



# Migrants Project in Sicily



First year of life: 2015-2016

## Genesis of the project and preparation

Everyone knows about the Executive Committee's desire to start a meaningful action on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its foundation that is being celebrated this year.

Thus, an intercultural and inter-congregational project was begun that has as its objective to be a "bridge" for greater communion and solidarity among the two populations in Sicily, the locals and the foreigners landing there.

Research begun a year ago in Sicily has become a reality: a community divided into two groups has begun, thanks to the availability of 10 sisters coming from eight different countries: Argentina, Ethiopia, Eritrea, France, India, Italy, Poland, the Democratic Republic of the Congo... and belonging to 8 different congregations.

### Time for getting to know each other and for formation:

Thanks to the help from various international organizations and numerous people, the UISG was able to provide a formation of 2 and a half months in Rome on the migratory phenomenon. Hospitality of the group at the Daughters of Wisdom allowed for the progressive building of community. They also took advantage of the time for studying Italian or improving their English.

This time of preparation was a **time of grace and a time of Church.**

The beginnings were very austere, and not without their difficulties. The sisters themselves

had the same experience of being in a foreign land ... they took the first steps, not without hard work, by learning to deal with the various cultures present in the communities and with the Sicilian culture, which was also totally unknown to them and completely different from the one from which each had come. They went forward with courage and perseverance by working on a personal and community level to make the inter-congregational community grow in accordance with Pope Francis' invitation: *"So I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create "alternate spaces", where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive."* They built networks with the people abroad and with Italian and foreign lay and ecclesial organizations who work there, looking for an opening to enter into relationship with the world of migrants and begin ministering in a simple and humble way in the places where institutional structures do not arrive, near those who are considered the "rejects of the rejects."

During this period the sisters were supported and helped by the local religious, thanks to the accompaniment of the USMI regional president, Sister Maria Ausilia Maniscalco, already from the first phases of research.

**Little by little the doors that had seemed closed began to open, authorizations arrived and the sisters found appropriate involvements.**

*So I trust that, rather than living in some utopia, you will find ways to create "alternate spaces", where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive. Pope Francis*

*Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People, on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, November 21, 2014*

## Ramacca

The community made up of 4 sisters (an Eritrean, an Ethiopian, and Indian and an Italian) collaborates with a hospitality center for 13 minors who arrive at the community with the single desire of reaching Northern Europe, and therefore, run away as soon as they can, and almost every day there is the need to begin again. The ministry of translation among the minors and the workers is precious work.

The sisters have also begun several projects for a presence in the hospital and in the prison of Caltagirone. One of them visits the imprisoned migrants in Catania in collaboration with the JRS and the others collaborating with the diocesan Caritas for distributing meals.

Bonds with the local population are strong. A small town allows the creation of relationships more easily and more quickly.

## Agrigento

welcomes a community of 3 sisters, a Congolese, an Eritrean, and a Polish sister. After long months of difficult, but precious waiting to begin to know the people and the land, the sisters had the authorization to have access to the Welcome Center of Siculiana, where more than 200 women and children are housed and, when the number of people arriving greatly increases, the population can reach 700 people... greatly reducing the living space.

Here, as well, the sisters act as interpreters, dialogue at length with the guests in their native language, listen to their stories filled with misery, anger and pain, pray with those who request it, translate between the workers and the guests, and have started to create some creative places for games and work with the women and children. Unfortunately it often happens that as soon as a process is begun, the group is moved to another center and so it is necessary to begin again from the top....

The sisters are present and collaborate with the diocesan Caritas, work in a soup kitchen and walk the streets far and wide, taking time to meet the migrants person to person.

## Caltanissetta

On October 25, 2016, we began a third small team of two sisters from different congregations, an Italian and an Indian, and in December a sister coming from the United States will be joining them. The sisters were quickly able to reach the migrants who live along the streets and under the highway bridges. Being able to speak in their language, the people are listened to daily and taken care of and receive medicine.... Not having documents, they have no right to assistance or are afraid of being deported. The parish priests had the sisters meet with the Nigerian women who are prostitutes in the area and they have begun some meetings and catechetical work, prayer times and celebrations requested by the women themselves. They work at the soup kitchen for the poor where anyone in need is welcomed. Dialogue and listening are the main keys that open the hearts of these young women. They hear their stories about the drama that led them to become victims of abuse and violence, against their will.





### Steps taken by the UISG team

The team from Rome following the project has regularly gone down to Sicily, seven times in nine months! The purpose of the visits was essentially, to accompany the experience, support and encourage, to get to know the reality, formation and relationship with the civil and ecclesial authorities, to review and redefine the project, and evaluate the involvement.

All the general superiors of the sisters went there to learn about the place and meet them there. And this has been important not only for the individual sister but for the entire community and for the respective bishops who perceived the presence of the Institutes alongside their sisters.

