

STELLA MARIS SEAFARERS CENTRE **CARING FOR SEAFARERS**



Stella Maris has been caring for seafarers for over a hundred years. It is an official missionary arm of the Catholic Church. Today, Stella Maris is the largest ship-visiting network in the world. In Melbourne, Stella Maris is situated at 600 Little Collins, where a 'home away from home atmosphere' is provided to all seafarers, regardless of race colour or creed. Volunteers and staff alike, are driven by a passion and commitment to care for and support all seafarers.

Australia is an island nation. We are totally dependent on seafarers to supply us with the 97% of all goods that come into our country every day. Seafarers are described as the lifeblood of our nation. To quote Pope Francis : without sailors the global economy would come to a standstill. Imagine, Myer, David Jones, JB HiFi or any other store you care to name, with no stock, nothing but empty shelves. This would be our reality if it were not for seafarers.

Many seafarers went to sea in the New Year of 2020 expecting to work their contract and then return home. Covid 19 changed all that. There were no crew changes and seafarers worked on what would be described as floating prisons. No port would allow seafarers to disembark. They truly were prisoners on their vessels.

The year 2020 presented a unique challenge to Stella Maris, i.e. to how best support seafarers. Our dedicated staff and volunteers, rose to the challenge, sometimes in most imaginative ways. Our pastoral care was delivered via the streaming of Mass, and continues from our Chapel every Sunday. The comfort this provides has been conveyed to us by the seafarers. One of our staff devised an electronic competition which was very popular. This initiative, among others, was important for the mental health of seafarers.

We also worked together with relevant authorities, eg a doctor and a pharmacist to provide seafarers with their medications, when they, otherwise, could not have obtained a script, much less have it filled.

A vast number of care packages were and are being distributed, containing donated goods from Rotary; monies from the International Transport Federation, were made available together with funds from the Seafarers Sunday collections. This enabled money for extras to be placed into the care packs. Each ship's crew that arrived in the port of Melbourne was given these packages. The kindness of people who baked biscuits and cakes was amazing. As were the people who knitted beanies. The seafarers were thrilled to receive these items. And went a long way to letting them know that, while they not permitted to access out city, they were not forgotten.

Because Seafarers have been unable to leave their ships, Stella Maris has been taking their orders and buying goods for them. Our staff have been very busy buying all sorts of items, including pizza and Maccas, and sourcing the best price possible for goods. They were then delivered to their Ships.

The International Transport Federation estimates that there are still 200,000 international seafarers forced to work on vessels beyond their contract, due to governments ongoing border and travel restrictions. Some countries have banned crew rotation, some have tight limits, a few are open, so a crisis continues.

Australia, USA, UK, Holland, and Denmark are vaccinating foreign seafarers. A global vaccine rollout is needed to stop a third wave crew crisis. Covid for some seafarers has affected their mental health to the point that they have suicided. In the Port of Melbourne in the last six months we have had one seafarer suicide.

Seafarers risk their lives daily on old ships, or space deprived new ships, some of inferior quality. Seafarers are vulnerable to the vagaries of the seas. When we look out at the bay and see the calm beautiful water it is hard to believe that this same sea can become treacherous.

Our Parish is a seaside Parish. In 1904 Father Alexander May began visiting ships that arrived in the Port of Melbourne. He was a curate at Sacred Heart Church and Father Kevin Quinlan, a former Parish priest at Sacred Heart Church was the first official Chaplain at Stella Maris.

When next you take a walk along the beach and you see the ships out there in the bay, please say a prayer for the seafarers working on those vessels.