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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE CHRISTIAN SUPPORT NETWORKS FOR IMMIGRANTS IN PALERMO

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ABSTRACT: Based on a fieldwork conducted in Sicily, this paper analyses how, when faced with the emergence of immigration, Christian organisations in Palermo become involved with the migration issue, notably thanks to the pioneering commitment of certain clerics. It draws attention to the heterogeneous nature of the Christian sphere, the internal secularisation of the religious organisations working with migrants, and the transformations of the church-related associative sector from a volunteering to professional expertise model. In sum, the capacity for organisational and ideological adaptation of religious organisations has enabled them to retain social control of the territory by becoming inescapable stakeholders in the migration issue. This study also identifies the practices and the know-how of the actors involved in these organisations, and singles out the motives that lead them to engage with these organisations and the meaning they attach to their implication

KEYWORDS: Christian associationism, Ethical and Pragmatic dimensions of involvement, Immigration, Internal secularisation, Professionalisation, Sicily, Welfare

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1. Introduction

This article is concerned with the religious organisations involved in supporting migrants in Palermo (Sicily). The results presented are based on semi-structured interviews with actors who are involved in these organisations¹. The aim has been to identify their practices and their know-how, acquired before their involvement in the migration cause, and to understand how and why they are involved. The interviews have also been used to analyse the perceptions these actors have of themselves and of their actions (Beaud 1996). Immersion in this field (without going as far as participant observation of an ethnographic kind) has made it possible to observe several types of interaction at the heart of these organisations: Italian lessons, legal advice, crèche...

Alongside with Greece, Portugal and Spain, Italy has only been affected by consistent immigration flows since the 1980's (Arango, Bonifazi, Finotelli, Peixoto, Sabino, Strozza and Triandafyllidou 2009), with great variation between regions. Most of the research into local governance of immigration in Italy is concentrated on regions in the North and the centre of the country where the percentage of migrants is higher than in the South (7.4% of the Italian' population, 10.5% of Lombardy, 9.5% of Tuscany as opposed to 2.8 % of the Sicily population², ISTAT 2012). Research focused on Sicily has been concerned first and foremost with arrivals of immigrants on the coast and detention centres, which monopolise the attention of the media and politicians. Both factors help to explain the small amount of attention paid to governance of immigration in Sicily. However, on the ground a number of immigrants have put down social and economic roots (Avola 2009), forcing a region traditionally characterised by emigration to confront this new social phenomenon. Palermo, where immigrants represent 3.3% of the city's population (654.987 inhabitants), provides a clear example of the urban transformation resulting from the

¹ Six organisations based in Palermo were selected for this paper: a centre belonging to Caritas, a Jesuit centre, a Salesian centre, the Comboni lay missionaries of Palermo, a centre of the Methodist Church and the Hope and Charity Mission (managed by a lay brother missionary). This case-study is based on eleven interviews with the clergy and lay people involved in these organisations: one vicar (70 years old), one lay missionary brother (30 years old), one nun (around thirty); two men (around thirty and forty) belonging to the Comboni lay missionaries; five volunteers between 25 and 35 years old (four women and one man) and the son of the vicar (around forty). Most of the lay people committed in these organisations receive salaries for their immigration-related activities or have jobs in parallel of their migration commitment. This paper is a part of my PhD doctoral project on the local governance of immigration in Sicily for which 73 interviews (between 2007 and 2013) have been carried out in various Sicilian towns with the main local stakeholders involved in the migration issue (lay and religious associations, lawyers, local administration, cultural mediators, labour unions, social centre).

² Undocumented migrants, who are not counted, would represent nearly 50% of the foreigners in Sicily (Pirrone 2010).

settling in of the immigrants at the end of 1980's, the highly visible presence and the central (and legitimate³) role played by Christian organisations to support migrants.

Immigration is a cross-sectoral field that is embedded in two policy domains. On the one hand, the sovereign state domain concerns the conditions of entry and stay on a territory, expulsions and border controls. On the other hand, the welfare state domain, which is the focus of our paper, concerns the rights recognized to foreigners admitted on a territory (social and health services, access to housing, insertion in the labour market...) and measures of assistance granted to foreigners with precarious juridical status (minors, undocumented migrants, asylum claimers...).

In the broad comparative welfare state literature, research on the challenges faced by the welfare system (pressures of globalization, demographic situation, changing role of women) and their consequences on the financing of the welfare state, its organisation and the provision of services have gained popularity over the past fifteen years. We hear more and more about a 'welfare in transition' marked by a decentralization of social measures, New Public Management modes of governance and the growing role of the voluntary sector and for-profit organisations in the provision of the welfare (Hassenteufel 2011; Jeppsson Grassman 1999; Ascoli and Ranci 2002). In parallel, some research explored the transformations of the voluntary sector, its professionalization and the hiring of paid staff (Hély 2009; Simonet-Cusset 2004). These considerations are also to be found in the research on the decline of traditional forms of civic involvement and the development of an "expertise model" of activists (Collovald 2002; Weisbein 2001).

The Italian welfare state is marked, amongst other characteristics (Esping-Andersen 1990; Leibfried 1992; Ferrera 1996), by the predominance of transfers over services, low employment rates, an underdevelopment of family benefits and social assistance and the prevalence of non-state actors that provide health and social service provision. The welfare role endorsed by the third sector has been strengthened as public funding destined to social policies has been cut during the last ten years⁴ and is particularly important in the South where the regulation of the society is traditionally strongly structured by third sector actors (Fantozzi and Musella 2010). Moreover the decentralisation of social competences to local governments in the 1990's (Kazepov 2009) reinforced socio-economic and welfare disparity among regions. Sicily's low socio-economic status and the progressive reduction of local revenue have narrowed the Sicilian government's scope for action in social policy. Considering that, as we have seen, migration is embedded in the welfare field, the voluntary sector plays a crucial role in the governance of immigration in Italy (Ambrosini *et al.* 2006, Caponio 2006) and particularly in Sicily. Indeed immigration is not a prevailing concern on the Sicilian regional agenda. Given the presence of Sicil-

³ Using the interviews carried out for my PhD research, it would have been interesting to explore what the local population, the lay social organisations and the public authorities think about the role of religious organisations (generally they enjoy legitimacy) and their conception of the welfare. But we do not have sufficient room here.

