

ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

The Priests of the Sea in the Late Francoist Period and the Political Transition: Their Participation in the Conflicts in the Fishing Sector on the Coast of Huelva

Los curas del mar en el tardofranquismo y la transición política: su participación en los conflictos del sector pesquero en la costa de Huelva

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Received/Recibido: 19/5/2023

Accepted/Aceptado: 31/7/2023



ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of a group of priests affiliated with the Apostleship of the Sea in Huelva during the late Francoist era and the transition period, focusing on their involvement in the struggle for democracy and their impact on the political and trade union awareness of maritime workers along the coast of Huelva. Utilising a combination of ethnographic and historiographical methodologies, including interviews, life histories, and archival research, we explore how these priests both witnessed and actively participated in the trade union and democratic movements within one of Spain's most impoverished regions. Their advocacy for improved living conditions and their defence of the class interests of sailors and fishermen exemplified their commitment to living out the Gospel message within a divided Church, while also challenging the political and union structures of the Francoist regime.

KEYWORDS: Apostleship of the Sea; Stella Maris; Huelva; late Francoist period; the political transition.

HOW TO REFERENCE: Hurtado Sánchez, J. y Mancha Castro, J. C. (2024). Los curas del mar en el tardofranquismo y la transición política: su participación en los conflictos del sector pesquero en la costa de Huelva. *Revista Centra de Ciencias Sociales*, 3(1), 11–28. <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.67>.

The Spanish (original) version can be read at <https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.67>

RESUMEN

Este artículo se aproxima al papel desempeñado por un grupo de curas vinculados al Apostolado del Mar de Huelva en el proceso de cambio político durante el tardofranquismo y la transición, sus acciones de lucha por la democracia y su influencia en la concienciación política y sindical de los trabajadores del mar en la costa onubense. Hilvanando métodos y técnicas etnográficas e historiográficas como las entrevistas, la historia de vida y la labor de documentación archivística, analizamos cómo un grupo de sacerdotes fueron testigos y protagonistas de la lucha sindical y por la democracia en una de las zonas más empobrecidas del Estado español. Su lucha por las condiciones de vida digna y la defensa de los intereses de clase de marineros y pescadores fue su manera de vivir el mensaje evangélico en el seno de una Iglesia dividida y su forma de enfrentar las estructuras políticas y sindicales del régimen franquista.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Apostolado del Mar; Stella Maris; Huelva; tardofranquismo; transición política.

1. Introduction

In 1953, the current diocese of Huelva attained autonomy from the archdiocese of Seville, despite the opposition of Cardinal Pedro Segura, a prelate representing the integrist faction of the Spanish episcopate, which dated back to 1937 (Hurtado, 2006, pp. 38–43). Pedro Cantero Cuadrado assumed the role of its first bishop through a papal bull on 22 October 1953, officially taking office on 14 March 1954 (Carrasco, 2002; Vergara, 2004). Like Segura, Cantero aligned himself with the reactionary and traditionalist sector of the Spanish clergy (Mancha, 2020, p. 610) and exerted significant influence in the political arena during the dictatorship (Casanova, 2005; Casanova and Gil, 2009, p. 249). From 1954 to 1964, Cantero spearheaded the administrative and infrastructural development of the diocese of Huelva. Confronted with a shortage of priests willing to join the new diocese, he contacted other Spanish dioceses to request priests capable of fulfilling pastoral and parish responsibilities, as well as serving as educators at the seminary. Among those who responded was Ignacio Palacios Esteban, whose involvement with the Apostleship of the Sea and Stella Maris significantly impacted the Catholic Church's engagement in Huelva's fishing industry and shaped political awareness among seafaring individuals.

The Apostleship of the Sea is an international ecclesiastical organisation, catered to sailors, particularly merchant mariners docking at major global ports, who were able to access hospitality at Stella Maris centres affiliated with the organisation (Palacios, 2009). This initiative, initially pioneered by Anglicans and Protestants in the mid-19th century, was later adopted by the Catholic Church, establishing the first Stella Maris centre in 1921 at the port of Glasgow. In Spain, Stella Maris emerged in Barcelona in 1927, followed swiftly by Bilbao. Huelva's centre, initiated by Cantero Cuadrado on 22 August 1954, was inaugurated by Navy Minister Pedro Nieto Antúnez on 14 January 1962. Occupying the former Seamen's Institute premises, handed over by the Spanish Riotinto Mining Company, the centre featured amenities such as a chapel, guest accommodation for relatives, a cafeteria, recreational and conference facilities, a library, a television room, a bazaar and maritime social welfare services. Furthermore,

the project included the establishment of a nautical-fishing vocational training school under ecclesiastical auspices, provision of housing for fishermen and the creation of sports facilities (ABC, 14/1/1962, p. 27). The objective was to establish a seafarer's residence without differentiating between the merchant navy and the fishing fleet.

This article examines the role played by the priests of the Apostleship of the Sea in Huelva in the struggle for democracy and the political and trade union consciousness of sailors and fishermen between 1962 and 1983. In connection with Torres' research (2017), this article initiates a broader line of investigation into worker priests in Andalusian dioceses during the late Francoist period and the political transition. Following the methodological principles of ethnohistory, we combine methods and research techniques typical of social anthropology and contemporary history. The central focus of the analysis is a key informant, Ignacio Palacios, whose life story has been constructed from various interviews and testimonies given between 2015 and 2016. This was supplemented by the discourse emerging from seven ethnographic interviews with other priests and collaborators who, like Palacios, were prominent figures in the political changes along the coast of Huelva during late Francoism and the transition. Additionally, the work of archival, press and bibliographic documentation, particularly from the magazine *El Camarón*, has also been crucial for the historical analysis of the subject under investigation.

