

Stella Maris

Antwerp

Summer Edition 2026 | Bulletin No. 19



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BEYOND THE AGE OF ANXIETY



Dear Reader, Dear Sponsor,
Various studies show that many people, in these uncertain times, are searching for direction and certainty in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile and heading toward conflict and war. The geopolitical situation in the world has undeniably deteriorated in recent years. Wars are raging in numerous countries, and trusted institutions suddenly seem to be failing. For many, new developments such as artificial intelligence are not seen as progress but as opening dangerous prospects.

Against this bleak backdrop, Canada's Prime Minister, Mark Carney, recently delivered a remarkable speech at the World Economic Forum 2026. He quoted the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, who stated that the current "age of anxiety" is caused by "trying to do today's work with yesterday's tools." The answer cannot come from dismantling but from building and seeking new partnerships. A positive thought in a chaotic world.

In the same spirit, Pope Leo XIV spoke on the occasion of the Jubilee Year of St. Francis. The world in which Francis lived 800 years ago was also marked by conflict and war: disputes over money through dubious trade dealings, geopolitical conflicts (the Crusades), and conflicts between cities. As a young man, Francis fought in a war between Assisi and Perugia. During his imprisonment, he reflected on the meaning of all this. He resolutely chose different values and became the apostle of peace and nature. He chose Brother Sun and Sister Moon.

In this issue, we follow in the footsteps of Francis, traveling from Florence via La Verna to Assisi. We follow our brother both on land and at sea. We attempt to translate the values of Francis into contemporary values and to open new positive alliances and perspectives. Only a sailor knows that his destination sometimes lies beyond the horizon. Stella Maris joins this journey and invites you to take part.

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

The current "age of anxiety" is caused by "trying to do today's work with yesterday's tools." The answer cannot come from dismantling but from building and seeking new partnerships.





Finding Purpose in Europe's Busiest Port

Antwerp attracted him precisely because it is one of Europe's largest ports, a crossroads of cultures, languages, and cargoes

Finn left the smallest German state to find one of the world's biggest harbours—and in Antwerp's maze of docks and container terminals, the young volunteer has discovered a vocation of quiet, steadfast presence for people who are almost always passing through.

From Saarland to the Scheldt

Finn grew up in Saarland, the tiny federal state in southwest Germany near the French border, far from any coastline or major port. Yet since August 2025, he has been living in Antwerp,

completing a Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr (voluntary social year) with the German Seamen's Mission and working closely with the Catholic seafarers' ministry Stella Maris.

Antwerp attracted him precisely because it is one of Europe's largest ports, a crossroads of cultures, languages, and cargoes where container cranes frame a skyline as international as any airport departure board. In this setting, he has found a place where practical social work, global shipping, and a living Catholic faith converge.

A Day Among Ships and Stories

A typical day for Finn begins at nine in the morning at the Seafarers' Centre office, where he tends the small shop and



Finn Christian Reisel, volunteer, DSM

checks the lists of incoming vessels across the port. Once briefed, he heads out to the terminals for ship visits, stepping across gangways into self-contained floating worlds that might only be in Antwerp for a few hours.

On board, his work looks straightforward at first glance but carries real weight for the crews he meets: he informs them about the Centre, encourages them to take shore leave, and listens. Many seafarers seize the chance to ride the evening bus service into town, grateful for a few hours in a warm, welcoming place where they can relax, meet other mariners, and use free Wi-Fi to video call their families. Others stay on board but open up in conversation, sharing worries about contracts, children growing up far away, or the strain of months at sea. For Finn, the heart of the job is being a consistent, trustworthy presence in a world defined by constant movement.

A "Home Away from Home" in Grief

Every so often, a single encounter crystallises what the Mission means to those who sail in and out of Antwerp. Finn recalls a Filipino seafarer whose infant son had just died back home; the man was still thousands of kilometres away, locked into his ship's schedule and unable to grieve with his family in person.

