

Stella Maris

Antwerp

Winter Edition 2026 | Bulletin No. 18



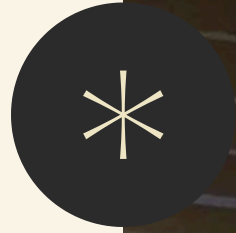
APOSTLESHIP OF THE SEA
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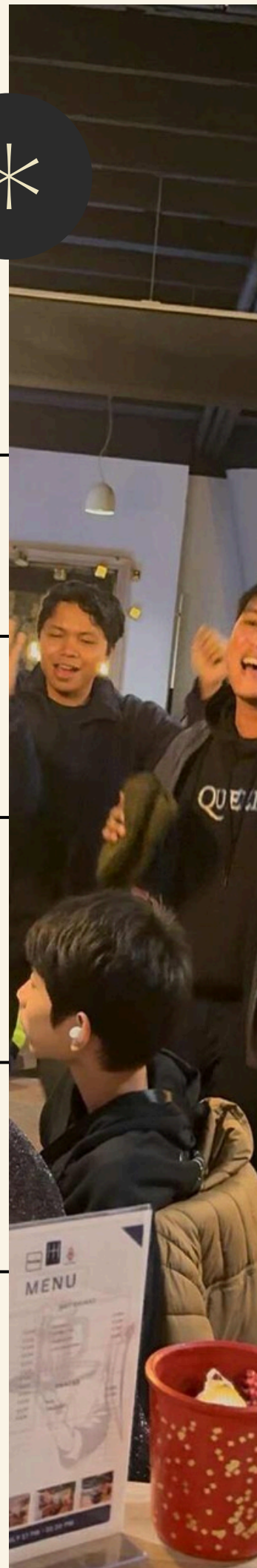
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WELCOME TO OUR WINTER EDITION



Dear Reader, Dear Sponsor,

As we begin a new year, the board of Stella Maris wishes you, your family and all your loved ones, a happy and prosperous New Year. Above all we wish you good health, the basis of all wellbeing, and a warm and welcoming environment in your families.

For our seafarers we wish them safe working conditions on board, a good team spirit, and of course good physical and mental health which is so important to continue in this branch. Indeed, a successful career at sea demands a warm welcome in the port.

Our world is changing rapidly and sometimes we fail to see the direction to which we are heading.

Rarely have there been more psychological problems and traumas in our society. Many are looking for support in a world that is turning increasingly wild and unpredictable.

Seafarers, although often less visible in today's society, are experiencing the same problems. They are at the heart of global trade but they are often forgotten in global strategies. Their well-being is crucial for all of us. Although in recent years a lot of progress has been made in the physical well-being of seafarers, the work of seamen's missions such as Stella Maris to ensure this warm welcome in the port remains necessary also in 2026. This warm welcome and signal of inclusion is the wish of all the volunteers, port chaplains and board members of our organisation in 2026. Happy New Year !

Capt. Jacques D'Havé
Editor-in-Chief
President, Stella Maris Antwerp

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“Sinterklaas” in the Port of Antwerp

By Fr. Edzel Cabañas, Port Chaplain, Stella Maris

If Sinterklaas were to ask our dear seafarers, “Have you been good/well behaved”, we think we know the answer.

As part of the longstanding tradition in Flanders, 6 December is always a special celebration for children, when a man dressed as Sinterklaas or Saint Nicholas together with Zwarte Piet (Sooty Pete) visit children and give them chocolates and different gifts. “Zijn jullie ook zoet geweest?” or “Have you been good/well behaved” is the question Sinterklaas usually asks children before handing over the gifts he prepared for them.

Children are very happy to receive these gifts from him and sing the song “Sinterklaas Kapoentje”. This is how it is traditionally done in Flanders, but we in Antwerp Seafarers’ Welfare celebrate it differently every year. Working together as a team, we prepare various gifts and chocolates, put them in bags and bring them to the port to deliver to seafarers in different areas of the Port of Antwerp. One of the team members will dress as Sinterklaas and one or two others as Zwarte Piet. It has always been a special activity that ASW organizes every year to bring joy, culture and tradition to the seafarers in the Port of Antwerp.



Sinterklaas interacting with seafarers on board

SINTERKLAAS & CHRISTMAS

Stella Maris, which plays an important role in the organization, always supports this activity by sponsoring the gifts that are distributed on board, and all Stella Maris chaplains and some volunteers are always present, either dressed as Sinterklaas or Zwarte Piet, or serving as drivers and photographers.