2. The dynamic priest of the Apostleship of the Sea and his team in Huelva

Ignacio Palacios was born in Burgos on 1 April 1938. He studied at the Piarist school in Santander and, at the age of eleven, entered the Jesuit minor seminary in Comillas (Cantabria), where he focused on Humanities. He pursued degrees in philosophy and theology at Comillas Pontifical University, later earning a degree in philosophy and letters from the University of Seville. At the age of nineteen, he discovered his fundamental concern: the challenges faced by seafarers (Palacios, 2013). Palacios, a member of the diocese of Santander, responded to the call for priests made by Cantero Cuadrado through the national leadership of the Apostleship of the Sea, becoming part of the diocese of Huelva with the aim of serving seafaring communities.

In 1962, upon his ordination to the priesthood, he relocated to Huelva as a professor of ecclesiology at the major seminary and assumed the role of diocesan delegate of the Apostleship of the Sea. He actively participated in national and international meetings of this institution, engaging in discussions on experiences at other ports and establishing collaborations with the chaplains of the fishing port of Concarneau (Brittany) and the merchant port of Birkenhead (Liverpool). Similarly to his colleagues, he also served as chaplain during different periods, encountering moments of great hardship, such as the retrieval of the deceased at sea and the subsequent delivery of their bodies to their families (Palacios, 2017). From 1962 until the early eighties, a group of priests, supported by religious sisters and laypeople, worked in the diocesan Apostleship of the Sea under Palacios' leadership, who noted that "they possessed extensive knowledge of the fishing sector and the maritime world, along with a strong sense of vocation" (2017, p. 549).

2.1. José López Boza

José López Boza was the first to join the group in 1965. Born on 14 February 1940 in Encinasola (Huelva), he entered the minor seminary of Sanlúcar de Barrameda at the age of eleven, completing the first four years of his humanities studies there; the fifth year was undertaken in Huelva, marking the opening of the seminary in the new diocese. He studied philosophy in Seville and theology at the Comillas Pontifical University, where he crossed paths with Palacios, who was a year ahead. He was ordained as a priest there in 1963.

My first posting as a priest in the diocese of Huelva was in the parish of Cumbres de San Bartolomé, a mountain town. I maintained the desire to work with seafaring communities and repeatedly requested a transfer to Huelva, which was granted in 1966. I served as a chaplain—a requisite for obtaining permission from naval authorities—aboard various vessels, including merchant ships, coastal fishing boats, deep-sea vessels and freezer trawlers engaged in extended campaigns across fishing grounds off the coast of West Africa (Mauritania, Senegal, Angola). These experiences were reflected in the pages of *El Camarón*, a cyclostyle publication distributed to crews enduring lengthy stretches at sea (López. Interview, 8/3/2016).

José López Boza was both the manager and editor of *El Camarón*, a magazine published by the Apostleship of the Sea with limited financial and technical resources. The publication highlighted significant events in the fishing sector and exposed the poor working and living conditions experienced by sailors. Alongside Palacios, he accompanied the Bishop of Huelva, José María García Lahiguera (1964–1969), who was appointed as promoter of the Apostleship of the Sea in 1968, on a voyage to the port of Dakar (Senegal) aboard the refrigerated cargo ship *Sierra Espuña* in February of that year, aiming to gain first-hand insight into the lives of sailors from Huelva. In 1974, he relocated to Madrid, where he contributed to various print media outlets. He later secularised, earned a degree in communication sciences, and joined public service broadcaster Radio Nacional de España, where he worked until his retirement in 2005.

2.2. Urbano Vélaz Arrizabaleta

Urbano Vélaz Arrizabaleta, born in Barbarín (Navarre) in 1932, entered the seminary of the Vincentian fathers in Pamplona. After being ordained as a priest and serving in various locations, he settled in Huelva in the late sixties. He held positions as coadjutor of Ayamonte and later as parish priest of the fishing neighbourhoods of Isla Canela and Punta del Moral, where he actively promoted grassroots movements. Devoted to the Apostleship of the Sea, as a member of Palacios' team, Vélaz Arrizabaleta provided assistance from the reception centre at the Anglican Church in Walvis Bay (present-day Namibia) to over three thousand fishermen from the hake fleet fishing in South African waters. However, his strong advocacy for sailors led the racist authorities to refuse to renew his visa in 1974 on the pretext that “he allowed Spanish sailors to dance with native black women” (Palacios. Life story, 2015/2016).

After seeking secularisation, Vélaz Arrizabaleta continued his work as an English teacher and educator at the Nautical–Fishing School, which he co-founded and promoted with Palacios. He was also politically active and ran in the municipal elections of 1991 as part of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) candidacy in Ayamonte led by Isaías Pérez Saldaña, a former seminarian and teacher. He was elected to the town council on 13 February 1992 after the resignation of a socialist councillor, assuming the role of citizen participation overseer. He retained his councillor position in the 1995 elections. After seven years of engagement in municipal politics, he declined to stand as a candidate in the 1999 elections and passed away on 4 September 2001.

