

MIGRATION AND SPIRITUAL REGENERATION

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental question of my research is: can be the migration experience a direct cause of generation of a new spiritual life? The starting point is a questionnaire aimed to about ten immigrant women from different religious origins. Thinking about their testimonies of faith, this survey focuses on migrant as spirituality generator boost and on the opportunity to give life to a new human landscape with many cultural bridges and flexible to the trip as a category. The inner processes and the symbolic representation of reality are much slower and much less obvious. The illusion of those who think that the world could always be equal to itself is often dictated by fear that prefers a static and predictable reading of the real. A similar consideration can be convenient, until the impact with something or with someone does not force us to think differently. The migrant presence, or, even better, a community of immigrants, changing the social fabric, suggests a new human environment, leading to undermine inveterate beliefs. Fixed, rigid and static conceptions should be replaced by a flexible and dynamic one, where knowledge of the faith of others finally appears appropriate, recommended and required. On the ground of consciousness we play the most difficult challenge, launched by the new citizens. Receptors apparently passive, immigrant members of the civil community tacitly propose a over the relationship and sharing, accessible only through empathy.

Keywords: migration, regeneration, women, faith, interreligious dialogue, social change, empathy.

1. Starting point of the research

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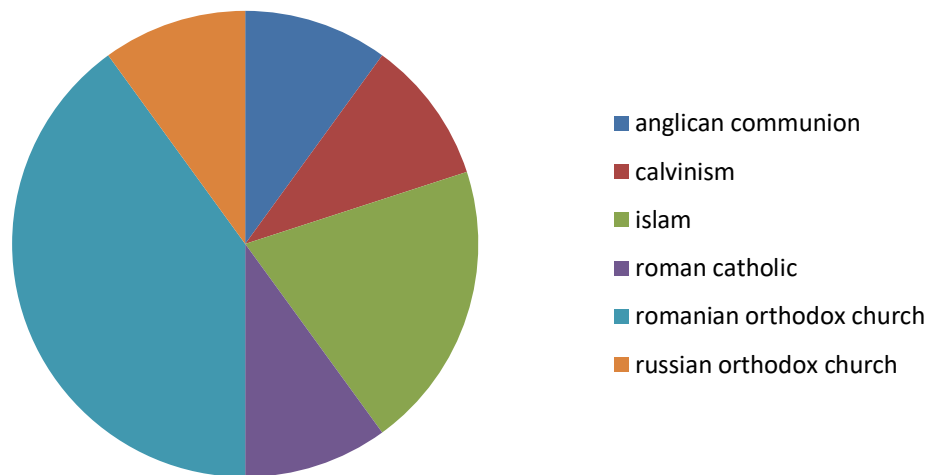
2. Questionnaire and data reading¹

1. In which religious belief did you grow up?

- Calvinism (1)
- Romanian Orthodox Church (4)
- Russian Orthodox Church (1)
- Anglican Communion (1)
- Islam (2)
- Roman Catholic Church (1)

