From welcome to encounter

Reciprocity as a Pastoral Paradigm for the Integration of Young People

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Introduction

The pastoral experience gained at the Parish of the Sacred Heart, near Roma Termini railway station, has been a valuable formative opportunity. It grew out of observing a concrete situation: young migrants and asylum seekers and young Italians who, despite living in the same area and belonging to the same generation, often find themselves in profoundly different circumstances. This gap in their experiences and living conditions means that the two groups often know little about one another, or have few real opportunities to meet, exchange views and build meaningful relationships.

In this regard, Roma Termini represents a particularly significant setting. It is a place of transit, movement, arrival and departure, but also a place where different forms of marginalisation, exclusion and vulnerability become visible. The station is a kind of "internal border" within the city, where people, stories and widely differing living conditions coexist. It is precisely in this setting that the parish has been called to reflect on its presence and, consequently, its pastoral responsibility.

Over time, this experience has brought to light a question which goes beyond simply providing welfare services. For young asylum seekers, material assistance (food, accommodation, legal support) does not fully meet the need for integration. Unfortunately, fundamental dimensions of human life often remain neglected: relationships, belonging, the opportunity to build strong bonds and to feel part of a community.

At the same time, the encounter with young Italians showed other forms of fragility, also generally present in the host society. In an affluent society, some of the young people encountered during the pastoral experience struggled to plan for the future, face sacrifice and find meaning in their own choices. This is not to generalise about all young Italians, but rather to recognise an issue that emerged through pastoral engagement: even those who are not materially deprived may experience existential poverty and vulnerability.

This led to the central insight of the experience: integration can become a process of mutual learning, in which the encounter transforms, and helps enrich, both migrants and the host community.

This paper therefore aims to reflect on and present this experience, not as a comprehensive or universally applicable model, but as a way of identifying pastoral principles that could be applied in other contexts: the central role of relationships, reciprocity in integration, the active participation of young people, the involvement of adults, the importance of accessible spaces, and the Christian community's ability to inhabit urban borderlands.

1. Roma Termini as an urban and existential borderland

Roma Termini is a place where contemporary mobility takes a particularly visible form. Thousands of people pass through it every day; some stay temporarily, others seek a point of reference, while still others live in particularly vulnerable circumstances in its immediate proximity.

The pastoral experience gained made it possible to perceive this area as an existential periphery. From this perspective, the border is not just a line separating two States, but above all something which separates people living in the same city without forging relationships. Indeed, the contemporary city can produce physical proximity and social distance. People may live just a few metres apart and still belong to different worlds. It is precisely through this distance that pastoral ministry can take on a clear function: bringing people closer and building bonds.

The parish in this "border" area is called to ask itself which people are not meeting one another and what invisible walls prevent them from recognising one another.

2. The double vulnerability: two young generations who do not meet

2.1. The vulnerability of young asylum seekers

The experience highlighted a specific vulnerability of young migrants and asylum seekers. Unlike minors, for whom school generally provides a natural environment for socialising, these young people may soon find themselves without a regular place to meet their Italian peers and build relationships.

In the context examined, young people living in reception centres are often required to spend part of their day outside the centres. This may result in spending long periods in public spaces without a meaningful network of relationships. Even when educational or employment opportunities are available, they do not automatically lead to real social integration.

The problem is not simply a lack of activities, but a lack of belonging. A young person may have a place to sleep but no home in which to experience relationships, to be seen, loved, corrected and encouraged. They may receive assistance but have no community. They can receive assistance without feeling recognised as a subject in their own right. This difference is essential for a pastoral care that takes human dignity seriously.

As the Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith recalls in its declaration *Dignitas infinita*, "migrants are among the first victims of the multiple forms of poverty". (...) Once they have arrived in the countries that should be able to accept them, "migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person"[1].

2.2. The existential vulnerability of local young people

The other side of the experience shows a second form of vulnerability. The young Italians involved were not experiencing the material insecurity of asylum seekers. Some, however, struggled to plan their future, face sacrifice and find meaning in their own choices. This observation is not a general diagnosis of Italian youth. What is particularly significant from a pastoral perspective is that these encounters brought to light questions some of these young people had never found a suitable space to express. Young people are not merely recipients of pastoral ministry. They are active participants in it. And, as the Termini experience shows, they can also become active participants in a pastoral ministry of encounter with migrants.

The two forms of vulnerability described are neither equivalent nor comparable in severity. Yet they can be considered from a pastoral perspective when both can find in encounter a space for recognition and growth.