2.3. Carlos Acitores Balbás

Carlos Acitores Balbás was born in Torquemada (Palencia) on 7 January 1942. At the age of thirteen, he entered the seminary of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) in Villava (Navarre). After studying humanities and philosophy, he earned a degree in theology from the Dominican Faculty of San Esteban in Salamanca. Ordained as a priest in 1968, he spent a year in the parish of Atxuri (Bilbao) before moving to London, where he served as a chaplain at Stella Maris in the port of London for almost a year. Upon returning to Spain, he was assigned to Madrid and then to Grao (Castellón) for a year. He embarked for Walvis Bay and, confronted with the difficult conditions faced by sailors in the hake fleet, chose to remain there until he was expelled by the racist authorities three years later, returning to Spain in 1976. After sailing as an ordinary sailor in various fleets, he secularised in 1980, opened an insurance brokerage, got married in 1982, had a son and passed civil service exams for the Regional Government of Andalusia. He retired as head of the Fishing Service at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries' Provincial Delegation in Huelva.

2.4. Antonio Vergara Abajo

Born in Madrid on 20 June 1927, Antonio Vergara Abajo entered the seminary of Burgos in 1941 and later joined the Foreign Missions seminary. He was ordained as a priest on 20 June 1953. His aspirations to work as a missionary in Rhodesia were thwarted when he failed the medical examination, instead spending his first two years as a priest substituting in Moneo (Burgos). In April 1955, he, along with thirty-seven other priests from various Spanish dioceses, responded to Cantero Cuadrado's call and arrived in Huelva. His initial assignment was in Alosno, where he served as parish priest from April 1955 to July 1967 (Vergara, 2006). Later, he was transferred to La Palma del Condado (1967–1968) and Bollullos Par del Condado (1968–1976). Rafael González Moralejo, the bishop of Huelva between 1969 and 1993, and a well-known liberal (Mancha, 2020, p. 611), appointed him—among other roles—as the episcopal delegate of Caritas and administrator of the diocese, a position he held from 1976 until late 1980. In 1981, he applied for secularisation, a process that took fourteen years to be granted. He had a civil marriage on 2 July of that same year and a religious one on 2 October 1995. He served as the secretary of the Nautical–Fishing Vocational Training School before passing away on 9 May 2016.

2.5. Joaquín Brito Ramos

Born in Ayamonte (Huelva) on 11 February 1943, he entered the seminary of Huelva during his teenage years. He served as a priest in his home town and became involved in the Apostleship of the Sea, where he worked as a teacher and supervisor at the Nautical–Fishing School. Additionally, he held a position in a construction company as head of personnel and administration. He chose to secularise and married in 1975. Politically, he aligned himself with the Workers' Revolutionary Organisation (ORT), a party originating from the Workers' Vanguard, a Christian movement promoted by the Jesuits. He died of cancer on 3 June 2004.

2.6. Fernando Motas Pérez

Born in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in 1946, Fernando Motas Pérez was a Jesuit. During the summer of 1971, he worked in a hospital kitchen in Lyon, where he became interested in the Apostleship of the Sea after meeting a French Jesuit from the Workers' Mission. In the summer of 1972, he boarded a small shrimp fishing boat in Huelva working in Moroccan waters alongside thirteen other sailors. It was a challenging experience, with no set work or rest schedule, working with nets in cramped quarters with no privacy. In the summer of 1973, he left Las Palmas aboard a merchant cargo ship, where he spent two and a half months before returning to Granada, where he was studying theology. Before his ordination in 1974, he met with Monsignor Azagra, Bishop of Murcia and national promoter of the Apostleship of the Sea, to strengthen the institution in Las Palmas with help from diocesan priest José Hernández Francés. To familiarise himself with it, he spent the 1975/1976 academic year in Huelva and, alongside Ignacio Palacios' team, acquired the knowledge and experience he needed to establish the institution in his home town in 1976. A year later, a group of maritime workers formed a union, of which Motas, the port chaplain, served as coordinator until 1984, when he decided to step down due to health reasons. In 2000, the Provincial of the Society sent him to Andalusia as the head of various communities, including Granada, El Puerto de Santa María, Seville and Malaga.

2.7. Francisco Cruz Beltrán

Born in Cartaya (Huelva) in 1944, Francisco Cruz Beltrán entered the seminary of Huelva at the age of twelve, where he pursued studies leading to priesthood ordination, which took place in June 1968. His first assignment was to serve several villages in the mountains, and from 1970 to 1977, he served as coadjutor in the parish of Punta Umbría. In Madrid, he studied sociology and requested secularisation. Upon returning to Huelva in 1982, he joined the School of Social Work, later obtaining a professorship in sociology at the University of Huelva.

During my time in Punta Umbría, I frequently went to sea as a sailor and acted as a chaplain for the Trasmediterránea ferry. I contributed to the magazine *El Camarón* as an illustrator and earned the certification of a second-class coastal fishing skipper. My dedication to seafarers and their families persisted in my academic pursuits, demonstrated by my dissertation titled "Social and Political Partici-

pation of Fishermen in Huelva”, defended in 1983, and my doctoral thesis titled “Social Structure of the Andalusian Fishing Sector”, defended in 1994, both under the guidance of Professor Vidal Beneyto. Beyond academia, I became deeply immersed in that milieu, to the extent of founding a folk group for which I composed protest songs highlighting the plight of Andalusia and its fishing industry (Cruz. Interview, 11/2/2016).

