

**The Olof Palme Prize  
Stockholm, 30 January 2017**

I'm both moved and grateful for the incredible honour of receiving the Olof Palme Prize together with the Mayor of Lesbos.

My islands, Lampedusa and Linosa, are very small, inhabited by a total of approximately 6,300 residents who survive on fishing and tourism. Geography placed them right in the centre of the Mediterranean, bridging Africa and Europe, and they've always been an essential hub for migration between the two continents.

Nearly 20 years ago, a migration route opened which first crosses the Sahara, arrives in Libya, and then intercepts the sea. From that moment on, Lampedusa became the epicentre of the greatest tragedy of our time. Anyone who crossed the sea up until 2013 landed in Lampedusa. Then in 2014, with the Mare Nostrum operation, military ships began carrying some of those rescued to other locations along the Sicilian coast, as the vessels of European border control missions still do today.

There are nearly 300 thousand people whose lives were saved thanks to my islands, and when I think of them, I imagine 300 new Lampedusans moving about the world, contributing to the growth of the West and helping pay for the pensions of our elderly.

All islands are welcoming by nature - and not due to heroism - as islands are rafts in the sea, shelter and safety. What isn't normal, however, is that the sea can't be crossed freely, as has been the case throughout our civilisation's history. It isn't normal that the people who need our help should die by the thousands in the attempt to cross the liquid border of Europe, and that they must entrust their lives and those of their children to criminal organisations, becoming goods, devoid of the dignity of being human beings. It isn't normal that the power to decide who enters Europe is left in the hands of human traffickers while the EU is more concerned about the space between knots in fishing nets than with the entanglements of the Dublin Regulation. It isn't normal to be indifferent when faced with a humanitarian catastrophe which, for more than 20 years, has made the Mediterranean one of the saddest cemeteries of our time.

It's an indifference which stops us from preventing daily tragedies and, after these are exhausted, leads us to develop increasingly improbable or useless or unjust solutions: rejections at sea, bombing boats, naval blockades, etc. According to some, rescuing these castaways means becoming the accomplice of the criminal organisations which traffic human beings. But human trafficking is one of the largest criminal businesses in the world, precisely because migrants pay for their transport upon departure, and not on arrival as happens with illicit weapon and drug trades. While other goods must arrive at their final destination to be turned into money, human beings do not. Even the dead have already paid their fee before drowning or dying in some other way. They are, at times, killed on the boats; they die asphyxiated in the holds or due to the chemical burns caused by fuel dissolved in seawater. They die because the smuggler threw their life-saving medicine in the sea; they die from the cold and from the heat. We know that rescue missions aren't the solution and that averting all the shipwrecks and their castaways isn't enough. The UN estimates that 5,000 people died at sea in 2016. That's as if almost the entire population of my islands passed away, without inciting even a gasp of indignation among those who continue to propose ineffective - and immoral - measures.

And after every shipwreck, there's the macabre hypocrisy of those who would rather avoid them, and the risk that public opinion will grow numb when faced with the most horrifying events of our time.

The largest shipwreck in the Mediterranean isn't that which claimed 366 victims near Lampedusa on 3 October 2013, which made Italian PM Letta kneel in front of the white caskets of children, made the President of the European Commission Barroso swear: "no

more massacres in the Mediterranean”, and made the Pope pronounce the word “shame”. In fact, in April 2015, more than 700 victims were sacrificed to the fears and cynicism of a continent, our Europe, only able to kneel before strong financial powers and hide the true failures of European economic policy behind the refugee emergency, incapable of facing the economic crisis with courageous choices rather than unsustainable austerity. The Europe of those powers is still unable to feel the shame of the massacres which result from short-sighted and atrocious protectionist policies. But how long must the bleeding of human lives, of women and children, last before we recognise that a true genocide is taking place? Before we consider it reprehensible enough that masses of people are considered superfluous, to borrow Bauman’s definition, that is, of no value or use?

The facts show that there are no other solutions than the regulation of influxes and the granting of asylum, restricted by quotas, directly from refugee camps. Humanitarian channels - guaranteeing those fleeing the right to asylum before boarding these death ships - are the only way to declare war on human trafficking, to prevent tragedies, to not betray our juridical culture, to guarantee human rights and to protect people as much as borders, to save Europe from a shipwreck of values, which is perhaps more dangerous than economic collapse. We need to act quickly, because it’s possible that soon there may be no Europe, no peace project, no future for any of us. The massacre of human rights and contempt for human life has never brought the rights and happiness of anyone to port.