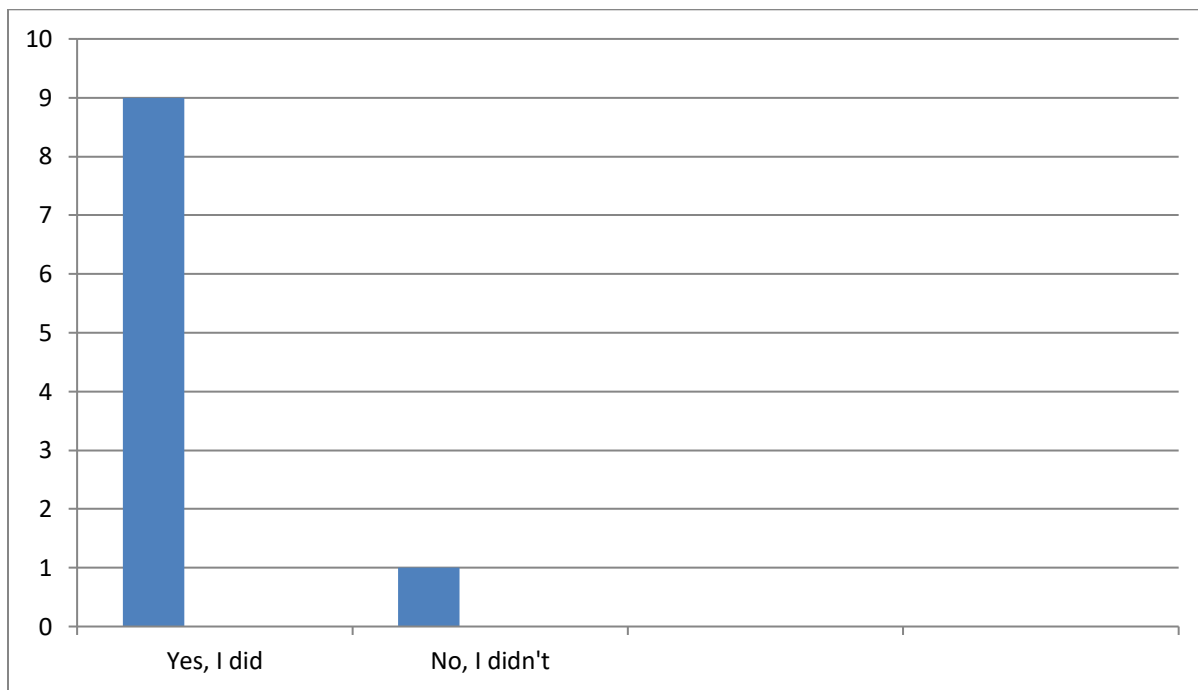
¹ My sincere thanks to the ladies who offered their time to respond to the interview, Anna, Antonella, Catalina, Corina, Elisa, Erika, Fatima, Khadija, Margaret, Olga.

**1. In which religious belief
did you grow up?**



2. Before leaving your country did you practice your religion?

- Yes, I did (9)
- No, I didn't (1)



How?

- Going to the church, to the mosque (some on holidays only, others regularly);
- praying;
- receiving the sacraments;
- following the commandments/the pillars of faith;
- attending the catechism learnt by heart;
- raising children in the faith.

From testimonies, in more than one case, the desire of God emerges from early **childhood** spontaneously (*I wanted to become a nun in cloisters, my mother said that I was not Catholic and I could not*) or thanks to the grandmother, *who read the Bible, she sang with me the sacred hymns*.

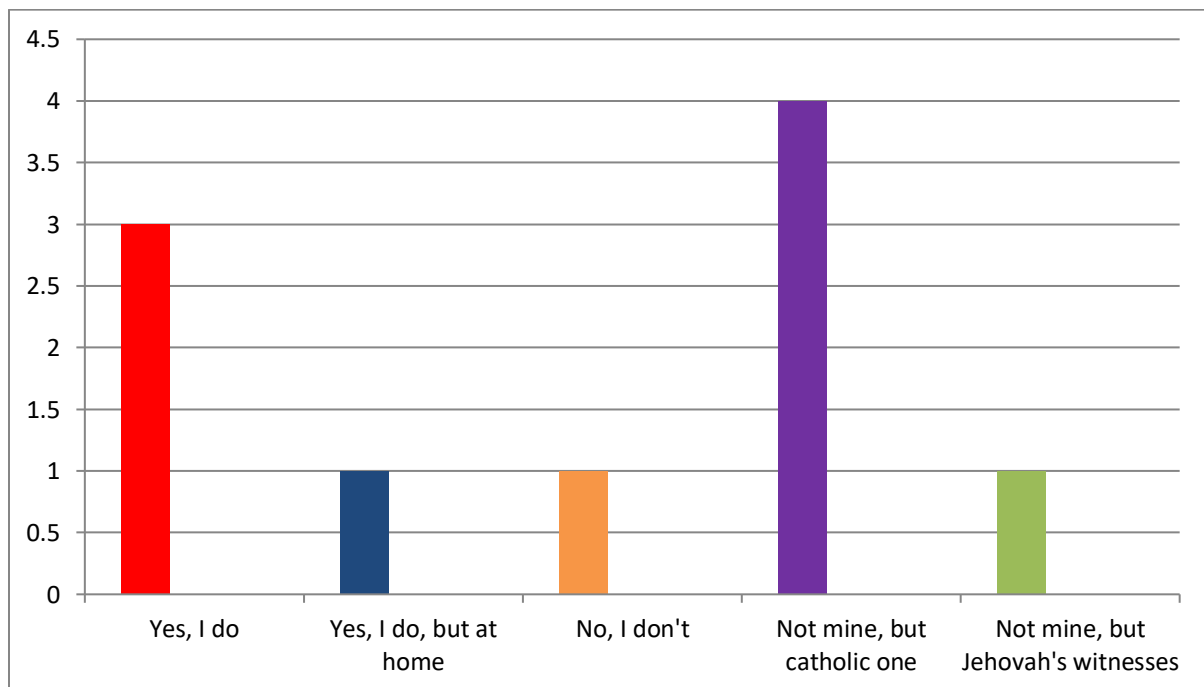
Some **meetings** are defined as decisive in the path of faith and the choice of conversion to Catholicism (from Anglican communion, from the Orthodox Church). In one case, the Catholic husband, *who took me to the Catholic Church on Christmas night*, in another one the spiritual guide recognized in a Catholic priest.