Politically aligned with the Socialist Party of Andalusia (PSA), for which he served as provincial secretary in Huelva from 1986 to 1990, he reveals:

My Andalusian roots trace back to my encounter in Punta Umbría in 1972/1973 with Alejandro Rojas-Marcos, who was in exile from Seville due to a ruling from the Tribunal of Public Order (TOP). Later, I took part in the electoral campaign during the first democratic general elections in 1977 by organising a rally at a school in Punta Umbría. I collaborated with the PSA, which later renamed itself the PA, while pursuing my studies in sociology in Madrid (Cruz. Interview, 11/2/2016).

3. The influence of the Second Vatican Council

Just months after the opening of the Stella Maris centre in Huelva, the Second Vatican Council commenced on 11 October 1962, concluding on 8 December 1965. Prior to the Council, there was significant concern within certain segments of the Church regarding the maintenance of an ecclesiastical framework detached from the Gospel message. Themes such as incarnation in diverse contexts, evangelistic missions, intra-ecclesial dialogue, advocacy for the marginalised and autonomy from political influence were pressing matters, particularly for those who lived their faith and challenged official Church stances.

Pope John XXIII recognised the need for the Church to engage with modern society to promote its message of tolerance and respect, and he boldly confronted the more integrist and resistant Catholic factions. His commitment to the renewal and modernisation of the Church—*aggiornamento*—aimed to fundamentally reshape the Church’s message, making it relevant to a world increasingly estranged from traditional institutions. Guided by this purpose, the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) was inaugurated, marking a pivotal moment in the Church’s historical journey and standing as the most significant doctrinal and pastoral event of the 20th century. The council aimed to embrace the values of modernity, transitioning the Church, as articulated by Dominican theologian Congar, from being “a Church unto itself” to one “for humanity” (Estrada, 1985, pp. 28–52), advocating for social justice globally, championing human rights and engaging in dialogue with Eastern bloc nations, other Christian denominations and various religions, thus “ushering in a new era in the history of the Catholic Church” (Küng, 2002, p. 232). Consequently, the Second Vatican Council transcended the theological notion of the Church as a perfect society, recognised the rights to religious and political freedom, modernised the hierarchical ecclesiastical structure, initiated dialogue with diverse global cultures by forsaking Eurocentrism and ecclesiocentrism, reaffirmed and bolstered the role of the laity within the Church and underscored the Church’s contribution to the social construction of the world (Hurtado, 2006; Alberigo, 2005, pp. 190–192).

The Spanish Church, taken aback by the council and remaining detached from its preparation and development, witnessed internal ecclesial rifts and tensions during the decade spanning from 1965 to 1975 between progressive factions, who were pushing for a swift and comprehensive implementation of the council's mandates in the Spanish ecclesiastical context, and the integristas, who resisted the new conciliar principles, viewing many doctrinal or pastoral propositions as an affront to the tenets of the Spanish religious tradition as interpreted by traditionalist National Catholicism (Raguer, 1998; Martín, 2005; Montero, 2011; Mancha, 2020). These were tumultuous times socially, politically and religiously, marked by the significant involvement of Catholic workers' organisations in social movements, leading to frequent clashes with the Francoist civil authorities, who labelled them as Marxist. Concurrently, another conservative sector, aligned with National Catholicism and resistant to any change, persisted. Ecclesial movements already aligned with many Vatican II ideas found validation in the council's texts to further their socio-political engagement, often resulting in conflicts and fractures with the ecclesiastical hierarchy itself, culminating in the Crisis of Catholic Action (1966–1968).

In the Apostleship of the Sea, as in other ecclesial groups, two interpretations of the new Gospel message and its pastoral implications emerged: the traditional welfare-assistance model—centred on welcoming seafarers in Stella Maris centres—and one advocating for solidarity with the most vulnerable, adopting a political strategy of advocacy, protests and demands to defend the rights of seafarers and their families. Despite tensions, across Spain, particularly in Huelva, a pastoral approach of embodiment, humble commitment, prevailed, with the Huelva diocese acting as a mediator—or reconciler, as per Palacios—between the two visions of Christian presence in the maritime domain.

The new approach prioritised denouncing injustices and defending the rights of seafarers over charitable endeavours. It was believed that such endeavours obscured society's true injustices, and that the Church's mission lay not merely in charity but in advocating for justice (Palacios, 2009, p. 12).

Aligned with the effort to reconcile both approaches, spearheaded by Bishop García Lahiguera upon his arrival in Huelva in 1964 and further championed by Rafael González Moralejo from 1969 onwards, the diocesan Stella Maris established a social services department diverging from the traditional charitable assistance model and incorporating scientific social work techniques and methodologies. Its objective was to foster social well-being within the fishing community through societal transformation and individual and collective autonomy, transcending the prevailing paternalistic paradigm in social services. Maribel Lasa, a Javerian religious sister, assumed leadership. However, this new initiative faced challenges and encountered resistance from some members of the Apostleship of the Sea in Spain:

Some colleagues resisted and persisted with an assistance-focused pastoral approach. Moreover, we encountered opposition from certain sectors of society and the Church. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the unwavering support extended

to us by the bishops of Huelva, García Lahiguera and González Moralejo, evidenced by the pastoral letters they authored. José López Boza and I accompanied García Lahiguera on his visit to Dakar in 1968, from 26 February to 9 March, and I joined him on the trip to Saint Pierre and Miquelon in 1969, from 15 to 28 April, this time by plane (Palacios. Life story, 2015/2016).

