

## ***Amica Sofia* “setting the standards” in Riace**

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Riace - what a special school! And how eager the children are to learn in the *Borgo dell'accoglienza* (an integration project). Although there are few of them left, they continue to attend school regularly in this seaside neighbourhood. The school in Riace Superiore has been closed due to a lack of pupils.

However, the standard teaching hours are not enough for these young students to spread their wings. They come from Syria, Pakistan, Somalia, Eritrea and Nigeria and are between seven and fourteen years old, attending school from the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of elementary to the 1<sup>st</sup> year of high school. To offer more support, *Amica Sofia* has decided to set up after-school activities, giving children access to support, whether they are simply doing their homework or with a selection of extra material, especially to broaden their vocabulary. Very frequently they request this themselves, because they have understood that being able to speak fluently is not just a scholastic requirement. In fact, they need Italian as a lingua franca to communicate with peers of different nationalities and to be able to help their parents, some of whom speak very little Italian and who therefore need their children as translators. In the colourful world of Riace there is a wonderful, harmonious melting pot, where everyone pitches in with joy and enthusiasm. For instance, young English-speaking Nigerians help their classmates who don't know this language and the same thing happens for French and Italian, which is also taught by people who have learnt Italian here, helping their classmates with their literacy. These activities are held in the “Casa della poetessa” (“The poetess' house”), where there is an atmosphere steeped in the pleasure of spending time together and getting to know each other, first and foremost, as human beings, making this generous and fruitful exchange of knowledge possible.

*Amica Sofia's* activities are supported by Riace's mayor Giuseppe Gervasi, who is also a poet. He shares the association's commitment to helping children, for whom he has written *Desiderio (Wish)*, “a fairy tale for all the children in the world who have been denied the joy of smiling, hoping that they can make their dreams come true”. Cooperation with the local community is essential to organize the after-school activities, possible also thanks to the contribution from some local people from Riace. In fact, together with them, the association's volunteers can offer young students the opportunity to study and broaden their knowledge but, more than anything, an important opportunity to share this experience with their parents at home.

Their shared experience repeats itself in a sort of loop and this becomes really important in creating strong bonds between the children, whatever their nationality, and between the children and the teachers, with whom the children have established a close, affectionate relationship and an intense emotional exchange. Moreover, young people between the ages of thirteen and eighteen are working as volunteers, providing concrete proof of how effective peer-to-peer learning is and highlighting the need for solidarity between workers and young students as the keystone for their motivation.

This is what the children of Riace really want: human contact. When they realize they can trust others, they transform from shy, silent little people into children bursting with joy and enthusiasm, becoming whirlwinds when they have finished their homework, had a snack and begin to play the traditional game of *Categories*.

The after-school-club children asked to meet other students and with some of them they have become pen friends, exchanging letters and poems. This activity not only requires a “concrete” linguistic and

communicative effort, but also satisfies, to some extent, their need for acceptance in a world that is ever less open to relating with those who are “different”.

This is how Riace is leading the way: for the children learning new words, but also how to build human relationships. Their parents learn to speak about their fears, but also their hopes for the future. The volunteers organize colourful, lively lessons, experiencing at first hand the re-energizing beauty of giving, discovering a little bit more about themselves through the exchange and solidarity. Students who have learnt, give their knowledge and work freely to others. The students who correspond with the children of Riace, have learnt how little it takes to give hope and a smile to those who have already tasted the bitterness of life, despite being so young.

Once again, the experience in Riace set standards during the *World Philosophy Day*, supported by UNESCO and celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of last November. There were about one hundred students from four local schools in the assembly hall at Liceo Classico Galluppi, a high school in Catanzaro. The day was dedicated to the theme “Philosophy as Integration”. Marvelous and Divine Lawal, a brother and sister from Nigeria, told their story as children escaping from their country with their parents and two younger siblings. For about five years, they have lived between Riace and the nearby village of Camini and are attending the first year of high school.

