



The Order
of Malta
at the gateway
to Europe

Grand Master
at Lampedusa relief
operations for immigrants

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THE SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER
OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA



The Order of Malta at the gateway to Europe

Grand Master at Lampedusa
relief operations for immigrants

Ensuring safety at sea. This is the main task of the Italian Coast Guard men and women. Every mission entrusted to us, whatever its nature, has the ultimate goal of protecting the environment and the safety of the people who operate in that sector. But it is in rescue work that our commitment is greatest. The sea is a marvellous element but it can also be cruel, making fast and efficient action an imperative. At sea there are no differences of race or religion, gender, age or social class: everyone is assured assistance or rescue. These principles are fully shared by the men and women of the Order of Malta Italian Emergency Corps, who for six months have been carrying out their humanitarian mission alongside our crews stationed on Lampedusa, the gateway to Europe for so many desperate people, and who will continue to do so every year from April to October. These dedicated volunteers who have worked on board our vessels with commitment and humanity have not only contributed to the many rescue

operations, but have also provided an incalculable assistance to aid desperate humanity.

Raimondo Pollastrini

**Admiral Chief Inspector (CP)
Commandant of the Italian Coast Guard**

With this operation, the Order of Malta Italian Emergency Corps has experienced one of the most significant moments in its history, for two special reasons: The first is sea rescue, a role the Coast Guards perform with great proficiency. The efforts of the many volunteer doctors, nurses and assistants have given a significant added value to the rescue operations for immigrants in the Straits of Sicily, guaranteeing continuity and dedicated resources. The second is the work performed by Order volunteers, who have alleviated the suffering of so many, including stricken pregnant women and exhausted children and in dramatic cases, having saved their lives. All this has been made possible thanks

to the involvement of the Italian Civil Protection system where a number of agencies - military and civil, voluntary and state, Italian and Order of Malta - have joined forces to achieve a single aim: the protection of human dignity and life. For the opportunity offered to us and to the community, I am grateful to the Prime Minister's Office - the Civil Protection Department, the Ministry of Home Affairs - the Department for Civic Freedoms and Immigration. I wish also to thank Admiral Raimondo Pollastrini for his help and determination, as well as all of the Coast Guard men and women who, with true self-sacrifice and amid a thousand difficulties, guarantee safety at sea.

Dott. Mauro Casinghini

**National Manager,
Order of Malta Italian Emergency Corps**



I had never been to Lampedusa before but the two days I spent on the island have left a lasting impression. Lampedusa, with its 20 square kilometres and 6,000 inhabitants, is an authentic European borderland. In recent years this island has been the target of exponentially increasing migratory influxes. In 2008, over 31,000 immigrants arrived from the African coasts in search of a better future. Over and above the political positions regarding this situation there is a real humanitarian emergency. Children, infants and pregnant women have braved the sea in death-defying conditions. Many never made it. I am particularly proud of what the Order of Malta Italian Emergency Corps has achieved, thanks to an agreement with the Italian Coast Guards. In 2008, over 2,500 immigrants were given medical assistance directly on board the Coast Guard vessels. This is a noble and difficult humanitarian mission. Thanks to the Italian Navy and Coast Guards, the Order of Malta is continuing its historic mission of presence and operations in the Mediterranean. This publication is a tribute to the work of all these, who in the name of our Order's founding ideals and values, have tirelessly taken part in this vast relief operation, assisting and saving the lives of thousands of people.

Fra' Matthew Festing

THE DESPERATE JOURNEY OVER THE SEA OF HOPE

In 2008 there was a massive surge in immigrants landing on the Italian coastline. According to the Italian Ministry of the Interior, arrivals continued even in the middle of winter, unlike 2006 and 2007 when there had been a significant drop in numbers.

A total of 37,000 non EU-immigrants arrived in Italy in 2008, most landing in one way or another on Lampedusa, then to be sent on to centres in other parts of the country. This figure is 75% higher than in 2007 and the island's temporary reception centre has a maximum capacity of just 850.

The men, women and children who land on Italian coasts after horrendous and frightening journeys come mainly from Eritrea and Somalia, two of the most afflicted regions of the African continent. There are many terrible stories. According to unofficial estimates, 14 million people are at risk of famine in the Horn of Africa. And the continuous flow that has achieved such sad records in immigration comes

precisely from this bottomless basin.