In line with its commitment to advocate for social justice, the Apostleship of the Sea group fostered a comprehensive social movement among seafarers, encouraging organisation in three spheres: trade unions, families and communities. *Stella Maris* became a hub for deliberating, setting criteria, proposing ideas and making decisions. In 1967, the Nautical-Fishing Vocational Training School was established, as outlined in the centre's inception plan, with the aim of equipping the Huelva fleet with skilled professionals—skippers and mechanics—not only to enhance fishing techniques but also to bolster safety at sea, thereby reducing the frequency of shipwrecks and accidents. This social and educational initiative was complemented by resolute advocacy for the rights of fishermen and their families, unwavering support for their grievances and activism and the advancement of a broad grassroots movement in fishing villages, where women played pivotal roles. *Stella Maris* became, in the last years of the dictatorship, a venue that offered its facilities and material resources to clandestine trade unions and political parties, akin to the actions of several parishes, convents and religious orders.

4. *El Camarón* (1970–1979): denunciation and support

The reality faced by sailors was harsh, challenging and unstable, characterised by frequent occupational accidents, family abandonment and low wages. In the fishing industry, two primary groups existed: coastal fishing, which employed artisanal techniques and operated in the waters of Andalusia, Portugal and Morocco, and deep-sea or industrial fishing, which required ships to venture far from their home ports for extended periods. Sailors found themselves unrepresented by both the Spanish Syndical Organisation and the Fishermen's Guilds. Despite the poor working conditions, there was no tradition of struggle, demands or protests within the sector. Deep-sea fishing encountered various challenges, including the lack of contract visas from relevant authorities, outdated labour regulations, overcrowded living conditions for sailors, a scarcity of freshwater impacting hygiene and cleanliness and long, exhausting workdays leading to psychological strain, tension and anxiety, all contributing to numerous accidents. The catalogue of labour issues persisted with economic conditions linked to piecework, excessively lengthy campaign periods, paid but untaken holidays, job instability, the continual dispersal of sailors among various vessels—hindering organised movements to advocate for their interests and working conditions—and the militarisation of the sector due to its reliance on the Navy, where a labour grievance could be deemed sedition and referred to a military tribunal (Zamora and López, 1975, p. 13).

Seafaring priests revolted against this reality and determined that the Apostleship of the Sea should fill the gap left by unions in the sector and foster the conditions for their establishment, while also serving as a conduit for sailors' interests and encouraging collaboration among seafarers, particularly among their families. Similar to numerous other Catholic Church organisations, the Apostleship of the Sea produced its own publications. Among them was *Hombres del Mar* (Men of the Sea), a magazine with a national focus, and *Platuxa*, aimed at the Newfoundland cod fleet. The objective of both was to “raise awareness and unite seafarers, both those from the merchant navy and fishermen, groups that had been overlooked and widely scattered across ports and seas up to that point” (Palacios, 2009, p. 9). The activist stance of these publications resulted in tensions with the Francoist authorities.

In line with this communication strategy, the Huelva branch of the Apostleship of the Sea opted to establish its own media outlet named *El Camarón*, which quickly faced challenges from the regime's officials. From January to May 1970, three newsletters were issued, composed and circulated among sailors by the priests of Stella Maris in Huelva. These bulletins covered current topics and underscored the necessity of organising to safeguard their rights and press for their demands. The enthusiastic reception and the need to increase the page count to accommodate the wealth of information and letters from sailors themselves spurred the group of priests to create a monthly magazine produced modestly via cyclostyle due to financial constraints. Its circulation averaged around six hundred copies per edition, limited by economic factors and the capacity of the duplicating machine. *El Camarón* was distributed free of charge to sailors and fishermen, although there were subscribers who contributed fifty pesetas annually in support. The inaugural issue of the magazine was released in August 1970 and it concluded until November 1979. José López Boza served as its editor, with Ignacio Palacios as director.

Although modest, the magazine served as a powerful voice, reaching all seas, ports and vessels, acting as a catalyst for awakening consciences and informing those who would take months to return home of the advancements and social changes occurring in Spain during the turbulent years of the transition period (Palacios. Life story, 2015–2016).

Initially, the magazine was aimed at the workers of the freezer shellfish fleet based in Huelva, operating in the seas of Senegal, Angola and Mozambique, “but it quickly evolved into a focal point for the labour struggle in Huelva during the transition years”; a genuine “school of democracy” (Feria, 2005, p. 8) as it addressed not only maritime issues but also broader topics concerning labour and politics. The magazine emerged as a valuable tool for communication and political consciousness among the numerous and dispersed fishing community of Huelva. For the first time, sailors and fishermen were able to openly discuss their problems and propose solutions, igniting a powerful advocacy movement that underscored their struggle for improved living and wage conditions within the magazine's pages, which swiftly became a concern for naval authorities and shipowners. *El Camarón* represented the first tool of denunciation associated with the maritime labour movement, and its advocacy role “resulted in its seizure on multiple occasions by the Public Order Tribunal” (Feria, 2009, p. 86).

