:

- the rich young man asks, 'what should I do to inherit eternal life' and Jesus responds: 'Keep you to the law' (Luke 18, 19).

Nowadays we must also say to our fishermen with emphasis and even in another context: 'act in accordance to the law and regulations!'

- On his way Jesus meets a yelling blind Barthimeüs and asks him, '*what can I do for you?*' '*Enable me to see*', he answered (Mark 10, 50-51).

Even today we sit with fishermen along the way, praying and asking for help to gain an 'insight' to their uncertain future, marked by the effects of the ecological hype and the Common Fishery Policy... and the accusation that they are the murderers of the sea.

There are so many themes in the Gospel that we can actualize and strongly involve in the life of modern fishermen!

If we proclaim the word of God to seamen with a humble heart in the conviction that it is not ours, but that of Jesus Christ, we may be confident that the seed that falls in the heart of man is irresistible. When evening falls we can confidently return home, because 'during the night the seed will germinate' (Marc 4.27).

### 1.3.2. With the eyes of faith

The first requirement in the pastoral for fishermen is to empathize with their feelings. Knowing fishermen is giving them a listening ear. It is listening without immediately having a strategy to make certain guidelines.

Give them, in those uncertain, fearful times, the opportunity to speak openly without restrictions. Concerns need not to be covered up. And they have plenty of them!

Fishermen were often regarded as scum, to be avoided as unreliable people. This did not prevent Jesus to found his church with them. God did not create men as a finished product, such as the Mozes of Michelangelo, but as a creature that grows and has its own growing pains.

Are we focused on their 'inward' feelings?

If not we only see defects and vices; we only hear a rough language. Then we risk getting bogged down on a sandbank of judging and condemning, saying: '*there is nothing to be done; there is so little to start with!*' Let us look at our fishermen through the eyes of faith.

God lives in them and loves them.

### 1.3.3. Telling them who you are



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Fishermen also look to the inside of their chaplain, who is also but human, makes mistakes and has his shortcomings, a human being with a particular temperament and character. In those 29 years that I have been attached to the Belgian Fishery, I learned to say to them 'I do not know' or 'sorry' or 'let me think about it' when they confronted me with their problems. But when I tell them what I feel and what I am: a Christian, a man of my time with my own doubts, my sufferings and joys, but also a man of good will, with his own life choices, because I do not share their experiences at sea, and I do not have to maintain a family, then I get respect and friendship.

As a school headmaster, I had the advantage that I could build a bond with my students. A bond based on respect and authority: strict but fair. I received their friendship and their confidence.

Once you have gained the confidence of the fishing community you may pick up the Bible and have your say about moral questions. Once you have their trust you can also impose requirements. I've planned already several meetings and conversations between husband and wife, in between sea voyages, for instance, when they request a marriage or baptism. These are all excellent opportunities to evangelize!

#### 1.3.4. ...approaching them with all-round respect for their job

It's important to know something about their profession, their vessels, their machines and the rules of navigation.

But most of all they should feel that you have empathy for their many concerns. If you're not interested in their abilities, in their thinking and feeling when they are far away from home, or have problems in their family, they will not be interested in 'who' you are and in the message of the gospel...It is sometimes a situation of giving and taking!

From a chaplain they require mediation in small and big disputes. Understanding of the challenges they are confronted with:

they are not able to control the expensive fuel, or to have control on the too low fish prices, they must reduce discards, they suffer from increasingly stricter control and a complex European legislation, etc. Today they suffer from the public opinion that they are the killers of the sea.

When you live between these people, you become one of them. They have their own vicars in their parishes, but they come to you with all kind of questions, knowing that they can contact you day and night. That close relationship will open doors for evangelization.

We must make use of it!

## **II. Fishermen and their faith: Popular religiosity**

Fishermen carry and experience their belief in a 'popular' religiosity. They believe in what we may call a "popular piety" which Paul VI made a plea for in his encyclical 'Evangelii Nuntiandi' (48), in relation to evangelism:

*"The popular religiosity is a precious gift from God to the people and a rich source of nourishment for authentic religiosity. It brings an intensive sensitivity of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence.*

*It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion.*



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*When it is well oriented, this popular religiosity can be more and more a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ."*

### 2.1. A treasure of tradition

Fishermen keep a treasure of tradition. It's a life stream for them. They love 'what always has been'. They do not feel themselves at ease when new things come up suddenly.

For generations, popular religiosity among fishermen has been deeply rooted in the families. It has its ups and downs and follows the adventures and important events of life: at birth, first and solemn communion, marriage, blessing of a ship, processions, pilgrimages, suffering and death, and so on.

