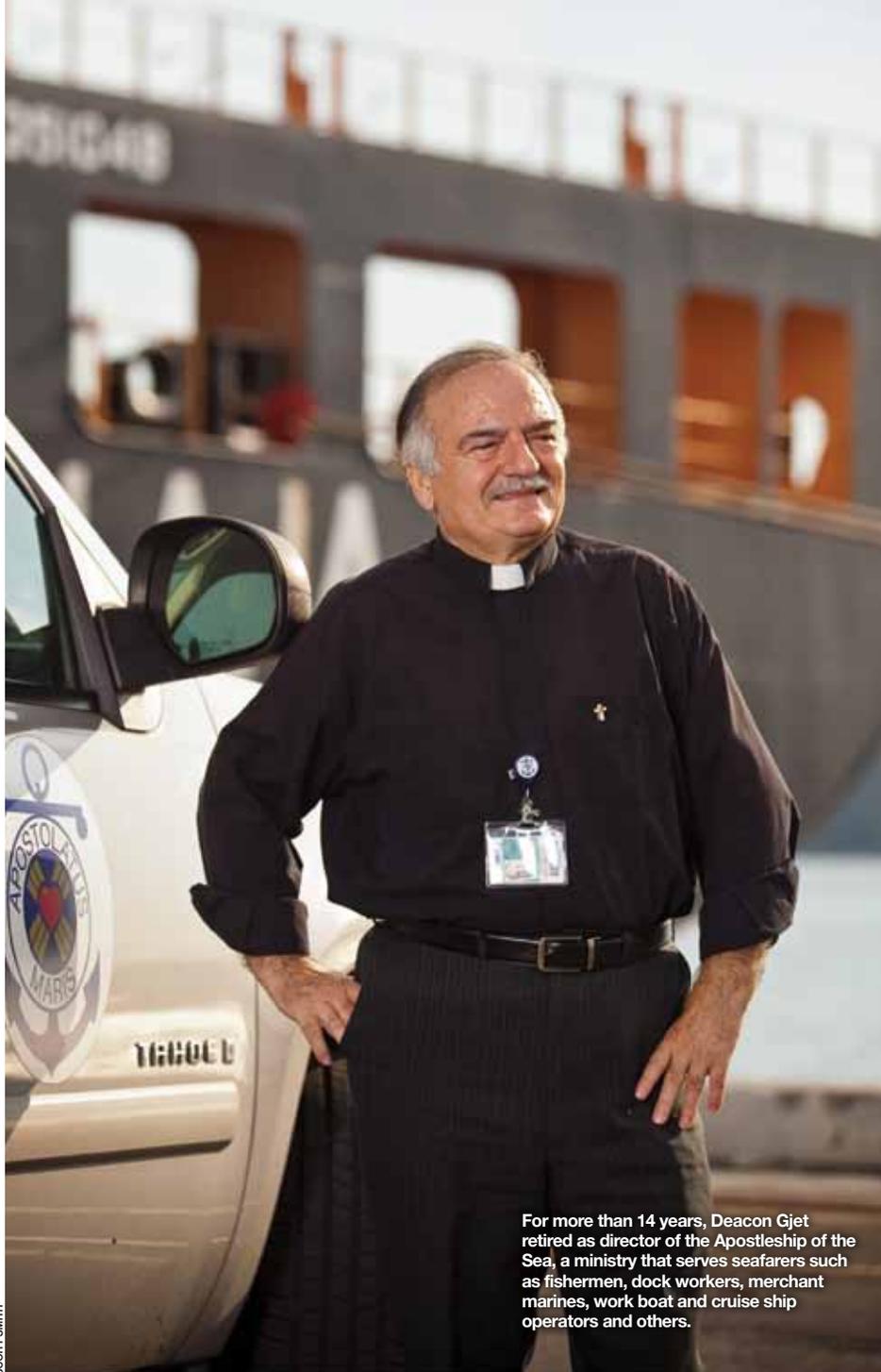


DEACON GJET BAJRAKTARI

## A Beacon of Light to People of the Sea

BY MARK UDRY



For more than 14 years, Deacon Gjet retired as director of the Apostleship of the Sea, a ministry that serves seafarers such as fishermen, dock workers, merchant marines, work boat and cruise ship operators and others.

IT SEEMS ONLY FITTING that a man who spent his formative years moving from one place to the next in his family's search for a home, would minister to seafarers.

Deacon Gjet Bajraktari of Jacksonville was born in Albania in 1944. Escaping religious oppression from Communist rule after World War II, his family was forced to move to Italy before gaining passage to America, passing through Ellis Island and settling in New York City. The family soon realized big city life wasn't for them, so they pulled up stakes and moved again, this time to Canada.

That's where he was ordained a deacon in 1979, at Our Lady of the Visitation Catholic Church in South Gloucester, Ontario – a parish he served for seven years before moving to North Florida.