⁴ Italian social funding is among the lowest in Europe (Pizzuti 2007).

ian's own destitute class, many problems concern local people as much as they do foreigners: the housing crisis, unemployment, failing schools, crime... Thus the migration question in Sicily is strongly embedded in the general weak welfare interventions: immigrants are just one of several groups of disadvantaged citizens.

In this context, a 'welfare space' for religious actors opens up in light of the inadequate public intervention. They fill the gaps in a weak welfare state and constitute a social shock absorber. Yet, despite their well-established role as a provider of welfare services in European countries, church-related organisations have seldom been regarded as welfare actors (for an exhaustive overview of the strand of research on religion and welfare in Europe, see Van Kersbergen and Manow 2009 and Bäckstrom, Davie, Edgardh and Pettersson 2010). Most of the Italian religious organisations involved in the migration issue originally come from 19th-century charitable institutions, traditionally involved in providing health and social care for the poor. After World War II the trend of "*religious social involvement, particularly Catholic*", translated into direct political action "*through forms of 'collateralism' of Christian Democracy*" (De Leonardis and Vitale 2002, 75), which dominated the political landscape of Italy for almost fifty years. The fall of Christian Democracy at the beginning of the 1990s "*weakened the political and party activities of the Catholic Church*" (Dorangricchia and Itçaina 2005, 186). One would have expected it to lead to a downfall of the influence of the Church over the political life. However some scholars consider that the infiltration of the Catholic Church in the policy and politics has been encouraged by the collapse of the DC: the Church would have become a sort of lobby (Ceccarini and Diamanti 2007).

At that time, the Church also had to cope with the ageing of the clergy and the secularisation of Italian society understood as a "*differentiation between autonomous social institutions and weaker integration and religious loyalty*" (Dorangricchia and Itçaina 2005, 186). Despite these changes, the Church continued to be active in the public sphere and to express its views on various social questions. The 'capillarity' of the Church's network throughout Italian territory, its organisational strength and its visibility remained prominent. The involvement in the migration issue gave the Church a space in which it could once more invest itself publicly and thus maintain and/or regain its threatened social position by positioning itself with regard to an urgent social issue. As soon as the migration process began, the Christian organisations claimed their position as "first movers" and set themselves up as the principal players for helping the new destitute – the immigrants.

In this paper, we will draw attention to the heterogeneous nature of the Christian sphere's involvement in the migration issue in Sicily. This "*unity in diversity*" (Pace 2008, 65) - typical of the Italian context - is characterised by internal pluralism when it comes to religious sensibilities (working-class Catholicism of the Left, liberal Catholicism, conservative Catholicism...). This pluralism is reflected in the large number of religious groups involved in the migration issue: traditional local parishes, diocesan bodies like Caritas, religious (and missionary) orders like the Salesians and the Jesuits, communities, organisations outside the Church hierarchy and Methodist churches. This organisational fragmentation also has an ideological side. It is reflected in the range of practices and discourses used by the religious organisations to justify their involve-

ment. These groups collaborate but at the same time they are 'competing'. While Bourdieu (1991, 5) underlined "*the strategy of different categories of specialists competing for monopoly over the administration of the goods of salvation and of their different classes interested in their services*", today these groups have to fight to legitimize the health and social care they are providing to migrants with regards to other groups. There are tensions between the religious organisations involved with migrants who attempt to impose their ways of thinking in order to reinforce their social position. Another important aspect concerns the secularisation of these church-related organisations in Sicily. On a macro level, secularisation is about territories and competencies, referring to "*the process by which the religious ascendancy is weakening or ending in certain domains*" (of social life) (Isambert 1976, 576). Here, however we are interested in a micro perspective which refers to "*observe empirically whether a domain of activity is likely to be 'secularized' or not*" (Frisina 2010, 162). In that sense, secularisation can be seen as the "*convergence, by similitude of religious and profane*" (in the activities and thought) (Isambert 1976, 583). As a result, its specificity becomes blurred. The social work with migrants carried out by Christian organisations in Sicily is mostly secularized: de-ritualization (diversity of texts used by the priest, increasing role given to lay people during the religious celebrations...), greater importance of ethical subjects and solidarity in comparison with strictly religious concerns; accessibility of the organisations' premises, proximity between the members of clergy, their congregation and the people whom they help...

Even if we focus on the welfare role of the religious-related organisations, it is important to say that they also play a political role: they shape the public debate and take part in the policy-making. We should briefly mention the early interest of Christian institutions in the immigration question and their participation in policy-making in the domain of immigration⁵. The question of population movement had aroused the interest of Christian institutions ever since the middle of the 19th century. The large-scale emigration of Italians abroad attracted the attention of diocesan organisations, well-known Catholic personalities (Monsignor Scalabrini, Giovanni Bosco...) and religious congregations (in particular the Jesuits and the Scalabrinians) who set up missions abroad to support their fellow citizens who had emigrated (Marin 2012). Since Italy's transition from a country of emigration to one of immigration in the mid-1970s, services designed to meet the needs of immigrants have increasingly replaced emigration services (Pugliese 2006). In 1971, the periodical publication of the Central Office for Italian Emigration (now known as the Fondazione Migrantes) had as its headline: "What if Italy were to become a Country of Immigration?". This adaptation of the Christian sphere differed strikingly from the low level of interest being shown at the time to the issue of immigration by the media and public institutions. The

⁵ At the local level, the religious organisations (and other third sector actors) also play a political role in participating to the local policy-making. But it depends on the openness of the local administration to the third sector and concerns essentially the biggest and the most integrated associations, like Caritas. The interaction with the local government also takes the form of partnerships set in motion between these organisations and public institutions for offering services. We have no room here to treat these interesting aspects.

time-lag between the appearance of migrants in Italy and the introduction of dedicated legislation left a space for third sector organisations, in particular religious ones, which played a “stopgap” role (Pastore and Dorangricchia 1999). Ever since the mid-1980s, Christian organisations have therefore shaped the public debate on immigration and playing a key role in policy-making, trying to soften the more security oriented aspects of the different immigration laws (Dorangricchia and Itçaina 2005; Zincone and Di Gregorio 2002; Mioli 2012). Thus the politicisation of immigration since the end of the 1980s represented an opportunity for the Church to occupy new social and political terrain and avoid losing its former influence.

The first part of this paper will analyse how, when faced with the emergence of immigration, religious organisations in Palermo get involved in the migration issue, notably thanks to the pioneering commitment of certain clerics. We will also analyse the internal secularisation of the religious organisations working with migrants. The capacity for organisational and ideological adaptation of religious organisations enabled them to retain social control of the territory by becoming inescapable stakeholders in the migration issue. After that we shall explore the transformations of the church-related associative sector from a volunteering to professional expertise model. This will help up to single out the motives that lead people to engage with these organisations and the meaning they attach to their implication.