They look forward to festive times. For them they are oases in the drag of daily life. Most of the celebrations for fishing families mentioned above, we have planned around the peak moments in the liturgical year: Ash Wednesday, Easter and Pentecost, Feast of the assumption of Mary, All Saints, and many local feasts.

### 2.2. Authentic and true responses

Fishermen and their families have primary, but authentic and true responses, they feel suspicious of big words and theories. They do not contemplate nor consider, they act. Liturgical meetings must not get bogged down in cool 'rationality'. They must recognize themselves in the used Bible text and there must be room for feelings and emotion. The ocean is too large for fishermen and their vocabulary too small in order to express what they feel. No words can describe a wonderful great catch, a beautiful sky at night or the power of an enormous storm. Their faith is nourished by the tremendum et fascinatum: fear and fascination.

God is the ineffable and mysterious force for which they have a lot of awe. Our reach liturgy can provides the appropriate words.

Fishermen are massively present in the celebrations for fishing families, at funerals of colleagues and friends. They are profoundly sensible for the blessings of the sea which, important to know, have their origin in the fact that fishers, centuries ago, asked their vicar, an abbot or a monk near the coast region, to do a protective blessing of the sea, which is their field of activity, and in many cases, becomes their tomb.

### 2.3. Religious expressions with a visual language

This religious experience needs images, pictures and statues. In the visual language everything comes together: understanding, emotion, mind and soul. Especially Jesus' miracles and parables, more than speeches, stimulate their imagination.

The evangelization among fishermen needs saints. In our fishing fleet all vessels carry statues of Mary and other saints and many ships have names of religious maxims (Custos Deus (guardian of god), Vaya con Dios (go with God), Ora et labora (pray and work).

The examples of the saints' sacrifices appeal to the fishermen. Therefore it is important to deepen the holy lives of saints in our liturgy.

! Here we face the challenge to put Christ again at the center of their faith. Mary and the saints form a guard of honor 'around' Christ, and not vice versa.

Evangelize is to connect the adoration of Mary, Star of the Sea "to a healthy Christology.



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Many Christological truths are anchored in Marian piety in a very human way. In Mary we see many evangelical values that Jesus constantly recommends in the gospel: faith, hope, love, poverty and chastity, obedience and willingness to listen.

The procession is a pilgrimage in miniature. Participants want to be seen. Processions are more and more personal confessions and public testimonies of the own faith. Participants, and sometimes complete families, do this out of conviction and usually in gratitude for being rescued and healed.

The popular religiosity that they experience and profess is rough material.

It must first pass through the filter to remove the particles of superstition and magic.

Our job as chaplain is to ensure that their belief, in its deepest essence, is a confession of faith in Jesus Christ, the Father and in both their Holy Spirit. Not everything that rises from the sensitivity of the heart and what belongs to tradition, is automatically evangelical.

### **III. The Catholic social doctrine as an ‘instrument of evangelization’** (cf. Centesimus Annus, 54).

Our work as a chaplain, our mission, must correspond to what we read in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. It fits perfectly into the theme of our World conference here, about evangelizing.

First, some stimulating quotes:

*“The Church is aware that she must enter into a new stage of history in her missionary dynamism” ... “The ‘new evangelization’... must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church’s social doctrine”* (C.S.D. 523)

Second:

*“The Church’s social pastoral ministry is the living and concrete expression of the full awareness of her evangelizing mission in the social, economic, cultural and political realities of the world.”* (C.S.D. 524)

This is applicable for the fisheries sector which has its own social community with an economic activity, its specific cultural habits and who is strongly politicized and legislated today.

Third:

*“The need for a new evangelization helps the Church to understand that today more than ever (...) her social message will gain credibility from the witness of action...”* (C.S.D.525)

Let me go more deeply into this witness of action!

To stimulate and support the integral promotion of the human person, we must use the insights developed in recent decades in the field of pastoral theology. Besides the (1) proclamation of the Gospel and (2) celebrating the faith, the pastoral attention is now more and more towards (3) service to the neighbor in his socio-cultural and evangelical context .

Today, a lot of publications, dealing with pastoral work, put the emphasis on “pastoral work as care-taking, a kind of assistance.

Besides our own frames of reference in the pastoral care, we should be inspired and use frameworks of other healthcare disciplines.

As chaplain today and tomorrow, it’s a matter of being there, be present, participate in the logistical frameworks of the fisheries sector with attention, not to the fish, but to the families.



To gain time, let me explain this with the help of a few questions: (see the ppt!)