Together with a colleague, Finn helped arrange an urgent money transfer so the seafarer could pay hospital bills and provided a SIM card so he could contact his loved ones immediately. They sat with him, listened to him, prayed with him, and gave him a Bible bearing a personal handwritten message—small gestures that, for a man trapped between ocean and obligation, made the ship feel a little more like a chapel and the port a little more like home.

Faith at the Water's Edge

Finn's decision to serve with the German Seamen's Mission grows

directly out of his Catholic faith and his discovery of the port's network of seafarers' missions. Through joint activities and events organised by the various missions in Antwerp, including Stella Maris, he came to know their work and was drawn in particular to the way they unite practical welfare with a clear spiritual mission.

In Antwerp, the Centre hosts Mass for seafarers every Sunday, offering a quiet space to pray, reflect, and receive the sacraments while far from home. On major Christian feasts, these celebrations take on added weight, recreating some of the atmosphere of a parish community for crews who may spend Christmas or Easter surrounded by steel decks instead of family tables. The Philippines—today's largest seafaring nation—is deeply Catholic, and shared devotion often opens doors quickly; many Filipino crew members recognise something familiar in the chaplain's stole or the rosary in a visitor's pocket.



Yet Finn is careful to note that the Mission is not only for Catholics. He has seen how seafarers of other Christian traditions and other religions, or of no religion at all, appreciate simple human contact, a listening ear, and the assurance that someone in port cares about their welfare. Values like hospitality, openness, and respect form a common language that transcends confessional boundaries even as his own service is shaped by passages such as Hebrews 13:2: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Challenges of a Globalised Sea

The work is rewarding, but Finn does not romanticise life in the maritime world. Language remains a daily challenge: even though he speaks four languages, many seafarers come from countries whose languages he does not know, and he often relies on very simple English, gestures, and patience.

Beneath the surface, there are darker currents. Demanding working conditions, long contracts, and isolation can lead to serious incidents on board, from work accidents to acute psychological crises and, tragically, even suicide. When such emergencies arise, the Mission relies on its trained port chaplains—specialists equipped to respond pastorally and practically to traumatic situations.

At the structural level, Finn sees modern shipping tightening the screws on seafarers' lives. Increasing automation, smaller crews, shorter port stays, stricter port regulations, and ongoing geopolitical conflicts all make it harder for crew members to leave the ship, visit a centre, or simply switch off for a few hours. In some cases, tensions in regions like the Middle East can turn a routine voyage into a high-stress passage, especially for crews on tankers whose routes pass through contested waters.

A Quiet School of Encounter

Despite the pressures, Finn speaks of his year in Antwerp as a school in human encounter. Living and working in this maritime crossroads has exposed him to cultures from East Asia to Eastern Europe, taught him to approach strangers with curiosity rather than fear, and strengthened his social skills in settings where there is rarely a shared mother tongue.

He has come to see ship visiting as a small but powerful instrument of interreligious dialogue and international understanding. Simple conversations on a ship's deck or in the Centre's common room can reveal how much people share across national, religious, and cultural divides. These experiences have deepened his faith, not as an abstract set of doctrines but as a lived commitment to hospitality and compassion for those who are often invisible to the city whose economy they sustain.

An Ecumenical Port, a Shared Mission

Finn did not grow up sailing; being raised far from the coast meant that maritime life remained mostly an imagined horizon. In Antwerp, however, working among ships and crews has given him a tangible connection to the sea and to those who cross it for a living.

He also moves in an ecumenical landscape. The German Seamen's Mission collaborates closely with other Christian organisations such as the Mission to Seafarers, Stella Maris, and the International Seamen's House Antwerp, forming a network of welfare providers that together offer spiritual and practical support. The port community has come to appreciate that their work is not an optional extra but a contribution to morale, safety, and efficiency on board; happier, better-supported crews tend to work more safely and cohesively.

Still, Finn is aware that welfare organisations depend on sponsors and often fade into the background when economic conditions tighten.

Misconceptions persist, including the idea that highly skilled seafarers do not need external support, a view that overlooks the particular burdens of isolation, long family separations, and the inherent risks of working at sea.

