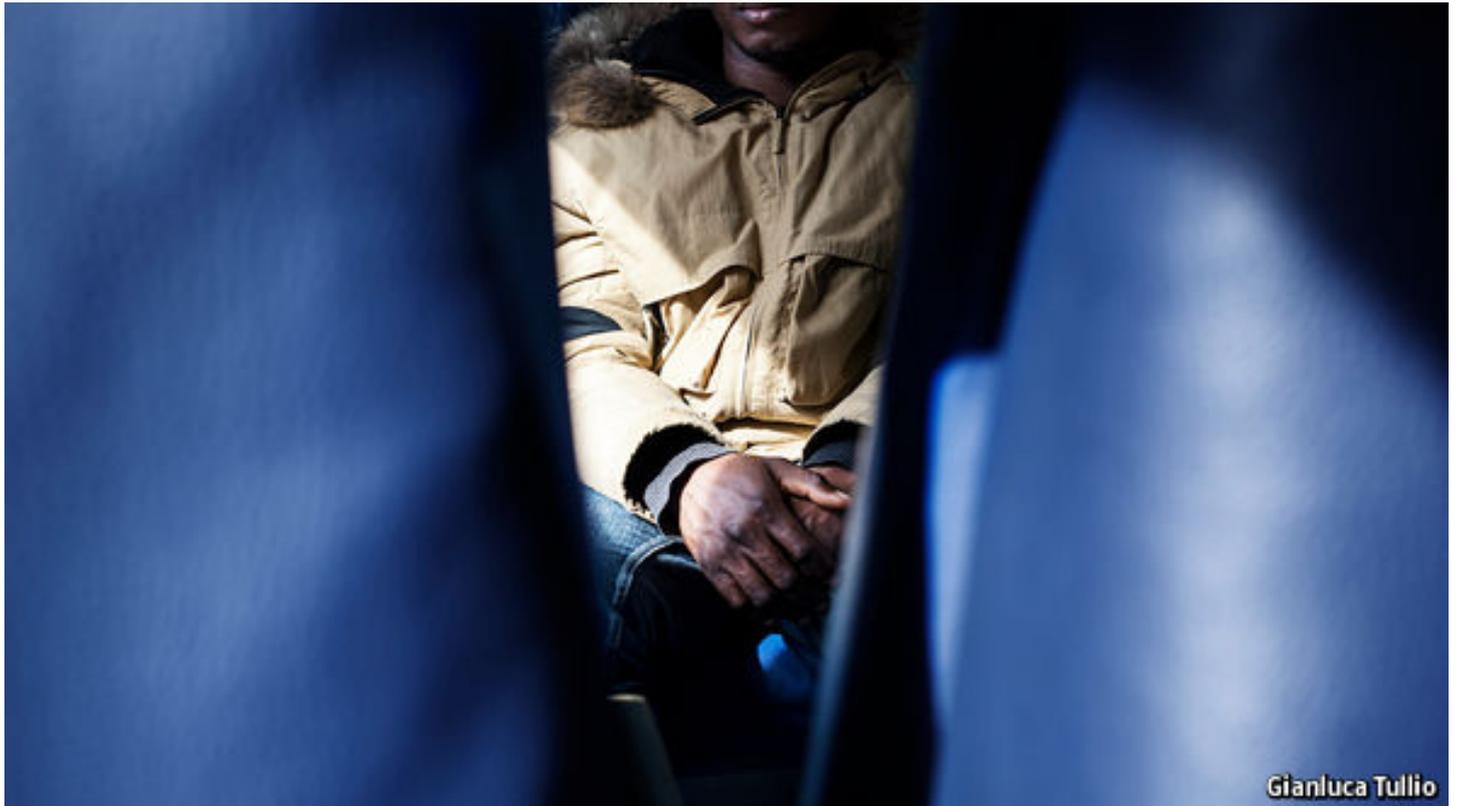


Migrants, Italians and the church

Faced with exploitation of migrants, the flock, not the church, looks away

Attitudes towards migrants in Italy pose a dilemma for the church



Erasmus Mar 10th 2017 | by ERASMUS and S. D'I.