- (1) Are we sufficiently accessible (easily reachable) and flexible in the sacramental ministry for fisher families, especially when the crew are at home?
- (2) How do we support mothers in the difficult upbringing of the children when the father is at sea?
- (3) What is our participation in the fishing training, including of course the religious level?
- (4) How do we help in the fight against alcohol and drugs?
- (5) In case of accidents, are we there (standby) to give social and psychological assistance and support to the involved families suffering from emotional traumas?
- (6) How do we help the families financially when crew members stay missing?
- (7) Can we make recommendations to improve the life- and work conditions of the crew?
- (8) How can we advise in the ever improving rescue technology? ...

All these and many more questions may not be answered by making intentions find their answers only through intentions, but also in a concrete "helping relationship, a witness of action through a patchwork of organizations and services related to the fisheries sector. For the chaplain it's a fulltime job! Let us be serious, it is not to combine with the pastoral on a parish!

#### **IV. Projects to support the integral promotion of the fishermen and their families.**

Confronted with the questions above, we have founded new services ourselves and there is became an intense collaboration with the already existing organizations.

All according to the order Peter got from Jesus after he proclaimed three times that he loved his master: '*Feed my lambs and take care of my sheep.*' (John 21, 15-16). Let me briefly, present some realizations which have grown from our practical needs in supporting fishing families....

4.1 'Feed my lambs': Educate young people to live as a fisherman

##### 4.1.1. Observation trips on a professional vessel.

With the cooperation of various authorities, we offer young people (of 13 and 14 years old) the opportunity to make, once a year, an observation trip with a professional vessel.

Out of this experience scholars realize if they can handle the profession or not. If not, they can easily skip to another employment, because fishery education cannot and may not be a rat trap.

##### 4.1.2. A polyvalent training vessel

Young people have to develop sea legs as soon as possible.

For that purpose we have a polyvalent training vessel De Broodwinner (the Bread earner) where most of the fishing techniques can be learned with a crew of experienced instructors and teachers.

Fishermen with a bad character do not exist!!!

A person who is not able to live and work together, day and night,



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during 15 or 20 days in the restricted space and surface of a vessel, cannot be a good fisherman. The rest of the crew will send him away.

So, learning discipline on board is vital!

The training periods on board are real tests for their handling and care for each other.

It concerns their notion of responsibility,

their sense for security,

their care for the environment,

their social behavior and their ability to discover each other's character and endurance in bad weather and dangerous situations.

We have to realize that we educate young people to take control on a vessel that costs a fortune. In the meantime they have to take care for the lives of the other four or five-man crew.

That's an estimable responsibility.

#### 4.2. "Take care of my sheep"

*"Take care of my sheep"*, said the Lord also to Peter.

Confronted with a ship disaster in which we lost a complete crew.

I noticed that the coordination between rescue services was inadequate. People were sent all over the place and received most of their information from the media. There was a lack of collaboration.

##### 4.2.1. 'Roadmap in case of deadly accidents'

We brought all the auxiliary services together to draw a 'Roadmap in case of deadly accidents'.

On one hand this guidebook serves as a support for the surviving relatives, covering all steps, from the reporting of the misfortune to the legal transfers at the notary.

On the other hand it is a document to work with for the different rescue services.

In recent times we have started an update of the roadmap taking into account the new international rules and methods in the rescue operations.

As a chaplain we have very important tasks, such as:

- communicate the misfortune of dead or missing persons to the concerned families;
- bringing the families together to pray in order to strengthen and support each other;
- be present to support them pastorally, day and night when necessary (especially when the ship and the crew stay missing)

- be present to the autopsies for the identification of the victim,

- organize an information meeting for the rescue services;

At long term missing of the victims we hold a national prayer service.

Supporting people in their mourning process is of utmost importance to discover the vigor of faith.

##### 4.2.2. Foundation of a national emergency fund for fishing families.

When fishermen stay missing, it's important to support the family socially and financially from the beginning. Together with the presidents of the fish auctions we have set up a

National Emergency Fund for the Belgian Fishery. The families can always get help from the fund to bridge the period between the administrative settlement and the start of the official



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social services of the community. Such a temporary support involves transport to the hospital in a foreign country, repatriation costs, costs of the funeral, clothing for crewmembers who survived a calamity, administrative regulations with the governments in foreign countries, etc. Every year we are supported by many authorities and by the ship owners who contribute by selling part of the catch.

#### 4.2.3. Fight against drugs

We hear the call in the first letter of Peter: *“Give a shepherd's care to the flock of God that is entrusted to you: watch over it, ... gladly, as God wants... because you are eager to do it... In the same way, young people must recognize the authority of the elders (1Peter 5,2.5).”*

Living and working at sea, away from home and friends, and so many other human factors, provoke discomfort and stress. Drink and drugs are temporary means to escape.