2. The Adaptation of the Christian Sphere to the Emergence of the Migration Issue in Palermo

a) Immigration – an opportunity for certain Clerics to Re-invest their Experience of Militancy

In Italy, the involvement of Christian organisations with migrants had thus developed under the influence of external factors: the increasing number of immigrants, the politicisation of the migration question, secularisation... Since the 1980's, services dedicated to immigrants were opened in northern and central regions. However, in Sicily, internal factors, notably the pioneering involvement of certain clerics in the migration issue, independently from the religious structure, were determinant and opened the way for a broader involvement in migration issues. Certain clerics had become closely involved in causes that shaped local social and political debates in the 1980s, particularly the struggle against the Mafia and the campaign for the right to housing. The evolution of the main socio-political stakes (the decline of certain societal issues predominant in the 1980s and 1990s and the emergence of others, in particular that of migration) had led them to devote their attention to the migration issue at the end of the 1980's. Baldasare Meli at the head of the Salesian centre of Santa Chiara from 1988 to 2003 and Biagio Conte, the founder and director of the Hope and Charity Mission are historic local figures who have had a crucial influence on the development of the religious organisations they led. So *“what is new (...) are not the militants themselves but the repertoire of action they opted for (...).*

They invest in their new activity a part of themselves that they have developed prior to joining a religious organisation, as part of their past militant socialisation” (Collovald 2002, 10).

Baldassare Meli, the paladin

At the end of the 1980's, immigrants settled in the historic centre of Palermo, epicentre of the crimes of the Mafia and the mobilisations for the right to housing. The *Ballaró-Albergheria* quarter was transformed through the impetus provided by the new immigrants residents at the end of the 1980s: a night-life has come into being along with commercial and touristic activities. Today, the quarter is characterised by a striking social and ethnic diversity. This transformation coincided with a cultural renaissance of the Sicilian capital initiated by the then local administration. Indeed, the Mayor at the time, Leoluca Orlando (1985-1990; 1993-2000) launched a policy of urban requalification aiming at “cleaning up” these neighborhoods from the Mafia. With the help of private sector actors who were deeply rooted in the territory he backed up the first local initiatives supporting immigrants.

Dedicated to educating the young, the Salesians installed themselves in Palermo, in the *Ballaró* quarter, after the First World War in order to work with war orphans. In 1988, Baldassare Meli was selected to head the Salesians' Santa Chiara centre, which had become a point of reference for the immigrants in Palermo during the 1990s. This deeply committed priest left his mark on the history of the centre and the district. He was part of the small group of Sicilian priests who had denounced the Church in Palermo for turning a blind eye to the actions of *Cosa Nostra* (the Sicilian Mafia) (Scaglione 2012). Certain priests and bishops had been in collusion with *Cosa Nostra* (Pezzino 2000; Cavadi 2009), while others had been involved in the strong anti-Mafia movement of the 1980s and 1990s (Santino 2009). Certain priests paid dearly for their involvement: Father Puglisi was assassinated on the orders of two Mafia bosses in 1993 and is now considered a martyr of the anti-Mafia struggle. Baldassare Meli had been one of the eight priests who, on the day after the Mafia had murdered Father Puglisi, sent the Pope an indignant letter denouncing the osmosis going on between religious and Mafia circles (Abbate 2011). Thanks to his support the Santa Chiara centre became a rallying point for the anti-Mafia movement.

*“Meetings were being organized for magistrates and judges. Large-scale demonstrations were being organized”⁶ (N. Sinopoli from the anti-Mafia association *Palermo Anno Uno*).*

Furthermore Baldassare Meli had been an important supporter of the movement for the right to housing in Palermo (Santino 2006; Abbagnato 2006). The activists supported by some of the local clergy, the local Left and the Christian associations set up a committee to co-ordinate their collective action (the occupation of Palermo's Cathedral in 1975 and of empty houses). During the 1980s, this struggle was centred in the *Ballaró* district. A march, to which several priests took part as well as laymen and local inhabitants, was organized to attract the attention

⁶ Scarafia (2006).

of the authorities to that urgent social issue and to demand the right to use property confiscated from the Mafia. These demands were made in vain. After 2000, the *Struggle for the House* committee organized weekly meetings at Santa Chiara.

In parallel to these activities, Baldassare Meli began campaigning at the end of the 1980s, in connection with the migration issue: Sicily's first medical centre specially dedicated to immigrants was set up in Santa Chiara in 1988⁷ thanks to a collaboration between the Professor Mansueto, director of the Institute of Internal Medicine of the University of Palermo, Baldassare Meli and the Mayor Leoluca Orlando. In the view of numerous Sicilians actors, the medical centre represented a fruitful collaboration between the public and the not-for-profit sector. Moreover a building belonging to the centre was set-aside as a night shelter for a hundred foreigners (this building was closed in 2008 after the building collapsed).

"It was the golden age of Santa Chiara, in the days of Don Meli (...). When immigrants arrived thirty years ago they were taken in at Santa Chiara (...). There was a priest who was very responsive to the problems of people in Palermo who had been evicted and later the immigrants arrived (...). More than a hundred immigrants used to sleep here" (Young volunteer at Santa Chiara).

In the middle of the 1990s, the district was shattered by a paedophilia scandal exposed by certain Salesians, in particular by Baldassare Meli and his right-hand man Don Dominici. Around ten adults (some of whom were from families connected to the Mafia) were convicted for having sexually abused about fifty minors in the district. Baldassare Meli received threatening anonymous letters and some of the residents of the district treated him with profound hostility. Faced with this scandal, the Salesian community transferred Baldassare Meli to a village in the East of Sicily in 2003. This decision led to a wave of protest from movements and associations. The different organisations that worked and met at the centre – Comboniani lay missionaries, activists from a social centre for the extreme Left, the *Struggle for the House* committee, academics, movements of the Left and doctors - gradually stopped coming. This "institutional crisis" had a decisive influence on how it developed.

*"For us it had been home. A true solidarity network gravitated towards the centre. Gatherings and meetings used to be held there. People discussed everything there. From the war to immigration problems, from the Mafia to the homeless. There's nobody left there now"*⁸ (Comboni missionaries).