On 6 December 2026, this traditional “Sinterklaas” activity was once again a success thanks to great team effort, just as in previous years. Even though 6 December fell on a weekend, chaplains and volunteers from different missions gathered to bring gifts and joy to the seafarers.

Two groups, each with Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, moved through different areas of the Port of Antwerp and visited about ten ships with roughly 130–150 seafarers of different nationalities. Smiles and gladness lit up the seafarers’ faces as Sinterklaas, Zwarte Piet and their companions brought joy, gifts and a touch of Flemish tradition on board.

After every visit, gift-giving and short explanation, Seafarers

With this simple gesture of bringing Sinterklaas to the Port of Antwerp, we express our gratitude to our dear seafarers for the many sacrifices they make for the world.

would approach Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet to have their photos taken with them. As the seafarers were happy with our unique visit and the gifts we gave them, we, as chaplains and volunteers doing this kind of apostolate in the port, were also glad and grateful for this unique opportunity to be instruments of joy amidst their heavy work and sometimes difficult days.

If Sinterklaas were to ask our dear seafarers, “Zijn jullie ook zoet geweest?”, we think we know the answer.

With this simple gesture of bringing Sinterklaas to the Port of Antwerp, we express our gratitude to our dear seafarers for the many sacrifices they make for the world.



Beyond the Sinterklaas festivities, Stella Maris Antwerp marked December with a Christmas Eve ecumenical service on 24 December at 20:00, followed by a community gathering and dinner at the Antwerp Harbour Hotel



All Aboard Alliance 2026 – 2030 strategy

The All Aboard Alliance is a community of companies and organisations working together to put people at the heart of every voyage.

During the Global Maritime Forum held in October 2025 in Antwerp the All Aboard Alliance adopted a new strategy for 2026 – 2030. This strategy will provide a much-needed framework for the maritime industry to improve the quality of life of seafarers..

Launched 22 October at the Global Maritime Forum Summit 2025, the new strategy is built around four strategic goals for the industry: safe working conditions, improved physical and mental health, inclusion and diversity, and flexible and attractive careers.

These goals provide the framework for change and will guide the Alliance's actions in the years ahead. Global trade's long term resilience depends on it, as does the industry's ability to seize the opportunities of the energy transition, digitalisation and automation of maritime supply chains in the decades ahead.

Why should people be at the heart of the voyage ? Because those who ensure the continued operation of global trade deserve nothing less. If shipping is to thrive into the next decades it must take better care of the millions of seafarers who crew the world's fleet.



Port Chaplain June and Welfare Officer José accompanying seafarers at the Red Star Line Museum

SEAFARERS VISIT RED STAR LINE MUSEUM

A welcome break from the hard life at sea

By Rev. June Mark Yañez
Port Chaplain, Mission to Seafarers

On 23 April 2025, just after 17:30, the evening rhythm of the Port of Antwerp changed slightly for a handful of crews. Instead of staying on board as the workday wound down, seafarers from three different ships stepped into three mission vehicles that, for once, were not heading to a supermarket or a seamen's club, but to the Red Star Line Museum.

INITIATIVES: MUSEUM VISIT



Activities like these are modest, but they create lasting memories and leave a real mark on seafarers' lives

At terminal 700B, I arrived to collect Captain Warren and five of his crew from MV Phoenix.

Almost at the same time, Stella Maris Port Chaplain Jos was at EDR ship repair 403, gathering seven men from MV Rig Andromeda, while José, head of the International Seaman's House, picked up six crew from MV BBC Genoa, also at EDR. The three cars – from the German Seamen's Mission, Stella Maris and The Mission to Seafarers, all part of Antwerp Seafarers' Welfare (ASW) – merged into the evening traffic, carrying 18 people towards a museum that most of them had never heard of before arriving in Antwerp.

The city traffic did its best to delay them, but around 19:00 the little convoy turned into the Red Star Line Museum. Normally the doors are shut at that hour; this time, they opened especially for the seafarers. Museum researcher Aniek, who had helped initiate the visit, stood waiting with colleagues to welcome the group.

Before anyone saw an exhibition panel, there was soup, coffee and bread – a small, concrete sign that, this evening, the crews from India and the Philippines were not just passing through but were guests.

