



# Migrants Project in Sicily



Account of this first year: 2015-2016

## Genesis of the project and preparation

You will perhaps have heard about the desire of the Executive Committee of UISG to initiate a meaningful project to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its foundation that was held this year.

As a result an intercultural inter-congregational project was launched in Sicily whose objective was to be a “bridge” for greater communion and solidarity among the local population and the people arriving from many different countries.

The research, which started a year ago in Sicily, has now become a reality. One community was established – based in two separate locations. This was due to the generous presence of 10 sisters who had come from eight different countries: Argentina, Ethiopia, Eritrea, France, India, Italy, Poland, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They belonged to 8 different congregations.

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

Thanks to the support provided by various international organizations and numerous individuals the UISG was able to provide a formation time of two and a half months in Rome focused on the phenomenon of migration. The Daughters of Wisdom very generously hosted the group of sisters and this allowed time to gradually build community. They also took advantage of this preparatory time to study Italian or improve their English. This time of preparation was a **time of grace and a time to create an ecclesial community.**

The beginnings were very demanding and not without many challenges. The sisters themselves

had the same experience of being in a foreign land ... they took their first steps, with a lot of hard work, in learning to deal with the various cultures present in their religious communities. They also came into contact with the Sicilian culture, which was also totally unknown and completely different from the one from which each had come. They moved forward with courage and perseverance, working at both personal and community levels 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 people from abroad and with Italian and international lay and ecclesial organizations who work with migrants. They searched for openings in order to enter the world of migrants and begin building relationships and ministering in a simple and humble way in places where institutional structures are not yet present, close to who are often seen as 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, who had been involved from the first phase of the research.

Little by little the doors that first seemed closed began to open, authorizations arrived and the sisters found ways of being involved appropriately.

*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) works with a welcome center for 13 minors who arriving at the centre with the single desire of reaching Northern Europe, run away as soon as they can; therefore almost every day there is the need to begin again. Their ministry, to translate conversations between the minors and the staff members, is a very important work.

The sisters have also started several other small initiatives including being a regular presence in both the hospital and the prison in Caltagirone. One of the sisters visits the imprisoned migrants in Catania in collaboration with JRS and the others collaborate with the diocesan Caritas staff in the distribution of meals. Bonds with the local population in Ramacca are strong because being located in a small town facilitates the creation of relationships more easily and more speedily.

## Agrigento

has welcomed a community of 3 sisters - a Congolese, an Eritrean, and a Polish sister. After many long months of difficult but important waiting during which time they began to get to know the people and the area, the sisters received authorization to have access to the Welcome Center at Siculiana, where more than 200 women and children are housed. When the number of people arriving increases, the population of the Centre can reach 700 people thereby greatly reducing the living space.

In Siculiana the sisters act as interpreters, have lengthy conversations with the guests in their own languages, listen to stories overflowing with misery, anger and pain, pray with those who request it, and translate conversations between the workers and the guests. They have started to create some creative places for games with the children and for practical work with the women. Unfortunately it often happens that as soon as the process has begun, the group is moved to another center and it becomes necessary to start again with another group... The sisters in Agrigento collaborate with the diocesan Caritas personnel, work with others in a soup kitchen and walk the streets far and wide, taking time to meet the migrants individually.

## Caltanissetta

On October 25, 2016, we began a third small community with a team of two sisters from different congregations, an Italian and an Indian sister, and in December a sister from the United States will join them. They were quickly able to meet the migrants who live along the streets and under the bridges near the highway. Because one of the sisters can speak their language, the people are listened to daily, their needs are taken care of and they receive any simple medicines needed. As many are without documents, they have no right to assistance and are afraid of being deported. The parish priests has asked the sisters to meet with Nigerian women who are involved in prostitution in the area. The sisters have started some catechetical meetings, organized prayer times and some celebrations requested by the women themselves. They work at the diocesan soup kitchen where everyone in need is welcomed. Personal conversations and attentive listening are the main keys that open the hearts of these young women. The sisters hear the dramatic stories that have led them to become unwilling victims of abuse and violence.





### Steps taken by the UISG team

The members of the UISG team, based in Rome, who accompanies the project have travelled regularly to Sicily, seven times in fact during the last nine months! The purpose of these visits is essentially, to accompany the sisters as they experience the reality, to support and encourage them, to help them to get to know the local contexts, to offer formation and to help build relationships with the civil and ecclesial authorities. They also help the sisters to review and re-define the project, and to evaluate their ongoing involvement.