Looking Ahead: More Agile, More Visible

For Finn, the future of maritime ministry in Antwerp lies in becoming even more agile and more visible. As port calls shorten and shore leave shrinks, the missions must continue shifting from a model that waits for seafarers to visit the Centre to one that meets crews where they are, on board and on tight schedules.

He believes that parishes, youth groups, and other church communities can play a greater role by learning about seafarers' lives and volunteering their time and talents. With more volunteers, the ministry can expand its reach across the vast port, ensuring that more crews receive not only practical assistance but also the simple reassurance that someone in this city knows they exist.

Above all, Finn wants readers to grasp how central seafarers are to daily life on land. In a globalised economy, they move the goods that keep shops stocked and industries running, yet their own dignity and well-being are often overlooked. Maritime ministry, he insists, offers them a safe, welcoming place and a human face in ports around the world—and in that work of quiet hospitality, he has found not just a volunteer gig, but a calling.



A friendly darts competition for seafarers, organized under a special initiative by Finn



EASTER VIGIL — 4 APRIL 2026

Traditionally, the seafarers' Easter celebration is an ecumenical service. As every year, it took place at the Antwerp Harbour Hotel, the home base of the various seafarers' missions in the port. The celebration was led by Father Kiran Joy, Chief Chaplain of Apostolatus Maris, together with his fellow chaplains. Attendance was slightly lower than in other years, as fewer ships were in port. Nevertheless, around sixty seafarers were brought by bus from across the port to the Antwerp Harbour Hotel. They were welcomed by an equal number of members of the Filipino community. Together, they attended the solemn Mass.

For seafarers, this is a unique opportunity to reflect in peace and serenity and to celebrate Easter and the Resurrection of Christ.

Equally traditional is the convivial gathering afterward, organized by the Filipino community. With at least 130 participants, it became an unforgettable karaoke evening. Karaoke is always a success among Filipinos, and everyone present joined in enthusiastically. Afterwards, they were treated to Easter eggs and a buffet of vegetarian spring rolls, chicken, and noodles.

Because the Easter candle is lit and the water is blessed during the service, all attendees also received a small bottle of holy water as a keepsake upon departure.

By Tony Vuylsteke
Stella Maris Antwerp



PORT CHAPLAINS TURN IT UP

MEET THE BAND BRINGING LIVE MUSIC TO ANTWERP'S SEAFARERS

On a chilly Tuesday in January 2025, a simple announcement at the Antwerp Seafarers Welfare Centre sparked something unexpected: the beginning of a chaplains' band.

Stella Maris had just installed a new sound system. For chaplains Fr. June and Fr. Kiran—both musicians at heart—it felt like more than just a technical upgrade.

It felt like the right moment. For years, each had been involved in music in different ways, quietly carrying the same thought: what if we could do something together for seafarers?

Then Fr. Edzel entered the picture, bringing with him a remarkable voice and a natural love for performance. His arrival gave the idea new energy and confidence. Suddenly, what had been a passing thought began to feel possible.

INITIATIVES: THE CHAPLAINS BAND



One idea led to another, and before long, a plan took shape: why not organise a live music night for Valentine's Day? The response from colleagues was immediate and enthusiastic.

At the same time, staff at the Seafarers' Centre were sensing a need—nothing dramatic, just a quiet awareness that crews were looking for something more: moments of joy, connection, and life that could lift spirits and make the centre feel even more like a home away from home.

The new sound system didn't just improve the space—it ignited a shared passion.

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A BAND IS BORN

The first rehearsal took place on 24 January 2025, with chaplains sneaking practice time between port visits and pastoral calls. Less than a month later, on 14 February, the newly formed group played its first live set for seafarers – and the room lit up.

Since then, they have played several more times at the Antwerp Seafarers Welfare Centre, with another performance planned for early June and a goal of three to four gigs a year. Today, the band is a joyful collaboration between the chaplains of Stella Maris and the Mission to Seafarers at the Antwerp Seafarers Welfare Centre, bringing together clergy and parish volunteers from different churches and traditions. It is ecumenism with a beat: guitars, keyboards, and microphones shared between Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants, and lay friends united by a simple desire to serve seafarers through music.