The question is how long they will last and how long they are able to ensure the safety of the ship and crew. Many young fishermen dramatically disappeared from the sector by drugs! (by deadly accidents) That's why our school started a campaign that we let in the hands of the students themselves, called: Clean ship! No shit! We've created a roadmap where the medical assistance is very important.

We do everything so that the fisherman can continue to sail during the treatment, because we don't have any qualified standby crew.

#### 4.2.4. 'Be vigilant' called the Lord: Fishermen fish safe!

'Be vigilant' called the Lord!

That applies not only to the Second Coming, but also to our mortality!

According to the “Work in Fishing Convention” of the International Labor Organization, we have a meticulous interview with the victim (-s).

The prevention officer investigates thoroughly each accident in all aspects: the causes and effects.

Through compulsory workshops for fishermen, all aspects of an incident are discussed, and it demonstrates how security can improve.

These safety workshops are successful, resulting in fewer accidents.

The result of the accumulated efforts is a safety manual called *'fishermen fish safe'*. Very useful in the maritime school and on board.

#### 4.2.5. Project Man overboard

“Be watchfull”, the Lord warns us several times. 80% of accidents at sea are due to an erroneous human action. Falling overboard is usually fatal for the victim. Undercooling is a killer. Death by undercooling is fast.

#### A moral call!

If we know that equipment, such as ‘Man over Board’ has been developed for each sailor to enable an alarm, to give a signal to aircrafts and the vessel itself, don't we have the moral duty to provide each individual sailor with this equipment?

I sincerely hope that all other countries will be able to follow this initiative. Europe is calling the member states to take initiatives and there is enough foreseen capital for it.

4.2.6. A new full social status for the Belgian fisherman to strengthen their pride.



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As a school headmaster and later as chaplain, I faced a lot of questions by the parents whose son wanted to become a fisherman: What will my son's position be, as a fisherman, on the social ladder? How much will he earn? What can he do if he is physically no longer able to fish? What will be his pension? What happens if he loses his life at sea and what assistance will his family get? In cooperation with the social partners, all those questions got an answer in a law 'Governing the Employment Contracts because of Ship service for the Sea Fishery'. The main issues are:

- Whoever can legally prove one hundred days of duty at sea each year, will be honored with the status of approved and qualified fisherman. This provides him many benefits and gifts him later a better pension.
- All Belgian qualified fishermen are rewarded with a share of total gross revenues, by the system: No catch, no pay. When they cannot fish (by weather conditions, storm, damage to the vessel, loss of nets, engine failure, low fish prices, and so on, they get a daily financial compensation, proportionate to the pay of a regular worker.
- A social agency checks the legitimacy and correctness of the "written" agreement (oral agreement are no longer sufficient), and timely payment of wages, hours worked, social security rules. And so on.
- The agreement is also a contract that insures against a fishing accident from departure until he comes home.
- The ship-owner must ensure that there is adequate protective clothing on board, such as gutter gloves, boots, Man Over Board -system, etc.
- In case the seaman deceases during the trip, the ship-owner has to pay the costs of transferring the remains. These costs are related to the transport and the administrative formalities.
- The wife or girlfriend of a dead victim gets paid a survival-bonus.
- In addition to the regular state pension and a supplementary pension, we build up a collective supplementary one and the accumulated sum is paid at the age of 60.

These are some projects that have been produced because of a real need.

To achieve such a social statute and to fulfill these and other projects, the golden rule for the chaplain is: maintain intensive contacts with several services, public institutions and policy-makers on an attitude of humility, patience and perseverance. Let the feathers in the cap of the decision makers who have the administrative and political power!!!

To end

*"...Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).*

*The warning that St. Paul addresses to himself rings in the Church's conscience as a call to walk 'all paths of evangelization', (...)also those that wind their way into public institutions."*(C.S.D.71)

One of those paths can be to maintain a sustainable pastoral care with a dynamic and creative presence in a network of services. We must make use of it! We cannot change the direction of the wind, but we can set our sails!

Distinguished audience, good friends in the AOS

We must always keep in mind that we all and the fishery families, as individuals and together, have got a divine mission.



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'We' must bring the Good News of Jesus as an instrument for harmony and happiness. Fishermen must rule and reign over the fish in the sea and convert it into good management and stewardship for bringing sustainable food to people. God does not give us orders that are not to be feasible! His orders includes a promise that the Lord himself will 'complete' this commission. Thank you very much for your attention.