"They were fantastic at Santa Chiara! (...). When Don Meli left, they all went because the priest who replaced him immediately distanced himself, he was far quieter and said straightaway: 'Here we're going to confine ourselves to providing shelter, we'll lay organise some courses after school, but that's it' (...). There was none of that drive that had been there before (...). But you can't oblige a priest to play the paladin. He hasn't got the charisma or the forceful character that Don Meli had" (D. lawyer).

⁷ The medical centre is currently closed. The service was taken over by the public hospital.

⁸ Scarafia, *Ibid.*

Today Santa Chiara has restricted its field of activity to welfare and health-care assistance to the poor, both foreigners and Italians.

Biagio Conte, the “prophet”

In the working-class district of *Branaccio*, otherwise known as the Mafia sanctuary, the Hope and Charity Mission provides shelter for almost 800 people, mainly immigrants. The Mission has three communities, two working with men and one with women. Biagio Conte, the founder of the Mission, invested his ‘capital’ of symbolic authority built up in the past in the immigration field. The way the saint-like, symbolic and extraordinary behaviour of this man was projected guaranteed him authority and a capacity to mobilise numerous people. Biagio Conte used his “*charisma as a professional ideology*” (Bourdieu 1991, 20), which lent his organisation a highly personalised character.

Biagio Conte, like Baldassare Meli, had supported Palermo’s campaign for the right to housing at the end of the 1980s. In 1991, this young man in his twenties from a prosperous family had had a “spiritual revelation” which had led him to live for two years side by side with the homeless who slept near the Palermo station. In 1993, he asked the City Council to let these drop-outs (the homeless, drug-addicts, alcoholics) take shelter in an abandoned municipal building. Receiving no answer, he decided to occupy the building and started a hunger-strike. In 1994, work began to renovate the premises. Today up to a hundred people can sleep there. A few years later he identified another site: an abandoned convent. Once again, faced by reservations on the part of the City Council, he embarked on a peaceful protest. After the Curia⁹ intervened, the City Council handed over part of the building to Conte: premises for taking in women opened in 1998. Today it provides shelter for approximately 100 women, either on their own or with children. Faced with the large numbers of requests for shelter and increasing numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers in Sicily, Biagio Conte and his loyal followers occupied the barracks of a former aeronautical centre that had been abandoned in 2001. A few months later, the *Carabinieri*¹⁰, who own the property, allowed Conte to use half of the space, which today takes in about 500 people.

Biagio Conte’s social commitment has brought him fame, which has spread far beyond local shores. In 2011, the MEP Cecilia Wilkström, which was then heading a delegation visiting detention and reception centres in Sicily, declared with regard to the Hope and Charity Mission: “*this centre is a very fine example of European integration*”. In addition, Biagio Conte received a European Citizen’s Prize in 2012, which is awarded each year by the European Parliament in recognition of citizens and organisations who have led projects aimed at promoting mutual understanding and interaction between citizens and States (Militello 2011; Punzo 2012).

⁹ Roman Curia is the group of various Vatican bureaus that assist the Pope in exercising his jurisdiction over the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁰ Italian military force.

Bit by bit, nearly all religious private-sector institutions, previously involved in social aid for the Italian poor and emigrants, developed social care services for migrants. These organisations have ceased to confine themselves simply to the provision of basic material assistance, i.e. to primary “first-welcome services” (showers, canteens, night shelters...). They have expanded the range of their activities and offer “second-welcome” services: language courses, crèches, medical and legal services, support for prostitutes, helpers to accompany immigrants to public offices... They oscillate between offering services specifically targeted to immigrants (legal advice on residence permits for example) and integrating these services into social measures designed for the “poor” in general. The disadvantaged socio-economic context in Sicily explains in part this embeddedness.

Caritas, Santa Chiara and the Jesuits have therefore kept restructuring their services in order to better respond to the needs of their new clients. The Caritas of Palermo, set up in 1973, worked with Italians. It was only at the end of the 1990s that special interventions targeted at immigrants were set in motion: in 1997, it opened a crèche for foreign children. In 2000 it set up services for immigrants: language courses, a medical centre, shower facilities, legal and advice centre... Since 2011, a team has been working with prostitutes to encourage them to denounce their exploiters. The Jesuits association dedicated to immigration – the Astalli centre – settled in 2002 in Palermo. Thus, today the Caritas, the Salesian Santa Chiara Centre and the Jesuits’ Astalli Centre dominate the local landscape: they are three pillars of social aid in *Ballaró*, which are highly respected and much in demand:

“The only institution in Ballaró is the religious institution. It is the only one which is respected by everybody” (Young Ghanaian cultural mediator).

Apart from a nursery and two schools, there are no public institutions in this district and the police goes there very seldom. Besides this physical distance, a crisis of confidence separates the citizens and public institutions. The immigrants and the Italians organize themselves and have their own ‘figures of authority’ regarded as more efficient than the State and as a better source of protection.

“The quarter is a one-off (...) People don’t go to school very much (...) and there is a good deal of delinquency (...). This quarter has its own rules, its own laws (...). The immigrants fit themselves into this context” (Volunteer in the Salesian centre).

b) Secularisation within Religious Organisations

After having explored the way the church-related organisations adapted their activities when faced by the appearance and growing of immigration, we are now analysing the internal secularisation of the majority of these organisations, which can be analysed as a form of adaptation. One of the differences between the various church-related organisations involved with migrants concerns the degree to which they define their religious character. The majority of them are very open to the outside world and place more emphasis on ethical subjects and solidarity as

opposed to strictly religious concerns and Catholic evangelization. Yet the ideological fragmentation of religious organisations in Sicily can also be seen in certain counter-examples, in which religious concerns are very important.

Fields for social relations open to the outside world

The 'atmosphere' in most of these organisations is characterised by a limited external expression of their religious identity. The services and activities they have developed, the décor used in their premises and the registers of language of those involved in these organisations hardly suggest religious motivations.

G., is *referente* at Santa Chiara – a mix between a secretary and an administrator. She is indeed somewhat concerned by the discreet, almost invisible expression of Christianity in her Salesian organisation. She regrets the way in which traditional practice and rituals have been played down:

"I have the impression that we, Catholics, express our religious nature very little. I see how the Muslims and Hindus express theirs. They have outwards means of expression (...). We, on the other hand, often put all that to one side (...). I think that all of us need outward signs".

