

## Speech by Doctor Pietro Bartólo

Good afternoon,

First of all I would like to thank the INLIA Foundation for choosing Lampedusa, and for choosing me as her representative. We are honoured to receive this distinguished award.

On Behalf of the Community of Lampedusa I would like to greet the authorities both civil and religious, and all the persons present here today.

INLIA's dedication is admirable: it really provides assistance and gives practical support to asylum seekers. Every day on my island we are used to welcoming people in desperate conditions, who are looking for a better future. It is a great pleasure for me to know that – beyond the primary line of welcoming – there are persons who work seriously to assure asylum seekers an effective integration.

We should all join forces and, synergistically, offer to those who are in need, a stable and good future.

I would like to remind you of the tenacity shown by the Sisters of the Holy Spirit in Knivsta, Sweden, who have opened their doors to the helpless. What they have always done – and especially what they did when the police turned up - is admirable. On that occasion INLIA concretely supported the sisters and, together with them, a solution was reached. All things were done bearing in mind that behind those contrasts there were human beings, persons full of difficulties, with one hope: to get a better life. In 2013 Lampedusa witnessed a tragedy, actually one of the greatest tragedies in human history. As you may recall, on the 3rd of October 2013, 368 migrants died in the sea while they were trying to reach the coast of Lampedusa, which is Europe – the place where to start a new life, a life that had been denied to them in their own countries. It was a disaster during which every Lampedusan gave a contribution. On that occasion, 159 people have been saved and welcomed by the Lampedusans. They offered shelter, clothes, food and love to the people who survived. Well, we are Lampedusans, we are fishermen, we are seafarers: we welcome whatever comes from the sea.

I believe and - I am strongly convinced - that helping people in need is a responsibility of every man.

We have been living the phenomenon of immigration for 25 years, trying to do our best: we have never given up, even at the most difficult times. And - believe me – we have had a lot of difficult times.

Nevertheless we have never backed out, we have never built walls, fences, barbed wire barriers. In all my years on Lampedusa I have dealt with a historic humanitarian emergency.

In the aftermath of the tragedy of 2013 the Italian Government wanted to introduce a maritime rescue service for migrants called Mare Nostrum. Then, other European countries have taken part in it, creating Frontex – an agency which co-ordinates the border-patrol operations. Actually, Frontex carries out rescue service activities, so from this view it is comparable to Mare Nostrum. So now, migrants are rescued close to the African coasts, in order to prevent similar tragedies.

Since the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 80.000 persons have been rescued. Nevertheless, sadly, a lot of persons are still dying in that small area of the sea.

Over these years it has always been clear in my mind that a migrant, far from being just a number, is a human being and behind every one of them there is a life full of suffering and tragedies.

Now, I would like again to thank INLIA for giving me the opportunity to be here with you today. I feel honoured to be here and I want to take the advantage of this occasion to make an appeal to all of Europe. Try to show our humanity towards these brothers, as Pope Francesco taught us. He said, with admirable strength, that: “migrants are not dangerous, but they are in danger”.

Motivated by these words, we must feel it as our responsibility to welcome them, we must feel to be like living stones that together form a building of love, mercy and solidarity.