



# **Migrants Project in Sicily**

**Triennial 2015 -2018**

## Migrant Project in Sicily on its way (2015 – 2018)

The project is approaching the end of the first three years of service in Sicily. It is a result of the efforts



of 17 Sisters coming different countries and institutes. It was inspired by the desire to create universal communion among the religious women at UISG and to respond to new forms of poverty and marginalisation. It is in response to the invitation by Pope Frances to **“go out and meet others”** so as to promote a new way of living the mission by putting together the efforts and resources through the enrichment of different charismas. It began with two small communities based in Agrigento and Ramacca,

followed by a third community that was established in Caltanissetta in 2016.

The first group started in September 2015. They really were “pioneers”, they left for an unknown destination although they felt strengthened by God’s promise to reveal them the way... Everything was still to be discovered, known and explored, including rejection, scepticism and frustration in front of closed doors...

Each community has since then done its best to organize itself, making great efforts to find its own pace and ways to live both apostolic and community life. They have forged a pathway in the ongoing search for harmony and respect for other cultures and different charismas; this has even included some moments of tension and challenges which have been overcome by the desire to fully live the two-fold mission of *firstly being a bridge between the local and the migrant population, and secondly showing that it is possible to live together, in small intercultural and inter-congregational communities*. It is thanks to the courage and faith of the first ten sisters and their institutions that we can now see how to move forward. Today many doors have opened,

our presence among migrants has grown; we have adjusted to the different places and needs. The scepticism of the local population and of organizations with women we relate has softened and cooperation has finally become possible.



In the meantime, five sisters of the initial group have left and seven new sisters have joined, becoming part of a project that was already operational with an efficient apostolic service in place, in a community

that had found its own style and modus operandi. On the one hand, they had the advantage of finding everything already functioning and on the other hand, they faced the difficulty of adjusting to an already well-organized community, where it was not always easy to integrate new approaches.

At the apostolic level, the activities have been developing on different fronts:

**In Agrigento**, the reception centre of Siculiana opened over a year ago. During this period the sisters have succeeded in gaining the trust of operators and managers by being patient and respecting everyone's



competencies. This focus of this service is mainly internal, with particular attention paid to the development of interpersonal relationships with migrants. This is done by engaging in roles that require active listening, accompaniment and providing translation for the operators, and even teaching Italian when official teachers were absent, and animating the moments for prayer which were requested by many migrants.

Outside the centre, the sisters have kept in touch with the local Church and with Caritas, cooperating when asked and participating in the life of the parish community (the counselling centre, the pastoral council), accepting any requests from some churches of the diocese, being in a continuous open dialogue with the dioceses who are working for and with migrants.

**In Caltanissetta** (a community opened in October 2016) the support activity carried out under the highway bridges has increased to include a series of other services whose need was highlighted by the migrants themselves: pre-school of Italian for Pakistani (men and women in separate classes) who only speak Urdu and therefore are not able to attend standard Italian classes; the spiritual accompanying of Nigerian women asking for sacraments for their children, preparation of adults for the sacraments and some nursing services (taking people to the hospital, medical treatments). Here, there is also a good relationship with the diocesan Caritas organization and with the parish. There is also some initial collaboration with some Mormons who are operating in the area. They



give financial support for the school activities. The sisters' activities are 24/7, especially in relation to the support provided for migrants living under the bridges.

**In Ramacca (diocese of Caltagirone)** the sisters work with the cooperative Hetty Hillesum who work with unaccompanied minors. It is a service requiring much patience and tolerance which often seems to have little success. The result is a very good collaboration between the two communities. The young men have developed a small garden and the community provides a room that will be used as a small workshop for making leather goods.



Also here it is fundamental to build a relationship day by day, by being present and... waiting for the young person to feel accepted and not judged, so that a relationship can begin.

