

ENCOUNTER TO TRANSFORM

Ministerial Innovation through Collaboration

In 2016 the tension for the numerous landings on the Italian coasts by international protection applicants reaches a peak, fuelled by populist propaganda that exploits fears and prejudices. Between light and shadow, there is, however, a reception system, coordinated by the prefectures, which operates through cooperatives and voluntary associations. The immediate, primary needs are taken care of, but the challenge of accompanying asylum seekers remains, especially in the interaction with Italian communities.

As Comboni missionaries we feel challenged. The Chapter of 2015 had already identified the issue of migrants as one of our missionary priorities in Europe. In Padua we feel challenged: it is not enough for the young people with whom we work to hear us talk about mission, they want to see us in mission. In August 2016, we organize a camp with young people at a shelter in Este. It is a powerful experience, of great impact, from which young people develop the desire to continue the experience throughout the year. The challenge is to be able to bring together such different and distant participants, which is not easy. On the one hand there is strong resistance on the part of the migrants, partly because of disorientation; and partly because of the difficulty of communication, not to mention the weight of traumatic experiences and a "suspended" existence, waiting for a document, work and stability. Sometimes they also have difficulty in participating due to distances and lack of means of transport. On the other hand, there is often no interest, no common ground for the encounter. Therefore the biggest challenge is the mobilisation of participants.

To achieve this, first of all we feel the need to form a team: young people as motivated animators, who have the sensitivity and the language to involve and dialogue with the world of youth. It is they who can also mobilize the participation of other young people! Then it is necessary to involve young asylum seekers and thus the association *Popoli Insieme* (affiliated to Jesuit Refugee Service) is identified as the project partner, which enthusiastically welcomes the invitation to collaborate. Its contribution is valuable: it can mobilize the participation of the refugees it welcomes, mainly from West Africa and Muslims; it can contribute from the training point of view, link the experience with other projects and initiatives, involve young volunteers who serve with the association. It is our task to bring out spirituality, to nourish the path with the Word, prayer and discernment, to recognize the Risen One along the way, to let ourselves be touched and follow him.

The team starts off by creating interpersonal relationships and a sense of mutual trust, through visits and contacts with the networks of which its members are part. Through relationships of friendship, reluctance and disinterest are dissipated. Thus *Malankeba*¹ *Encounter 2 Transform* is born, a path of sharing and intercultural dialogue involving young Italians and young asylum seekers.

Once the path has been started, along the way there are important convergences with other groups, such as *Arte Migrante* and *Rinascita*². The fundamental dynamic of the process is to bring together young Italians and asylum seekers, in a climate of mutual reception and listening, in a group context

and in a space free from prejudices, stereotyping and predefined roles, for facilitating sharing and intercultural dialogue. The role of the team is to create this space, which generates energy and creativity in the participants, the real protagonists of the path. The team listens deeply to people and situations, identifies, promotes and supports initiatives that arise from within the group, such as solidarity football matches that bring together migrants and young people from sports teams, or the *Afrodance* group, which promotes dancing on African music. But it also listens to expressed and unexpressed needs and proposes paths that meet them.

Among the main activities there are the monthly thematic evenings. The program is elaborated together and the group is also involved in the preparation. Then there are the home visits, which promote small-group dynamics, and participation in events and recurrences such as the National Day of Memory of the victims of migration and the diocesan *March for Peace*. The team also proposes formative moments, addressing current situations, the needs of the participants (intercultural dynamics) and offering in-depth study of themes proposed by them. The strength of the path lies in the ability to facilitate a meeting of humanity and the use of participatory methodologies, thanks to the skills of the team members.

Malankeba! allowed us to bring back into play in Europe the skills acquired in Africa, opening us to the mission to Europe. Working with asylum seekers and refugees has a meaning that goes beyond accompanying migrants: it is the starting point for living the global mission, for a prophetic missionary presence that invites Europe to conversion. And it surprises us how the true protagonists of this mission are the young people and the asylum seekers themselves.

For personal and community reflection:

- What strikes me about this experience of collaboration? Why?
- What does this experience evoke in me? For what reason?
- What does it say to us as a community?

¹ *Malankeba* is a Mandinka expression meaning "great leader!": in Este's field experience it had emerged as an expression of respect, welcome and mutual service.

² *Rinascita* is a group of Christian asylum seekers formed through pastoral work in two large refugee camps near Padua, thanks to a pastoral team led by Fr. Lorenzo Snider (SMA), in which also Comboni Missionaries participate.