All of the General Superiors of the sisters have visited Sicily to learn about the situation and to meet the sisters there. These visits have been important not only for each individual sister but for the entire community and for the respective bishops who see the different Religious Institutes accompanying their sisters.

***The Sicily Migrants project was the first concrete response by UISG to meet the need to be present among the many migrants disembarking in Europe***

### Financial Situation

The financial support of the General Superiors has been a wonderful gift. We continue to receive donations and we pray that these will continue to arrive because the sisters are not able to assume salaried positions. As the number of communities increase, so also the costs! Thanks to the help of a generous individual donor and of an embassy to the Holy See in Rome, we were able to purchase cars. Thanks again to the generosity of a number of schools we have been able to support some small projects that serve the migrants. The cost of living for each sister is on average about €600 a month (which includes personal expenses, food, transport and the payment of the household utilities, gas, water, and electricity/heat.)





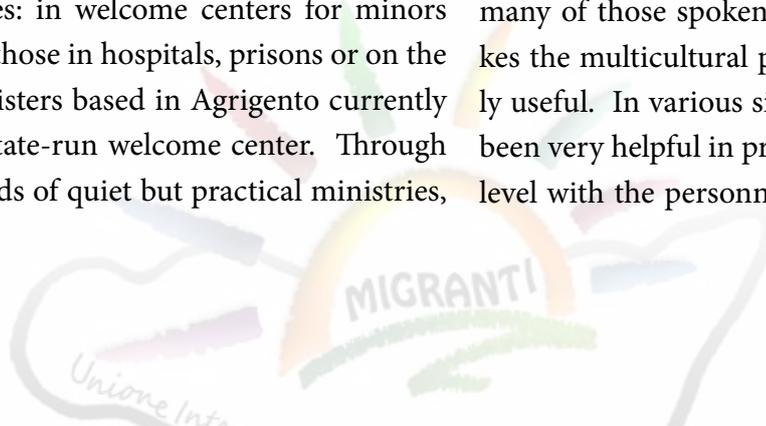
**We truly hope that other sisters will volunteer to join us so that the Sicily project can be strengthened and move forward.**

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

We know that beginnings are always difficult, because the reality is often different from that described by the media. As we have outlined in the preceding pages, our involvement is not at the ports or in the "hot spots." We are involved in local contexts providing small services: in welcome centers for minors and women, with those in hospitals, prisons or on the streets. Only the sisters based in Agrigento currently have access to a State-run welcome center. Through these different kinds of quiet but practical ministries,

we join our efforts with those of other congregations in Europe and in other parts of the world. Our collaboration, as religious from different congregations and charisms, in addition to providing concrete witness that it is possible to live together and carry out common projects, allows the congregations who desire to do so to participate in this common project that is trying to respond to Pope Francis' urgent 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 languages spoken by the sisters, include many of those spoken by the migrants and this makes the multicultural presence of the sisters especially useful. In various situations their intervention has been very helpful in providing mediation at a cultural level with the personnel at a welcome center or with



the local people. Knowing the language of the migrants helps to create a bridge between the Sicilian people and the migrant population by sharing testimonies, organizing meetings and times and places for integration.

**The Sicily Migrants project was the first concrete response by UISG to meet the need to be present among the many migrants disembarking in Europe. We are convinced that this project is not the final step. We have to continue to walk along new paths and where necessary to keep opening ourselves to the world.**

**In the upcoming year we dream of:**

- Setting up networks at an international level among the congregations working in this field.
- Sharing information and much needed resources for the mission alongside migrants and refugees
- Promoting formation in networking
- Encouraging the birth of new inter-congregational projects throughout the world
- Strengthening collaboration with international, civil and religious organizations working with migrants.

In order to be able to embark on this new phase, the UISG has identified a second religious sister to help coordinate the project at an international level. She speaks various languages and has significant experience in the field of migration and consequently will be able to develop the international dimension of the project.

And we are counting on your invaluable help, as we did for the first phase of the project, in order to succeed in carrying out these next steps.

**This is the program for 2017!**

## Thanks

At the end of this first year we want to thank all the Congregations who have responded to the call of the UISG and have helped to develop this project. A special thanks goes to the congregations who have released their sisters for this mission, because without them the project could never have begun. We want to thank you for your generous support. Each person has contributed according to the capacity of the congregation; some have given money, others have provided prayerful support, some have provided personnel and yet others have offered encouragement. However we are aware that for each community to function well, there is a need to have at least four sisters in each group.

We have received and learned much from the local religious communities who have extended practical experience in serving migrants, even though their focus may be different to ours. The sisters who needed to improve their Italian were hosted in two local communities who work with migrants and this sharing provided an important opening for us.

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