
Mondragone. Don Morelli (parish priest): “Numb consciences in the face of degradation.”

Degradation, poverty, exploitation, social tensions were unveiled after the detection of an outbreak of Covid-19 in Mondragone, in the province of Caserta, involving the Bulgarian community of Roma ethnicity. Yet, this unliveable situation has been ongoing for almost ten years now. As Father **Oswaldo Morelli**, parish priest of San Rufino, Director of the diocesan Caritas of Sessa Aurunca, told us, everyone is washing their hands of it, shifting responsibility onto others.



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I have been serving in this parish for 5/6 years. Here we have a diocesan soup kitchen: we offer 80 meals a day. These people come knocking on the door of the community, the only place where they find some understanding and hospitality”, Don Oswaldo said. “We offer meals from Monday to Saturday: most of those who avail themselves of it are Bulgarians, some are Muslim, others Orthodox and Gnostics.

We welcome everyone.

Most of the buildings of a former Cirio factory (where the outbreak was detected, ed.'s note) house Bulgarians of Roma ethnicity, but here in Mondragone they live also in other dwellings, located in the territory of my parish community, which is quite large and close to the sea, approximately 700 of them in the whole district. Some live here on a stable basis, but others are seasonal workers arriving in the harvest season with more work in the crops, such as the pregnant girl who tested positive for the coronavirus.” The parish also distributes food parcels. “When they come at our soup kitchen - the parish priest said - in the hour they spend with us we try to teach them to respect the rules, in this period also to wear masks, wash their hands, measure their temperature; in general to respect others and to show mutual hospitality, to pray each one for their faith, but *establishing a dialogue is hard. They come simply for the services we offer: the counselling centre, the family counselling service or medical advice.*” Caritas has also promoted a literacy course involving the school inviting immigrants to learn the Italian language, but "only 2-3 Bulgarians took part."



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Bulgarians are EU citizens, so they have no regularization problems. Nonetheless their living conditions are precarious: "They accept illegal working conditions," Don Morelli explained. *Only women work as farm labourers from morning to evening, in the areas surrounding Mondragone, Castelvolturno and Agro Casertano; they are underpaid: € 1.5/2 per hour. The men hang around the town square doing nothing all day. It's part of their culture.* The greatest worry of these families is paying the rent. Many live in shacks by the sea. We visited them for assistance and to bring some basic necessities. As many as 10 people live in small, dilapidated and often uninhabitable dwellings. Rents are in the black and often the tenants sublet. Despite conditions of neglect, they manage fine here; what they earn is much more than they might scrape together in Bulgaria." "The prostitution scandal involving young Bulgarians broke out a few years ago. They doing nothing all day long and thus try to earn something this way too."



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"School dropout rates are particularly high among the youngest:

We contacted the municipality, but they told us that these children are enrolled in school in Bulgaria, so they cannot be forced to attend here. They spend the day mooning about and causing trouble. Their mothers work all day, their fathers abandon them to their fate. We often see them in the parish playground, but they tend to wreck everything." "Some Roma are also involved in robbery. Bulgarians are themselves in charge of criminal activity. But, as the bishop said, there are probably also connections with Camorra organized crime". The Director of Caritas denounced "a situation of serious degradation which has been ongoing for over 10 years: everyone is aware of the way they live, the difficulties they face, but public authorities, politicians and even trade unions wash their hands of it and shift the responsibility to someone else."

Consciences are numb to this situation."

Last November "we organized a conference in the parish on *caporalato*, the illegal gangmaster

system, but very few attended.” The priest reiterated: “We are the only ones establishing basic relations and dialogue with these people. What is missing is synergic action involving all the players on the ground: the Church, government institutions, trade unions.

Only the Church is actively engaged, but there is little she can do alone.

We never gathered together to discuss, plan something, study a strategy, identify ways to establish a dialogue with them and help them.” In reality, the parish priest pointed, “they have no relations with the locals of Mondragone either. The Bulgarian Roma are overbearing, their behaviour is unruly, they urinate in the middle of the street, where they also leave bottles of wine and rubbish. This lifestyle led to a form of resentment on the part of Italians, who after 10 years can stand them no longer. The situation worsened with the Covid-19. There are great fears of contagion. In fact the parish, adjacent to the former Cirio buildings, has been somewhat depopulated.” The situation is also fraught with tensions: “Mondragone has always been a welcoming city. Romanians, Ukrainians, Poles came here before the Bulgarians and were always well received, but with Bulgarians it seems difficult, they don't even try to learn Italian. Even in the soup kitchen we communicate with signs, occasionally someone who speaks Italian acts as translator. Indeed, there are two or three fine Bulgarians who help us prepare food parcels at Caritas.” Don Osvaldo concludes: “Mondragone has a tourist vocation, but the presence of these people has damaged the image of the city because of the degradation they have brought.”

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