MEET THE MUSICIANS

The line-up is as international as the crews who pass through the port. From Stella Maris, chaplains Fr. Kiran Joy OP from India and Fr. Edzel Cabañas from the Philippines bring energy, humour, and a love of performance. They are joined by Mission to Seafarers chaplain Fr. June Mark, also from the Philippines, who has been playing guitar since his parish youth days and has written songs since he was fourteen.

Nigerian priest Fr. Moses CSSP adds rhythm to the mix, while Br. Wilson from the Antwerp

International Protestant Church holds down the bass lines. Around them stands the vital parish/friend circle musicians: Anna, Pearl and Sangeeth from India and Florizel from the Philippines, each bringing their own flavour, style, and encouragement. Together, they are quick to insist that they are not professionals, just “music lovers” who want to grow, improve, and put their talents at the service of others. Band rehearsals are a blend of serious practice, shared prayer, and the kind of laughter that only happens when someone misses a cue or accidentally starts in the wrong key.

THE SOUNDTRACK OF SEAFARERS' LIVES

Musically, the group travels light but wide. Their set lists are built around themes: love songs for Valentine's Day, nostalgic tunes for farewell parties, and songs about the sea and home for Seafarers' Month. Pop, country, and slow rock sit alongside Tagalog ballads, Bollywood hits for Indian crew members, and faith-based songs that speak gently of hope, courage, and God's presence in the middle of long voyages.

Alongside well-known covers, the chaplains are beginning to write their own material. One original, “King and Queen of

MINISTRY WITH A BACKBEAT

If you ask the chaplains why they invest precious free hours in band practice, the answer comes quickly: music is ministry. Port chaplaincy – on top of parish and community work – can drain body and soul, but music has a way of giving energy back. Playing together relaxes and refreshes them, recharging the mind, body, and spirit so that they can keep serving others.

For seafarers, the impact is just as real. Life at sea can be lonely and mentally taxing, and live music on shore is a rare treat. A night at the chaplains' concert offers more than entertainment: it creates a space where crew members can laugh, sing along, and sometimes even take the microphone themselves. In those moments, stress eases, confidence returns, and seafarers feel a little closer to the people they love far away.

In the warm light of the Seafarers Centre, songs become a bridge – between cultures, between churches, and between the shore and the sea.

The band's performances add an extra layer of hospitality to the work of Stella Maris and the Antwerp Seafarers Welfare Centre, turning an already welcoming place into something that feels like a family living room with amplifiers.

LOOKING AHEAD

The chaplains' band is still young, and they know there is room to grow. They dream of recording their original songs once they have enough material and are actively hoping to welcome more volunteers – especially an electric guitarist – to enrich their sound.

In the meantime, they keep doing what they do best: showing up, plugging in, and playing for the people who keep the world's trade moving. Somewhere between the verses and the guitar solos, seafarers discover that their chaplains are not only there to listen and pray, but also to sing them home, one chorus at a time.

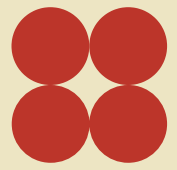
By Jeroen Daem
Volunteer, Stella Maris



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THE VIA FRANCISCANA OR VIA DI SAN FRANCESCO

By Tony Vuylsteke
Stella Maris Antwerp



The Camino is well signposted and heavily traveled by thousands of pilgrims, with numerous accommodation options along the way. None of this applies to the Via di San Francesco.

The Via Franciscana or Via di San Francesco

Since the Middle Ages, there have been three major Christian pilgrimage destinations: Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela, and Rome. The Via di San Francesco is a pilgrimage route along which pilgrims walk in the footsteps of Francis.

Along the way, one passes places and monuments associated with St. Francis. Each year, many pilgrims and hikers from all over the world undertake this journey through Tuscany and Umbria, crossing forests, passing monasteries, traversing mountains, and moving through medieval towns and villages.

