

International Update (no.2)

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As 2019 springs into life, let us bring you up to date with the work the work we have been involved in – and the issues which have affected us – over recent months.

Welcome Manifesto

The body which gave life to the Mediterranean Hope project is the FCEI¹, generally referred to in English as the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy. The FCEI provides, amongst other things, a vehicle for members to act collectively in living out – rather than simply talking about – faith. The Mediterranean Hope project is one manifestation of the FCEI's commitment to justice. For the FCEI, it is important that the public at large understand not only what we are doing but why we are doing it.

Perhaps unusually, whilst migration may polarise from a political perspective, from a theological perspective, the fundamental principles seem fairly straightforward. There is clarity about what our attitude to “the stranger” should be. In light of that, the FCEI has seen fit to cut through the political maelstrom with its “Welcome Manifesto”, a two-page leaflet² which sets out the biblical position on migration and, significantly, how that applies in today's context.



For those coming at this from a faith perspective, this little leaflet takes us back to basics, providing some markers in the mist of the conflicting chatter. For those coming at this from another perspective, it clarifies our motives for acting as we do, smashing any perception that this is party political. Notwithstanding the Italian context, the principles it expounds are universal. Fundamentally, the FCEI is arguing for radical hospitality, even where that presents some personal challenges. The Welcome Manifesto was formally

¹ <https://www.fcei.it/>

² <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Welcome-Manifesto-English.pdf>

adopted by the FCEI last year, and has now been shared widely with congregations across Italy. It is a reference tool and a stimulus for discussion, making clear the link between faith and action.

Salvini Law

4th December 2018 saw the formal entry into force in Italy of Law No. 132³, formally passed a few days earlier by the Italian legislature. The provisions of the so-called “Salvini Law”, which are described within the body of the document as “urgent”, cover “international protection, immigration and public security”.

It was a key election promise of Italy’s current Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, that he would tighten Italy’s approach to migration. He has not failed to keep his promise, as the new law attests. Key amongst its provisions is the abolition of humanitarian protection, one of three forms of protection formerly afforded by the Italian state to vulnerable migrants. It will remain possible to apply for refugee status (as defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention) and subsidiary protection (as provided for by European law) but those whose permits are currently based on humanitarian protection will not be able to renew these when they expire, and this will no longer be an option for new arrivals. Given that the vast majority of Italy’s vulnerable migrants benefit from this form of protection, this is a significant step. The replacement scheme of “special protection” is widely considered to be much more restrictive in scope and repatriation will not keep pace with the anticipated expiry of these permits. The majority of those with humanitarian protection will accordingly become irregular migrants. It seems ironic that, in a year when actual migrant arrivals have dropped by 80%, “irregular migration” should potentially increase as a result of a deliberate change in the law.

The effects of this change will be exacerbated by the Salvini Law’s provisions in relation to reception centres. Italy currently provides different types of accommodation for those in the asylum system, including “SPRAR” centres. These are considered to be well-adapted, providing a service which goes beyond basic accommodation, with a focus on integration into society at large. Accommodation in these centres will now be available only to those who have been granted refugee status, and not to those who are in the process of making an application for this, or other forms, of protection. It is not clear that there will be sufficient space in other centres for those who will be obliged to leave SPRAR accommodation, and unlikely that those who are so placed will access anything like the current level of support whilst their applications are pending. For those whose application would have been for humanitarian protection, no accommodation will be made available. Meantime, informal camps, such as Baobab Experience in Rome, are being dismantled by the authorities. As temperatures drop, an increased number of people are facing life on the streets. The challenge for civil society and the faith community to plug the gap is considerable.

Unsurprisingly, these measures are not universally approved. On 10th November 2018, a demonstration involving over 450 organisations took place in Rome denouncing the prevailing xenophobic and anti-immigration rhetoric and policy. A week of mobilisation against the Salvini Law has been earmarked from 2nd to 9th February (#indivisibili) and there is ongoing discussion regarding the creation of a permanent anti-racist forum around which these diverse organisations can converge.

Calabria

It is important to recognise the very significant efforts which many Italians have made over the years to welcome migrants. One such example is the community of Riace, in Calabria, led by mayor Domenico (Mimmo) Lucano, whose approach has received worldwide plaudits and praise.

³ <http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2018/12/03/18G00161/sg>

Riace opened its doors to migrants over a decade ago. Its far-sightedness reversed the village's depopulation, led to the local school remaining open, and saw the development of a number of new businesses. For the initiative to succeed in a region beset by economic challenges and organised crime was particularly inspiring. As Mimmo said in a recent television interview, "If this approach can work in Riace, it can work anywhere."



Last year, however, Mimmo was arrested and charged with facilitating clandestine immigration and, pending trial, has been banned from Riace. State assistance formerly provided to Riace has been withheld and, in the same week as the arrest, Matteo Salvini announced his intention to disperse the migrants living in Riace to other parts of Italy.

Some of those living in Riace are beneficiaries of our humanitarian corridors programme. This year, Mediterranean Hope will express solidarity with Riace and its neighbour, Gioiosa Ionica, by funding a project to support the development of tourism in this area. "*Il turismo ecosolidale*", which might be described as tourism with a conscience, attracts those who wish to do more than benefit themselves as they explore the world. For those migrants and locals providing tourist accommodation in Calabria, promotion of the area would provide a much needed boost to the local economy and, potentially, enable the "Riace experiment" to stay alive.