In practice, there are setbacks, **crises**, due to misfortunes (*it happened a disaster near a coal mine, many children died, I had a crisis, I started to wonder, "Where is God?"*), or due to the emigration (*I was looking for God*).

There is no shortage of **tensions**, if someone says: *I disagree with everything that the church says. God has clear laws, in the (Catholic) church they want to rule.*

3. Now do you practice your belief in Italy?

- Yes, I do (3)
- Yes, I do, but only at home, because there are no mosques for women (1)
- No, I don't, I await the period of purification after childbirth (1)
- Not my origin belief, but the catholic one (4)
- Not my origin belief, but Jehovah's witnesses (for some time) (1)



How?

Someone, even she has been Catholic forever, she feels uncomfortable to attend a parish in Italy, she prefers to talk to God, pray: *When I pray I want to be alone, I do not need anyone who looks at me. Today you can meet some people, also very good, thanks to the internet.* She emphasizes

the help received from Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy with whom she was well, as with friends, she shared with them a Bible study period and she said: *they were very close*. This attendance did not result in a conversion because the lady in question reproaches to them, as to Catholics, for acting differently than they preach.

A woman does not temporarily practice, because she has given birth shortly, but she will return to practice just past the time allocated to her tradition. Another claims to be more assiduous during Ramadan, less in other periods of the year, she complains that her city in Italy (Foggia) hasn't got a mosque for women and not even a space for them in the one frequented by men. Her practice is familiar, in this context the Qur'an is read.

They all define prayer as a positive practice to be cultivated (more than one claims to pray with the rosary).

Four of them claim to have chose to go to catholicism (from anglican communion, from orthodoxy), one is still preparing to officially pass the passage. More than one of these women approached belonging to the church with the geographical residence, some others told the conversion as a call.

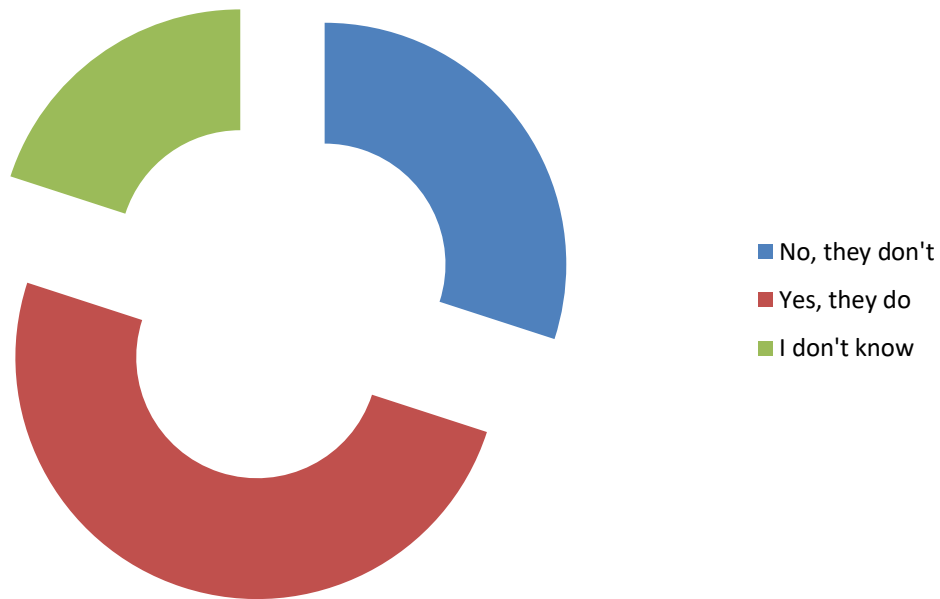
Some of them are active in the commitment of faith made up of adoration, service, choir, Bible studies, participation and responsibility at the consultation bodies, a lady in particular joyfully talks about visits to communities in the area with her husband, orthodox priest.

