

Community of Sant'Egidio: The experience of the Humanitarian Corridors

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On December 15th, 2015, a Memorandum of Understanding marking the opening of humanitarian corridors was signed in Rome between the Foreign Ministry, the Interior Ministry, the Sant'Egidio Community, the Federation of Italian Evangelical Churches and the Waldensian Church. This is a highly innovative initiative promoted by civil society (and in particular Christian communities) availing itself of the cooperation of institutions.

Immigration is nowadays a globalised, unavoidable and complex phenomenon, not a fleeting emergency, which requires forward-looking policies, greater solidarity between nations as well as the participation of these societies especially as far as reception policies are concerned.

What are humanitarian corridors? I would like to dwell on the two main aspects of the humanitarian corridors initiative. The first involves creating safe and legal arrivals in Europe avoiding deaths at sea and countering the exploitation of human beings by traffickers and those providing the boats. The second aspect involves an innovative integration process also thanks to civil society's significant involvement.

Let us address the first of these aspects. We all know that access routes to Europe are closed, with the exception of UNHCR Resettlement programs. Nowadays the "main gate" is closed and all that remains is the often dangerous "back door". The tragically increasing number of those who have died at sea in recent years speaks for itself. We who belong to the Sant'Egidio Community asked ourselves whether there might be a way of avoiding this tragedy. Our objective was to find a legal way of entry that would overcome European fears without changing current legislation on asylum. We also wanted to present a project in which we would be personally involved, exposing ourselves. So we asked the Italian government to support us, but paying all expenses ourselves using sponsors, funds and revenue arising from ecclesiastic taxes that the Italian and Waldesian churches benefit from. This would include all travel expenses as well as those linked to reception in Italy over a long period of time.

The reference European law is Article 25 of Visa Regulations (no. 810/2009 dated July 13th, 2009), according to which each signatory state is permitted to issue humanitarian visas with limited territoriality and therefore only for their own countries. In compliance with the agreement signed in 2015 and renewed in 2017, the Italian government has made available 2,000 visas to the promoting or-

ganisations for a first phase. In less than 2 years we have therefore been able to bring 1.500 Syrians (and some Iraqis) from Lebanon to Italy in a safe and legal manner. Furthermore, in 2017 a second agreement was signed between the Italian government and the Sant'Egidio Community to open a second humanitarian corridor from Ethiopia to Italy, this time in cooperation with the Italian Episcopal Conference and the Italian branch of Caritas. A first contingent of 500 people, mainly Eritreans, Somalis and Sudanese will be able to travel safely to our country in the coming months; 300 of them already have arrived in the last months.

The people are chosen in Lebanon and in Ethiopia by the promoting organisations with assistance also provided by local associations and international bodies, like UNHCR and others. But selection is directly made by the promoting organisations (Sant'Egidio, Italian Protestants, Italian Caritas). We follow criteria based on vulnerability regardless of ethnicity and religion. These are victims of persecution, torture and violence; children who are ill or wounded, elderly people who are ill, the disabled, people wounded in the war, war widows with children etc. In making our choices we are trying not to separate families and whenever possible we bring the entire family nucleus. The first to arrive here a year ago, together with her family, was young Falak, a seven-year-old girl suffering from a serious eye tumour. She had lost one eye as it was impossible to receive treatment in Syria and in Lebanon and the disease was spreading. Falak is now well and being looked after at a pediatric hospital in Rome.

Humanitarian corridors – and this is a very important aspect – are safer for everyone (for the migrants and for the Europeans welcoming them). They are safe for the refugees who no longer travel by sea but by air. They are safe for the country welcoming them because refugees are identified before leaving and their identities checked, with fingerprints taken at the embassies in Beirut and Addis Ababa. It is only after these checks that humanitarian visas are issued. The timeframe is shorter and the first 1.500 people were selected, identified and brought to Italy over a brief period of time. Time is decisive especially for people experiencing a situation involving vulnerability.

I will now address the second important aspect linked to humanitarian corridors, that of an innovative integration process. As I have said, it is a bottom-up initiative and one that makes use of the Sant'Egidio Community's three-decade-long experience in the reception and the integration of those we call "new Europeans". Whoever arrives in Italy is the guest of families, parishes, local associations, dioceses, ordinary citizens who feel sympathetic and generously offer their facilities and resources. It is a model of private sponsorship one could describe as "adoptive". It is, after all, a model that is already active in many Italian families with carers who become part of the family. The

result is an instant relationship with the population, the quick integration of adults in schools where they learn Italian, children immediately enrolled in state schools and, in the future, a broader network for finding a job and becoming independent. The first few weeks in Italy are decisive for embarking on a positive integration process. There is no time to be lost. In other words, the humanitarian corridors allow us to test an innovative reception system as it exploits and mobilises civil society's resources. Immigrants are in fact very often placed in centers. These centers rarely foster integration. Furthermore, immigrants are distributed all over the country, according to the principle of widespread reception. The 1,500 people who have arrived so far are living in 17 regions and in 90 different cities. We from Sant'Egidio, together with other organisations, monitor and support the entire process in addition to personally hosting some of them.

I would like to also underline the money saved, since many services are provided by private citizens making available their resources and their time. The average cost of hosting is half the government's cost. Another important aspect facilitating integration is that of the greater speed with which refugee status recognition procedures are implemented. Refugees arriving through humanitarian corridors are not yet acknowledged as such and like those arriving by other means must be assessed by a commission. Procedures to obtain refugee status recognition are faster, since the procedures are already agreed on as are the subjective characteristics of the asylum-seekers, with particular reference to the conditions of those who are most vulnerable, facilitating and simplifying all assessment procedures. On average, refugees arriving in Italy through humanitarian corridors obtain refugee status within six months instead of the customary two years.

There is one more aspect of these humanitarian corridors that I would like to underline, and it is perhaps the most important. The fact that they can be replicated. Ours is a pilot project that does not immediately involve large numbers of people, although some have emphasised that Sant'Egidio has placed more refugees in Italy than 14 European states have done all together. Our intention is to open new paths that can be followed by other states and other organisations. It is for this reason that we signed a similar agreement with the Governments of France, Belgium, San Marino and Andorra, opening new humanitarian corridors for Syrians from Lebanon to other European countries. We are holding discussions with other European countries. This project could extend beyond Europe in a manner similar to what the Canadians are already doing.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise one last aspect of these humanitarian corridors that is of the utmost importance in recent times. The humanitarian corridors can contribute to change the narrative about immigrants. We were surprised by the positive reactions of so many people in Italy and

in other European countries. Every day we receive offers of help, availability to host people and solidarity. I believe this is linked to various factors. First of all the process involving humanitarian corridors places right at its centre the stories of those arriving in Italy, often children or victims of violence. We are not dealing with sterile numbers but with people in danger. There is therefore a spreading of the awareness that they are not a danger – to quote Pope Francis – but people in danger. I would also like to emphasise the security aspect. As I said earlier, those arriving through humanitarian corridors are identified and checked before leaving. We know who is entering our countries. Furthermore, humanitarian corridors answer the needs of many citizens asking for the migratory phenomenon to be “managed” by institutions. Such a complex and structural phenomenon cannot in fact be addressed by calling for walls to be built or ignoring it completely. It is necessary to implement medium and long-term policies capable, on the one hand, of fighting the causes of emigration with intelligent cooperation policies, while on the other, simultaneously creating safe and legal access routes for an immigration we will increasingly need, fostering from the very beginning the full integration of those arriving in our countries.