The release of a special edition in February 1971, dedicated to the collective agreement of freezer vessel workers, prompted the Naval Commander to lodge a complaint with the Civil Governor for subversive propaganda, leading the delegate of the Ministry of Information and Tourism in Huelva to declare it illegal. The Apostleship of the Sea sought official recognition for the magazine and its registration in the Register of Press Companies. Meanwhile, from May to November, the publication was renamed *Boletín del Apostolado del Mar* (Bulletin of the Apostleship of the Sea), reverting to the *El Camarón* title in December, along with its confrontational and accusatory style. It promptly covered the first collective agreement of the industrial freezer fleet, the first agreement of its kind in Spain. Workers in this sector had a distinct advocacy approach compared to those in the fresh fleet. The former aimed for changes in labour relations and social enhancements through collective bargaining, while the latter prioritised the preservation of acquired rights. The conflicts they encountered had a more significant impact as they unfolded in small and medium-sized towns.

Workers in the industrial fishing sector primarily advocated for three points: job stability within the company to ensure employment continuity; a change in the compensation and work system, which relied on piecework, thus demanding a guaranteed salary, payment for overtime hours and the establishment of a fixed workday; and limiting time at sea to a maximum of five months, followed by one month's holiday to maintain a balance between work and family life. On the other hand, workers in the fresh fleet, both artisanal and pre-industrial, did not challenge traditional structures of work and compensation, although they sought updates to them and the eradication of certain corrupt practices that had become widespread, primarily within the Fishermen's Guilds, entities reliant on the Spanish Syndical Organisation, whose senior leaders were appointed by the government. Workers called for the democratisation and oversight of the Fishermen's Guilds, transparency in remuneration—urging for written contracts—, the presence of sailors' representatives at auctions, access to sales receipts and payroll records and the elimination of intermediaries in sales at major ports, as the Fishermen's Guilds managed these transactions in smaller ports themselves.

The fishing sector began to simmer in the early 1970s. Conflicts between shipowners and fishermen escalated as the basic demands of the workers were disregarded by both the shipowners and the administration. On 30 November 1971, workers from the industrial freezer fleet signed the sector's first collective agreement, which entailed establishing a welfare fund and guaranteeing fishermen a minimum wage along with incentives, while also restricting sea campaigns to a maximum of eight months. However, none of the other demands—such as job stability within the company or paid rest—received attention from the employers. This led to discontent and disappointment among the workers, prompting them to launch protests demanding a new agreement. According to Zamora and López (1975, p. 15), the agreement was negotiated under conditions inferior to those already accepted in the fleet, and in some aspects, even fell below what was stipulated by regulations. Despite the overall frustration over the agreement's outcome due to the lack of desired social gains, it

catalysed a heightened advocacy consciousness among affected fishermen. Many workers united and acknowledged the imperative to persist in organised efforts to uphold their dignity as individuals and as a collective, marking an unprecedented development in the maritime labour landscape.

With this background, the second agreement for the freezer trawlers of Huelva was addressed, a process meticulously documented by *El Camarón*. According to a report published in the magazine *Sábado Gráfico* in December 1972 (Zamora and López, 1975, pp. 21–22), the labour situation of the workers was dire: workdays lasting between fifteen and eighteen hours for successive days—including holidays and eve days—without fixed meal schedules; both work and wages were piecework-based, with the most significant portion of the wage being the so-called fishing bonus; deplorable living conditions; lack of paid holidays; seasonal contracts, with the worker being dismissed without entitlement to compensation once the campaign ended; frequent occupational accidents due to fatigue and the scant concern of the shipowner in this regard; very poor quality food, which apart from a small portion, was paid for by the workers themselves. Moreover, there was the family separation lasting between six and ten months, a period that the shipowner tended to extend, leading to serious family problems.

In issue 15 of *El Camarón*, dated March 1973, an open letter from the sailors' representatives was published, informing about the commencement of negotiations for a new agreement on the 29th of that month and seeking support for their demands. The previous day, the sailors unanimously endorsed a preliminary draft of the agreement in an assembly, which applied to all freezer ships in Huelva city and its province engaged in shellfish fishing, and to all crew members, regardless of their rank. The preliminary draft highlighted aspects such as the establishment of a base salary, a share of sales, the probationary period, job stability within the company, living expenses fully covered by the companies, an eight-hour workday which could exceptionally be extended to four more hours but never exceeding twelve daily or two hundred and forty monthly, a limitation on sea time not exceeding five months, one month of shore leave paid by the company for every five months embarked, the right to a twenty-four-hour rest period for every thirty days at sea, the right to assembly and provision of air conditioning for ships lacking it (Zamora and López, 1975, pp. 45–48).

The employers declined to discuss the preliminary draft, citing the low profitability of the freezer fleet. This compelled the workers to seek assistance from a group of economists who prepared a report demonstrating the economic viability of their demands. The employers were only willing to offer minor salary improvements and thirty days of annual leave but refused to engage in discussions regarding the workday, piecework, living conditions on board, food provisions or family separation. In response, the workers organised a lock-in on 7 April at the Rocío Church in Huelva to protest the delay in reaching an agreement and to bring public attention to their plight. They penned an open letter to the bishop and the civil governor, expressing their frustration with the

five unproductive meetings held with the shipowners and emphasising that they were tired of hearing that their demands were just without any enforcement to ensure that companies respected their dignity and rights. The following day, at ten o'clock in the evening, the nearly eighty confined sailors departed from the church, having been accompanied by members of the grassroots Christian communities.