Throughout his 28-year service with the Diocese of St. Augustine, Deacon Gjet served as a deacon at Our Lady Star of the Sea in Ponte Vedra Beach, and Jacksonville's Holy Spirit and San José parishes. He served the Albanian Catholic Community mostly at San José Parish for many years.

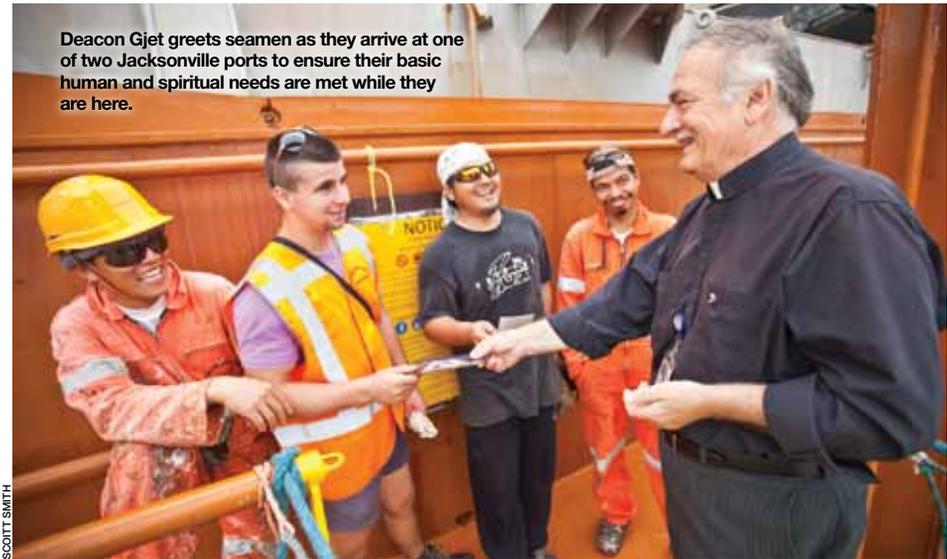
*"There really was no Catholic identity at the port, and at least 90 percent of the seafarers coming off the ships are Catholic."*

In 2001, Deacon Dale Wamstad retired from his ministry work with Apostleship of the Sea, and asked Deacon Gjet if he would be interested in taking over the ministry at Jacksonville's two port terminals on Blount Island and Talleyrand.

"I said I would go where I am most needed, so I thought I'd give it try," said Deacon Gjet. "I never thought it would last this long."

A ministry of Catholic Charities, Apostleship of the Sea is a professional association that offers counseling and spiritual support to mariners, fishermen, dock workers, work boat and cruise ship operators.

Deacon Gjet greets seamen as they arrive at one of two Jacksonville ports to ensure their basic human and spiritual needs are met while they are here.



SCOTT SMITH

Along with a small group of volunteers, Deacon Gjet meets each ship at the docks and must escort the men throughout the port. They provide other assistance as needed such as driving seafarers to and from errands, as well.

Soon after taking over the ministry on Sept. 1, 2001, the largest terror attack on American soil took place on Sept. 11. As expected this posed a challenge to the Apostleship of the Sea ministry with

increased security at U.S. ports.

And, then there was the fact that the diocesan ministry didn't really have a space to call its own. Taking matters in his own hands, Deacon Gjet lobbied for a permanent place to minister to the seafarers at both terminals.

"We had nothing," said Deacon Gjet. "There really was no Catholic identity at the port, and at least 90 percent of the seafarers coming off the ships are Catholic."

With funds provided by the diocese and Catholic Charities, a 1,700 square-foot center was opened at the Talleyrand terminal in 2004; Blount Island followed with its own facility in 2008. The centers offer computers with Internet access for seafarers to check email, a row of private phone booths, bathrooms with shower facilities, an area to relax and watch television and a chapel where Deacon Gjet performs a Communion service or where a visiting priest can celebrate Mass. He estimates that about 700 to 800 seafarers pass through the centers' doors each month.

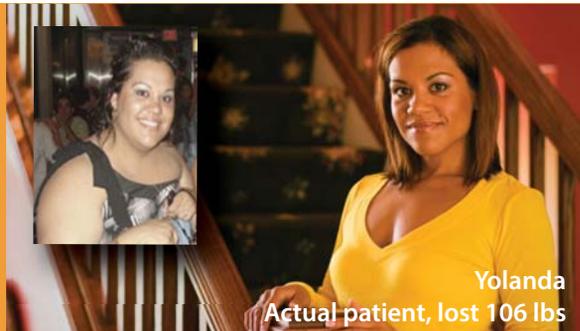
For his efforts, the National Association of Apostleship of the Sea honored him with the Maritime Samaritan Award in 2008 and 2013.

At age 70, Deacon Gjet is ready to retire. After the long journey from his Albanian homeland to his adopted country, ministering to men who make a living traveling from port to port, he has only one desire – "to rest a bit," he said, laughing. "I just want to relax and enjoy some time with my wife."

Deacon Gjet thank you for your many years of service – you and your volunteers are a beacon of light offering hospitality and pastoral care to the people of the sea! 🙏

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