

Journey to the Edge: Outward and Inward

On January 16th I flew from Rome with Sr. Elisabetta Flick AP and Sr. Carmen Bando SSps – who coordinate the newly established UISG Migrants Project - to the small Italian island of Lampedusa, off the coast of Africa. There we were joined by sisters from the two UISG inter-congregational communities, recently established in Sicily. These communities are based in the dioceses of Agrigento and Caltagirone in which there are significant numbers of migrants who first landed in Lampedusa and were then transferred to various centres in Sicily and throughout Italy if they were judged to be fleeing from war zones. Those classified as economic migrants are often living rough in the towns and countryside as only those with official refugee status are given governmental help under European regulations. The reason for our visit to Lampedusa – a parish of the diocese of Agrigento - was to join Cardinal Montenegro, the Bishop of Agrigento, who was opening the Holy Door on the island, a simple door but a profound symbol of the island's welcome for all, especially for migrants and refugees. The whole experience affected me much more than I had anticipated.



Shortly after our arrival in Lampedusa we made our way to the little shrine of Santa Maria del Porto, which has a huge significance for the people of the island, which is home to 5,000 many of whom are fishermen. This is where the people gather to pray when someone from the island is missing or lost at sea. The tradition of the local fisher folk is to never allow anyone to perish at sea, even if it means putting your own life at risk. I learnt that this island has been welcoming migrants from Africa, long before we, in other parts of Europe or worldwide, became aware of the recent arrivals. For many decades the inhabitants of Lampedusa have been rescuing people from the sea and have left food, flasks of coffee and clothes on their doorsteps for those arriving with little or nothing. One of the priests spoke about the generosity of the islanders who have often given away the little that they had to help the new arrivals. Many local groups participated in the ceremony to open the Holy Door including a representative group of migrants, the Red Cross, the Coastguard, the police and the NGO Misericordia who are responsible for running the local centre for migrants. Cardinal Montenegro thanked the people for their generosity in welcoming those who came to the island searching for a better life and said that whenever a stranger is welcomed that place becomes holy.



On Sunday morning we went by minibus to the edge of the coastline to what is called the Porta d'Europa or the Door of Europe. This concrete door has been built to commemorate the many that have lost their lives or disappeared while trying to reach the shores of Europe. As if to emphasize how desperate the people must be to undertake that journey across the sea, the weather that morning was beyond description. There was a biting cold that I can still feel in my bones over one week later. To get some shelter we huddled together and the many layers of clothing were little or no protection. The sea was grey and angry and all that I could think of was the 500 men, women and children who had arrived in Lampedusa on December 22nd in an old fishing boat, wearing light clothing. What must it have been like, crammed together lashed by the biting wind and bitter rain? This seemed to me a contemporary reminder of the flight into Egypt.

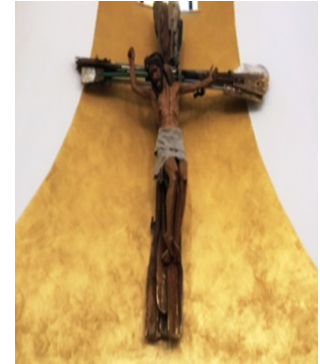


The official morning ceremony at the Porta d'Europa had been cancelled because of the howling wind, rain and sleet. However our group of 12 sisters with two priests from Agrigento couldn't seem to leave this symbolic place which commemorated the suffering of so many. Then a group of young migrants arrived and they too stood shivering near the symbolic door, pointing out the various symbols



– shoes, numbers, names etc. Then the word went out “the sisters and the migrants are here” and gradually all the local officials and diocesan personnel began to gather. It was decided that a simple prayer would be recited at this holy door and a wreath placed on the rocks below, where many bodies have been washed ashore. As I reflected later on the morning’s experience I wondered whether the tenacity shown by the religious women standing together with the migrants in the bitter cold highlighted that what is most needed to face today’s global challenges - the ability to stand in solidarity with one another in the face of difficulties.

We left the angry shores of the Mediterranean Sea and went to the nearby parish Church where Cardinal Montenegro was to celebrate Mass and unveil a special cross which was a gift of Pope Francis to the local people, a sign of his solidarity with them as they open their doors and their hearts to those in need. The cross was a gift from President Castro of Cuba to Pope Francis during his recent visit. It was designed by a female Cuban artist who was present at the unveiling together with the Cuban Ambassador to the Holy See. This cross is a very moving representation of the crucifixion because the wood of the cross is made from discarded oars and the planks of old boats – it gave me a whole understanding of the words proclaimed at the adoration of the cross on Good Friday: “Behold the wood of the Cross on which hung the Saviour of the World. Come let us adore him.” The battered boats carrying hundreds and thousands across our seas are today the visible presence of the suffering Christ. “Come let us adore



him” is an invitation to recognize him in these our brothers and sisters.



