

Marseilles: Catholics, Muslims and the “chain of good”

Accounts of peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Journey to Europe’s poorest neighbourhood, among faithful that share a bond of mutual trust. Sister Valeria Rubin and Narimane Deffas share their stories



A Muslim girl attends a Christian school.

CRISTINA UGUCCIONI, VATICAN INSIDER, 6 DECEMBER 2016

“France has failed on the integration front. Its assimilationist policy, which aims to transform every immigrant into a French citizen, doesn’t work. It has produced squalid ghettos in which people live as second rate citizens. Thinking that France could simply impose its own values as if they were absolute and unquestionable, as if immigrants were deprived of their own cultural and religious traditions worthy of respect, was a huge mistake. I see the consequences of this policy on a daily basis, first hand.”

These are the words of Sister Valeria Rubin, a 73-year-old Scalabrinian nun of the association Enfants d’Aujourd’hui, Monde de Demain (Today’s Children, Tomorrow’s world) based in the French city of Marseille and founded by the Scalabrinian family in 1987: “Our Centre (the association’s head offices) is located in the city’s 3rd arrondissement and is home to thousands of first, second and third generation immigrants, many of whom are Muslims: this is Europe’s poorest neighbourhood. But compared to other cities like Paris and Lyon, the social tension here – caused by soaring unemployment – is far less acute. This is thanks to a robust network of associations that promotes and fosters relations, understanding and mutual respect, with numerous initiatives being organised in support of those in greatest difficulty. Christian-Muslim relations for example are good. The state certainly isn’t to thank for that, in fact it is considered by the people to be absent.”

The Centre’s initiatives

Daily life at the Scalabrinian Centre tells the story of people who have been rescued from poverty and exclusion and are now receiving guidance and being looked after. People here patiently build their future, within a fraternal and caring environment that keep desperation at bay. There are families that are regaining hope, receiving food, clothes, comfort and friendship. There are hundreds of adults following literacy courses and are then able to pass exams and obtain a residence permit. There are children and young people (over a hundred) that attend after-school clubs and manage to complete their studies achieving good results. Young people meet every week to reflect on important life issues, learning to be together and support each other responsibly.

The young Muslim volunteer

There are currently 70 volunteers working at the Scalabrinian Centre. Many of them are Muslim and have themselves received assistance from the nuns in the past; some even sit on the administrative council. One of them is Narimane Deffas a 23-year-old female Algerian student who is about to obtain her BTS Banque (a diploma for banking customer service advisers). She says: "I had a lot of problems at school so my parents decided to bring me to the Scalabrinian Centre: I received close guidance in my studies, until the high school diploma. Now, every Saturday morning I work in an after-school club, I have been put in charge of a group of second grade pupils. I really like devoting my time to these little ones; it seems only right and normal to me to help others after I myself received help. There are nuns, priests, Muslims, Christians and atheists working here: we all share the same spirit of dedication and work together in great harmony". Regarding Christian and Muslim relations in the neighbourhood, she said: they're "generally good, people are tolerant and support each other, although there are cases of selfishness and indifference."

History repeats itself

Sister Valeria has been living in Marseilles for 32 years and has witnessed the changes the city has been through: "there were many Italians living here once (especially from the Piedmont region), they came in search of a better life, they suffered abuse and great humiliation. There was serious discrimination against them and they were unable to find work. There was glaring racism against them. History repeats itself today, with immigrants arriving from Africa and the Middle East, fleeing war and poverty: unfortunately, nothing has changed."

The limits of French politics

Narimane adds: "In my opinion, France is not pursuing a policy that is capable of guaranteeing a dignified life for immigrants. I was born and grew up in Marseille, I have French citizenship and yet I am still considered a foreigner and therefore, someone who is, how can I put it, inferior and dangerous. I am aware of the fact that it's going to be hard for me to find work both because there aren't that many job opportunities around and because I am a Maghrebi woman."

According to Sister Valeria "the state concentrates on issues that are not crucial, such as the way Muslim women dress, instead of dealing with the real problems immigrants face, primary unemployment. For people of different cultures and religions to get along, there needs to be mutual understanding and respect but this country has never given due attention to this in education. Muslims willingly come to our Centre because they have realised that they will be respected here and they know that we as Catholics expect to receive the same treatment: this is how mutual trust and relations become transparent and fertile."

Genuinely religious people (of different religions) living together in peace, have a great deal to offer today's world, Narimane remarks: "They can bear witness to real values and money is not one of them. They can show that it is possible to act together, accepting and valuing respective differences, to build a better world with more equality and justice".

The aftermath of the attacks

The terrorist attacks against France – from the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in January 2015 to the assassination of Fr. Jacques Hamel in July this year – have left a deep wound in French society

and have triggered a string of reactions. “The mistrust and racism shown towards Muslims, for example, have increased exponentially,” says Sister Valeria. “For its part, the Church took immediate action, launching a public reflection involving bishops, priests and imams, who came together not only to condemn the use of violence in the name of God but also to support and encourage peaceful and industrious co-existence among all citizens. Muslims were invited to the Eucharistic celebrations and attended in large numbers, here in Marseilles too. It was a significant gesture.” Narimane concluded by saying that “the men who committed those atrocities are not Muslims even though they proclaim themselves to be: no one has the right to take a life!”