In the past few months, the reception centre at Cara di Mineo has opened the doors to the sisters from Ramacca, welcoming them for their liturgical services and for preparation for

the sacraments for those who request it. Even here, the knowledge of different languages makes the development of relationships easier... for months the sisters have been waiting at the door of the centre without being allowed to enter... and they started to teach Italian to those who wanted to improve the fluency in the language in a minivan on the street. Meeting in the streets has enabled them to develop even deeper relationships with different migrants.

The sisters also regularly pay visits to the CARA migrants who are ill and brought to the hospital of Caltagirone. Here the sisters act as intermediaries between patients and hospital personnel. Once recovered from his/her illness the migrant finds himself/herself alone, without the smallest relationship and in need of a lot of support, often unable to communicate....

The good relationships built with the local population has presented an opportunity to start a progressive integration of the young people with the local families. The cooperative's activities are mainly focused on this aspect.



At the **community** level:



In this world in which individualism and a focus on self makes it more and more difficult to get together, where fear and prejudices lead to the building barriers and the raising of walls... UISG wants to open a prophetic path, which breaks our inner borders... and which brings together fragility and richness and consolidates collaboration at all levels. Community life is therefore a key element of experience.

The sisters testify, without speaking about it, that it is possible to live together, even if they come from different congregations and charisms, speak different languages, and come from other cultures and countries.

This requires every religious women to be able to respect the other, to accept diversity, to build sisterly life together, to seek carefully, even in difficulties, what unites rather than to be afraid of what can divide: whether differences in lifestyle, habits, ways of praying, formation... but, to be honest, perhaps the greatest difficulties are due more to the character and temperament of each person rather than to our inter-cultural composition....! The rooting in Christ and the common mission at the service of those who today are excluded from society, are the reference point that allows each sister to persevere in difficulties.

Life in common is a challenge that the sisters face daily, and it is bearing fruit also as a testimony of a different kind of religious life. If, at the beginning, the religious were looked at with a certain diffidence, because they were often on the road, outside the "convent"... today the inter-congregational experience and the type of apostolic activities carried out are recognized and esteemed by both the clergy and the local population.

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The problem of migration is far from being resolved. If in Autumn 2017, it seemed that the arrivals were few, in December the shipwrecks, the rescues, started again and the clandestine landings on the coasts of Sicily and of Calabria continue, despite the notorious pact with Libya. At the same time the challenge of opening the door to welcome the migrants is growing... Is this due to fear? selfishness? indifference? political exploitation?

This situation makes it difficult to establish long-term programs. The continuous change in the immigration laws, which can lead to the sudden transfer of migrants from one city to another, the closure of the centres, where the sisters work, and the need to start each time in a different situations and with new people is creating some difficulties for the sisters. All the hard work the sisters have done, the networks of relationships they have created, the accompaniment of the individual which has begun are destroyed and they have to start again from scratch...!

At the end of the first three years, three of the sisters who began the experience, have given their consent to continue their service in Sicily, with the religious who took over in the second year, while two new sisters are preparing to start the journey.

If this service will be able to continue it will be due to the generosity of the various Institutes that have sent and continue to send capable and competent sisters who, with great willingness, carry out the project. It will continue because of the financial support that many superior generals continue to give with great generosity. Without this precious help, in terms of both human and financial resources, this project could not continue. We also know that we can count on the accompaniment of many religious communities that are praying for the success of the project. The work done by the sisters cannot be remunerated, in a country where unemployment is very high. The dioceses in which we are inserted provide the housing, but the daily living, the etc. maintenance, repairs, taxes are paid by the UISG Migrants Project .. We would like to express our gratitude to all, because this service is not only for migrants ... but it opens a new way for the future of religious life, in response to the invitation that Pope Francis expressed, several years ago, in the letter that announced the opening of the year of consecrated life:

*“I also hope for a growth in communion between the members of different Institutes. Might this Year be an occasion for us to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization, and social action? This would make for a more effective prophetic witness. Communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations can open up a path of hope. No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. Such a communion inoculates us from the disease of self-absorption.”*

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sr. Elisabetta Flick

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