

Sicily Action Team

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Prayer Letter March 2010

Ciao tutti,

'So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' Genesis 1: 27 (NLT)

New arrivals

Around a month ago, Rosano, a southern Italian refugee camp, was demolished by the government, after friction between immigrants and the locals. This camp held around 1,000 immigrants, living in desperate conditions – three showers and eight toilets between them. Some of the immigrants from Rosano fled to Syracuse. On arrival these immigrants had nowhere to go, so our good friend, Father Carlo from Bosco Miniti Catholic church, allowed 40 of them to sleep in his church. We happened to be at the church doing an ecumenical Bible study the night they arrived. It was awful seeing them sleeping on the cold stone floor.

As many of the immigrants speak English, Father Carlo asked us to spend time talking with them. At the next available opportunity, we returned to the church. Once there we were able to make friends with the English-speaking immigrants, the majority of whom are from Gambia. At first many of the



Hangin' out with the Gambian crew!



immigrants were suspicious of us and thought we might be journalists. After a short while we were able to earn their trust and have since become good friends with them.

Long journeys

The more time we spend with the immigrants the more we hear the dreadful stories of what they go through to get to Italy. Many of the immigrants have travelled here from Western Africa. The journey is long and dangerous. In order to undertake such a journey, the immigrants have to pay very large sums of money, after which they are bundled on to trucks like sardines, and driven north across the Sahara desert. Often some of the journey would be made on foot with little food and water. In some cases, the immigrants were simply dropped off in the middle of the desert and left to fend for themselves as the driver ran off with their money – these guys have literally stared death in its face. Whilst the exact route differs, the majority of immigrants coming to Italy found themselves in Libya, where some are imprisoned by the authorities and the 'lucky ones' find boats to bring them across to Sicily. The boat journey generally takes two and a half days, and the immigrants often have to stand for the whole journey, so that more people can fit in. The individual stories have been quite horrendous.

Racism

Once the immigrants arrive in Italy they face the major problem of racism. Every immigrant we have spoken to appears to have experienced it in some



Race? (Indicate which); Human

form, with stories ranging from being punched in the middle of the street to being mugged at gunpoint. There are other less striking instances too – particularly with people refusing to sit next to the Africans on the bus or making them move. One guy even told us about a coffee place here

in Syracuse, which focuses on the colour of your skin – if you are white, you may sit down at a table and have your coffee in a china cup, if you are black, your coffee is put in a little plastic cup, which you must drink outside – either way you will pay the same price. This hardly seems fair. As a result, it is a great testimony to the love of God to see the people in the church reaching out to the Africans, caring for them, chatting with them and coming alongside them. We are really privileged to be part of it.

Activities

We now visit the immigrants at least three times a week. We often take our guitars and play music with them. The majority of them are really talented drummers. They love sharing their talents with us and enjoy hearing us playing our guitars as well.

Nick and Ben also play football with them. Football has been a great way of building relationships between cultures. We often have representatives from an array of African nations, Italy and the UK all playing together.

A lot of the time we just sit and chat with them. We talk to them a lot about their past experience and about their dreams for the future. This has been moving and challenging. It is great that we have built up enough trust from them that they feel they can share these things with us.

Priest in prison

At the beginning of February we received news that Father Carlo had been put under house

arrest under allegations that his church was a secret mafia base. This has been stressful for the immigrants and they have stopped getting lunch as a result. However this has sparked a positive reaction from many people in the community who have stepped up and taken up many of the jobs Father Carlo has left behind.

Protests

Recently we have been involved in two peaceful protests against the racism in Sicily. These included processions through Syracuse, music concerts and a whole lot of balloons. During these parades we wore giant yellow sandwich boards bearing equality slogans. This was great as many people came out support the cause and helped in raising awareness about the issue.

Please pray:

- ◆ For the immigrants, that they would be able to get their work permits through quickly, and that the allegations concerning Padre Carlo would not slow this.
- ◆ For Padre Carlo, who has been under house arrest for around a month now.
- ◆ For us, that we would make the most of the month and a half we have left here in Sicily.
- ◆ For the other projects we are involved in: English corner, homework club, church services, and a musical with the youth of Lentini.
- ◆ For our church which is still struggling and facing the possibility of having no pastor in the near future.

Thank you once again for all your support and prayers.

With love,

Nico, Rhianna, Beniamino & Daniela xxxx