

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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(Photo notes: Top 2 left pics from Alitalia Airport display. Third from rt. on bottom is picture of photo of pope on wall in Lampedusa Catholic Church.)



DAY 5: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 3—Travel to Lampedusa for Ecumenical Ceremony in Commemoration of Four Year Anniversary of Migrant Boat Accident

With the presence of international contracts for interdiction and detention which have “externalized the borders,” much of the EU is increasingly shielded from daily view of the faces and suffering of migrants—while migrants seeking protection are trapped too often in detention centers in Serbia, Libya, and elsewhere. Researcher at the University of Bergamo and the Legal Clinic of Palermo, Alessandra Sciarba, shared with conference participants that while rhetoric endeavors to paint refugees as criminals, in truth “the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ is actually becoming in large part a ‘right to asylum’ crisis.” As denials of asylum applications have risen by more than 20% in the past two years, Sciarba boldly claims “the EU is destroying asylum and perhaps ending the European dream.” At the same time, visa policies, inconsistent throughout the EU, have typically focused on reducing visa numbers; thus resulting in more immigrants without legal status.

Emerging policies related to the international contract agreements have fueled increased raids and beatings of migrants whenever they leave reception centers—and the money and weapons provided for under such contracts have been used to exacerbate tortures of migrants. Concurrently, there has developed increasing resistance against non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who have been providing search, rescue, and reception activities of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. “There is a growing criminalization of solidarity and new legitimization of racism” against the NGOs who often have themselves most directly and repeatedly witnessed life threatening pushbacks and illegal refoulement of refugees at sea.

Yet faith leaders and lawyers, NGOs and ethicists emphasized again and again at the conference that the EU’s (indeed, the world’s) soul and sense of justice are entangled with how and whether we respond to the multiplying—even if often hidden—protection needs of migrants. And perhaps NOWHERE in the world are such questions more at the fore in this crucial time than on the remote island of Lampedusa off the southern coast of Sicily. Sometimes called “The Forgotten Island,” Lampedusa is the southernmost part of Italy and Italy’s southernmost island. Occupied variously by Greek,

Roman, Phoenician, and Arab colonies throughout history, Lampedusa became a part of the new Kingdom of Italy in 1860, but was used primarily in that era as a penal colony for Italy. Indeed, it was Lampedusans themselves who just over a century ago were known for crossing the Mediterranean Sea in the opposite direction, to seek a better life.

But in recent years, this 7.8 square mile island with a population of less than 6,000 has become a central hotspot for migration into Europe. As a Sicilian island actually geographically closer to Tunisia than to the mainland of Italy, Lampedusa throughout history has served as a meeting point between the global south and north. In recent years, it was the site to which the then new Pope Francis chose to make his first pastoral visit in July of 2013; feeling “I had to go” to place a wreath in the waters of the seas (because) “I was touched by the news of migrants who had died at sea, who had drowned.” The Pope’s pulse on the importance of the island for highlighting the dangers of migrant journeys was further confirmed when less than three months later on October 3rd, 368 migrants seeking safety from North Africa drowned as their vessel sunk in the sea just kilometers off shore.

A best practice of welcome in Italy, and recently also in France, has been the “Humanitarian Corridors” program. Humanitarian Corridors is applauded not just because of its effective linkages of refugees with genuine human contact and “heart to heart” welcome, but because it has crafted one of the very scarce legal and safe ways that refugees are able to enter the EU. In Lampedusa and throughout the world, “Humanitarian Corridors” stands in stark contrast to the horrific endings to refugee journeys without any secure arrival options. Given the challenges in global migration noted above, it stands as a sign of hope not just for migrants, but for Europe itself. The Humanitarian Corridors project expresses an ecumenical partnership between Catholics and Protestants from the Community of Sant’Egidio, the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI), and the Waldensian and Methodist Churches. It is a partnership forged likewise together with public government, beginning in December of 2015, when faith partners signed an MOU with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior in Italy to endeavor to welcome 1,000 refugees of all religious and ethnic backgrounds over a two year period—anticipating most to come from Lebanon (primarily from Syria), from Morocco (to which sub-Saharan Africans have escaped to hopefully cross to Europe), and from Ethiopia (where Eritreans, Somalis, and Sudanese have gathered). As of the time of the conference, more than 850 refugees thus far have arrived safely into the care of the partnering faith communities.

The positive effects of the Humanitarian Corridors project is palpable in Lampedusa, as in Palermo and other ports of Italy, as its purposes are to help prevent refugees from traveling on unsafe vessels to seek safety, to help them avoid the damaging abuse of traffickers, to offer the possibility of applying for asylum, and to allow for the potential issuance of humanitarian visas and secure entry without abuses of human rights. Remarkably, funding for the project is completely provided through private non-state sources—especially through the “8 x 1000” taxation system which allows participants to contribute a portion of their tax income to the Waldensian Church, which then allocates funds for the program. Support is also provided through other donation campaigns from partners such as the Community of Sant’Egidio, as an expression of its commitment to building international communities “without borders or walls” among persons of various nations and cultures.

It was in the presence of leading ecumenical partners of the Humanitarian Corridors project that our conference participants gathered on the shore of Lampedusa’s waters on the evening of October 3rd to commemorate the lives lost at sea exactly four years ago. In the service held in Lampedusa’s Catholic Church, champions of migrant welcome from ecumenical faith partners mingled with champions from the community who had directly assisted in the rescue on that tragic day. Some who joined the service—like a young Italian couple—came to cry and remember family members and friends lost in that particular accident. We were surrounded in the center chancel by a huge cross, made of oars by a Cuban artist, and contributed by the Pope. In the hallway was the pulpit, decorated with a boat’s steering helm, behind which the Pope had stood when he visited the island. At the side was a model of the Christ family, helping to pull aboard a migrant onto their small boat.

Throughout our worship, we came to grieve ongoing abuses and human frailties which continue to feed similar migrant tragedies and the global migrant crisis in its many forms around the world. And we came ready to symbolically and physically call upon the inspiration of scripture and the power of our God to break down dividing walls (represented

through stacked boxes that formed a barrier in the front of the sanctuary) caused by militarization, wealth, slavery, human trafficking, egoism, exploitation, selfishness, and commitment to security above human love. As our bulletin said, it was a service which recalled “The Memory that Leaves a Mark on the Present.” And, as a climax of the service, our ecumenical participants offered and read together the “Ecumenical Statement of Lampedusa” developed through our conference in recent days—intended as a statement of commitment to continue to work against injustices that objectify and endanger migrants, and to offer hope and welcome in all our contexts.