Soon they followed a professional guide into the museum's spaces. Ship models, historical artefacts and objects marked out a path through the stories of people who left their homes and crossed the sea in search of a better life. For seafarers from so-called "third countries", who regularly leave families and friends behind to support them through their work at sea, that theme was more than distant history. Yet, for one evening, they were able to walk through those stories calmly, as visitors with time to look and listen, instead of people hurrying between work, rest and the next watch.

Behind this simple-looking evening lay weeks of uncertainty and coordination. Together with fellow port chaplains and ship visitors, I had begun inviting crews days beforehand, never knowing exactly which ships would arrive when, or whether interested seafarers would be free from duties long enough to join.

After the first invitations came follow-up messages, checking who could really make it. On the day itself, shared use of cars and drivers through the cooperation of the missions and the International Seaman's House under ASW turned a good idea into a moving reality.

The visit was part of a broader pattern. In 2025, Antwerp Seafarers' Welfare organised three ship museum visits to the Red Star Line Museum, with participants from India, the Philippines, Russia, Ukraine and other countries. The very first spark had been lit when Aniek interviewed me. Conscious of ASW's aim to care for seafarers and aware of the pressure and stress on board, I used that conversation to ask whether the museum would consider opening its doors to seafarers as special guests. The museum agreed, and both sides have since been working towards a more formal agreement to continue this cooperation in 2026 and beyond.



INITIATIVES: MUSEUM VISIT

When the guided tour ended, the evening did not simply fade out. Around 21:30, the three drivers gathered their passengers again and headed to the ASW seamen's club at Noorderlaan 100. There, the seafarers were given more time, more treats and more chances to relax before being driven back to their ships at about 23:00. For many, it had been a rare pause in a demanding routine: a few hours ashore that were neither rushed shopping nor lonely waiting.

The next morning, 24 April 2025, at around 10:30, I climbed the gangway of MV Phoenix once more. This time, the conversation was not about problems or paperwork but about the previous evening. Speaking for his crew, Captain Warren repeated his thanks and described the museum visit

as an excellent and rare chance “to experience joy amidst the challenging work of seafaring.”

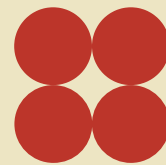
News of the initiative travelled further. Reverend Steve Morgan, Europe Region Director of The Mission to Seafarers and himself a former seafarer, heard about the Red Star Line visits and remembered being treated in a similar way decades earlier. His comment was simple: activities like these are modest, but they create lasting memories and leave a real mark on seafarers' lives. With the Red Star Line Museum ready to continue its collaboration with Antwerp Seafarers' Welfare, the story that began for me with a few cars leaving the port one April evening is set to continue, one small group of seafarers at a time.



For many, it had been a rare pause in a demanding routine: a few hours ashore that were neither rushed shopping nor lonely waiting.

SHIP ABANDONMENT ON THE RISE

By Jeroen Daem
Volunteer, Stella Maris Antwerp



Abandonment has quietly become one of the biggest scandals in shipping today: more ships, more crews, and more families are being left to fend for themselves when owners walk away from their responsibilities. What used to be seen as “rare” is now a regular feature of seafarer welfare reports and helpline statistics.

How big is the problem?

The joint IMO/ILO database has recorded more than 1,100 abandonment incidents since 2004, affecting over 16,000 seafarers. The real shock, however, comes in the last few years: 142 new cases were logged in 2023, then around 310 in 2024, the worst year on record. ITF calculates that at least 312 ships and 3,133 seafarers were abandoned in 2024 alone, almost double the previous year’s total.

And the curve is still climbing. By May 2025, 158 cases had already been reported, a one-third increase on the same period in 2024, involving more than 1,500 seafarers asking ITF for help with basic rights like food, water, wages and a ticket home.

What does abandonment look like on board?

Behind every number is a very ordinary, very concrete story. A ship sits at anchor or alongside, the owner stops paying wages and disappears, fuel runs low, food and fresh water are rationed, and crew are told to “stay on board and wait”. Sometimes port authorities or local charities bring supplies; sometimes they do not, and it is the seafarers who keep the lights on and the ship safe long after the company has given up on them.



Families at home often hear only fragments: “contract extended”, “problem with the company”, “still waiting for tickets”. Meanwhile, months of unpaid salary pile up, school fees are missed, loans are not paid, and people grow ashamed to explain what is happening.