Practice is sometimes tested by conflicts that do not even feel right with God. The importance of spiritual guidance is supported by catholic, reformed and orthodox believers (*My spiritual father in Romania has given me permission to do so how I can do*).

4. Do people, whom you attend frequently, perceive your religion/religious difference?

- Yes, they do (5)
- No, they don't (3)
- I don't know (2)

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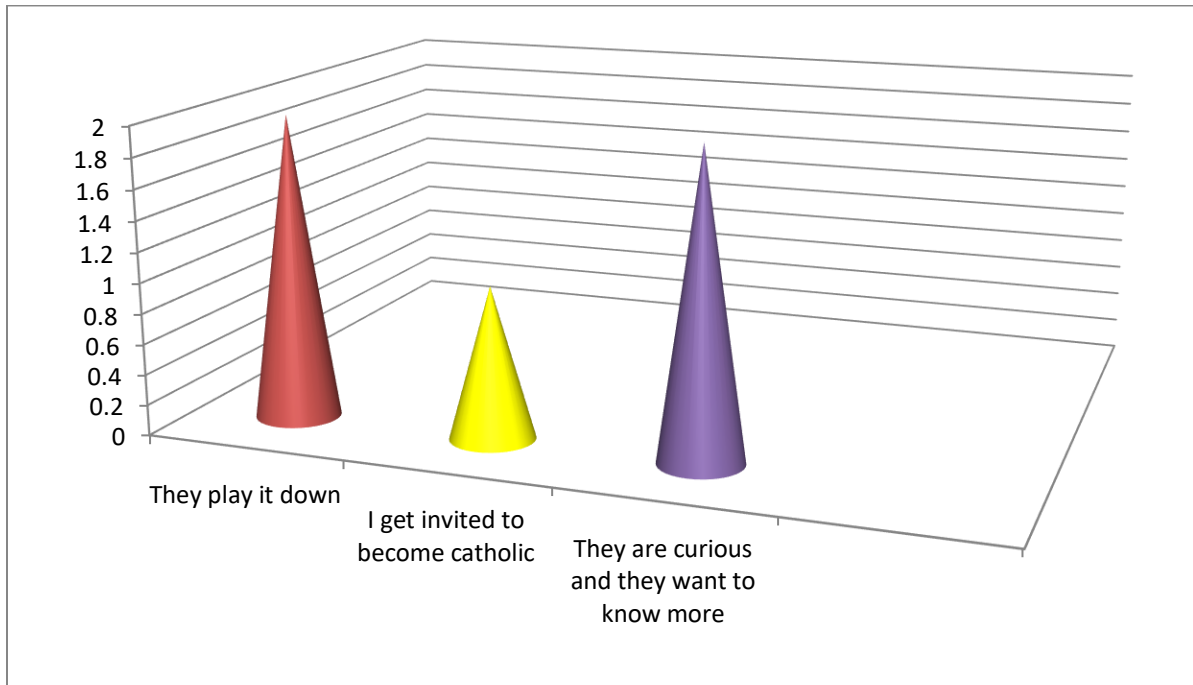
How?

Three out of ten people admitted not to attend people outside the family circle. This clarification is slightly expanded by three yes, including some *close friends, community people, some neighbors*.

Involvement by third parties manifests itself by disparaging diversity (*as if they considered mine like a second-rate faith, they are not like us ...*), trying to assimilate it (*become catholic!*), asking questions driven by a curiosity (if the priests can marry, about the gestures of faith, concerning the differences ...).