3. Parallel worlds and the need for an intentional Space

The two groups of young people described coexisted in the same city without any natural places where they could really meet. This created a paradox: people belonging to the same generation could be physically close but socially distant. And when the encounter is absent, the other person is easily replaced by an image of that person. The real face is replaced by a stereotype, a personal story by a category, and knowledge by fear.

For this reason, pastoral ministry cannot simply invite to dialogue: it should create conditions that make dialogue and encounter possible. Here lies one of the central insights of the experience: a place for encounter does not come into being spontaneously. It has to be created. The culture of encounter mentioned in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti* is not a vague feeling of openness: It "means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes

[1] Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas infinita. Declaration on Human Dignity*, 40.

everyone"[2]. Pope Francis stresses that "what is important is to create processes of encounter, processes that build a people capable of embracing differences"[3]. The Termini experience can be understood precisely as the concrete creation of one of these processes.

4. A place for encounter as a theological and pastoral choice

The practical response was to transform an ordinary parish hall into an informal meeting space. Sofas, tables, a library and board games helped create a less institutional and more homely environment. This choice has a deeper pastoral significance than might first appear. The place where people meet communicates a message. An office says: "You are here to receive a service" A waiting room says: "You are here temporarily". A home says: "You can stay". The space at Termini station sought to fulfil this third function. Not a private home, of course, but a home based on relationships: a place where someone can stay without immediately having to prove that they are in need. This is particularly important because it makes it possible to move from a pastoral approach centred on needs to one centred on the person.

5. A relational catalyst: doing things together to learn to be together

Simply opening the space would not have been enough. Practical activities were organised to encourage encounters: language courses, theatre, painting, art, cooking, film discussions, sport, outings and opportunities for interreligious dialogue. These activities can be understood through the concept of relational catalyst. This catalyst is neither false nor artificial; it allows the relationship to begin.

Two people who would otherwise have no immediate reason to speak may meet because they are cooking or playing a game together. They may learn a language by speaking it with someone their own age, discover another culture by sharing an outing and explore a religious question because they have already built a relationship of trust. An activity thus creates a space between people in which difference can be encountered without immediately being perceived as a problem.

6. Reciprocity as a paradigm for integration

The most original contribution of this experience concerns the possibility of understanding integration as a two-way process.

Traditionally, integration may be pictured as follows:

> A person arrives → society welcomes them → the person adapts → the person becomes integrated.

The Termini experience suggests a different model:

> A person arrives → forms relationships → meets other people → gives and receives → both sides change.

This shift is not merely sociological but it has a theological and pastoral significance. If every person possesses a dignity that precedes their social circumstances, and if everyone has gifts to offer, then the other person cannot be regarded only as the recipient of my actions. They also have something to give me.

Fratelli tutti expressly states that "for the communities and societies to which they come, migrants bring an opportunity for enrichment and the integral human development of all"[4]. The migrant, then, is not simply

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[2] Francis, *Fratelli tutti.* Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship, 216.
[3] Ibid., 217.
[4] Ibid., 133.

someone who receives something from the community: their presence may transform the community itself. This is what the experience showed.

7. From receiving assistance to building friendships

For young migrants, one of the most important effects of the experience was the shift from a relationship based primarily on assistance to one based on personal connections. In the parish hall, a young person was not simply someone receiving food, information or administrative assistance. They could simply be a friend. They could play, study, cook their traditional dishes, do sport and tell their own story. In some cases, relationships led to deep friendships, support in education and even the development of family life plans.

It is important not to assume that these relationships necessarily have a direct causal role in these outcomes. However, their emergence confirms a fundamental insight: integration occurs not only through institutions, but also through bonds of friendship. A society does not become truly inclusive simply by allowing someone to access its services. It becomes inclusive when that person also has relationships, recognition and a sense of belonging.

8. Those who welcome are also transformed

Another decisive element is the effect on young Italians. The daily contact with young people from different and particularly challenging backgrounds led some of them to see things differently. The experience shows examples of young people who chose to focus their university dissertations and studies on immigration law, intercultural education and social work. This brings to light a particularly interesting aspect of youth ministry. Encountering someone who is disadvantaged is not simply experienced as an act of generosity by a "strong" young person towards a "weak" one. The person experiencing poverty becomes someone who, in turn, "evangelises" the young person they encounter. It is not about idealising suffering or vulnerability, but acknowledging that every individual, even someone in need, remains capable of giving, challenging and transforming another person. Another person's story can raise questions of meaning that had not previously been asked. What does it really mean to live? What do I consider important? What is worth committing myself to? What does it mean to build a future? What profession do I want to pursue? What kind of relationship do I want with society?