These organisations remain places where faith finds an expression, but they appear above all as spaces for social relations and as structures capable of satisfying the needs of socially disadvantaged groups, to which public institutions or associations do not respond (Garelli 1999, 44-45). The internal secularisation of Christian institutions also comes to the surface as a result of ethical issues being discussed more than strictly religious ones. There is also a new understanding of discipleship, different from the traditional enterprise of "evangelisation" (secular objectives have now overtaken religious preoccupations). So the space where these organisations hold sway is far from being a strictly religious one. They are even in competition with certain lay organisations in the social field, which forces them to borrow methods from the latter as they modify their repertoire of action and the language they use. Besides, in many religious organisations the majority of the staff is composed of lay people.

At the same time numerous organisations seek to set themselves up as an alternative to the pyramid-shaped structure of the church hierarchy. The Comboni lay missionaries for example present themselves as a group belonging to the Catholic tradition, while at the same time expressing reservations towards the church hierarchy. Their social commitment ensures their continued militant ethos rather than their religious adherence:

"We are a group with that [Catholic] connotation, although we are – let us say – a novelty in inverted commas, an alternative to the hierarchical Church when it comes to our way of thinking and doing things" (member of the Comboni lay missionary).

Finally, these organisations perceive that there is a continuity, rather than a rift, between the Church and the social world (Lagroye 2009, 111). This position is reflected in the accessibility of their premises and the relationship fostered by the members of clergy with their congregation and the people whom they help. Most of the priests involved in providing social aid to immi-

grants are very accessible, close to their flock and the clothes they wear are similar to those of lay people.

Insistence on an inter-cultural and inter-religion model is another sign of openness towards the outside world. Most of the Christian organisations stress that it is necessary to encourage contact between different religions and to reject ethno-centrism. Charity and the duty to be welcoming have got the better of any sense of religious separateness (this consensus is not so evident among bishops, Dorangricchia and Itçaina 2005, 220).

"The centre is managed by Catholic priests. That definitely means something. But there are different ways of expressing religion (...). Christian charity is based on welcoming in everyone and that what's we do" (Young volunteer at Santa Chiara).

Santa Chiara is well-known for being a place where numerous religious and multi-cultural festivals are celebrated by the various immigrant communities. This situation is to a large extent due to the lack of public places of worship for non-Christians in Palermo.

"Another very fine thing is the religious contact (...) with Muslims, Pentecostals, Buddhists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus... At Santa Chiara they have the chance to express their religious traditions (...). Sometimes in one hall you have the Muslim community praying alongside the Pentecostals and the Catholics in the middle" (Young volunteer at Santa Chiara).

The Counter-example provided by the Mission of Biagio Conte

At the other end of the scale, the religious nature of the Mission created and directed by Biagio Conte, who presents himself as a "lay Brother Missionary" is very objectivised: religion is omnipresent in the language used and the way the three communities that make up this Mission are organized. The transmission of this "objectivity" (Lagroye 2009, 3) is maintained by a variety of features: the clothes worn by its staff, the furniture, the workshops for manual labour, religious ceremonies and rules... *"The belief in the symbolic efficacy of religious practices and representation"* is crucial (Bourdieu 1991, 20).

In the first community, which takes in men, a prayer hall is decorated with icons and religious mosaics, some of which were made by the occupants. In the second centre, the workshops for manual labour offer activities which relate to the Catholic religion: making of religious mosaics, pottery models of the Virgin and miniature Franciscan sandals similar to those which Biagio Conte wears. In the entrance hall of the Mission for women, there is a glass case sheltering a statue of the Virgin. On the walls newspaper articles describing the hunger strikes embarked upon by Biagio Conte are spread out, as well as short texts reporting his words. He is the object of a true cult within the Mission. He has a long beard and is dressed like a monk (in a tunic and sandals). He spoke to me about his "revelation" sent by the "hand of God". Those who come to the Mission behave towards him with what borders on veneration. Sister Lucie, who is in charge of the Mission for women, describes a direct link between the work of the Mission and God's will:

"Numerous families give us these clothes. In this we see the hand of Providence at work. If we lack something, the Lord makes sure it reaches us (...). So many brothers, so many sisters and

children are able to eat each meal every day thanks to Providence (...). It is the Lord our architect who makes all things".

The two communities for men are managed mainly by Missionary Brothers and nuns manage the female community. The lay people working at Biagio Conte's Mission are allotted only a secondary role: contrary to the Missionaries, lay people are only given very operational tasks - distribution of meals; cleanup of the premises - and have no decision-making responsibilities. Biagio Conte keeps his faithful at a respectful distance and insists on deference in the way they approach him. He thus maintains the distinction between *"the holders of the monopoly on the management of the priests and the laity (...) defined as profane"* (Bourdieu 1991, 12).

Contrary to other religious organisations, this Mission is an organisation shut in on itself and difficult to access. A lawyer friend who, as a volunteer, provides legal advice for the occupants of the men's centres facilitated my access to this mission and introduced me to 'F'. Despite this, I encountered major obstacles when trying to make contact with the Mission. In order to overcome the suspicion of 'F' regarding my research, I had to play the young student keen to see this *"real situation so important for Palermo"* and to maintain that all I wanted was to *"have an informal discussion with Biagio Conte"*. Before I had hardly crossed the threshold of the first centre for men, I was stopped and asked to justify my presence there. I was then led through into 'F's office and he took me round the two men's centres but he refused to let me tape our conversation and was reluctant to answer my questions. Access to the women's centre was also difficult, despite the instructions given to me by 'F', who had introduced me to Sister Lucia who was in charge there. Like F. before her, Sister Lucie took me round the centre but did not reply to my questions and refused my requests for permission to record our conversation or to take photographs.

We have explored the variety of responses of the religious organisations in front of the emergence of immigration in Sicily. We are now going to explain the involvement of numerous people in this kind of organisations and their interest for the migration issue. One of the justifications put forward by the interviewees are the *"pragmatic motives"* as a result of the transformations of the associative sector in a professionalising field. Other motivations have to be found in the ethical dimension of this involvement.

3. Justifications for Involvement

For as long as my questions were concerned with the content of their activities, the language of those interviewed flowed freely. On the other hand, as soon as they were asked to explain why they were attracted by the immigration issue and by that form of involvement, they seemed uncomfortable. They were reluctant to speak about their lives up till then, as if their involvement was natural or the result of key experiences (humanitarian work, encounters with social deprivation, with other cultures...).