It's interesting the story of a caretaker, who, by abstaining from the meat on Monday, Wednesday and Friday in accordance with a small sacrifice; she hears: *Eat, you're in Italy now!* Even the old woman, whom she attends, tells her: *Eat, I do not tell anyone!* She responds serenely with a smile.

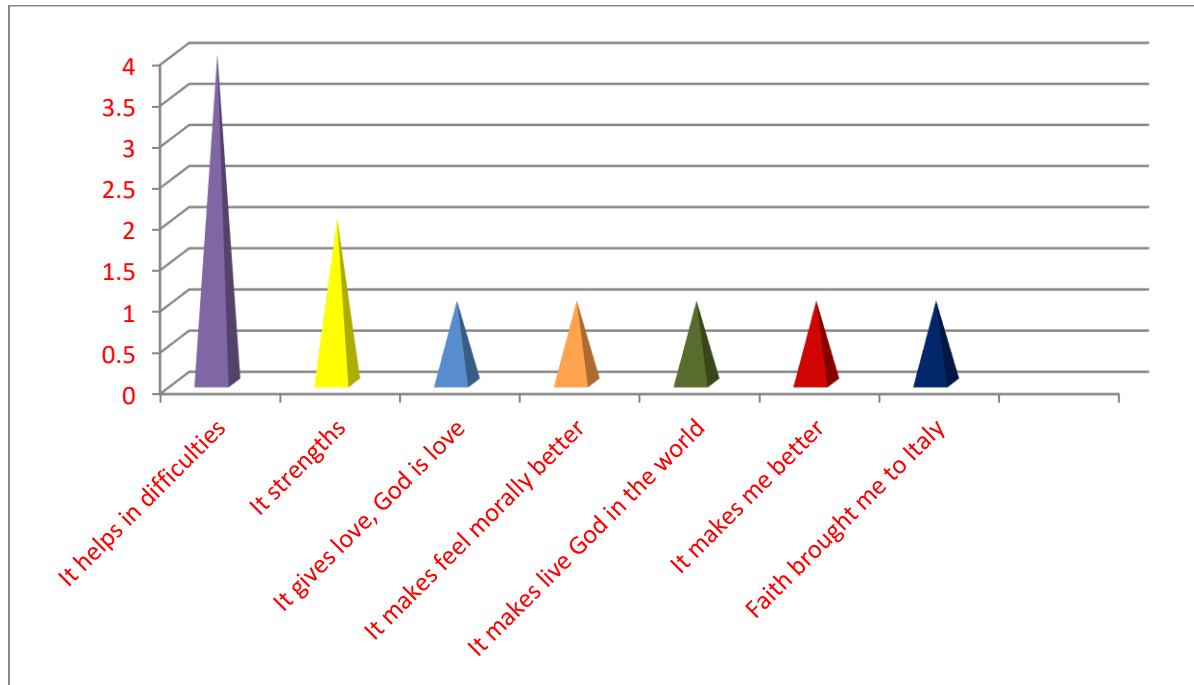
4bis When others talk about my faith ...



5. Does your faith make you stronger in the foreign country you live in?

Surveyed women said unanimously yes.