On 11 April, the press reported on the indefinite strike of over two hundred sailors whose vessels were docked in Dakar. Through the strike, the sailors protested against the breakdown of the agreement and expressed solidarity with their representatives. According to Palacios (2009, p. 76), this was the first—and possibly only—strike by Spanish fishermen abroad. This strike bolstered the morale of the workers negotiating the agreement. However, the naval authorities in Huelva responded by accusing the leaders of the revolt of sedition and demanding their immediate repatriation. One of the main goals of the group of priests was to achieve demilitarisation aboard ships, as it restricted the freedom of maritime workers. The shipowners presented a new proposal that was rejected by the workers as it did not address their fundamental demands. The negotiation collapsed, and the Labour Delegate issued a Mandatory Compliance Regulation, valid for two years, which reflected the shipowners' position but did not incorporate most of the sailors' requests. The information circulated by *El Camarón* outraged the shipowners, prompting them to cease acting as carriers for the magazine. Consequently, in May 1973, the seafaring priests penned a letter to sailors in Dakar, Luanda and Lourenço Marques (present-day Maputo, Mozambique), informing them of the shipowners' decision to halt magazine deliveries due to the dispute over the collective agreement.

Naval authorities actively sought to prevent the distribution of *El Camarón* and the Huelva court seized the magazine twice. Furthermore, the Public Order Tribunal (TOP) initiated two proceedings against Palacios in his role as director. The magazine's proponents were unequivocal from the start about their aim: to advance democracy, recognising that without it, the rights of workers and citizens would remain unacknowledged. In December 1975, after Franco's death, *El Camarón* issued an editorial reaffirming its unwavering commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It advocated for the involvement of maritime workers in forging a fairer and more democratic society, where the rights of assembly, expression and association would prevail. In January 1976, the magazine called for the release of all political and union prisoners. In the March edition, in response to the announcement of a new Association Law, it warned of the risks to the country's democratic future, stressing that it was the workers who had to spearhead democracy. Additionally, it endorsed the amnesty plea and advocated for abstention in the referendum on the new Electoral Law.

The group of priests also recognised the role of the wives of maritime workers, who gathered in small groups in almost every coastal town. The Francoist authorities threatened to halt these gatherings, deeming them illegal. Consequently, the priests set about creating a Provincial Association of

Families of Maritime Workers in 1975. They opted for a religious association as the legal entity, bypassing the need for authorisation from the Ministry of the Interior. The diocese of Huelva approved the association on 20 April 1976, although it had been operating provisionally since 18 November 1975. The association aimed to limit the duration of campaigns, increase holiday days and time spent at home and actively participated in the mobilisation organised by the Apostleship of the Sea at the national level. This effort led to the approval of regulations limiting seafaring time to five months, followed by one month's holiday. These mobilisations were crucial in improving the lives of sailors at sea, securing the release of crew members detained by African countries and persuading shipowners to negotiate agreements.

However, these demands expanded when women discovered the needs of their neighbourhoods, prompting them to lead a grassroots movement that attracted residents not involved in fishing activities. In issue 55 of *El Camarón*, dated September 1976, a review of the association's activities was provided, highlighting its collaboration with maritime workers in their demands, the establishment of nurseries in nine coastal neighbourhoods and the promotion of neighbourhood associations. The nurseries, along with Stella Maris facilities, served as venues for women to discuss and raise awareness about the neglect in maritime communities. These discussions sparked a grassroots movement calling for essential amenities such as lighting, sewage systems, transportation improvements and the development of social housing.

On 8 April 1976, delegates from the sardine fleet in Isla Cristina met with shipowners convened by the Fishermen's Guild to initiate negotiations for the agreement. Upon arrival at the guild, they were confronted only by the Civil Guard. Incensed, the sailors decided to stage a protest through the town's streets. Twenty demonstrators, including "a sailor from Huelva", Fernando González Vila, a naval mechanic affiliated with the General Union of Workers (UGT) who had led negotiations for the Freezer Fishing Fleet Agreement, and "the priest of Stella Maris in Huelva, Ignacio Palacios" (Blanco, 1976, p. 20), were arrested and transported to Ayamonte prison. According to Blanco (1976), eighteen of the detainees were released twelve hours later, while González Vila and Palacios were released after twenty-four hours upon posting bail of 5,000 pesetas. The case was eventually dismissed by the Public Order Tribunal (TOP) months later.

Starting from mid-1977, the magazine transitioned from a monthly to a bimonthly publication, with fewer pages than usual. The legalisation of trade unions and political parties resulted in Stella Maris losing some of its influence among maritime workers. The content focus shifted towards labour issues, backing neighbourhood associations in maritime areas and ecological concerns, particularly the pollution of the Huelva coast, which adversely affected fishing. In the May–June 1977 edition, issue 64, the magazine outlined the fishing policies of left-wing political parties and made its political stance clear in the editorial titled *Trabajador, vota a los trabajadores* (Worker, vote for workers). Simultaneously, it sharply criticised centrist and right-wing parties, asserting that "they are the

same old bosses with different labels”. Issue 65 delved into the legalisation of trade unions, while issue 67 expressed support for Andalusian autonomy and the protests scheduled for 4 December. Additionally, it vehemently condemned the police repression resulting in the death of Manuel José García Caparrós in Malaga from police gunfire.