At the back of the parish church was yet another powerful symbol – presenting the Gospel message of salvation in the form of a rescue from the stormy seas of life. This was another gift from Pope Francis to Lampedusa for Christmas 2013. The Nativity is taking place in a boat and the figure in the sea is seeking safety in the fragile boat. There is much to reflect on in this striking representation – the open arms of Joseph, the loving gaze of Mary as she looks at her Son

and the hopes and desires of the person seeking safety, as he/she tries to escape from drowning. In a certain sense we are all migrants seeking a place of safety where we can escape the treacherous seas of life that many times threaten to overwhelm us. The Saviour of the World is present with us in the boat of life and reaches out to us through the goodness of others. When we are in touch with our own poverty and need, we know how to open our hearts and lives to others. During the Eucharist Cardinal Montenegro mentioned the presence of the Ambassador from Cuba and the sisters from the many different parts of the world who had recently come to Sicily in solidarity with the people of Lampedusa and Sicily. In his homily reflecting on the Marriage Feast of Cana, the Cardinal said: *Humanity today needs the water of indifference to be turned into the wine of welcome.* The sisters from the UISG community read the prayers of the faithful in their own languages: Amharic, Tigrinya, French, Swahili, Polish, Italian, Hindi, Spanish and Kanada – a small symbol of global solidarity.

After the Eucharist and again later in the afternoon we had the opportunity to speak with several of the young migrants, most of whom were from Eritrea. They had spent months crossing the desert from Eritrea to Sudan and onwards into Libya where they waited for eight months before they could get a passage to Italy. Several spoke a little English and as some of the UISG community members are from Eritrea they were able to converse in their own Tigrinya language. Their joy in being able to do so was so evident. When I asked some how much they had paid to come to Italy, they answered:

\$500 per person. When I wondered how they found that kind of money one of them said: "In the group we help one another and we don't leave anyone behind." This kind of solidarity puts us all to shame and has much to teach us. I was so aware of the light clothing that they wore. All are meant to receive clothing on arrival and each person does in fact receive a "kit" but often the sizes are too big or too small and even with swapping clothing there is not enough to go around.



There are presently only two religious sisters on the island of Lampedusa. These two sisters from Rumania are fluent Italian speakers and have full access to the centre where they try to communicate with the new arrivals. They shared their experience with our group, reflecting on how comforting it seems to be to those arriving to see the presence of religious sisters. They greet them with a smile and often the migrants respond by blessing themselves as they pass the sisters. Their ministry is one of presence and they have seen times when this centre which has accommodation for 400 people has had to cope with 3,000 as the numbers arriving in summer increases substantially.



We met a group of women in the centre from many different African countries – several of whom had small children. Though standing freezing outside in the cold – as there is no gathering room in the centre, just bedrooms - they were delighted to welcome us and to share their hopes and expectations. For so many of them their dream of coming to Europe is on the one hand to escape compulsory military service (Eritrea) or lack of opportunity and poverty and on the other-hand to be educated and to find work. What struck me was how young and under-nourished they all were. I kept asking myself "How can we here in Europe work together to welcome them, to help them to integrate into our different societies and to provide them with the educational opportunities for which they long?" Perhaps there is some way that we can mobilize our religious congregations and our students to become the companions and companions of these new arrivals building respectful, mutual relationships instead of separating them in centres.

I left the island of Lampedusa early on Monday morning and not on Sunday afternoon as had been expected. Due to the windy conditions the planes were unable to land in Lampedusa and in Palermo and so our flight was delayed. This short "waiting" time gave me the opportunity to reflect on the experience of this visit. We had to wait overnight for a plane back to Palermo and from there to Rome. I thought about the hundreds waiting along the African coast for months hoping to cross the seas to a Europe which seems so full of promise. I'm left with so many questions and challenges about how we sisters, in our different countries and regions, can respond to what is probably the greatest mass movement of people in history.



During the Year of Consecrated Life Pope Francis has called us forth in clear and explicit ways. He says "leave your nests"; "go out through that door and meet the people" "go out on the streets"; "go to the frontiers" "leave the centre and travel towards the peripheries"; "reach the fringes of humanity."¹ In various ways recent documents ask "where will the consecrated be" in this new human journey, in this mass of humanity? Will we be like "watchmen at the edge of things" where we can get clarity about what is happening and then discern the small humble responses that we can

¹ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Rejoice: A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women*, (R) # 10, KW, p. 60; Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), #46

make in different contexts? Will we be prophetic witnesses of the Gospel not safeguarding the status quo and the bottom line but demanding that resources be shared and protected? Will we take upon ourselves the desperation of the people? Will we have the courage to swim against the tide of efficiency and the culture of waste? Will we have warm and tender hearts for the tired and the weak? Will we “sense the mystique of living together” in the middle of the chaos and flux and things? Will we be there to mingle and encounter, to embrace and support one another un-afraid “of stepping into the flood, which while chaotic can be a genuine experience of fraternity.”² Will we be part of this caravan of solidarity and work with others to form a truly human community? Will we answer the call to be part of an outgoing Church?

May we begin this prophetic journey – both outward and inward.

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² EG, #87.