Over the last 15 years, 250,000 people have attempted to come to Lampedusa from Libya, and it is estimated that of these, 22,000 have gone missing in the Straits of Sicily, 580 in 2008 alone. What the official statistics tell us is that in general men leave their country to seek work. But in the face of extreme danger the women flee as well, many arriving on Lampedusa, the first landfall in Europe, on rickety boats, leaving behind them a story of abuse as long as their journey. During the first eleven months of 2008, some 3,500 women landed here - triple the number who arrived in 2007. The percentages are even more significant: up to October 2006, 5.2% of immigrants to Italy arrived on Lampedusa, with 8.8% in 2007 and over 12% in 2008. Equally significant is the increase in minors, who often travel alone without family members: they have risen from 2% in 2006 to 8% in 2008.



Italy

37,000
IMMIGRANTS LANDED
ON ITALIAN COASTS IN 2008

Mediterranean Sea

Tunisia

LAMPEDUSA



14 MILLION
PEOPLE ARE AT RISK OF FAMINE
IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

580
PEOPLE WENT MISSING
IN THE STRAITS OF SICILY IN 2008

Algeria

8%
OF IMMIGRANTS LANDING
ON LAMPEDUSA ARE
UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Libya

3,500
WOMEN LANDED
ON LAMPEDUSA IN 2008

THE DARK DAYS IN AMINA'S EYES

Her name is Amina and she has a gentle expression on a prematurely aged face.

A certain grace survives a life spent waiting on the edge of a dusty road between a civil war and a coup d'Etat.

Amina is 23 years old and her body looks double that. Burnt by the sun, ulcerated by wet clothes chafing her skin. Amina comes from Somalia.

Her father, mother and younger sister have come with her. Their journey started in Mogadiscio, a zone devastated by fighting. Then the Sahara and the prickly sand breathed in while travelling in a truck like a tin can. Then Libya.

Hope didn't die even when faced with the prospect of boarding a decrepit boat.

And you have to give your last coins to policemen who will pretend not to see.

A fishing boat of less than 12 metres, crowded with desperate people, standing huddled together, all heads turned in the same direction: towards the future.

Two days and two nights (if the weather

holds) in which bodies become stiff, soaked in sweat and salt, disfigured by scabies. In the beginning the horizon seems calm. The 70 thousand nautical miles separating the Libyan coast from Lampedusa are not so daunting when compared with the enormous distances covered to get there.

But without warning the sea can become a ravenous beast. Some don't make it and are swallowed up by the night or crushed against the rocks. Others, frozen by horror and cold, can't even manage to shout. With Amina and her family there are dozens of immigrants fleeing from twenty years of violence. Many are young people who no longer accept their destiny as victims and are attempting to 'burn the borders', as they say in Arabic, putting as much space as possible between them and the vultures looking for prey. There's no difference between failing and dying and any risk is better than a life in which seeing a new day is a matter of luck. And

so, Amina explains, you just have to find a trafficker who organises departures for this pitiable human cargo, and hope to reach 'the country of opportunities'.

We discover that prices vary according to the country of origin. They range from 500 to 3,000 euro per person per crossing. Amina's family had finally managed to scrape together the 2,000 euro demanded of them.

Then the girl recalls her joy in having finally beaten the Mediterranean.

The boat on which they were travelling had been sighted by a Coast Guard patrol vessel, heralded by a great spotlight on their frightened faces. As they disembark, buses are waiting to take them to the temporary reception centre.

The assistance of the volunteer doctors and the distribution of a kit with basic necessities eases the entrance into yet another enclosure. Most of the immigrants have no idea what to ask for.

They are just happy to be alive. But what Amina really wants for herself and for her family is simple: work and dignity.

But she also knows that the struggle has not yet ended. Meanwhile she prepares her request for asylum and hopes for a temporary residence permit.

And she waits for the miracle to happen, perched on a tree of ravens and thorns.



11 OCTOBER

8.30 a.m.
Departure from Rome Ciampino Military Airport

9.40 a.m.
Arrival and departure from Naples Capodichino Military Airport

11.30 a.m.
Arrival on Lampedusa

12.00 midday
Transfer to port: greeting Coast Guard crews and other services

12.45 p.m.
Lunch on board the Coast Guard vessel Lolini CP 407

3.00 p.m.
Visit to Financial Guard operations centre

3.30 p.m.
Visit to temporary reception centre

8.00 p.m.
Dinner with the Mayor, Prefect, Chief of Police and Coast Guard representatives

11.40 p.m.
Transfer to the port: arrival of immigrants



12 OCTOBER

10.00 a.m.
Mass with
immigrants
in the temporary
reception centre

11.30 a.m.
Transfer to the port.
Departure for
operations at sea

1.30 p.m.
Lunch with staff
of Italian Emergency
Corps and Coast
Guard crews

4.00 p.m.
Departure from
Lampedusa on Coast
Guard flight landing
in Rome at 6.30 p.m.