This route follows the footsteps of Francis and should not be confused with the Via Francigena, another pilgrimage route from Canterbury that runs further west via Lucca and Siena to Rome.

We already had some experience with the Camino to Santiago de Compostela and assumed this would be a similar experience. Not at all. The Camino is well signposted and heavily traveled by thousands of pilgrims, with numerous accommodation options along the way. None of this applies to the Via di San Francesco. Finding suitable accommodation is already a challenge before you even set out. Despite all preparation and GPS tools, we often struggled to stay on the path. Sometimes the path was overgrown, forcing us to retrace our steps, but with determination we continued to follow Francis's "Tau."



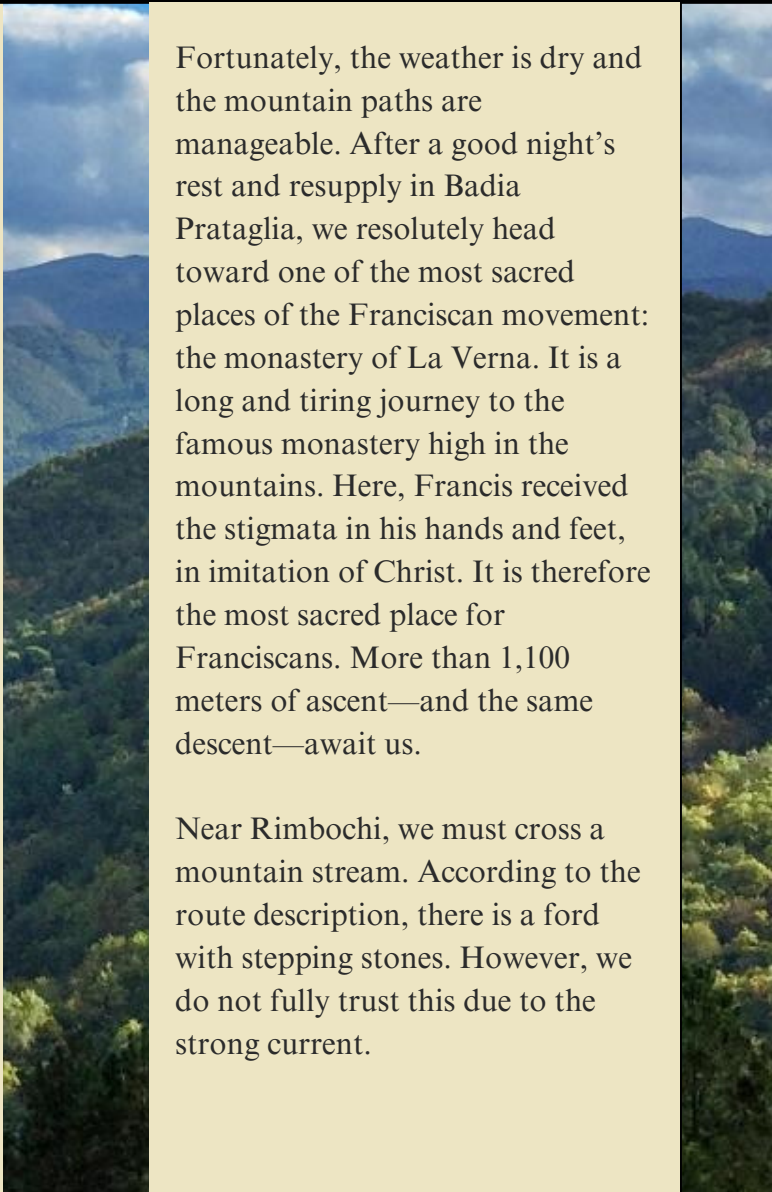
The Tau is the nineteenth letter of the Greek alphabet and also a scientific symbol. For Francis, however, it held special significance because of its resemblance to the cross. It played an important role in his life and actions and it remains a symbol of the Franciscan movement. On our journey, it served as a signpost guiding us to Assisi over mountains and valleys. Tuscany and especially Umbria are known for their mountainous terrain and rugged nature. The monasteries visited by Francis are often located on mountain tops.