EVER since Pope Francis, making his first trip out of Rome, met the boat people arriving on the islet of Lampedusa off Sicily, the welfare of refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers has been one of his prime concerns.

As you would expect, such a policy makes enemies, not least in the Holy See's Italian hinterland. For a segment of Italy's political right, lambasting the pope and his bishops for being too migrant-friendly, and ultimately Muslim-friendly, has become a well-worn trope. Leading the charge has been the *Lega Nord* (Northern League), a party that seeks to raise its profile by denouncing the chaos and corruption seeping upwards from Italy's southern tip. One spat occurred last autumn, after a bishop said the "Christian conscience" was

“disgusted” by a popular drive to keep asylum-seekers out of a port on the north Adriatic. “The disgusting thing is the hypocrisy of a church...which asks a secular state to be invaded by millions of Muslims without any filter,” a *Lega* politician retorted.

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Such arguments rage mainly in Italy’s industrial north. Reactions to the migrant crisis by churchmen and politicians have been more muted in the far south, although that is where hundreds and thousands have come ashore, and many remain. According to Pasquale Annicchino, a research fellow at the European University Institute, this is because migrants are less visible there than in the industrial cities of the north.

They have also become an integral part of the local economy: cheap migrant labour controlled by *caporali*, or gang-masters, has become indispensable for the harvesting and processing of tomatoes, a product in which Italy is a world leader. A range of other products, from courgettes to citrus fruits to olives, are also picked by migrants. They regularly work 12 hours a day in sweltering heat for a wage of no more than 30 euros, from which their "masters" take a cut.

For shelter, many crowd into makeshift camp-sites of wood and cardboard huts which have sprung up in remote rural places, far from any town. The word “ghetto”, which originally referred to Europe’s Jewish quarters, has been revived to describe these awful shanty-towns. Local Italians have little reason to go near them, unless they are agricultural employers looking for cheap workers. One of the best-known, the Gran Ghetto di Rignano, burnt down earlier this month, killing two workers. It is suspected that the fire was started deliberately.

Does the church of Pope Francis protest against or alleviate this ghastly phenomenon? Catholic charities certainly do. Caritas, which looks after refugees on arrival, has produced an extensive study of the *caporali* and lobbied for legislative change. A law passed late last year, designed to punish those who profit from semi-bonded labour, owes something to campaigning by Caritas as well as by Italian trade unions. Caritas says it is providing legal and medical support to migrant farm workers in 18 territories, almost all in the south. Father Gianni Di Gennaro, of the Jesuit Refugee Service in the port of Catania, says that his agency finds itself vying with the state when it comes to looking after new arrivals: his staff have

sometimes been sidelined by state agencies, which are wary of the legal advice that church volunteers can give.

Still, there is something to the suspicion that for all the stringent papal rhetoric, the church is allowing itself to be sidelined in the south to avoid alienating powerful local interests, such as big agricultural employers. In time-honoured southern tradition, local bigwigs are encouraged to finance religious processions and festivities, however ill-gotten their gains may be. That can be a way of buying assent.

But the church does not always play nice with the bullies. A priest in a small town in Italy's southeast recently agreed to hold a showy evening mass in memory of a locally born man, described by police as an organised-crime boss, who had been shot dead in Canada. But the regional archbishop and a police chief barred the event; the prelate dismissed the idea of a public mass for such a wrongdoer as a "great scandal". Marco Ventura, a religion-and-law professor at Siena University, notes that "it takes a lot of courage for the church to speak out against networks of illegality which may have deep social roots." But at least some of the time, the church does find that courage, whether the law-breaker is an organised-crime boss or a gang-master.

More than the church, it is other parts of society in southern Italy that are prepared to overlook the exploitation of migrant labour because it keeps the wheels of the regional economy turning. As long as the migrant toilers are doing work that very few Italians would want, the newcomers will not be accused of stealing jobs. And while they huddle in shanty-towns which are relatively far from ordinary towns, many local people in the so-called host society will care little about the migrants' fate.

Be it north or south, the church's challenge in Italy is to induce people to care about migrants' welfare and to remember that they are vulnerable human beings—not job thieves or slaves.

Dig deeper: For further impressions of migrant life in Italy, see Gianluca Tullio's photo essay on *The Economist's Instagram feed*.