The mental toll: more than money
Helplines report rising calls about abandonment, repatriation problems and money worries, very often mixed

Abandonment may look like a legal problem on paper, but on board it is first of all a human and spiritual crisis.

with anxiety, low mood and even suicidal thoughts.

In the first half of 2024 there was a marked increase in mental-health-related contacts, with seafarers describing isolation on board, fear of making mistakes and intense pressure from families who depend on their income. For many, the deepest wound is not just being unpaid, but feeling discarded: a sense that their work, their skills and even their lives are considered cheaper than a port bill or a scrap price.

Where does Stella Maris fit in?
International rules like the MLC financial security amendments are meant to prevent

abandonment and to guarantee repatriation and wages when it happens, but the statistics show that gaps and delays remain large. This is exactly the space where Stella Maris and sister organisations are quietly present: visiting ships that have been lying too long at anchor, listening to crews who do not know whom to trust, helping them contact unions, lawyers or the ITF, and sometimes simply bringing phone cards, groceries and the sacraments when everything else has failed.

Abandonment may look like a legal problem on paper, but on board it is first of all a human and spiritual crisis. Stella Maris cannot solve the global numbers, but it can help make sure that, for the crew on this forgotten ship in this port, someone still knows their names and has not walked away.



A message from **A 'SOCIAL CONSCIOUS' SEAPILOT**

By K.O.
Seapilot

I've been working for the Flemish pilotage service for 17 years now. Over the years, it became increasingly noticeable during work meetings with ports and other organisations : 'the ship' is always discussed like a pawn on a board game, but never the crew...

'The ship' is indeed just a steel structure in itself; but it is kept in motion by several hardworking people : the crew. These are men and women who allow themselves to be locked up for weeks or months to keep this 'thing' running day and night, without rest, far from home, and without much relaxation which increases efficiency.

And yet... As a (socially conscious) sea pilot, I often sense the atmosphere on board from the moment I'm on the bridge. This feeling is fuelled by several signals. One of them is the captain's attitude towards his crew and the interaction between officers and sailors, or rather, the gap between them...

A typical phenomenon are officers and captains who feel insecure in their work. They try to command authority from the crew instead of earning it. They will act more friendly towards a pilot, thinking we won't see it, but this is often misleading. As pilots, we quite often unwillingly follow a phone conversation between the captain and the shipping company. Sometimes this is accompanied by excessive submissive behaviour towards their employer. An unhappy

crew is what we often see in these cases.

Another sign is the bridge layout: a bridge covered with memos and warnings, as opposed to one where you can find a plant or a quip. A clear example of how the owner thinks about his crew is the entire ship's lay-out and accommodation or relaxation cabins.

Last but not least: shore leave!! For the crew, this means they can leave the steel island for a while and feel 'normal' among the people ashore. Sometimes this provides a greater energy boost than a power nap (knowing that chronic sleep deprivation is a constant element of stress for a seafarer).

Earlier this year, I attended a conference on seafarer well-



being with many attendees, managers and CEOs, fewer seafarers.

And although their promised plans sounded good (especially more internet), there was not a word about 'shore leave'... or more rest, or better food... It simply shouldn't be difficult or too expensive. Perhaps they simply weren't the right participants?

But back to the ship; where the captain is the link between the crew and the shipping company. As a good leader, he/she should take responsibility for the well-being of his/her crew, both on board and towards the shipping company, resulting in mutual respect.

Unfortunately, in this far-from-ideal world, as a pilot, I see a lot of disdain, from the shipping company towards the crew, from the officers towards the sailors. It can also be fuelled by racist prejudices.

But I'd like to end on a positive note. When I started sailing 28 years ago, there wasn't much publicity about seafarer welfare. Now, through social media, I see how many organizations like Stella Maris are putting their heart and soul into it. Like everything in shipping, it's slow, but I suspect/hope it's moving in the right direction.

PHOTO COLLAGE



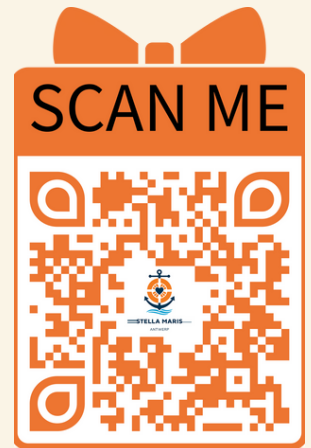
Christmas Eve 2025



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