5bis The effects of faith

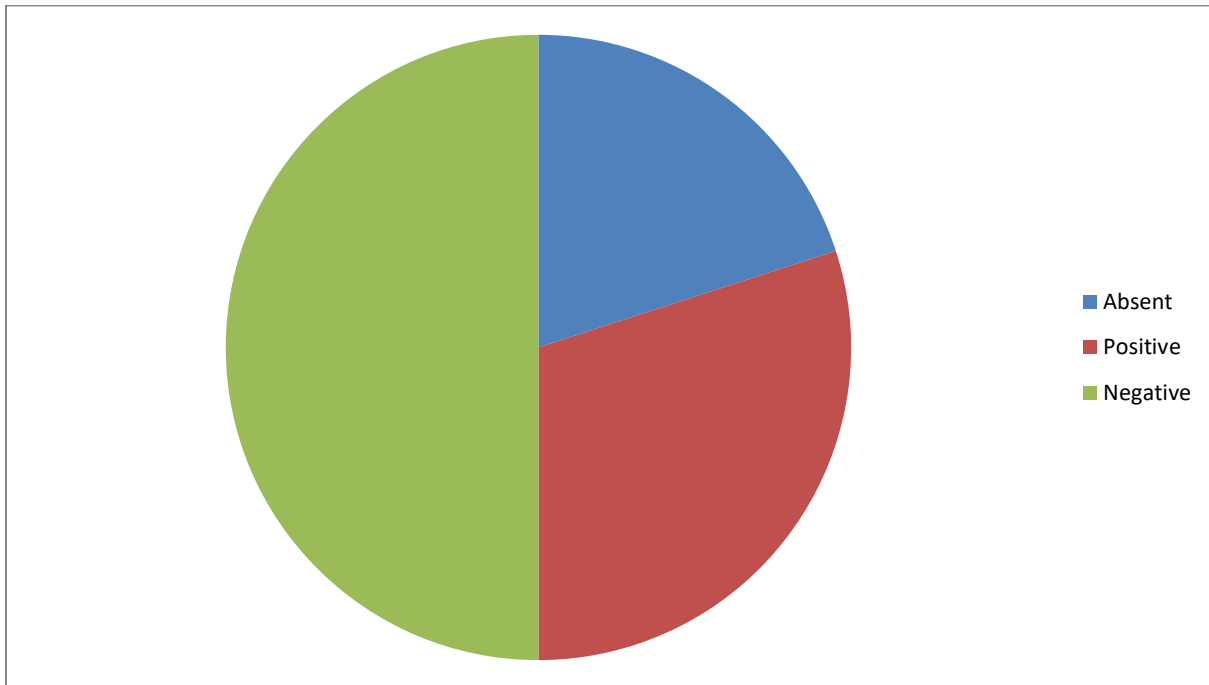


6. Can you testify your impact with the Italian religious reality from the point of view of your faith?

Two women out of ten, through their husbands, claim that they have no experience of Italian religious reality.

Three express words of appreciation. Five are critical enough, both towards practicing lays, and towards the clergy.

6bis **The impact with the Italian religiousness has been:**



Positive experiences concern

- the meeting with welcoming Italian families with whom I can share faith in mutual respect;
- the experience in mission, the pursuit of *the lost soul*, the gathering of orthodoxy to keep the faith alive, encouraging Catholics too to practice their faith;
- religious education from a small age even in schools.

Negative experiences detect:

- ignorance of religion;
- lack of the history of religion in schools, catholic religion taught as doctrine;
- misinformation, inaccuracy in mass communication;
- propensity to homogenisation, superficiality, lack of respect for diversity, silent belief that the only true faith is the catholic one;

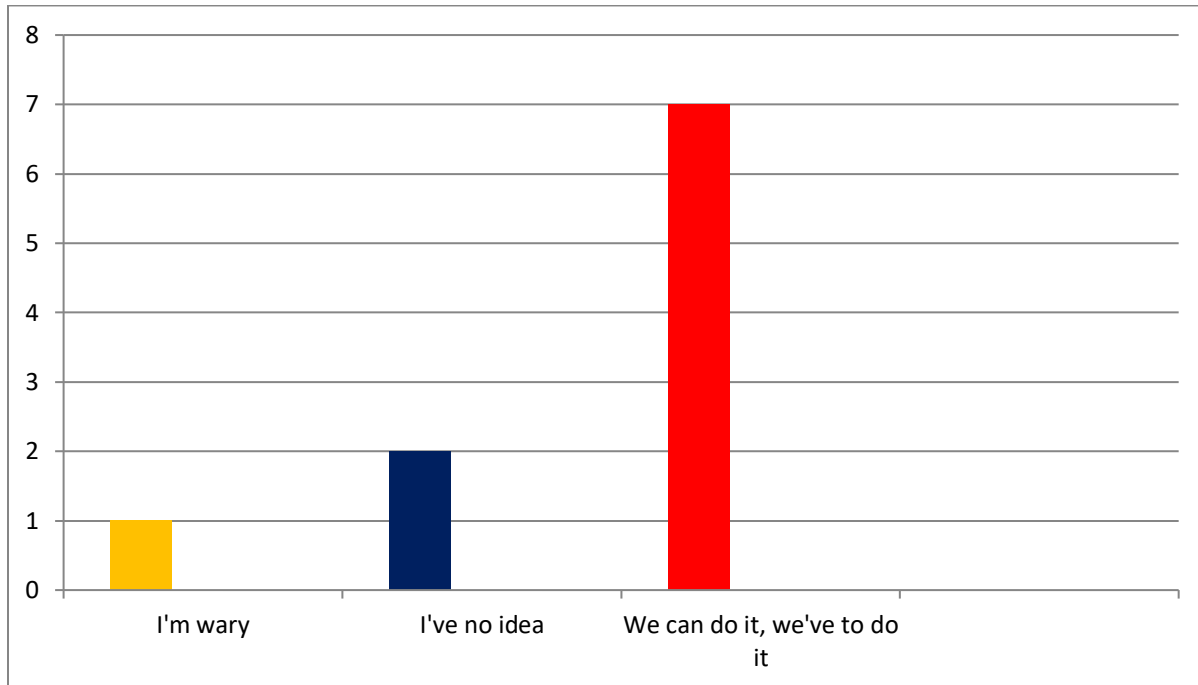
- catholic priests far from people, unable to convey faith, little informed about other faiths, about documents such as the *Charta Oecumenica*, they do not always give the appearance they follow Pope Francis;
- remoteness of people from faith;
- separation between faith and life;
- faith reduced to tradition and habit;
- only a little of prayer.