On arrival the Grand Master is received with warmth and informality.

Below: the Grand Master and the Grand Chancellor with the Mayor of Lampedusa Bernardino De Rubeis and the Prefect Umberto Postiglione

Left: with Rear Admiral Vincenzo Melone



STORIES OF EVERYDAY HEROISM





Fra' Matthew Festing piped aboard Coast Guard Vessel CP 407 Lolini.

The Grand Master came to meet representatives of the institutions and armed forces on the vessel that has for some months been the centre of operations in the Straits of Sicily. He also greeted the men and women of the Order of Malta Italian Emergency

Corps who, living on board on ten-day shifts, have provided first aid to immigrants during rescue operations. Dozens of children, including newborns, have been assisted, as well as numerous pregnant women, in many dramatic cases at risk of giving birth on board. The most frequent afflictions encountered were dehydration and malnutrition, chemical burns,

sunstroke, injuries from falls and cuts and grazes of varying seriousness. There were also many cases of scabies.

To date, an unspecified but certainly very high number of people have lost their lives in the desperate attempt to pass through Europe's gateway to escape wars and persecution or simply to seek better living conditions.





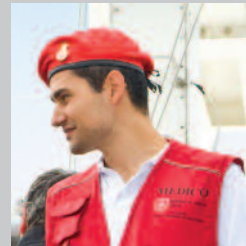
“These are the heroes,” says Rear Admiral Vincenzo Melone presenting his men. “On countless occasions they have saved human lives in very dangerous conditions.” The Grand Master bows. “I am honoured to meet them.”

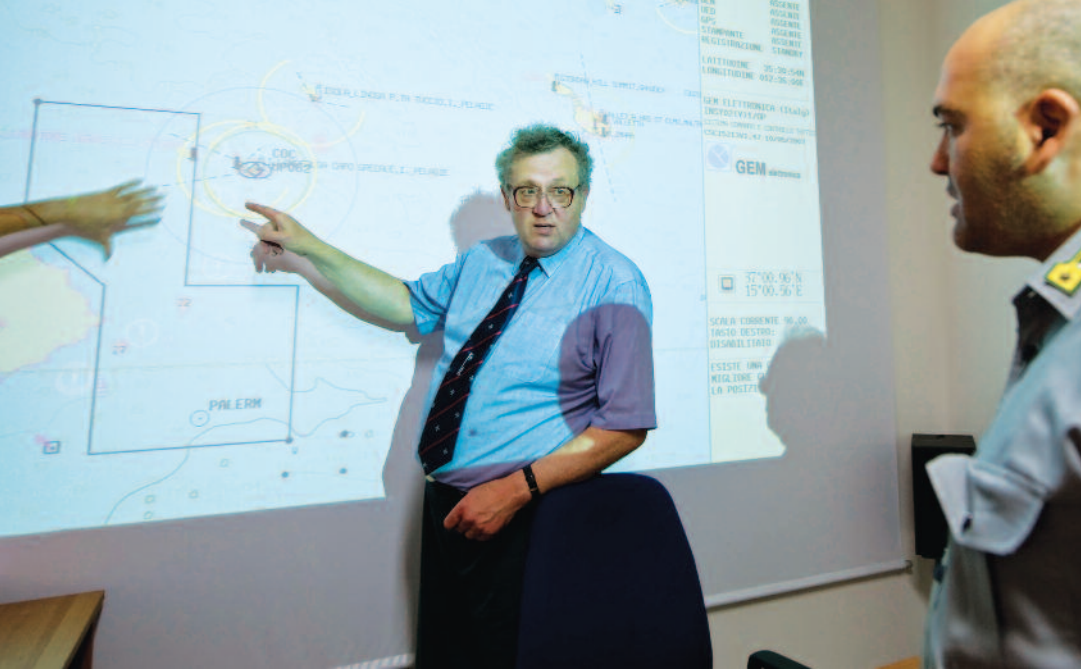




The Grand Master asks them to break ranks, he wants them around him while he thanks them. He shakes their hands, asks them to explain the situation.