Search and Rescue (SAR)

In our last newsletter we reported how NGOs at work in the Mediterranean were being steadily choked out of existence. The situation remains precarious. There is one alliance left, comprising Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms, German NGO Sea-Watch and, in an interesting development, an Italian-backed collaboration known as Mediterranea. These sea-based NGOs are supported in monitoring migrant crossings by airborne NGOs such as Pilotes Volontaires.

Mediterranean Hope continues to provide financial and practical support for those engaged in SAR work. Just prior to Christmas, Daniele Naso undertook his fifth mission as ship's cook aboard the *Open Arms*, during the course of which the *Open Arms* was engaged in rescuing over 300 souls. As the ship eventually headed for a safe port in Spain, Daniele sent the picture below. The timing served as a reminder of another refugee family who would ultimately be chased from home to another country following the birth of their child.



Italy's #chiudiamoporti ("close the ports") policy - trailed on Twitter rather than in any draft law - remains to the fore. As this newsletter goes to press, two boats respectively carrying 32 and 17 migrants rescued from the sea over two weeks ago remain without a port. Despite the FCEI's offer to look after these migrants, Italy's Minister of the Interior remains steadfast in his refusal to allow the boats to dock. And, despite repeated calls for help, no other European country has so far offered a safe berth for the boats. Although the reasons for this may be complex, Europe's failure to establish a coherent collective response to such emergencies remains a source of shame and concern.

Europe – Humanitarian Visas

EU institutions remain deadlocked in attempts to reform the Common European Asylum System. As the EU elections approach this year, there is concern that agreement on proposals for reform which have been on

the table for years will not be achieved. In an effort to make some progress, the EU Commission has proposed that the five least controversial proposals of the seven under consideration be passed. This would mean abandoning, for now, any reform of the notorious Dublin Regulation, which provides that migrants arriving in the EU must make any application for international protection in the member state in which they first land. Application of this regulation leads to inevitable pressure on the EU's border states which, for reasons of geography, receive and have responsibility for the vast majority of migrants attempting to reach the EU. Unless a system which allows migrants to be distributed across the EU is implemented, the burden will continue to fall on countries such as Italy, fomenting inevitable resentment about the situation within those countries.

MEP Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar has long lobbied for a system of Europe-wide humanitarian visas which would potentially ease the pressure on specific member states and disrupt “illegal” immigration. Under his proposal, such visas could be applied for from abroad and, if obtained, would permit beneficiaries to travel openly into Europe without involving people smugglers. The proposal envisages, in the first instance, limited numbers from a small list of countries over a pilot period: carefully considered measures which would allow the scheme to be tested before its scope were widened. The example of schemes such as our humanitarian corridors programme demonstrates that such initiatives can work and we have been pleased to provide information about that to those involved in the proposal. Following two plenary votes, the EU Parliament endorsed the proposal with a majority of 64.6% and invited the EU Commission to prepare a draft bill giving effect to its terms prior to 31st March 2019. There are many hurdles to cross before such a bill becomes law – not least the need for individual member states to agree to its terms – but this represents a constructive step outside the current package of reforms which have proved to be so controversial.



Call to Action

The support you already provide to us through prayer and in showing solidarity with our work remains invaluable. There are, however, some other concrete ways in which, if willing, you could potentially support us further.

First, in relation to the *Welcome Manifesto*, we would be delighted if you would use and raise awareness of this. We are aware that some churches outside Italy have already endorsed this document and that others are planning to use this as a basis for creating their own welcome manifesto. Should that be the case for your organisation, please let us know. We would love to see the document bear fruit!

Second, we know that the political situation in Italy is not always well publicised and that reporting in relation to the ongoing challenges in the Mediterranean Sea can be patchy. Across Europe – and beyond – we see the rise of xenophobia and anti-immigration rhetoric. To stem that tide, we need to keep people informed about what is happening and the effect of that on individuals.

We will continue to keep you updated through our newsletters, website, Facebook page and Twitter posts. These include:

@Medhope_FCEI <http://www.mediterraneanhope.com/>

<https://it-it.facebook.com/Mediterranean-hope-252231521632595/>

@fionakMedHope

<http://www.nev.it> (“News from Italy”)

Please do circulate the information we post on social media and in your own circles.

Third, we are always on the lookout for volunteers at the Casa delle Culture in Scicli (Sicily) and with the team working on Lampedusa. Because these are sensitive roles, we ask that volunteers commit for no less than one month, and ideally for longer. Time is needed to train volunteers and for them to adjust to conditions which can be psychologically challenging. Anyone interested in volunteering should email their c.v. and expression of interest to Alessia Melillo at alessia.melillo@fci.it, ideally some months in advance of the period envisaged.

In their own words...

We'll end with some recent quotes from those who regularly speak on the project's behalf.

“As Italian Protestants, who for years have been committed to welcoming and integration actions, we feel that Riace ‘belongs also to us’, and for this reason we want to express to you, in addition to our solidarity, our willingness to support the Riace experiment, and other similar ones that are developing in Calabria”. (Extract from letter to Mimmo Lucano, mayor of Riace, sent on behalf of the FCEI Council)

Luca Maria Negro, President, FCEI 16th October 2018

“As for the challenges, the main one is to remain faithful to ourselves, to our convictions and to our mission in a time when those who shout the loudest are heard, and those who are working for humanitarian purposes risk criminalisation or derision because they go against “common sense.” Our aim is to defend human rights, effectively communicate what we do and not waver from our vocation to serve Christ.”

Paolo Naso, Co-ordinator, Mediterranean Hope, 27th November 2018