7. In light of your experience, what do you think of the interreligious dialogue?

20% claim to have no idea about it, 10% admit to be wary of the other believers who often take advantage of foreigners and they bring them closer to convert them. The remaining 70% consider the theme with availability, in some cases they anchor it in their faith (*my religion states that there are holy books, the five of the Torah, the gospels, and we respect them*), others see it feasible In the field of ethics (*a good behavior is the most important thing, the rest does not count. We are all children of God and we must learn to love ... who does not do good, he goes against religion ... that the Christian is a good Christian, the Buddhist a good buddhist ...*), or, still, someone else judges it a necessity and an antidote to terror and to new wars of religion.

The experience of **ecumenical dialogue** among Christian confessions with positive appreciation is more widespread (*Catholics in Italy have accepted us, without their help we could not even celebrate the functions. The dioceses make us available to the churches, we personally received help In the introduction by catholic priests*), and someone comes to say: *with or without the Pope, Catholics and Orthodox should join.*

7bis **What do you think about interreligious dialogue?**



3. Spiritual regeneration and data emerging from the questionnaire

The protagonists of the questionnaire have in common the status of immigrants in Italy and a faithful experience. With respect to the chosen topic their answers give rise to important basic considerations:

1. The practice *before and after*

Graphs 2 and 3 point to the substantial change in the scenario that occurred after the residency in Italy: religious practice is undergoing mutations in 60% of cases with different solutions. Someone continues to practice her faith by adapting it to the new condition, partly by attending Catholic churches and praying with Catholics. In other cases, the public dimension is reduced by the inability of the environment to welcome and integrate diversity. Lastly, the appearance of a further religious subject is recorded thanks to the best human contact, different from the practice of origin and the majority in the host country. Uniform practice becomes varied and must rely on the free synthesis of the worshipper who often attends more religious environments. So doing, he "contaminates" them and he lets they contaminate him. Sometimes he also chooses formally for

a conversion, sometimes he wander. No interviewed woman completely abandoned the practice. The reason can be found in part in answering question n. 5.

At least 50% of sample women are, more or less aware, a tool for publicizing their own religious tradition to the impact with the host religious reality that somehow reacts.

2. Reaction of the environment

The total and certain lack of environmental response (30%) is related to women who live only in the family environment and seem not to even feel the need for external sharing.

At least for half of the women, the environment somehow responds to the religious difference, thus offering the unambiguous evidence of it. This conquered notoriety highlights the religious in itself and often translates into a topic of conversation, in mutual witness, in sharing prayer.

We can imagine that in a longer period of time the religious practice of the host country will also record mutations similar to what happened to 60% of the interviewed women, forging new models, where faith is accepted by choice, the testimony comes even from outside one's own community (not obvious conception by reading the considerations of the answers), a better knowledge of religions is cultivated, a more appropriate is promoted environment to favor the practice of all present religions.