This has a strong parallel in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus vivit*, in which Pope Francis stated that "Social engagement and direct contact with the poor remain fundamental ways of finding or deepening one's faith and the discernment of one's vocation"[5]. Encounter with migrants can therefore also become a place of vocational discernment.

9. A youth ministry that brings people together rather than keeping them apart

One risk in pastoral ministry is the creation of separate programmes for different categories: youth ministry on one side, ministry to migrants on the other. The Termini experience suggests instead that bringing these two areas together can be fruitful. Young migrants do not simply need a ministry "for migrants". Italian young people do not simply need a ministry "for Italian youth". Both need a pastoral approach capable of creating places for encounter.

The entire community is called to take responsibility for welcoming, motivating and accompanying them. The aim is to create a space that offers young people enough freedom to take the lead, while providing sufficient care and guidance to ensure an educational presence and a formative environment.

[5] Francis, *Christus vivit*. *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation to young people and to the entire People of God, 170.*

10. Structured freedom and alliance between young people and adults

An informal setting does not mean an absence of responsibility. The experience showed the need for a few clear rules: respect for others, care for the space, and observance of agreed opening times and arrangements. These rules must be accompanied by the presence of adults with an educational role. This pastoral approach can be described on two levels.

- First level: peers. Italian young people can help facilitate encounters, not as "workers" dealing with migrants, but as companions on the journey.
- Second level: key adult figures. Members of religious communities, educators, families and other adults provide stability, attentive listening, guidance in discernment and support in navigating more complex situations.

This approach finds significant support in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus vivit*, which emphasises both the active role of young people and the need for adult accompaniment. Pope Francis insists that "Mentors should not lead young people as passive followers, but walk alongside them, allowing them to be active participants in the journey"[6].

The Termini experience thus points to a clear pastoral principle: youth ministry requires both active participation and accompaniment.

11. The pedagogy of attentiveness

Another important aspect is what we might call a pedagogy of attentiveness In a setting where people can easily be reduced to numbers, case files or categories, pastoral encounter begins with personal recognition: knowing someone's name, remembering their story, noticing when they are absent, listening to a concern, sharing a moment of joy. These seemingly simple gestures are a concrete way of recognising dignity. The person is no longer "an asylum seeker", but someone with a name. Such attention also fosters shared responsibility: those who feel recognised are more likely to see the space as something they share and should look after. In this sense, pastoral ministry is about the quality of one's presence.

12. The paradox of success and a "pedagogy of letting go"

One of the deepest aspects of the experience concerns the passage of time. A meeting space is inevitably marked by transience. Participants change. Some arrive; others move on. Some attend for months, others for shorter periods. Turnover certainly presents an organisational challenge. But it can also be understood as an inherent feature of the circumstances of young migrants.

Even more interesting is the so-called paradox of success. When a young person finds stable employment and becomes more independent, they often spend less time in the space. Emotionally, this can be difficult for those who have accompanied them along the way. Yet here the experience suggests a valuable pastoral criterion: genuine welcome does not create dependency. Young people should not have to stay because they will always need the space. They should be free to leave because they have developed the ability to build their own lives. The space is therefore a place of transit, a place from which to depart. This might be called a "pedagogy of letting go": accompaniment also means preparing someone to no longer need the person accompanying them.

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[6] Ibid., 246.

13. The need for pastoral training

This pastoral approach cannot depend on spontaneity alone. Intercultural mediation requires training. Cultural and religious differences can cause misunderstandings; some participants may have lived through difficult experiences and working with diverse groups requires interpersonal skills. For this reason, training volunteers and young facilitators is part of pastoral ministry. A Church that encourages encounters must also learn how to safeguard them. This entails training in conflict management, listening, intercultural communication, interreligious dialogue and understanding group dynamics.

14. From good practice to transferable pastoral principles

At this point, we may ask what aspects of the Roma Termini experience could be applied elsewhere. What matters is to identify the deeper pastoral structure underlying the experience. This can be summarised in three pillars.

First pillar: relational symmetry

The first is the decision to go beyond the service "user-provider" model. Migrants and local young people are given the opportunity to meet as people. This does not erase differences in their roles. Educators remain educators, and those who accompany others remain responsible for the space. But everyday relationships between young people are freed from a model based on providing assistance.

