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European public opinion is being systematically updated on the number of migrants landing on our shores. Almost every day newspapers report figures and variation over the corresponding periods of previous years. The not too subliminal message is: TOO MANY. Rarely, if ever, do they mention the dimension of the heartrending human slaughter, the bloody toll exacted by Mediterranean crossings from the Middle East or Africa to Southern Europe. And yet here too record numbers have been reached: 4,420 casualties in 2016, compared to 3,463 in 2015 and 3,184 in 2014. This is a 28% and 39% increase respectively. According to a survey carried out by the University of Amsterdam 3,188 people drowned between 1990 and 2013, but by August 2015 the number had increased to 8,607. It is a macabre account and exact figures are very hard to come by. Some sources go as far as bringing the total of migrants who drowned or died on overland travel to Europe between 2000 and 2015 to a staggering 23,000: 50% more than estimated. A warlike slaughter, an average of over 1,600 a year.

On July 8, 2013, four months after his election, Pope Francis went to Lampedusa on his first pastoral trip. He talked about the globalization of indifference and concluded his moving homily with these words: “Who cried over the death of these brothers and sisters? Who cried for the people who were on the boats? For the young mothers and their children? For the men who were hoping to make a little money, enough to provide for their families? We live in a society which has forgotten how to cry, how to share in other people’s sufferings: the globalization of indifference deprived us of the ability to cry!”

Drownings have become an open wound in the body of our societies, a wound that burns and festers. Lest we forget, for some years now the *Community of Sant’Egidio*, on the occasion of the World Day of Refugees, has been honoring with a solemn ecumenical and interreligious prayer the memory of “dying of hope”. For it is the hope of a better future that is the root cause of migration, that “makes people oblivious of danger, obliterates fear and sometimes obscures reason”, as Domenico Quirico, a great reporter, wrote.

In welcoming refugees from Beirut reaching Italy thanks to a “humanitarian corridor” Andrea Riccardi explained that “humanitarian corridors not only offer an answer to the great humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Syria but provide an escape from the deadly tentacles of the human traffickers, smugglers, death lords who force so many to undertake such a terrible journey”.

The initiative of humanitarian corridors, launched in January 2016, is first of all an answer to the innumerable tragedies that take place near our coastline, the possibility that Christian organizations offer the refugees: they no longer have to risk their life in order to seek the protection to which they are theoretically entitled. But the guarantee of safe and regular access routes is accompanied by a proposal submitted to the EU to overcome the contradiction of having an advanced juridical framework – perhaps the best in the world – and yet one that is almost impossible to implement.

Europe has in fact extended the protection offered to asylum seekers. Next to the refugee status defined by the Geneva Convention, which in practice covers cases of individual persecution, it added subsidiary, humanitarian and temporary protection. It introduced the category of individuals at risk of discrimination, inhuman or degrading treatment, adverse events or the life threatening results of armed conflicts. But though the right to seek asylum is strengthened, in practice it is greatly limited since applications require the applicant's presence in a EU state. Furthermore there is no or very little harmonization between the various states: national asylum policies differ widely and great discretion is left in the implementation of common standards. This explains why the percentage of migrants from the same area who are granted asylum is so different from one country to the other. Under the migratory pressure of the last few years EU member states have retreated behind their borders, barring a few temporary exception, and abandoned the principle of solidarity and shared responsibilities. Just think of the anachronistic Dublin III Ruling still extant and of how the resettlement and relocation agreement has failed. In Europe doors are barred even to UNHCR programs for global resettlement – i.e. the transfer of refugees from the country of first arrival to another country which agrees to offer them protection.

The project of humanitarian lanes developed out of the belief that refugees should be able to apply for protection with third countries institutions. Its juridical basis is Article 25 of the European Union Visa Regulation which grants each member state the possibility of issuing visas with Limited Territorial Validity for humanitarian reasons, reasons of national interest, or existing international obligations. Thanks to Article 25 an agreement was signed with the Italian Ministry for Foreign Relations and the Italian Home Ministry to authorize the arrival of 1000 refugees from Lebanon, mostly Syrian nationals, over a two year period. Some ten days ago, with the last contingent, we have reached about 850 arrivals. Lebanon, with a population of 4,5 million, hosts approximately 1,2 million refugees: by comparison Italy should host 13 million.

The agreement grants legal entry into Italy (and the possibility of filing asylum requests) to vulnerable people, i.e. families with children, elderly and sick people, people with disabilities but also victims of persecution, torture and violence. These people are selected through representatives of the sponsoring organizations operating in loco, thanks also to the cooperation of local players (international organizations, Churches, local NGO, etc.) and the names are passed on to Italian consular authorities in transit countries to allow control by the Home Ministry. On

arrival in the country of destination they are photographed and fingerprinted and a final check is carried out in real time by the European control system. Safety, both for refugees and hosts, is a basic characteristic of the project.

Once in Italy refugees are welcomed by the project sponsors and – in cooperation with other partners – are settled in various homes and reception centers. Our communities have been very active in helping us to find accommodation at religious houses or in apartments made available by private individuals. Migrants are helped to integrate into the Italian social and cultural tissue: they are taught the language, children are enrolled in school, etc., and of course they are offered legal assistance to file asylum applications. The template is one of small units, personalized assistance similar to that provided for adoptions, involvement and active participation of local communities. Andrea Riccardi has spoken of them as “the answer of Italian civil society that eschews selfish self absorption, does not look the other way but wants to act, to help”. In fact so far offer of help has been higher than demand.

The central role of civil society is also due to the fact that the project is entirely financed by the sponsoring organization, at no cost to the State.

The first humanitarian lane was born thanks to the partnership between the *Comunità di Sant'Egidio*, the *Federation of Italian Evangelical Churches* and the *Waldensian Evangelical Church*. In January 2017 a second humanitarian lane was officially opened: the hotspot is in Ethiopia and it will transfer 500 refugees from South Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia over a one year period. In this instance the *Comunità di Sant'Egidio* will be cooperating with the *Italian Episcopal Conference* through *Caritas*.

The model has proved contagious: recently the French government decided to adopt the same approach and negotiations are under way with other European countries. It is an example of best practice and a perfectly replicable avant-garde solution. Our hope is to see it soon extend to cover the entire continent.