



Intercultural Dialogue as an Activity of Daily Living

Maria Flora Mangano

INVITED PROFESSOR OF DIALOGUE AMONG CULTURES AND COMMUNICATION OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH, ITALY

Context

The intercultural dialogues described in this case study occurred with youths of central and southern Africa, who arrived in Italy as migrants in 2017. In the last few years, “extraordinary reception centers” have been established in Italy to offer temporary hospitality to migrants and refugees coming across the Mediterranean Sea. These centers are designated by the local authorities, through agreements with associations and hotels, and in accordance with public contract regulations. Accommodation is intended to be limited to the time necessary for their transfer to mid- and long-term reception centers, although the wait may be one, or more, years. This time is often a sort of limbo for most migrants, who desire to turn a page in their lives, by finding a job and moving towards other European countries to reach relatives and friends. The temporary center provides them accommodation, a psychological support, and basic training in Italian. In addition to these primary steps towards their inclusion into the new context, these centers are involved in several activities, generally carried on by local volunteer associations or spontaneous groups of citizens. They may include theatre, music, song, sport, and initiatives for promoting social cohesion among migrants, often drawn from several African countries, together with local residents.

In 2017, extraordinary reception centers were established in my town (Viterbo, in central Italy) and in the surrounding towns. The dialogues described in this case study occurred in March 2018: the first happened when I visited one of these centers; the second took place during an active citizenship initiative promoted in my town, involving some of the migrants living at two reception centers in Viterbo. The citizenship activity was the first official event that brought together the migrants and the residents, as they collaborated in cleaning the city center of Viterbo. It involved nearly 1500 high school students, 80 migrants, and 300 residents.



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues Case Study #9

Participants

The dialogues presented in this case study involved young migrants drawn from several countries in central and southern Africa, including mostly Nigeria, but also Mali, Equatorial Guinea, and Togo. All of them spoke English, with a few words of Italian. We had short conversations, either during my visit to the reception center, or while we participated together in the active citizenship initiative dedicated to cleaning the city center.

In both cases, I started the conversations, by asking if I might visit the reception center in the first episode, and while we were waiting for instructions for cleaning the streets in the second. I visited the center on my own and participated in the citizenship initiative as inhabitant of my town, with the aim of building bridges among people in various categories: migrants, center workers, students, and citizens.

Description

The first dialogue occurred in an extraordinary reception center located in a small village close to my town. This structure used to be a monastery until a few years ago, and a religious community of Zambian friars used to live there. Many of these religious were students of mine, and most of them returned to Zambia after having completed their academic training in Italy to become priests. The monastery was closed until, in 2017, it was renovated and transformed in an extraordinary reception center for migrants and refugees. One of these Zambian alumni became a priest in Viterbo on March 2018, and he celebrated his first Mass in this village. Before going to the church, I wanted to visit the monastery, and to meet its current guests.

I introduced myself to some African youths at the entrance, and I explained why I was there. One of them smiled and welcomed me. He told me he was from Nigeria, and described the center: they were 60 migrants, drawn from different countries of Africa, including families with kids. He told me something about his story, his trauma, his desires for the future, especially for a job, as he loves to work. He also told me he is happy to be in this center, where he has been for 7-8 months, and he showed me some pictures on his smartphone with the parish priest, as he is Catholic and participates in Mass on Sundays.

I recognized in this picture the priest I knew, as he was one of the Zambian friars of the religious community which used to be based there. Recently, he became



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues Case Study #9

the parish priest of the village, and he celebrates Mass with the migrants, in the small chapel of this monastery.

I told the Nigerian young man that, in my opinion, it was not by chance that that monastery became a center for temporary hospitality for migrants and refugees, as this is the real meaning of a religious place. Therefore, they could be sure that it was not by chance that they were there. It was a holy place, thus a place of hope and peace. Despite their dramatic past, their sad present, and their totally uncertain future, in that place they might still be happy. He confirmed that they were fine there, and they feel at home with the Italian people who work there. I wished to him to consider this time in Italy a possible "portion of hope and happiness", which he may in the future recall as a beautiful experience, although short and temporary. He looked at me, smiled and nodded.