Second pillar: an intergenerational alliance

The second is the presence of both young people and adults. Young people foster horizontal relationships and make friendship easier. Adults provide continuity and safeguard the process.

Third pillar: relational catalyst

The third is the activity itself. Relationships do not grow solely out of abstract discussions about differences. They grow out of doing things together. Language, art, cooking, sport, theatre, cinema, mountain outings and dialogue become ways through which people can gradually recognise one another.

15. Towards a safe and accessible third space

These pillars suggest a more general pastoral concept: a safe and accessible third space. It is a third space because it is neither merely a place where assistance is provided nor part of the private sphere of personal relationships. It is safe because it offers an environment of respect and protection, and accessible because it is easy to reach, particularly for those without their own means of transport or who face difficulties in getting around or concerns about their personal safety. These principles can be applied in different settings. It might be a parish room, a library, a cultural centre, a university space or a courtyard. What matters is the pastoral purpose that the space serves.

16. Potential orientations for the local Church

Three practical recommendations emerge from reflection on the experience.

Identify areas of exposure and vulnerability

Dioceses and parishes are called to identify the urban places where people are most at risk of being left without relationships. Stations, peripheral areas, transit areas and other marginal spaces can become privileged settings for a pastoral presence that fosters closeness.

Combine youth ministry and ministry to migrants

The second recommendation concerns the need to overcome the separation between these two areas. Ministry to migrants can offer skills, experience and knowledge of vulnerable circumstances. Youth ministry can contribute to providing energy, creativity and networks of relationships. The goal is to create spaces in which the two forms of ministry become a single experience of encounter.

Train those who accompany others

The third recommendation is about training. A culture of encounter cannot be built on goodwill alone. People need training to listen, mediate, accompany others and manage differences. From this perspective, intercultural training is a concrete form of pastoral responsibility.

17. Integral human development: a key to interpretation

Finally, the experience can be understood through the concept of integral human development. Development is not simply about finding employment or improving one's economic status. These things are crucial, but they do not encompass the whole person. People develop integrally when they are able to build relationships, develop their abilities and sense of responsibility, experience belonging and freedom, and make plans for the future.

From this perspective, the Termini experience reaches beyond social integration alone. For young migrants, it offered opportunities for relationships, language learning, friendship, study, independence and planning. For local young people, it offered an opportunity to encounter different perspectives, become more open-minded, assume responsibilities, volunteer and, in some cases, reconsider their career choices. It is precisely this reciprocity that allows us to speak of integral human development. One person's growth does not come at the expense of the other, but through the encounter with the other.

Conclusions

The experience of the parish at Roma Termini arose from a very concrete situation: two groups of young people living in the same city who, without a deliberate pastoral choice, might never meet. A space was therefore created where they could meet and share time, activities, questions, difficulties and friendships.

The most important outcome of the experience seems to be a different understanding of integration. Integration means creating the conditions in which different people can recognise one another as individuals in their own right and discover that encounter changes both sides. This reciprocity is the experience's most significant pastoral contribution.

Young migrants are people who need support in becoming independent, but they are also people who can build relationships, share something of their own story and help transform the community that welcomes them. Local young people are those who give their time as volunteers, but they too are searching and may gain, through encounter, a new understanding of their lives, their responsibilities and their future.

The practice developed at Roma Termini can thus be seen as a small but concrete expression of this ecclesial vision. The parish becomes both border and home, because it is present where the city experiences its divisions and offers a place where those divisions can be overcome through closeness and relationships.

A pastoral ministry of welcome thus finds its fulfilment in helping people move towards independent lives, rich in relationships and full participation.

The challenge for the Church, then, is to create places where fraternity can become a lived reality. At Roma Termini, this insight began with an ordinary hall, a few sofas and tables, a library, games and, above all, people willing to share their time. This very simplicity shows that fostering encounter requires a deliberate pastoral commitment: recognising where relationships are lacking and taking responsibility for bridging that gap.

The experience thus points to a possible pastoral journey: from welcome to relationship, from relationship to reciprocity, from reciprocity to fraternity and, through fraternity, to a more holistic form of human development. Against this backdrop, the experience raises a question for the Church: what spaces are we creating today so that people living in the same city can finally meet? And, above all, a second question: are we willing to welcome the other not only as someone to whom we can give something, but also as someone from whom we can receive something? Perhaps this is where the decisive shift from welcome to encounter takes place. And from encounter to fraternity.

Essential Bibliography

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