What makes Lampedusa and Linosa special? Perhaps courage? But even we were afraid. On tiny Linosa, 433 residents live, and faced with boats carrying 500 refugees, that community faced an immense task. On Lampedusa, with its 5,800 residents, 25 thousand Tunisians arrived in two months in 2011 during the Arab Spring. At the time, the Minister of the Interior (then Lega Nord member Roberto Maroni) decided to deport them directly from the island, unsuccessfully. 25 thousand truly was a laughable number for a country like Italy. But by confining them all in Lampedusa, like an open-air prison, an extraordinary tale of electoral propaganda was spun for the populists of the Lega Nord, which we can define as “the perfect invasion”. The consequences were devastating for the Tunisians, treated like stray dogs, and for the inhabitants of my islands, who didn’t see a single tourist the entire season. In these microcosms, we gained the experience of what exactly it means to fear for ones survival. But as we also understood that the cause was entirely political paired with the poor management of immigration, we didn’t commit the fatal error of seeing the refugee as the enemy and the cause of our pain. Wasn’t the refugee emergency throughout the Balkans, seen from Lampedusa on TV, perhaps the same scene of ‘perfect invasion’ applied, this time, to the European macrocosm? What good did it do to gather 15 thousand people behind the barbed wire of Idomeni? It certainly didn’t save the destiny of Europeans or defend us from terrorism.

We know that worldwide there are about a billion people who are setting out to seek safety, that hundreds of thousands of fleeing people stop in bordering or nearby countries, often much smaller and much poorer than our nations. We also know that environmental refugees, still lacking any sort of international protection status, are destined to increase significantly in the coming decades, and that climate change, directly or indirectly contributing to a rise in conflicts and poverty, will push immigration even further. Yet on our continent even today we continue to scream about the ‘refugee crisis’ and the ‘invasion’ when facing a few thousand lucky ones who have won the face-off with death, managing to land on our coasts. In 2016, about 180 thousand migrants landed in Italy. They come from from Eritrea, where there is a dictatorship; from Somalia, where war has lasted 25 years; from Nigeria, wounded by attacks from Boko Haram; to a lesser degree also from Ghana, Mali, Ivory Coast, etc. Today, the emergency in Italy isn’t one deriving from numbers, but rather from the lack of a real reception system, still today made up mostly of emergency structures, and by the absence of common policies of solidarity from Europe. The Juncker Plan for migrant relocation has, in fact, remained largely unrealised. After more than a year, only

approximately 2,600 refugees have been transferred from Italy to other European countries, compared with the 40 thousand predicted in two years.

The same selfish attitude that Italy displayed towards Lampedusa for many years lives on in Europe's stance towards Italy and Greece.

Today Lampedusa has defeated the emergency logic, as treating boats which land ashore the same as one would an earthquake or flood is stupid. The result is that the people saved are treated better than in the past and that tourism has increased 30%. We have shown that everything we do for the refugees, we also do for ourselves - and that no one dies from welcoming others. Only a horizon made of solidarity and responsibility towards all can guarantee a future for us as well, for us, who have been more fortunate than others to be born in this part of the world, on this side of the sea, on this side of the walls.

In Lampedusa you hear the dramatic stories of the people and the reasons behind these desperate voyages. It is experience, then, not courage, that makes us special. This is understood best by he who leaves everything behind (land, loved ones) sets out towards the unknown, bringing only a few pictures as luggage, or a book, the Christian Gospels or the Quran, travelling for months or years of hardship and suffering. From the stories of the survivors of 3 October, we learned that women, during the voyage in the desert or upon arrival in Libya, were kidnapped, repeatedly raped by the same criminals which manage human trafficking, and then offered as gifts to other men. Men abducted and tortured so that their families would pay the ransom and, when the money didn't arrive, they were killed if they refused to give up an organ in place of the money. We learned that people paid 4,800 euros total per person for that journey, which would lead them to an incredibly sad and unjust death.

No edict from Fortress Europe, no barbed wire or wall can stop he who doesn't even stop when standing in front of death, simply and banally because he has not other choice. Migration, which is one of the most effective survival strategies, is unstoppable, but not unmanageable.

Instead of investing thousands of euros in the building of walls, we must expedite policies of aid and effective cooperation with the peoples of the Mediterranean, and serious actions which fight against human trafficking, whose proceeds might be bankrolling international terrorism. Instead of dismantling welfare in the name of austerity, we need to invest more in social policies to combat the marginalisation and estrangement of entire groups of foreigners in our cities, because that which we know about terrorists recruited to strike the heart of Europe shows that the failure, or the great difficulty, of reaching the goals of integration into the social fabric and civil existence with the 'other' is the need for constantly increasing investment in terms of resources and values, in particular.

Olof Palme stated more than 30 years ago: "We cannot build walls that separate us from the rest of the world, walls that would mean isolation and regression. Evolution continues to bring humans closer together, in a relationship which involves stimuli, but also strain and difficulty... But if we want to survive, we must learn to live with others."

Today however, European countries continue to concentrate on the defence of borders, external and internal, instead of building a more supportive and safer Europe for all, encouraging the spread of a climate of siege, suffering, inhumanity and degradation which feed hate and fear on one side, and racism and xenophobia on the other.

On the other hand, we're seeing the heroism of the women, men and children that arrive wounded, in need of everything, but with faith in their future. And right in the middle there's us, the islands, the ignored and mistreated periphery. But though we may be small and alone, we must never stop being human, carrying out actions which can create peace and build the future. It will be the strength and the humanity of regions and of cities, even the small ones, to save the world.