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An island few have heard about - until today

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today
Pope Francis

Vatican Radio did a background piece on the island Pope Francis visited Monday. Among its facts:

- Lampedusa, part of the Sicilian province of Agrigento, is the largest island of the Italian Pelagic Islands. It's the southernmost tip of Italy, closer to Tunisia (which is about 70 miles away) than it is to Sicily itself (about 110 miles away).
- Lampedusa has a population of almost 5,000 people. Its main industries are fishing, agriculture and tourism.
- Since the early 2000s, the island has become a primary European entry point for migrants, mainly from Africa.
- In 2011, during the exodus caused by unrest in many North African countries during the Arab Spring, the number of immigrants far surpassed the number of islanders.
- By May 2011, more than 35,000 immigrants had arrived on the island from Tunisia and Libya. By the end of August, 48,000 had arrived.

Vatican Radio's Linda Bordoni spoke recently to Giulia Cirillo, a graduate student doing research on women and migration. Cirillo traveled to Lampedusa twice this year as part of her dissertation research.

An excerpt from Vatican Radio's interview:

Giulia said she had the occasion to visit the immigrant reception center of Lampedusa. She describes it as being a very basic facility, meant just to welcome refugees and give them

shelter for the first 48 hours or so. "Unfortunately, a lot of the time people are kept there for much longer". She says if you stay there for a long time it could almost feel "prison-like".

Giulia pointed out that the center is just meant as a primary welcoming structure and it is "geared to giving people the first medical attention they may need if they come off the boat dehydrated or that sort of thing". And then, she says, people get sent to other facilities where they can request asylum. So decisions regarding the status of the refugees are actually made elsewhere, on Sicily or on the mainland.

How about the islanders themselves? What are their feelings towards the refugees?

"The general feeling towards the refugees is that they are people who need help. The people of Lampedusa are very clear about the humanitarian element of the arrival of migrants and don't have a lot of time for the political intricacies of whether they should be in Italy or not" And she says: "that's really great because a lot of the time in the political intricacies the human element get lost". She says her impression is that "it has also been very trying for them in the last two years. Particularly in 2011 the situation became very difficult to live with, so there is a mixture of patience but also a kind of long-suffering disillusionment for the lack of support from Italian authorities in dealing with the crises as they come along".

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