At the moment, however, the picture emerged from this small fragmentation of Italian religious reality reflects a widespread improvisation on other religions, I mean different from that of Catholicism, and a lack of sensitivity to religious diversity as such (see graphs 4bis and 6bis). Structural deficiencies, such as the lack of places of worship, are also mentioned.

3. The internal engine

The source of life got into the system through religious exchange by the unanimity of the interviewed people is identified in faith as a force. The inner dimension, the care of personal spirituality is also revealed in other responses and it is judged as the most important aspect. It is experienced as a personalizing element (*without I wouldn't be the person I am today*), and, in some cases, it is in close contact with the journey, with emigration (*it has led me to Italy*).

The little of prayer, the superficiality in practice, the distance between faith and life are just among the negatives that some women point out in the Italian context.

4. The perception of the other

Some women have reported the feeling of an Italian environment that tends to assimilate, that does not always perceive the faith of the other with respect, that does not know the other religions, but it yet show guilty judgments. It is very significant that almost all of them declare themselves strongly in favor of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. It is the testimony of an intelligent way to respond to the creeping violence of denial, the expulsion of alterity, in the wake of the famous Spinoza assertion: *non flere, non indignari, sed intelligere*². The encounter with the other, different in faith, opens up a gap that contains the possibility of exploring the religious, to draw on its qualities so far unknown and to respect them in the unique form, capable of giving meaning to punctual, unrepeatable existences. It is an antidote to ease and superficiality dictated by assimilating the other and reducing him to known shapes. It's an opportunity: that gets it open to dialogue and trusts.

They who arrive to unknown beaches are born into a new phase of their history, at the same time they fertilize the ground with the luggage they carry, also made of religious substance. Thus opening up to the indigenous the opportunity to open up to an extension of the other.

Regeneration associated with immigration and religiosity consists in new declinations of the divine, listening, receiving of religious testimony, sharing of faith, common ascesis in view of a better environment in which to live.

4. A new spiritual perspective

1. The trip

The overcoming of the already known and the impulse to the unknown, which the journey imposes, is a characteristic figure of the human being as such, the instrument that forged our world into every single of its own, even the most hidden. It is a landscape that, like contact with the divine, contains something terrible. In the journey you can find the death or bestial conditions of survival, while hopefully and strongly it craves another life, an extra life, perhaps unmoving the previous one and convinces that it is worth living in this world. On the road all seek an opportunity, so the person who, by renouncing his habitat, faces it, he enjoys a particular condition, he researches.

And already at the time of departure, the traveler embodies a spirit of initiative that makes him the protagonist of his time, though sometimes he prepares to walk with death in his heart. In the country of arrival, the indigenous population simply comes into contact with the end result of this journey, and at a glance often gets the weak image of those who arrive because they need

² That is, *do not cry, do not be angry, but understand.*

and they have nothing. Compared to this supposed inferiority, aptly sense of superiority is triggered by generators of labels that falsify reality.

However, if we return to the source and do not clear the memory of the journey, we can easily recognize each of us in the pilgrim's condition, confident or discouraged that it is but always seeking to find the sacred land on which to spend days full of added value, more capable of the future, not only in the present time and for the present, but above all in future prospects and for those who will come. In living this tension the emigrant is a bearer of the future, of life, and of sense. This sense acts as a casket and encapsulates a typical spirituality, intertwined with research and need, and it can show itself in nuances that range from tenacity, and from its possible arrogance, to the absolute availability sometimes covered by the ashes of submission.

The anthropological and sociological analysis critically applied to the plural world are intended primarily to cross into the thematic nucleus of coexistence. It emerges with urgency precisely because the immigrant is not a passive subject, but, on the contrary, moves the landing society to change and to novelty. The arrival community is thus involved in the journey, though not physically moving, but changing to the slow and regular variation of the human landscape.

2. The immigrant, a generative proposer

The most problematic comparison is apparently about public affairs and social interest. By focusing on the issues closest to us, we are aware of the fact that the presence and the direct encounter with the immigrant leads us to overcome barriers at another level. On the ground of conscience, the biggest challenge is played by *new citizens*.

Apparently passive receivers, civilian immigrant members propose tacitly *an additional goal* of the relationship and sharing, accessible only through empathy.