Some contextual factors explain how immigration appears as an attractive cause. Certain struggles, like that against the Mafia, appear less relevant to young people than in the 1980 and 1990' when it was highly visible and when a large number of mobilisations and associations emerged (association Libera, the Anti-Mafia caravan, legislation on confiscation of Mafia property...). In the 2000's, young people often respond to other causes that are more 'fashionable' and salient, in particular the anti-military movement, immigration and environmental issues, or are involved in multiples causes.

We shall concentrate first of all on the transformation of religious associations reflected in the hiring of more professional staff and the development of an "expertise model". Thus, both economic motivation and the need for professional experience are pragmatic motives that lead people to join these organisations. Then we shall examine the constant fluctuation between the register of *agapè* (Boltanski 1990) and donation and another, which is more anti-establishment and political.

a) Pragmatic Motives for the Transformation of the Associative sector

The profile and the status of the lay people involved in religious organisations in Sicily vary considerably. They include numerous students, retired people, trainees, young people carrying out their Voluntary National Civil Service (*Servizio Civile Nazionale Volontario*), as well as both full-time salaried staff and staff taken on for temporary projects. The forms of involvement in these activities also vary considerably: full-time commitment, commitment of a few hours a week, involvement of professionals (lawyers, doctors, psychologists...) in addition to their ordinary work...

Several pieces of research devoted to the sociology of the associations and to the sociology of work (Hély 2009; Simonet-Cusset 2004; Bernardeau-Moreau and Hély 2007) have analysed the changes at the heart of the associations sphere, underlining in particular how they have evolved into "associative enterprises/firms", far from the traditional idealised image of philanthropic associations consisting of altruistic volunteers short on qualifications¹¹. Various characteristics identified in that research reflect the way in which religious organisations have evolved in Sicily.

Professionalism of the "volunteers" and the model of Expertise

The volunteers involved in this work are more and more qualified nowadays thanks to the professional activities in which they were previously engaged (pensioners are coming to play an increasing role) or are still engaged in, alongside their work with immigrants.

¹¹ The rationalisation of the procedures underlying partnership between these associations and public institutions is another dimension of the changes taking place in the associations which we shall not be analysing here.

Their “registers of justification” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) refer to the effectiveness of activities on the ground, which make it possible to diagnose and respond to requests for help. They use expressions that smacks of management speak: efficiency, responsibility, project planning... They describe their methods in detail and insist on the level of qualification of the specialists who work with these organisations: their professional skills in the legal, health or social domain (lawyers, doctors, psychologists, teachers...) are equal to those of professionals operating in public institutions. They thus seem to be structuring their involvement on the basis of the expertise model (Rozier 2002; Siméant 2001).

For example, the group of Comboni lay missionaries, established in Palermo since 1995, consists of about twenty individuals working in various spheres (immigration, defence of human rights, defence of common goods such as water etc.) in parallel to their professional activities. At the heart of this group, seven people take in, on a voluntary basis, immigrants finding themselves in extremely difficult social and economic situations.

“All that goes on in parallel to our everyday lives: I, personally, am a [hospital] nurse and my wife is a social worker (...), so she already has some experience in this area (...), Maria is a biologist. The couple has retired but Franco is working in the prison and Anna is currently working at Santa Chiara” (member of the Comboni lay missionaries who is taking in migrants).

Highlighting and Recognition of skills

In addition, skills of those involved in work with immigrants are now better recognized and valued thanks to the development of the Voluntary National Civil Service and the accreditation systems, which enables the young people involved to benefit from the professional experience they acquire.

The Voluntary National Civil Service instituted in 2001 enables all Italians aged between 18 and 28 to work in organisations for a maximum of one year. The volunteers are given a monthly allowance of 433 euros. Administrative bodies, NGOs and associations which have been engaged in non-profit-making activities for at least three years and which operate in specific fields (social care, civil protection, environmental projects, artistic and cultural heritage, education...) can take on volunteers. Universities can issue qualification credits to young people who have been carrying out such activities, when they are coherent with their profile and education. Over the course of time the number of available places and the allocated funding for this have decreased. In 2011 the regions in the South of Italy (Campania, Basilicata, Puglia, Calabria, Sardinia and Sicily) took on 51.17% of the 15,524 volunteers, with Sicily leading the way (Ufficio per il Servizio Civile Nazionale).

At the end of her studies, Lucy (aged 28) gleaned professional experience abroad in a range of fields. On her return to Sicily, she was not able to apply her skills for paid employment in the ‘normal’ labour market. She did voluntary work in the Santa Chiara Salesian centre and then joined the Voluntary National Civil Service *“because one can’t make a living as a volunteer”*. In

that context she was able to work as an occasional assistant in the Santa Chiara crèche and provided two hours of Italian lessons for young adults each day.

The Growing Number of Salaried Positions

Finally, the growth in the number of salaried positions in the religious associations provides an economic incentive to certain actors, encouraging them to work in religious organisations. Although most of the individuals interviewed underlined the pre-eminent role of volunteer work (*"the heart of Santa Chiara is the volunteer work"*; *"It is thanks to them [the volunteers] that the [Jesuit] centre is making progress. It is a key human resource"*), some salaried positions are opened to provide specific services (legal, medical...), for management roles and as individual operators for temporary projects.

At the Jesuit Astalli Centre, apart from volunteers (about ten form a regular core and around sixty turn up from time to time), E., a man of 25 who is in charge of statistics and AI., a social worker, have been taken on by the Jesuit centre. E.'s career to date illustrates the stages through which most of the salaried staff in this and similar organisations have passed: first of all he worked as a volunteer, then as a volunteer with an allowance thanks to the National Civil Service scheme and finally as a salaried member of staff:

"I started as an unpaid volunteer at the Astalli Centre distributing food (...). Then I did my Civil Service stint and then I was asked if I wanted to continue working here (...). [Today] I'm paid by the Centre".

In the immigration department of Caritas, Sara – a social worker and psychologist – is in charge of the advice centre and S. works in the immigration office. They are helped *"for periods of varying length"* by trainees or volunteers carrying out their National Civil Service. Sara also started out as an unpaid volunteer; next she continued with the organisation during her Civil Service year and was then taken on by Caritas for paid employment.