The second episode of intercultural dialogue occurred while we were cleaning some streets in Viterbo city center. I tried to engage in as many conversations as possible with the people involved in this initiative. The occasion was provided by the instructions for cleaning the area assigned to our group: I was asked to distribute disposable gloves and bags for collecting the waste. While I was explaining to each of them what to do, I proposed to a few students that they should help some migrants by talking to them in English in addition to Italian. At the same time, I frequently checked if everything was clear, how they were, and whether they were tired or cold.

I noted a growing participation, involvement, and joy among the people I met, especially the migrants and the students, as they felt useful, "really protagonists of the initiative", as one said. Most of them put much effort in cleaning small bushes or corners often ignored.

"Today, we are all citizens of Viterbo," a young man from Nigeria told me. "In this day, we are not black or white, African or European, we are all the same" added another one from Equatorial Guinea. "We are not tired, we are happy, as we have the opportunity to thank this town and the citizens for having offered hospitality. *Grazie, merci*, thank you, Viterbo!" said one young man from Mali. "When we do it again? We are ready also tomorrow!" added another one from Senegal, as we delivered the garbage to local sanitation.

The time dedicated to collecting the waste from each group offered me the opportunity for deeper conversations. I asked a few migrants about their ordinary days at the center, how they felt in Viterbo, and what they hoped for the future. A Nigerian young man answered in Italian, that he used to be a mechanic in his



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues Case Study #9

country, with a garage, before the civil war. He dreams of doing it again, in Italy, or wherever. Another young man from Togo said he is happy to be in Viterbo, feeling at home in the reception center, although there are still problems of language due to the different cultures. He felt understood by the Italian staff, who they consider “bigger brothers”, as he phrased it. Many others confirmed this feeling, with positive notes. I shared some of these comments with the Italian workers of the center, and they used the same expression about the migrants, calling them “brothers.”

At the end of the initiative, while we were waiting for the final comments by the local authorities, two migrants, both from Nigeria, who brought a soccer ball, started to play by handing it off to some of the students, who accepted their invitation.

After this active citizenship initiative, additional activities have started, which involve citizens and migrants, coordinated by volunteer associations and residents. Among the projects are: social theater and a footrace through the city center, as well as volleyball and rugby tournaments.

Dialogic Features

Both episodes of intercultural dialogue were characterized by short exchanges, mainly consisting of brief questions and answers, which offered the opportunity for deeper conversations. Although only using a few words, members of each group (migrants, students, local residents) put forth an effort to expose themselves, by listening and talking with the other, someone who was unknown, often in a non-native language.

We interacted as equals as I was the guest at the reception center in the first episode, and we were all involved in cleaning the streets in the second one. The unusual condition of both being the guest and working together on a task helped each of us to build a bridge across differences in our cultures, ages, backgrounds, and personal histories. I would say that what we experienced is the opposite of what happens to many migrants, who are considered unwelcome guests in several countries.

These short encounters probably cannot change their daily life but have the potential to create the conditions for sharing a space of dialogue, which may become a space of relationship.



Constructing Intercultural Dialogues Case Study #9

Lessons learned

The experiences described in this case study imply the value of considering dialogue as a space of relationship – among cultures, religions, human persons with different histories. Therefore, intercultural dialogue has the potential to become a practice in everyday life, in addition to something more typically discussed in the abstract sense as part of academic studies. Indeed, intercultural dialogue may become more than a practice, a habit, which goes beyond study or profession, as it may come to characterize daily life.

The situations described here are unusual, in terms of everyday life, thus, in a way, extraordinary, just as the reception centers for migrants and refugees are described as extraordinary. But these situations may become ordinary, as the effect on the people involved in these dialogues indicates. The idea of dialogue as a space of relationship with relevance to everyday interactions may also suggest ways to increase the occasions for migrants and local residents to build bridges among, across, and beyond individual participants. These bridges become essential, as activities of, and for, the whole day, thus, ordinary, vital, and necessary.