

REFLECTIONS FROM PARTICIPATION IN “LIVING AND WITNESSING THE BORDER”

An International Conference on Migration, Borders and Reception

Palermo and Lampedusa, Italy

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Promoted by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) and its Mediterranean Hope Ministries

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DAY 3: SUNDAY, OCTOBER 1—Palermo Tour, Worship, & Conference, “Reception between Vocation and Legislation”

It was nearly three years ago that Benju Gue crossed the Mediterranean as a 16 year old unaccompanied minor from Burkina Faso. He travelled through Libya in North Africa to the “House of Cultures” project of FCEI’s Mediterranean Hope program in the prefecture of Ragusa, located in the southeastern area of the island of Sicily, Italy. Together with nearly 40 other migrants, Benju joined the community of other migrants in the project which continues to build a network of faith support for protection of asylees and integration of refugees in several locations. “For five years, I looked at the lights of Italy before I could cross,” he said. “I told my friends not to go, but the living conditions were very harsh. When I finally crossed, we had just one small meal a day. It was very dangerous as we travelled. They (traffickers) took everything from us, and stripped us naked. When I finally landed, I thanked God and my Mom!” Already, Benju has learned good Italian language, and found an initial job while at the House of Cultures. And above all—he found there a community that felt like family. In fact, he learned and developed confidence so quickly that he now has chosen to move for even additional job opportunities within the capital of Sicily in Palermo.

For Benju—as for all migrants—to enter Palermo is to join a historical stream of diverse populations that have inhabited the city since the Prehistoric Age. As early as 8,000 BC, the Sicani peoples dominated until the Phoenicians sailed up from Canaan to settle. Later came the Punic Wars, after which Palermo became a Roman colony, until Germans overtook it in the 5th century. Next, the North African and Muslim Saracens rolled in, renamed the city Balharm, and built it into a cultural city thought by some to rival Cairo. Christian Norman crusaders then took their turn as leaders, until the Kingdom of Sicily and Naples saw the conquering of the Holy Roman Empire in the area. Finally, the Kingdom of Italy annexed the island in the mid 1860’s—and then was invaded and heavily bombed by Allied forces.

Today, the Mayor in this city of Palermo that is called by some “the most conquered city in the world” is determined to successfully conquer the challenges of migrants to his shores. As he visited the conference, Mayor Leoluca Orlando, who first gained fame by fighting mafia bosses and arresting thousands of mafiosa in the 1990’s, shared how he now goes to meet every migrant boat that arrives in Palermo’s harbor. He also personally met Benju upon his relocation here. Barriers in front of the land of Palermo have been destroyed in order to make it more possible for migrants to safely arrive.

“Migrants” he says, “are an example of the need for respect for every human being. Behind the word ‘migrant,’ we tend to forget there is suffering—but we must respect their rights. Sometimes persons ask me, ‘How many migrants are there in Palermo?’ I say ‘No one! Because, if they are here, they are US!’” The Mayor heartily greets Benju and other

migrants reporting their experiences at the conference, and then says courageously before he departs us for a next commitment—“I respect the laws. But if I am ever put in jail for respecting human dignity of migrants, I will be very happy!”

His words seem the perfect match with today’s World Communion sermon challenge laid out by Pastor Luca Maria Negro, President of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI). Micah, in 2:12-13, prophesied that God would gather together the remnant of Israel and then “break open the way (and) go up before them (so) they will break through the gate and go out.” Likewise, the Mayor’s courage—and that to which the churches are called—is to continue to “break open a way” for resettlement and integration to be possible; trusting that our God will in power desires to open a breach of opportunity and freedom for migrants.