



## **Salesian group believes no one on earth is an orphan...**

### **...and puts belief into practice**

by Sr. Denise Sickinger, FMA, and Fr. Tom Dunne, SDB

We would like to share with you something from the Salesian Family Spirituality Days that will be helpful in implementing the Rector Major's Strenna 2017. One of the more memorable experiences of that conference was listening to the story of Salvatore Adamo and Linda Castaldo, members of a group of friends who would volunteer and share faith experiences together. After seeing the needs of at-risk young people in their area, they felt it necessary to form an association to assist minors and their families under the care of the court system and other minors at risk. Thus, **MetaCometa** was born in Giarre, a small town in the province of Catania, Sicily, in December 1998. This non-profit family association took as its inspiration and impetus Don Bosco's phrase: "no one on this earth is an orphan."

The first Family Community Shelter was opened in July 1999. The place was not chosen at random but purposefully so it could be close to the Salesian spirituality center, Casa Tabor, which is still a place of formation and prayer for the entire MetaCometa Association. Since 2012, at first sporadically, and now since October 2015 almost daily, this family association has welcomed unaccompanied immigrant minors. The welcome begins right in the port area and continues in their homes. Normally, the minors are under 14 years of age and are particularly vulnerable: the youngest and those who have the greatest need of a family.



Today, throughout Italy, there are about 25 MetaCometa sites: family-style shelters for minors, shelters for women at risk and their children, group homes, and foster families who take in and welcome the young – to date, about 500 minors through family court placement and a powerful Social Service network – especially the “poorest and most abandoned.” They live with couples raising their own children or with a foster mom, regaining and experiencing what they have lost: a family and all that a family provides. Theirs are security, protection, food, clothes, education, and, most important, love – experiencing it in the style of the family spirit created by Don Bosco.

Some of these children will return to their birth families when possible. Others, such as the unaccompanied minor refugees, will be set on their path for life with this healing experience giving them the hope and the future they otherwise would have lacked. Where possible, they will be put into contact with their families or extended families.



On Sunday, January 14, 2017, just a few days before we gathered in Rome, RAI 2, one of the national Italian broadcast TV networks, ran a feature on the crisis of families in Italy on its program *Sulla Via di Damasco* ("On the Road to Damascus"). During their talk to the Salesian Family, Linda and Salvo showed us this episode which highlighted the work of MetaCometa. What a moving experience it was for us to watch the story of Lamin, an unaccompanied minor who had come by boat from Gambia and received what he asked for: a family! The video, in Italian (although Lamin speaks in Italian, his words are subtitled in Italian), can be viewed at <http://www.raiplay.it/video/2017/01/Sulla-Via-di-Damasco-42fa42d6-aa88-410e-a1c5-3b7185ed863c.html>



For the foster families, opening their hearts and their homes to these children became an occasion for them to discover that they receive far more than they are able to give. It was the way they found to share with these young people the love that God gives them and to help them realize that they, too, are loved by Him in just the same way: "no one on this earth is an orphan."

Eventually, MetaCometa was recognized by the Italian civil authorities as an official non-profit organization affiliated with the National Federation for Salesian Civil and Social Services, with its headquarters at Via Marsala, Rome (Sacro Cuore). Founded in July 1993, this Federation was created and is directed by the Salesians of Don Bosco and today comprises 88 organizations of diverse nature: ecclesiastical, volunteering, and social organizations and cooperatives.

The mission of the Federation is to:

- ◆ coordinate, support, and promote the activities of its members who are working as volunteers, and for marginalized youth at risk or in difficulty;
- ◆ create a network for these groups to help them work together;
- ◆ organize and coordinate national civil service being done by young people in youth centers and Salesian works;
- ◆ plan and implement interventions on behalf of minors and of the young, especially those who are marginalized, in difficult situations, or excluded from society; and
- ◆ foster and collaborate in advocacy initiatives for the benefit of minors and of the least.

### **Point of reflection for implementing Strenna 2017**

In the midst of the refugee crisis in the USA today, this initiative touched a special chord in our hearts. This group of friends had the courage to see the need at their front doors and band together to do something about it, to help those who most needed it. May the knowledge of such initiatives being carried forward by the lay members of our Salesian Family, in conjunction with and the guidance and support of the consecrated members, be for us a beacon of hope that such collaboration within our Family is possible and most desirable here in our provinces, also.

More information and links to MetaCometa's Facebook and Blog pages, as well as the RAI 2 video, and the Federation SCS/CNOS may be found on the homepage of our Salesian Family website, the Don Bosco Salesian Portal: <https://donboscosalesianportal.org/>.