***The Sicily Migrants project was the first concrete response of the UISG to the need of being present among the migrants***

### Financial Situation

The financial generosity of the General Superiors has been great. We continue to receive donations and we hope that the income will not stop... because the sisters will not be able to have a salaried work and as the families increase, the costs increase! Thanks to the help of one person and an embassy, we were able to buy cars, and thanks to the generosity of some schools we have been able to support some small projects that serve the migrants. On average, the cost of living for each sister is about € 600 a month (including personal expenses, and the utilities of gas, water, electricity/heat.)





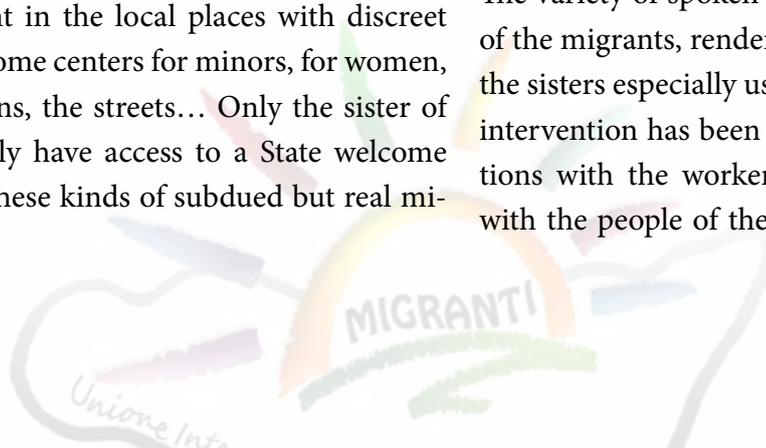
**We truly hope that other sisters will be able to join us so that the Sicily project can be strengthened and move ahead.**

The apostolic competencies required are varied: in the area of health, informal education, pastoral ministry, working with minors and women. A driver's license is important as is a knowledge of Italian, or at least the ability to learn it, and knowledge of a second language such as English, French or Arabic.... Some weeks ago a fourth bishop requested involvement in his diocese that welcomes very many migrants. "The harvest is great, but the workers are few."

We know that beginnings are difficult, because the reality of the place is different from what the media describe. As we said in the preceding pages, our involvement is not at the landing places or in the "hot spots," but in involvement in the local places with discreet services: first welcome centers for minors, for women, in hospitals, prisons, the streets... Only the sister of Agrigento currently have access to a State welcome center. Through these kinds of subdued but real mi-

nistries, we reach that which other congregations in Europe and or in the world are already doing. But our getting together, religious from different congregations and charisms, in addition to being a concrete witness that it is possible to live together and carry out common projects, allows the congregations who desire it to participate in this common project that is trying to respond to Pope Francis' pressing call: *"I also expect from you what I have asked all the members of the Church: to come out of yourselves and go forth to the existential peripheries. "Go into all the world"; these were the last words which Jesus spoke to his followers and which he continues to address to us (cf. Mk 16:15). A whole world awaits us... I ask you to work concretely in welcoming refugees, drawing near to the poor..."*

The variety of spoken languages, among which those of the migrants, renders the multicultural presence of the sisters especially useful. In various situations their intervention has been a great help in cultural mediations with the workers at the welcoming center or with the people of the place. Knowing the language



of the migrants fosters the creation of bridges among the Sicilian people and the migrant population through testimonies, meetings, times of common integration.

**The Sicily Migrants project was the first concrete response of the UISG to the need of being present among the migrants disembarking in Europe. We are convinced that we cannot stop this project. Continuing along new paths by opening ourselves to the world is necessary.**

**In the upcoming year we desire to:**

- Set up networks on an international level among the congregations working in this field.
- Share information and needed resources in the mission alongside the migrants, refugees...
- Promote formation in networking
- Encourage the birth of new inter-congregational projects in the world
- Strengthen collaboration with the international, civil and religious organizations working with migrants.

In order to be able to embark on this new phase, the UISG has taken on a second religious who, by speaking various languages and having significant experience in the field, will be able to take the international reality of the project in hand.

And we are counting on your precious help, as we did for the first phase of the project, in order to succeed in carrying it out.

**It is the program for 2017!**

## Thanks

At the end of this first year we want to thank all the Congregations who were receptive to the call of the UISG and helped to develop this project. A special thanks goes to the congregations who sent their sisters to this mission, because without them the project would never have begun. We want to thank you for your generosity. Each has contributed according to her possibilities, some with money, some with prayers, some with people, some with encouragement and support .... We are aware that for each team to function well, there would need to be four people for each group.

We have received much and learned from the local religious communities who have practical experience in serving the migrants, even though it is different from ours. The sisters who needed to improve their Italian were hosted in two communities who work in the sector of migration and important dialogue was opened for us.

**Report written by Sister Elisabetta Flick, sa**

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