

# Seafarers' advocate Von Dreele brings shelter from the storm *Rajesh Joshi reports*

**R**EADERS might remember Rev James Von Dreele as author of a recent First Person column in this newspaper, in which he said so-called "whistle-blowers" in US oily water separator prosecutions are least interested in the bounty cash as opposed to drawing the world's attention to the violation of their basic rights as seafarers and human beings.

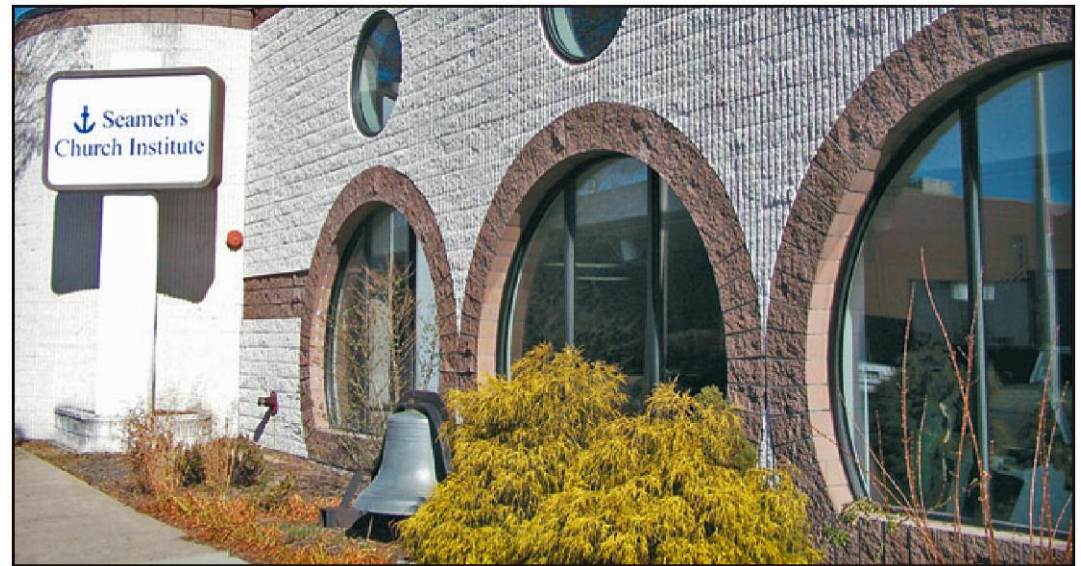
Those familiar with this chaplain are not surprised: he is wont to be in the news for matters more than just shore leave or procuring cash for a chapel.

Whenever a seafarer within earshot of Philadelphia is faced with trouble in wages or working conditions, Rev Von Dreele pops up as saviour.

The most recent case involves a South Korean-owned bulker, the 1985-built, 31,253 dwt Sun New, which ran afoul of authorities in Philadelphia on New Year's Day after a few Filipino seafarers lodged a complaint alleging illegal discharge of oily sludge on the high seas several weeks previous.

In December 2005, the 1980-built, 32,025 dwt, Greek-owned bulker Irene EM sailed into the Delaware Bay and became subject of a separate and similar federal investigation.

To some observers these



*The Seamen's Church Institute in Philadelphia*

ships are data points, to some others they are object lessons on what happens when owners get too smart for their own good.

For Rev Von Dreele, they are a humanitarian fiasco. For one, he says, the Filipinos from the Sun New have alleged physical abuse at the hands of the South Korean chief engineer charged as defendant.

Furthermore, under the guise of testifying as "material witnesses" against those actually charged with the crime, four crew from the Sun New and eight from the Irene EM are being forced to remain in Philadelphia indefinitely.

These men cannot go home even for family deaths or other emergencies, the chaplain points out. Their

seagoing careers have been interrupted if not scuppered outright. Their monthly allotments have stopped, and they face an uncertain future in the seafaring trade even after their forced "cooperation" in the US ends.

In the SCI Philadelphia, these distressed seafarers have what could be their only friend. They spend their days in the relative comfort of the SCI cafeteria or online, at least being able to read newspapers from their homeland or otherwise stay in touch with near and dear.

"Father Jim" is the man who has made this succour, insufficient as it may be, possible. In an article for the church organ, titled "Why We Do What We Do", Rev Von Dreele writes:

"Working in a largely unregulated environment, seafarers are sometimes vulnerable to exploitation and bad treatment. When crews are not paid for months at a time, their families must sell their possessions to eat.

"They simply cannot quit their jobs and go home in these situations. They need an advocate. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, maritime chaplains willingly confront owners and captains who are exploiting seafarers and make them accountable."

Brian Smith, SCI Philadelphia board member, has a non-Biblical take on him. "[Father Jim] is an aggressive supporter of foreign seafarers and a man with a very strong social conscience."