

A wind-rose of hope

On 2 October 2014, an inter-faith prayer meeting took place on the theme “Memory between sea and sky”. The Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) organised this event at Lampedusa in order to commemorate, one year later, the tragedy of 3 October 2013, in which 368 people lost their lives only a few metres from the island’s shores. This prayer initiative was so spiritually intense and opened up such significant scenarios for future collaboration that it is worth reporting on.

Imagine you are in a square in front of an attractive little church, its facade painted white and blue. While young volunteers set out chairs in a circle, you can stroll to the right along tree-lined avenues, banked by flower-beds, leading to the caves where, as Don Mimmo, the parish priest of Lampedusa, explains, it was the custom in ancient times to leave food and water for travellers resting there. In honour of this story, the place is still called “Porto Salvo” (safe haven), and the sanctuary is dedicated to the Madonna di Porto Salvo. Lampedusa is not only a theatre of massacre and human drama, it is above all a place of encounter, of welcome, of sharing. To the left, another avenue leads to a cliff plunging down to a gully forming a natural amphitheatre.

The seats are now all occupied and many others line the walls around the square for the whole ceremony. In conclusion we will hear that there were over 350 people present, among inhabitants of the Island, tourists, participants at the various events held recently and representatives of faith communities. In the first rows sit about twenty young Eritreans, survivors of the terrible tragedy: today they live in Europe, but they wanted to gather with us, and now they sing and pray.

Why are we here? Ten men and women tell us. Sitting among the crowd, they get up and go to the microphone. We are here to ask God’s forgiveness because the deceased whom we commemorate today are victims of an unjust system that we cannot, or do not want to change. We are here to proclaim that the love of God will be victorious over all. We are here to ask God’s blessing on those who every day defy the sea to flee persecution, hunger, poverty and war. We are here to pledge together that the Mediterranean may be a sea of encounter and hope and not a sea of death and fear. The silence that follows is not one of emptiness, absence, bewilderment, surrender or, worse still, indifference. The silence is a moment of truth, about our own sin and the sin of the world; it is a time of waiting for that word of grace that renews all things.

This truth and this proclamation are at the heart of the messages of the various religious leaders. Some read passages from their own sacred book, some invite us to pray holding hands or taking off our shoes. Some sing, recite, reach the consciences of those present with an appeal. Personally I chose to call the attention to a work that links us up - those who were in Lampedusa and those who leave for their “journey of hope”, those who are safe and sound in their own homes and those who risk their lives in the desert or at sea or through the violence of slave-drivers. The word is: promise. But at the end I wanted to utter another word: pardon, forgiveness. Pardon that is not like a sponge wiping out the responsibility and guilty, but is an opportunity to change, transform the situations, keeping the tormentors in view and sitting at the same table as those with the power to pass laws and decide on the future of the helpless and persecuted.

After the words, a gesture. On the ground, in the middle of the circle of chairs, we build a wind-rose, a compass, with the wood of the boats piled up in a corner of Lampedusa. Knowing the winds is vital to get your bearings and go on, as it is essential to know the points of the compass. But here there is something more. Two women stand up, take pieces of coloured cloth and spread them on the ground. So, North becomes the North of Solidarity, South becomes the South of Justice, East becomes the East of Hope, West becomes the West of Welcome. The music dies down. Everyone's eyes are filled with emotion and sympathy surging up from the depths. The bodies of those seated and of those standing are filled with trust in God and the desire to bear witness to it. Italy hides from reality and truth. Europe lowers the shutters. But the women and men moving in the shadow of the promise do not accept that, they cannot accept it.

At the end, we take a slip of paper and write down a thought, a prayer, a verse, a pledge, and place them inside the circle of the wind-rose. And we have kept those slips.

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