The island is the target of a continuous wave of migrant boats, and often the bad weather conditions mean they go adrift in the Straits of Sicily.





In the Financial Guard Operations Centre.



What strikes you most is the fear
in their eyes.
Young eyes that have looked death
in the face, on the sea at night in a rubber
dinghy after five days without being
able to move, on top of each other without
food or water.



The temporary reception centre on Lampedusa. Buses bring the immigrants here after they have disembarked. All who enter must have health checks, identification procedures, be photographed and fingerprinted. The centre, designed to accommodate 850 people, is often stretched to the limit because of the massive number of arrivals, sometimes over a thousand in the space of a few days.







The open-air Mass celebrated on Sunday morning in the temporary reception centre throbs with emotions and sensations. There is a makeshift altar, surrounded by chairs and prefabricated buildings from which men and women gaze out, mostly non-Catholics, but whose attention is attracted by the service. Everyone is moved, especially by the immigrants' religious chants during the ceremony. Bringing back memories of home.



MEDICO
C.I.S.O.M.





The Grand Master stops to speak with the immigrants, listening to their stories told in a babel of voices.

He questions everyone and they tell their stories.

Horrendous accounts, full of excruciating events. Journeys of hope begun many months ago. Routes found by trial and error, following hazardous trails with compulsory stops to scrape together enough money to continue. Travelling on foot, on buses, through deserts, to escape hunger, wars and destitution.

NIGHTS AT SEA WEARING THE MALTESE CROSS









"...we were alerted to a boat in distress, 12 miles from the coast and with 270 people on board. The weather conditions were bad and we had to take immediate action."



Emergency blankets for preventing hypothermia, the backdrop of yet another emergency action. A night of suffering and solidarity, like many others in the heart of the Mediterranean.







Dr Gabriella Varisano with Sub-Lieutenant Paolo Pisano, captain of the Coast Guard boat Lolini.



Dr Gabriella Varisano is an Order of Malta Italian Emergency Corps (CISOM) volunteer helping to tackle the refugee emergency on Lampedusa. Specialised in internal medicine, Gabriella practises in the province of Agrigento and in Palermo, but this year she decided to use her holidays and energies in a different way, following to the letter the precepts of her faith.

Dr Varisano, how did you come to work on Lampedusa?

"I was asked to participate in the 'Lampedusa project,' a joint venture between the Order of Malta and the Italian Coast Guards, to provide medical assistance to the immigrants landing on the island. I had worked with CISOM before and I immediately accepted the challenge."

So one day you arrived on what is Europe's gateway to the Mediterranean...

"I'd been to Lampedusa twice before, in August and October. I remember in particular the summer period, when I was working on the patrol vessel CP 290. At each alert we sailed out to the immigrants' boats to check on the situation and offer our assistance."

You are a professional of course, but doesn't humanity sometimes take over?

"Yes. I remember the morning when we were at the temporary reception centre to greet the Grand Master of the Order of Malta who had come to visit the refugees, to see this difficult situation for himself, and we received a warning about a boat in difficulty, 12 miles out and with 270 people on board. The weather conditions weren't good and we had to act immediately. At the beginning we could only rescue 50 people. We learned from them that many were ill. So I went on board to help whoever I could. And at that point they put in my arms a young girl who was having a heart attack. I will always remember the look on Jasmina's face as she came back to life. But the cold was also a real threat. The refugees' clothes were so sodden I had to cut them off before wrapping them in emergency blankets. In the end everyone was saved. While behind us their boat slowly sank."

Finally on land, for first aid...

Indispensable aid... The people who arrive on Lampedusa travel in horrific conditions. This means dehydration, hallucination from stress, hypothermia, scabies and chemical burns. It is also very difficult to communicate with them. They are all squashed together - Arabs, Egyptians, Congolese, Eritreans - and very few speak another language. And then there are the pregnant women, at risk from hardships, hunger and fear. For every disease there is a different identifying bracelet which helps the Red Cross, operating on land, to give precedence to the more serious cases.

Nights at sea wearing the Maltese Cross...what has this meant to you?

"I'm very proud to have been able to help! For me the Maltese Cross represents that spirit of service which is the very essence of being a Christian. An experience that I have shared with other volunteers."

Will you return to Lampedusa?

"Certainly, to give my contribution and to try to change something, acting right at the heart of the emergency. Alleviating even for one day the sufferings of our brothers is a privilege. I'll see you there!"



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OF ST. JOHN OF JERUSALEM OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

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