Near Rimbochi, we must cross a mountain stream. According to the route description, there is a ford with stepping stones. However, we do not fully trust this due to the strong current.



We begin our journey in Florence, the city of the Medici. After a brief immersion in Renaissance culture, we start at Santa Croce, the great Franciscan church in Florence. There is much to see in this Gothic church, including the tombs of Michelangelo, Dante, and Galileo, and beautiful frescoes by Giotto depicting the life of Francis. But the challenge awaits. We gladly leave behind the crowds and tourists and head toward the Passo della Consuma (1069 m), the first real Apennine pass we must cross. Until now, we have walked through the rolling fields and vineyards of Tuscany.

From the pass, we continue through forests toward Stia, a small town with a few good hotels. After Stia, we enter the pristine Casentino National Park, one of the largest forest areas in Europe.



Fortunately, the weather is dry and the mountain paths are manageable. After a good night's rest and resupply in Badia Prataglia, we resolutely head toward one of the most sacred places of the Franciscan movement: the monastery of La Verna. It is a long and tiring journey to the famous monastery high in the mountains. Here, Francis received the stigmata in his hands and feet, in imitation of Christ. It is therefore the most sacred place for Franciscans. More than 1,100 meters of ascent—and the same descent—await us.

Near Rimbochi, we must cross a mountain stream. According to the route description, there is a ford with stepping stones. However, we do not fully trust this due to the strong current.



Staying at the monastery of La Verna is an experience in itself. If you stay more than one night, you are given a simple but comfortable cell. The next day, you can visit the monastery and the Basilica Maggiore, attend services, and join the daily procession in the Corridoio delle Stimate.

On the map, we see that a small bridge lies just over a kilometer further, and we choose this detour rather than risk getting soaked.

The route continues along a steep ridge and through a forest, the Foreste Sacre, where many Franciscans have meditated over the centuries.

For us, however, there is no time for meditation—the road is still long, and we hope to reach the monastery of La Verna in time.

We have planned a rest day there, which we will certainly need!

After a steep and exhausting climb that seems endless—and even a fall—the monastery of La Verna suddenly appears on a sheer cliff face. One final effort. The gate appears to be permanently closed, but via a small staircase we climb over the enclosure and reach the main entrance of the monastery complex, where we present ourselves at the guesthouse for a two-night stay.

Staying at the monastery of La Verna is an experience in itself. If you stay more than one night, you are given a simple but comfortable cell. The next day, you can visit the monastery and the Basilica Maggiore, attend services, and join the daily procession in the Corridoio delle Stimate. The many frescoes in this corridor depict the life of the saint. Numerous relics also refer to the man who renounced all luxury and became the patron saint of Italy and of the ecological movement.

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. The many frescoes in this corridor depict the life of the saint. Numerous relics also refer to the man who renounced all luxury and became the patron saint of Italy and of the ecological movement.



It is a special experience to be among Franciscans and pilgrims from all over the world. I meet a woman who left on foot from Brasschaat more than three months ago and is now sitting at our table. Her journey will take her further to Rome. Compared to hers, our journey feels like a walk in the park. That evening, the sunset from the terrace is particularly impressive, with views over the vast forests, followed by a night of almost hazy silence. One cannot come closer to the “apostle of peace.”

(Continued in the next edition: The Journey to Assisi)

PHOTO COLLAGE



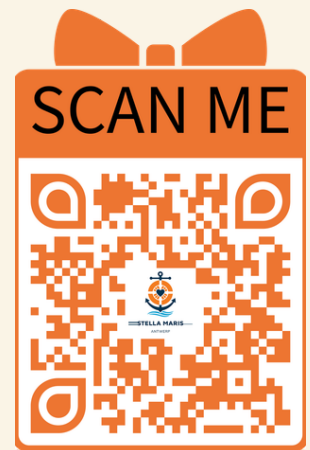
The Chaplain's Band in Action



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