



***REFUGEE AND MIGRANT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES:
Preserving family life through hard challenges***

**Introduction by Francesco Belletti, director of Cisf
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A warm welcome to everyone who accepted our invitation and chose to dedicate some of your time to reflect upon such a complex and important theme in today's human history. And I am certain that I am not engaged in rhetoric when I say that talking about people on the move more now than ever means asking ourselves what kind of society we are building for ourselves and for our children – not just for those who are “on the move.”

I will resist the temptation to dwell too much on the conference content; our time in these 2 days is precious and I will just remind you in summary form the 5 brief points that bring us all along the pathway to these days and what we can expect.

1) Cisf and ICCFR. In February, 2018 at the conclusion of the ICCFR Conference in Malta on couple relationships the ICCFR Board (of which I am a member) began discussing its next Conference: where to hold it and what its theme might be. The discussions led us to select the topic of migration from the point of view of family relations, seen as unexchangeable resources for the

well-being of every person, but perhaps even more critical for the fragile and vulnerable – and certainly, therefore, for migrants. This inquiry is in perfect alignment with the work that Cif does. In fact Cif in 2014 produced a study dedicated to the theme of “families and migrations” (Families Faced with the Challenges of Immigration). This study highlighted the importance of the family dimension not only for those who seek welcome and refuge but also for those who offer it. Where does one learn, if not in the family, to welcome and accept others? You will find the data in our study, with 4.000 interviews of Italian families. It is very interesting, although it might be of even more interest if the same inquiries were done today, in order to glean the opinions of Italian families now that Italy has gone through the huge migratory crisis of 2015-2017 and the debates that followed. In short, since February 2018 we have been planning this conference that finally –let me say so – starts today.

2) The dates are important because they are related to the nexus of this event with politics and with governmental decisions, especially for Italy. From February 2018 to today Italy has had three national governments with three political agendas concerning migrants (along with discussions about the topic) which differ radically from one another. From the Gentiloni government (center-left) with Minister Minniti to the Conte 1 “yellow-green” (Northern League and Five Star Movement) and Minister Salvini, and finally the current “Conte 2” also called the “yellow-red” (with parties from the left and Five Star Movement) with Minister Lamorgese. I won’t get into the merits of this debate, as I don’t want to use artificial words which, in my opinion, become stereotypical and “thinking shortcuts” (amongst them progressivism, populism, sovereignty, do-goodism). Ours is a theme that warrants respect and deeper thinking. Each of you can surely imagine what setting up an event in Rome, the capital of our national politics, entails on such a push-button topic, so inflammatory, knowing that we are reckoning with one or the other of the political scenarios.

However, this aspect is worth paying explicit attention to at the start of our work here because both Cif and ICCFR have deliberately chosen not to inject politics into these two days. As you will note no politicians have been invited to speak, and even the run-up to these two days has been devoid of catchy slogans. We want to reason with one another, to listen to one another, to confront what is happening in so many parts of the world, where millions live, choose, suffer, resist – and sometimes sadly, are overcome and lose their lives - even within reach of our shores – or they lose their very humanity when they close their hearts to the suffering of others. This isn’t just about the

choices of governments, so much as it is about the nasty looks cast at those who are different: that is towards others.

3) We cannot be neutral, an impossible stance in view of such large-looming issues. It is clear that at the heart of the matter we have to understand “how do we come together” in a society that is ever more intercultural, in a highly mobile society across long distances, in a world where the distribution of wealth is ever more inequitable, in a world which, despite all of the lessons learnt from history, still has not learned that when armaments are given free reign, the first to suffer are the littlest. But this doesn’t mean – at least for myself – drawing a red line on the ground and saying: “whomever who sees it my way is good and whomever doesn’t is bad.” Because even that red line can become a wall, or a closed door, exactly like the walls and closed doors that we see today shut against migrants. We’ll have a chance to talk about all this in these 2 days.

4) Another facet, tied to the last one, that characterizes these two days is the knowledge that the phenomenon of migration today constitutes one of the social spheres in which it is clearly evident we have to adopt both a global as well as a local perspective. The more or less forced movements of large masses of people involve many parts of the globe and are guided by global factors that are difficult to administer or control. On the other side of the coin, the micro-social dimension, in the choice of people and in their encounters with one another the quality of the impact and the consequences of migratory choices are decisive. A true GLOBAL phenomenon becomes completely globalized as well as being decidedly valued at the local level. And if looking at this at the global level calls governments, multi-national groups, strategies, and political choices to the table (such as the Global Compact for Migration of December, 2018), to be able to reason at the microsocial level, the local one, restores value to people, to their prominence and individual responsibility. So we would prefer to talk about “migrant people” as opposed to migratory phenomena, and if we talk about welcoming, we want to think first and foremost about how each family, each community, each local village can welcome people, well before worrying about what laws will be approved. Of course laws are decisive, rights must be guaranteed, rules are made to be clear and efficient; but before all else we want to understand and recognize here that “every person’s death takes something away (even) from me because no man is an island” – (John Donne, sixteenth century).

On the other hand we need to look upwards and to understand that it isn't enough to look, understand and regulate what is happening in our little backyards, because everywhere on earth the challenges of welcome and migration face all of us: it is worthwhile to listen to those who have tried—and have succeeded in making themselves close to the weakest others, those who knew how to welcome, those who succeeded in living once again, and even those who have succeeded in regulating without shutting doors, and governing without exclusion.

5) In conclusion, anyone who works with families cannot help but ask himself about the conditions of the children, how to further their well-being, and what dangers they have to be protected from. In particular, we wanted to focus our attention in this conference on the millions of children who are currently in migration, wrenched away from their homelands, often traveling thousands of miles, sometimes with their families and sometimes all alone, in foreign lands, too often dying along the road which was to be a voyage of hope but turns into a voyage of horror – even right in sight of our shores or along the banks of rivers and seas that trap them. Amongst the 70 million people globally who are forced to move about 30 million are children, and if the Mediterranean basin is certainly one of the “hot spots” (and Italy even more so) we can't forget that other countries are host to millions of asylum seekers and refugees whose resources to deal with them are vastly inferior to those of a wealthy but inhospitable Europe; in Lebanon there are over one million refugees out of a population of 6 million and there are more than 4 million Venezuelans who have fled their country, without even counting internal migration within individual countries (for example Syria, but also many African countries). And in these giant migratory shifts, too often the children are “the last of the last” and their rights exist only on paper – legally acknowledged but trampled on. On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the ratification of the United Nations General Assembly Convention on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (20 November 1989) we trust that our Rome conference will be a contribution to the debate on the well-being of the smallest ones and a small step towards a society not looking the other way.