



INTERNATIONAL FRANCISCAN CONFERENCE of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular

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The 3rd of October 2023 marked ten years since the tragic Lampedusa shipwreck in which 368 migrants, trying to reach Europe aboard a Libyan boat, lost their lives at sea. October 3rd is the Italian National Day of Remembrance and Reception, in memory of all victims of migration.



Thanks to my experience of living and working as part of an inter-congregational community welcoming migrants in Caltanissetta, Sicily, this year I was invited to commemorations in Lampedusa as a spokesperson for the International Union of Superiors General (UISG). UISG is the umbrella organization for leaders of Catholic women's congregations: it brings together 1,903 Superiors General, with Generalates in 97 countries, who represent over 600,000 Sisters worldwide.

While in Lampedusa, I was happy to take part in a panel discussion reflecting on what has changed, or not changed, in the past ten years for migrants arriving in Italy. I also gave several interviews on the issues of migration and integration: I was interested to note that many journalists asked why the presence of religious communities is important in welcoming migrants, and I realized this is something that religious women understand, but perhaps don't

Sister Charity Katongo Nkandu – (FI) talk about enough.

Our main purpose, I believe, is to act as a bridge between immigrants and local people. I have experienced first-hand the negative attitudes and prejudices that many local communities hold until a trusted third party – often a sister or other religious figure – can gain their confidence and reassure them that immigration is an opportunity, not a risk. Our message to local communities is that new arrivals are human beings, like the rest of us, who have a right to safety and development regardless of where they find themselves.

On the other hand, a key part of our role is also to provide support and orientation to immigrants. Many of the Africans who leave their home countries do not know what they are up against and fall into the hands of those who exploit them. Some people take advantage of their vulnerability and ignorance of the law: it is all too easy for immigrants to fall into the wrong hands – or even the wrong gangs – when they lack timely and trustworthy information. These vulnerable people need to be properly informed of their rights, to prevent them from being revictimized a second time, after the horrendous suffering they have often encountered en route to Europe.

This alone, though, cannot solve the problem of building a future for migrants and their families. One of my co-panelists in Lampedusa noted that Italy, which was once a country of arrival, has become a country of transit, as many immigrants seek to move on to northern Europe, where they have better hopes of finding work and a stable future.

The presence of religious women and men helps to enculturate, integrate, and educate immigrants in several aspects of adjusting to a new social context. Sisters help new arrivals to legalize their documents, access translation services, enroll in language programs, connect with genuine lawyers who will not exploit them, and link up with charitable organizations that can welcome and embrace them. We also seek job opportunities for migrants and make sure that they work according to the labor laws of the country – in short, we help them to settle down and prosper.

One thing I highlighted to journalists is the joy that I derived from my work in Sicily and particularly from home visits, which created opportunities to listen to touching stories and share the closeness of an accompanying presence. As Sisters, we break barriers of race, color, religion, and status: we provide a helping hand when needed, without segregation or prejudice, but with the aim of building a fairer, kinder society for all.

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