Funds making it possible to pay some of the staff come from a variety of sources: the centrally allocated funds of the organisations themselves, donations from private individuals, private enterprises and institutions, financial backing obtained for participation in specific projects (European, national or local), funding from the Curia, the "8 for a 1,000" tax¹² and funding from the National Civil Service.

b) The Ethical Dimension of Involvement: a loosely objectivised but structuring Christian Ethos

¹² Since 1984, following on from an agreement between the Republic of Italy and the Holy See, taxpayers declare that 0.8% of their taxes should go to a religious denomination or, failing that, to a public social aid programme.

Although it is not possible to reduce the investment in these organisations to a voluntary involvement of a totally altruistic nature, the ethical and moral dimension often referred to in these conversations, does come into play. Those involved find in this work opportunities to satisfy their need for social commitment. Al., (around thirty) for example, felt the need to interrupt his promising professional career in order to find his sense of dignity, his moral code. He had important responsibilities in a pharmaceutical laboratory, but he decided to give up his position to become a nurse and thus be able to participate more in the social activities of the Comboni lay missionaries. After that he felt *"at peace with himself, although things were much more difficult with regard to finances"*.

Initially it might appear that the Christian ethos counts for little in the motivation of the committed members of staff. Indeed, their involvement is first of all charitable and not spiritual. It is only seldom that the religious character of an organisation and their faith motivate young lay people to become part of these organisations. They do not necessarily attach religious significance to their decision to become involved in the migration cause and they rarely see a link between their "Christian roots" and their practical activities.

"I am not religious and I do not do this work for religious reasons – I am an atheist. At first, when I started, I felt a certain mistrust, particularly because I am not a believer. Biagio Conte really is an unusual type, who started out from nothing and then had this mystical revelation" (D., volunteer lawyer in the Biagio Conte centres).

Yet, although most of the people involved sideline any religious considerations, these definitely stimulate and shape their involvement. Indeed there are *"sociologically pertinent characteristics [that] allow an individual to find himself socially predisposed to test and express (...) ethical or political arrangements"* (Bourdieu 1991, 35). In Italy and in Sicily Christian socialisation remains strong (Catholic education, previous generations who were practising Christians, participation in Scouts movements, parish activity...) and the majority of the population continues to identify itself with Catholicism. It succeeds in reconciling a sense of Catholic belonging and autonomy vis-à-vis Church institutions. The individual chooses places and occupations that best match his expectations and his religious sensibilities (Pace 2008; Garelli 1999, 41-42).

Furthermore, as *"a structured symbolic system"* (Bourdieu 1991, 13), Catholicism implicitly imposes a representation of the social world and hence a vision of the migration issue. Several ways of 'framing' it are possible and here too the religious sphere manifests its capacity for flexibility.

Justification that alternates between the Ethics of donation and Political action

A certain tension exists between the social repertoire of these organisations as a convenient substitute for the lack of public commitment and a situation in which this repertoire assumes a subversive connotation, which challenges the shortcomings on the part of the State. In the latter case, the repertoire of protest is brought into play in order to defend the rights of immigrants, who are the victims of political and social inequalities. Those who adopt this political and civic stance are closer to trade unions and lay associations than to purely charitable ones. Stran-

ge “*advocacy coalitions*” (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) or “*strange bedfellows*” (Zolberg 2006) come together from very different outfits. In accordance to Dorangricchia and Itçaina (2005, 211), it is therefore impossible to reduce the role of these organisations to “*simple charitable continuations of State authorities searching for promoters of integration by default*”.

We have seen that certain clerics (Baldassare Meli) and certain members of organisations (the Comboni missionaries) have also participated – alongside lay players – in collective campaigns aimed at calling public institutions to account. Another example is provided by the retired pastor who directs the centre of Methodist Church for migrants, the CEMI. He virulently denounces collusion between xenophobic political players and certain local priests, particularly in the North-east of Italy.

“All these arguments concentrating on fear bring in votes. There is the noble veneer of the defence of Catholicism, to which the Catholic Church is party, the fear that Islam will take root in Italy (...). If you go to the North, particularly the North-east (...) there is an alliance between the Lega [Northern League, a xenophobic party] and local priests”.

Certain lay people working in this field also criticize the gaps in State provision.

“I think that an institution of this kind [Biagio Conte’s Mission] should not exist in a normal State because that should be the responsibility of the State (...). I appreciate what he does and I also recognize to some extent that it’s not really useful. On the one hand, (...) it is indeed intolerable that the Church has to replace the State (...) in the name of charity (...). On the other hand, if the State’s not doing it, at least someone’s stepping up to the task” (D. volunteer lawyer at the Biagio Contre centre).

In the majority of cases, however, those taking part in the work of the religious organisations confine themselves to the language of *agapè* and donation. It is especially the case of the young people involved in Christian organisations. This “charitable militancy” (Lagroye 2009, 119) states that nobody (in particular Christians) can be indifferent to poverty and the suffering of the “disinherited”. Those committed to helping refer to “*a sort of moral obligation (...). Their involvement is presented as the natural continuation of the emotion which is thought to grip anyone (...) who witnesses first-hand an event which collides with his sense of injustice*” (Rozier 2002, 136). They use universal terms that awaken compassion: our “neighbour”, “suffering” and “poverty”.

“[The Astalli centre] is managed by lay people (...) who have Catholic roots; lay people who have lives of their own and professions. Normal citizens who make this contribution to society because they feel this need, particularly in the Mezzogiorno” (E. volunteer at the Jesuit Astalli Centre)

Most of those interviewed see themselves as indispensable to the system of social solidarity and cohesion. They stress the legitimacy of their existence and their “social usefulness” (Collovald 2002) because they offer services to people abandoned by the State. They see themselves as welfare providers who make up for the inability of the State to intervene or failure to do so, using the language of subsidiarity and donation.

“There are enormous shortcomings as far as the State is concerned. The greatest affront that can be suffered by the State is the opening of these centres by private individuals who note this social necessity and who feel the need to help their fellowmen” (E. paid-staff at the Jesuit centre).

It is interesting to note that several of the actors involved are quite clear about the fact that the public authorities are using the “charity” of these organisations to their own advantage.

“All these children we have, the public bodies do not manage to take proper charge of them, because there are not even enough places for Palermitan children (...). That’s when organisations like ours intervene (...). It is practical for them; we plug the holes they have left” (G. volunteer at the Salesian centre).

