

# Occupational health of seamen: what can *Laborem Exercens* say to us 40 years later?

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Forty years ago, Pope John Paul II published a social encyclical about work, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work, 1981) [1]. While the “sea” is only mentioned twice, as a natural resource, and the term “seamen” does not appear, can the encyclical reveal something to us about maritime health or work health of seamen today without there being any question of Catholic spirituality [2]?

The encyclical was written in a particular historical context. The Polish Pope knew about the social movements in his home country. The magisterium of the Church was increasingly aware of globalisation. If we look at *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II develops a new vision of work, honouring the dignity of work itself. He distinguishes between objective work, namely the technical part of the tasks, and subjective work. Work is then seen as a focal point for the development of the person as such. For seamen, we can take the example of Peplińska et al. [3] who have shown that seafarers with good marital relations have a lower level of stress. The perception of his role for the good of society, in this case his family, gives meaning to work. Subjective work according to John Paul II is a means of developing human capacities for oneself and for society.

But the encyclical also spoke of another dimension of work. Alongside the direct employer, namely the person with whom you sign a contract, there are one or more indirect employers: company, law, states etc. The problem of the indirect employer is particularly acute for the health of seafarers. The majority of these are employed in countries other than their own; they sail under foreign flags. The sailors, who connect the land by the seas, crystallise the divergent logics of labour rights, trade law, and human

rights according to their country of birth, their flag country and their navigation countries.

The health of seafarers has always been a global issue. Their internationality is an integral part of their profession which calls them to go beyond borders. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, maritime law and international law allow a dialogue and a step back on these questions [4]. John Paul II shed light on the human stake of respect for the dignity of each person, allowing them to work for the common good, in particular that of those close to them. The encyclical of John Paul II reminds us here of a major issue for the occupational health; that we can extrapolate for seamen. Far from their relatives, often in crews of multiple nationalities, some can feel alone, no longer perceiving the meaning of their work, as Sekhon and Srivastava showed [5].

However, seamen transport 90% of world trade [6]. They thus cooperate for the common good and for the development of society and international cooperation. And one can imagine that with the fight against global warming, maritime trade is developing even more [7]. How then to promote, for the years to come, a work organization of seafarers that promotes the subjective meaning of work, attachment to others and awareness of their role in the development of common good?

**Conflict of interest:** None declared

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