5. In conclusion: the new direction of the priests of the sea

The team of priests from Stella Maris in Huelva, along with their colleagues from the Apostleship of the Sea at the national level, embarked on a process of reflection during the transition period in response to the evolving social, political and ecclesial landscape. This reflection led to a renewed commitment by the institution to vigorously denounce injustices and advocate for the rights of maritime workers.

We were entering an era of great hope with the Second Vatican Council, liberation theology, worker priests and other pastoral experiences dedicated to the gospel and the marginalised. We believed that the Church’s mission was not merely charity but also the proclamation of justice, engaging fishermen and their families in addressing their challenges (Palacios. Life story, 2015–2016).

Although the regime prohibited the existence of left-wing trade unions and political parties, it reluctantly permitted Church associations, as stipulated in the Concordat signed in 1953 between the Catholic Church and the Francoist State. Aligned with their commitment to justice, the seafaring priests collaborated with clandestine trade unions, spending three years with Workers’ Commissions (CCOO) and transforming Stella Maris into a hub for those advocating for democracy. Subsequently, they worked with the legal offices of other unions in Huelva, particularly with UGT, where Carlos Navarrete and José Antonio Marín Rite offered their expertise. They also forged connections with the Unitary Union led by Juan Ceada, a former seminarian and member of Workers’ Vanguard. All the priests of Stella Maris established collaborative relationships with groups advocating for freedom and democracy from secrecy, although not all were actively involved in union or political activities, at least during the dictatorship. Regarding the role played by the group of priests, José López Boza asserts:

I believe that Stella Maris played an important role and contributed to achieving democracy. It was not an easy path, but the group of priests [...] was determined to contribute their abilities, commitment, perseverance and their influence, whether significant or minimal, in social, political and union movements, so that democracy, and with it autonomy, became a reality. [...] I did not engage in political or union activities, although Ignacio and I had our passports revoked. Some of the priests of Stella Maris initially had contacts and collaborated with the PCE and CCOO, although later, during the transition, they leaned towards UGT and PSOE because they provided us with legal and labour advice and support (López. Interview, 8/3/2016).

Acitores highlights the work undertaken at Stella Maris to substitute trade unions: defending maritime workers, supporting their demands and raising political

awareness. This role was not confined solely to the fishing sector but was undertaken by Christian groups across nearly all social sectors.

However, with the arrival of democracy and new union liberties, our services were no longer essential. The surrogate function we had been fulfilling for the banned unions during the Franco regime was drawing to a close. Chaplains from ports like Bilbao, London and Hamburg advocated for maintaining a traditional pastoral approach, centred on assistance and observance of Sunday rituals. Conversely, others, such as those in Saint Pierre and Miquelon, Huelva, Madrid and San Sebastián, championed a different paradigm, one responsive to the evolving political and union landscape. [...] I have never been affiliated with any union, but I am a member of PSOE [...]. Our group in Huelva was imbued with progressivism, leaning left, broadly speaking, although our views on political activism were not uniform (Acitores. Interview, 24/2/2016).

Cruz concurs with fellow colleagues in evaluating the role of Stella Maris, particularly in its substitute capacity for the prohibited unions:

The work of Stella Maris in Huelva leaned more towards trade unionism than politics. We understood that our role on the ships primarily involved companionship, standing alongside the working people; we assisted with tasks, and although the shipowners did not pay us—at least in my case—they did enrol us with Social Security. [...] On the ships, we did not conduct masses or engage in religious practices. Instead, we were exemplifying a Church dedicated to those enduring the most hardship from their own circumstances, striving to adhere to the new directives established by the Second Vatican Council, which often prompted a re-evaluation of our priestly calling. It was crucial for us to raise awareness among maritime workers about defending their rights, recognising the surrogate role we played in light of the prohibition on class unions. However, with the recognition of these unions, our mission as the Apostleship of the Sea had essentially concluded (Cruz. Interview, 11/2/2016).

Palacios concurs with Cruz's assessment and that of other interviewees that with the arrival of democracy, there was no longer a niche to occupy or a surrogate role to play, as these responsibilities fell within the purview of other societal realms. Between 1980 and 1983, Palacios assumed the role of national director of the Apostleship of the Sea, a position he held until he embarked on a new chapter of his life in December of that year by joining the Regional Government of Andalusia in Seville. Here, he had the opportunity to continue his extensive work in the fishing sector, a pursuit that resonated with his socialist convictions. Following his retirement in October 2006, Palacios dedicated himself to disseminating his experiences, insights and recollections through various publications, thereby enriching the knowledge of researchers and maritime workers (Palacios, 2017). He passed away in October 2020 at the age of 82.

The priests along the coast of Huelva bore witness to and actively participated in the struggle for democracy during the waning years of Francoism and the subsequent political transition within one of Spain's most economically challenged regions. Their involvement in the fight for democracy and their advocacy for the interests of sailors and fishermen reflected their interpretation of the Gospel message, albeit not universally embraced within the Church. They demonstrated a commitment to the most vulnerable, stepping into the void left by the absence of class unions and nurturing the political consciousness of maritime workers.

6. References

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