The reasons given by those working with charitable organisations, in particular by the young people, reveal a depoliticised commitment. Often, they confine themselves to basic descriptions of the emotion they felt in the face of certain situations they were confronted with. Solutions for problems are seen as one-off solidarity actions rather than more in-depth actions, such as public campaigns, which could address the reasons behind the injustices witnessed. These actors rarely link individual situations with a more general view of the problem and they set themselves apart from political (and trade-unionist) militancy perceived as corrupt, ineffective and serving the interest of individuals rather than groups (Collovald 2002). Rozier (2002, 157) speaks of the *“difficult formulation of an accusatory rhetoric”*. Most of the organisations analysed in this article make do with extolling humanitarian and charitable commitment to help the destitute and the “excluded” (the unemployed, AIDS sufferers, the homeless, immigrants...) and highlight statements denouncing politics.

“I am not enthusiastic about political activity in my country (...). It reminds me of a religious sect. Since I was born we’ve always had the same politicians around (...). Politics are not where I feel at home” (G. volunteer at the Salesian centre).

“We tend to keep our distance [from the political world]. We should just like to make this small contribution to society so that immigrants might be able to live in acceptable conditions. We try to have as little contact as possible with politics” (E. volunteer at the Jesuit Astalli Centre).

The Transformation of the Charity Logic: the rejection of mere assistance

These young people involved in work with immigrants who adopt the depoliticised language register of *agapè* have yet a view of social commitment that is different from the traditional idea of “doing good” (alms for the poor). They are seeking time to set themselves free from the political register without at the same time falling into the pitfall of charity-speak and a paternalistic helping-the-poor approach. They see their activities and the services they offer as a desire to transform the social and civic conditions in which immigrants find themselves; revealing an evolution of the perception of the “other” that is receiving help. The majority of them thus insist that they are seeking to encourage immigrants to endorse responsibilities and to help them on to the path towards autonomy. They justify their activities more by the criticism voiced

against a culture of dependence (hands out) than as a denunciation of the State's lack of action. They contrast their "assistance" (*assistenza*) or "aid" (*aiuto*) model to that developed by the Biagio Conte Mission, which they refer to as the "hand-out/dependence" approach (*assistenzialismo*). In their eyes the Mission is encouraging ghettoization of the destitute and keeping them in a state of dependence.

A young psychologist working with Caritas explains that "*the fundamental objective*" of the Caritas crèche "*is not so much to look after children as to enable women to work, particularly African women (...). You are helping them to emancipate themselves*". Caritas also manages a canteen. Those who wish to avail themselves of this service need to have a ticket which has to be renewed "*every two months, precisely to make sure that they do not start relying on hand-outs*".

From the very first minutes of our conversation, E. from the Astalli Centre stressed the difference between the "first-welcome" and "second-welcome" services and also the view of aid advocated by the Jesuit centre. He also quickly went out of his way to draw a distinction between himself and the Biagio Conte Mission, which embodies the ideal example of paternalistic charitable paradigm, while at the same time praising the historical commitment of Biagio Conte to the disinherited.

"[The second-welcome services] seek to bring into play the conscience of the immigrants [so] that the beneficiary should become aware of his rights and potentialities (...). We focus on the Italian lessons because [they] offer possibilities for people to become independent. We make a distinction between assistance and aid. We do not want to give assistance, because that can often turn into hand-outs".

"The thing that we do not have in common with Biagio Conte is that he provides hand-outs. There are people who have been with him for years and who do not speak Italian (...). [Those living in his centres] are not encouraged to be autonomous. They know that Biagio Conte will let them sleep there and eat and that's enough for them. We, on the other hand, want the beneficiaries of such services to be independent, to speak Italian and be able to find work and be autonomous".

A volunteer at Santa Chiara also criticises the tendency of both those providing the services and the beneficiaries – whether they be Italians or foreigners – to be in favour of hand-outs.

"We are trying to change our method of intervention (...). We are trying to pass on from the hand-out stage to that of shared responsibility. We get carried away by emotions and end up failing to educate a person to cope with life as an individual responsible for his own actions; this applies to both immigrants and Palermitans. For example, someone comes to you for help with filling in a form; you help them the first time, the second and the third, while they ought to be learning to do it themselves".

The way these young lay people separate their ethical behaviour and their religious faith is perhaps a way of making sure that their activities are not seen as just charity for the poor. This is a more general tendency of the Catholic Church. Indeed, having to face up to the presence of members of other faiths, the secularisation of society, the politicisation of the migration issue

and to the criticism expressed by some of the lay associations against the monopoly of religious actors in the welfare domain, the Church has been obliged to go beyond its traditional points of reference regarding charity.

The arrival of the first waves of migrants to Sicily and their settling in at the end of the 1980s brought an opportunity for certain clerics, who had been previously involved in other causes, to invest once again in the migration issue their social and 'militant capital'. Progressively, most of the church-related organisations turned their attention to the immigrants and adapted their services to meet the needs of the new public. The malleability of the Christian network can also be deduced from the internal secularisation within most religious organisations, though there are contrasting examples of strong religious affirmation in the charity work. In the meantime, we are witnessing a professionalization of those involved in these activities, whose competences have been recognized and granted greater value. Far from the traditional image of the religious associations made up of altruistic volunteers, there is now a European trend to be observed: wider use of salaried staff. These organisations are driven forward by a host of lay-people of varying status and profiles: students, trainees, pensioners, volunteers; both unpaid and salaried. Thus, both economic motivation and the need for professional experience recognized in the labour market lead people to join these organisations. Finally we have explored the "ethical" dimension of this involvement. Most of the lay people interviewed do not embark on a religious rationalization of their activities. Yet their Christian socialization does shape their involvement: they talk about doing good and empathy in the face of injustice and they justify their role as "safety-valves" given the shortcomings of welfare provision. They do not, however, construe their action as political. The Clergy is more protest-oriented than the more professionalized lay people working with migrants in the catholic organisations. Indeed, the politicisation of the immigration issue has pushed the Church to demand public, collective solutions that would usually be a matter for political authorities. While the lay people interviewed do not see themselves as political militants, neither do they present themselves as acting only in accordance with their faith. Their discourse on the transformation of a charitable logic, shared in distinct southern European contexts, does not imply a more political involvement of these organisations. Rather they see themselves as empathetic experts who 'arm' migrants so as to help them become autonomous citizens, thus going beyond the traditional framework of charitable aid.

We have delineated the potential of the political, organisational and cognitive adaptation integral to religious organisations and the diverse actors within them. An exploration of the response of religious organisations to growing immigration in the Sicilian context (and for that matter that in Italy in general) has also brought to light tensions between different courses of action, the wide ranges of activities undertaken and the diversity of the discourses and references employed to justify.

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