The extraordinarily striking words of Marvelous demonstrated a determination to go on, despite great uncertainty and a vision of the world, according to which, in spite of everything, he continues to trust others and in the future.

The *Amica Sofia* project stands with the children of Riace, renewing its commitment every day. In spite of the cruel reality, it represents the most beautiful experience of philosophy in action, of social utopia, which becomes real with every word learnt by these little students and in the continued belief that cooperation and integration are the only ways forward to the future. Still believing in a different humanity, that is not only possible, but alive, strong and which will not give up.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of last November, to support Riace and the work being done there, a group of people and associations launched a “poetry marathon” entitled *Poesie che accolgono* (“Poems that embrace”). This is the promoters’ presentation:

“Poems that embrace” is an initiative that stems from the work done by poetry enthusiasts, who believe in solidarity, integration and social inclusion for the most vulnerable. You can join the initiative as an informal group, a private organization or a public body.

The main objective is to show solidarity through collective poetry readings in Riace, with its inhabitants, old and new, those who have decided to make this their home. Starting from Riace, together we hope that this first budding event will take root and contribute to spreading the values of solidarity. We hope that new projects and initiatives will come from these new exchanges, so that Riace continues to be the testing ground for integration and social transformation we all know. There are many other places on the planet, where people are forced to leave their birthplace, pulling through unimaginable experiences and traumatic barbarities. We want to extend our solidarity to all these people through new initiatives, against the background of poems that embrace.

To launch this first act of solidarity in Riace, we have chosen to read together “Preghiera Laica” (“A Layman’s Prayer”) by Erri De Luca.

## **A LAYMAN’S PRAYER**

Our Sea, thou art not in Heaven  
embracing the shores of the island and the world

hallowed be thy salt  
hallowed be thy bed  
welcome the crowded vessels  
with no passage over thy waves  
fishermen off in the night  
their nets gather thy bounty  
coming back on the 'morrow  
with their catch of lost souls.

Our Sea, thou art not in Heaven,  
at dawn thou art the colour of wheat  
at dusk the colour of ripened grapes,  
we have sown you with lost souls  
more than in any other stormy age  
you are more merciful than dry land  
you may raise waves like walls  
but then you lower them and smooth the way.

Take care of these lives, souls fallen  
like leaves on the avenue,  
be their autumn  
a caress, an embrace, a fond farewell  
from a father and a mother before they go out.

*For this occasion, Erri De Luca, in addition to giving his personal conviction and support, has also written the following text:*

As the Romans said, 'what is spoken flies, what is written never dies'. I would say the very opposite, what is written is closed in a book, left closed on a shelf. On the other hand, what is spoken flies far, reaching the shores of the listener.

The story of our times is that of the epic poem of the Aeneid, of those who cross land and sea to escape a Troy engulfed in flames. However, Aeneas had a safer passage and there is no Virgil among us.

The words I have written and to which you will give voice, in Riace on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2018, are those of one who listens and speaks up about lucky landings and cursed shipwrecks. These words belong to those who know that they will die but will not be stopped.

At night, the mother holds her son, boards an overcrowded vessel, facing the darkness, drifting on the waves. This is the most accurate image of despair, overwhelming even maternal instinct, allowing us to understand the exact meaning of the word despair today, a word that is so often on everyone's lips. It is not tearing your hair out, nor throwing yourself off a cliff: it is the strongest driving force of our times. Every last sacred tear has already fallen, dry eyes look straight ahead at us.

Promoters:

Rocio Nogales, Voces del Extremo Valle del Jerte, Spain  
Paola Minussi, Women in White – Society, Como  
Giulia Galera, Garzola Muri a Secco, Como  
Massimo Iiritano, Amica Sofia, Catanzaro  
Elisa Turci, Trento  
Raul Daoli, Trento  
Debora Nicoletto, Feltre  
Marta Pezzati, Como Accoglie, Como  
Pietro Berra and Mirna Ortiz Lopez, Sentiero dei Sogni, Como

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