

# **AIRPORT CHAPLAINCIES AND THE SITUATION OF AIRPORT WORKERS, AIR CREWS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

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**Father Michael G. Zaniolo, STL, CAC  
President, National Conference of Catholic Airport Chaplains  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the common estimation of people, airport chaplaincies serve the spiritual needs of travelers. Indeed, they do. Viewed more closely, the picture is more complex. The pastoral care extended through airport chaplaincies reaches not only to travelers but also in a significant way to airline personnel, ground workers who service airplanes, and those charged with safety and security in the airports. In fact, airport chaplaincies reach even beyond these groups of travelers and workers. We must be mindful that every person who enables the air travel of others belongs to the primary social unit of the family. What affects airport workers most certainly affects their families. This is the larger context for my remarks today.

Permit me to add an additional word of introduction. With regard to ministry in the context of airport chaplaincies more generally and in the context of workers and their families more particularly, we must note the fundamental and distinctive shape of this kind of ministry. In my experience and reflection, I would identify airport ministry as providing an ecclesial experience for travelers and for those who make their journeys possible. The heart of this ecclesial experience shares the common ground of all authentic experiences of the Church: proclamation and reception of the Word of God, celebration of the life-giving sacraments of the Lord, and direct service to those in need. In saying this, I am not saying anything new but rather repeating what has been the experience of the Church from the very earliest apostolic moments: *kerygma*, *leitourgia*, *diakonia*.

Airport chaplaincies engage in a ministry of word, worship-sacrament, and service on behalf of airport workers and their families and so provide them with four essential elements which strengthen their faith and give them encouragement as

they make their spiritual and professional life's journeys. These elements, as I shall describe them, are: stability, security, solidarity, and support.

## **STABILITY**

The air travel industry within which airline and airport personnel work not only serves the movement of people but is itself in a state of constant flux. This is so for two principle reasons. We live in a technological age that drives a constant flow of change. Basic engineering, for example, shifts continuously to accommodate more efficient aircraft. Information technology and its constant development also allows for a greater efficiency in the scheduling and transport of goods and people. The other continuously shifting dimension of the air travel industry is economic. We find ourselves at a threshold of world economic change because of the economic process of globalization. Although there are many positive features, such as greater efficiencies within the industry, there are also less positive features because of profit-driven motives that often take scant account of the human impact of realigned commercial structures.

Those who work in the air travel industry must face this process of continuous and rapid change with a concomitant sense of instability. It is possible to see one's previous training and experience vanish without value as new technologies emerge. It is possible to find oneself out of a job because of downsizing due to acquisitions and mergers. Shortly, I will address the question of security which includes job security. For now, I want to highlight the fundamental instability of the air travel industry. This has an obvious direct impact on workers. It also has an overflowing impact on their families.

Airport chaplaincies cannot address and, much less, resolve all the critical and threatening situations faced by workers and their families because of the inherent instability of the air travel industry. Airport chaplaincies, however, can offer a point of stability grounded in faith that enables workers and their families to assess their situation in a larger perspective. "Christ yesterday, today, and tomorrow" becomes a compass point for navigating a work world in flux. He is proclaimed in his Word, celebrated and made present in his sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist, and served in the daily needs of his people.

## **SECURITY**

A sense of security is proportionate to the reliability of the environment in which one lives and works. For airport workers and their dependents security today is compromised both by the instability of the economic environment which I have just now indicated but also—and perhaps more decisively—by the emergence of worldwide terrorism which has targeted air travel in a special way. The heightened sense of mortal risk has transformed the airline industry which previously had to deal with mechanical catastrophe or human error. Now, in a way that menaces all those who travel or make air journeys possible, risk is the result of human malice and the intention to destroy and destabilize governments and the general confidence of the public in fundamental institutions of life, such as transportation.

What does it mean to live and work in an environment which continuously reminds one of vulnerability and a risk that potentially has mortal and, indeed, catastrophic dimensions? Airport chaplaincies deal with the human and emotional impact of this question. Obviously, the chaplaincies do not deal directly with terrorist activities. They do, however, offer a word of reassurance to those who must deal with this plague on a daily basis. They do so by redirecting concern to the providential hand of God which accompanies us on our daily journey. These same chaplaincies by welcoming persons of all religious affiliations create an atmosphere in which workers and their families come to realize that religion and the name of God cannot be authentically be invoked by those who plan and execute the destruction of innocent people. In this way, the chaplaincies affirm in a vibrant way that God is on the side of the just and those who respectfully live with their neighbor.

## **SOLIDARITY**

An airport chaplaincy has a major role to play in connecting people with each other. In other words, airport ministry can affirm human solidarity in a constructive and humanizing way. This happens in a number of different contexts.

Because air transportation is a business and one that determinedly seeks to make a profit, relationships with the customer-client base can be severely strained.

Passengers, for example, can become valued only for their capacity to generate a profit. Airport chaplaincies can remind those who work in the airline industry that persons are persons, not instruments for profit, not nuisances, not problems, but real persons endowed with God-given dignity. The chaplaincy may be the lone voice affirming the humanity of passengers, as well as the humanity of those who work for the airline industry. Thus, the chaplaincy can build a bridge of human solidarity that transcends the profit motive which can seem to be the single force driving the air transportation enterprise.

The air chaplaincy can further build bonds among those who labor together in the air transportation industry. The humanization of the work space and the task of the workers is an essential ingredient of pastoral ministry in the context of airports. In the triple ministry of word, sacrament, and service, workers are reminded of their linkage among themselves and of their vocation not only to transport people from one place to another but, through travel, to link people to each other in a new form of social solidarity.

Finally, the air chaplaincy can help workers to remain connected to their families. The demands of the travel industry often create inevitable separations from family and friends. This is a part of the cost of the work that is done. By affirming and celebrating the family ties of air transportation workers, the chaplaincies are able to foster a continuing solidarity of family life. That same ministry can be available when inevitable separations can cause stresses and strains in marriages and family relationships.

## **SUPPORT**

Although there are specific circumstances which uniquely belong to those involved in the air transportation industry and their dependents, they are also subjected to the ordinary stresses and concerns of life shared with other human beings. Parents grow old and sick. Marital relationships can suffer from difficulties. Children can seem to lack direction and be in need of special guidance. Friends and relatives die. Illness, whether physical or emotional, can take its toll. In the face of all these “ordinary” circumstances and problems of daily life, the chaplaincy is close at hand. It is available, if not to address every concern, to receive the concerns and to be a useful resource in addressing the pains and hurts of the human condition. Sometimes this means a word of God that can

enlighten a given situation. Sometimes, the sacraments, most especially the sacraments of healing and forgiveness, can give a new lease on life. Sometimes, a supportive word or a helpful referral can bring new hope to a difficult situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The ministry of the Church, in my own experience and estimation as an airport chaplain, is alive in a most intense way in the context of airport workers and their families. Clearly, the reason for this is that airport ministry encompasses the full range of the human experience but in a more intense way. The shifts in today's culture and economy are all accentuated in the context of the air transportation industry. Just as the challenges are magnified because of terrorism and economic instability and globalization and countless other factors as well, so is the hope which the Gospel can bring to the human condition. In word, sacrament, and service, new hope and confidence can be born in the more challenging and difficult situations of today's world, especially as these emerge in the air transportation industry with their particular impact on airport workers and their families.