Meeting with Didier Leschi

Meeting with the former head of the central bureau of worship at the Ministry of the Interior and assistant Prefect for equal opportunities in Seine-Saint-Denis. For the last two years, Didier Leschi has been Director-General of OFII – French Office of Immigration and Integration, a public institution under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior and which employs some 1,000 agents.

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A seminar on « Migrants and Refugees » took place on 24 March 2017 at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana of Rome. It was organised by our Federation and its partners and aimed to draw a state of the art and work on the pedagogies of an International Conference that will take place in the same institution in November 2017.

Didier Leschi, Director-General of OFII - French Office of Immigration and Integration, participated in this seminar like many other specialists (International Organisations, State Institutions, NGOs, Holy See). He will also take part in the International Conference on « Migrants and refugees in a globalised world : Role and responsibility of the universities » in November 2017.
IFCU - International Federation of Catholic Universities – is to organise an International Conference on Migrants and refugees in a globalised world: Role and responsibility of the universities with its partners from 1 to 4 November in Rome. It will bring together various specialists of the academic and political world, as well as NGOs. How do you perceive this initiative?

It is an important initiative, it is essential to exchange views on the European and world situation and see how the different countries and actors react to the stakes of the migration crisis.

Several countries are working together and one must tighten these links and elaborate a common vision of a migration process that, to my mind, will not cease.

**What are the main missions of OFII- French Office of Immigration and Integration, of which you are the Director-General?**

OFII fulfils three main missions for which it was given responsibility by the State: the hosting and integration of immigrants who are entitled to remain in France for a long period, hosting asylum seekers and aid for their return to their country of origin and the reinsertion of foreigners in their country of origin.

First of all, OFII is responsible for the hosting of legal migrants, that is its main task. Some 160 000 people arrive in France every year (this figure does not include international students - some 60 000). They mainly arrive in the framework of marital or family groupings and are less importantly working migrants. They go to the territorial offices of OFII (there are 31 in France) or to their representations abroad in order to obtain a seasonal work permit. French language tests are organised in the offices of the French Office of Immigration and Integration in order to then orientate them towards French courses. Information sessions on « French reality » that are similar to the civic instruction sessions and which last for two days, as well as medical visits and vulnerability tests are also offered.

The second activity of the OFII is to take care of asylum seekers by offering what is called « material hosting conditions »:

The first chapter of this hosting policy is housing, since today we shelter some 60 000 people in the country.

The second is benefits for asylum seekers which concerns some 110 000 people. This aspect of the OFII is often the most mediatised, since it participated in the massive sheltering of refugees in Calais or in the Parisian camps. Indeed, the French Office of Immigration and Integration is the king pin of the relocation of migrants and refugees, especially those from the « hotspots » of Greece or Italy to France.

The third specificity of OFII is « aid for a voluntary return to the country of origin ». We offer those who wish to return to their country of origin the transport costs (including the cost of the ticket
and luggage), a small sum of money and an aid for their reinsertion (between 3500€ and 9000€, depending on the country of origin). Emphasis is laid on countries that require a visa to come to France. In 2016, we organised some 5 000 voluntary returns and we noticed a strong progression of returns to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and also to Tunisia or Moldavia, for example. In the country, operators mandated by OFII, will help to organise the economic project of the returning migrant. The money invested helps to develop the country and stabilise the person and his family in his country of origin so that he neither needs or wishes to leave.

Europe is facing an unprecedented migration crisis. With over 65 million displaced people in the world in 2016, compared to 19.4 million refugees in 2005, the number of migrants has tripled in the last ten years. This very high increase as a result of the multiplication of conflicts reflects the urgent situation.

**What is the situation of France compared to its neighbours? What is its policy?**

France is a European country that has a long tradition of immigration which is linked to the arrival of workers who later brought their family in the family grouping framework. This figure sometimes reached up to 200 000 people per year.

Yet France is not the first country chosen by migrants. Why? Migrants, as one can understand, make economic calculations in the choice of their destination. They seek countries where they believe they have real economic prospects since they wish to acquire economic autonomy through work as quickly as possible. France is therefore less affected than other countries by the crisis we have known in the last two years.

Yet in Italy for example, 30% of those who arrive there are from Francophone countries. Hence France seems to be a «second choice» and today we must face large arrivals from Germany or Northern Europe. This phenomenon is growing: Indeed, one often describes Germany as a very generous country in terms of migration policy, with 1 200 000 people welcomed on its soil in 2015. One must moderate this somewhat: 250 000 people were refused their asylum request and 400 000 refusals are foreseen by the end of 2017. These migrants choose France as a second option, especially the Afghans, Soudanese, or Albanians arriving from Germany, Norway or Sweden.

In the framework of the agreements between the various European governments in the context of the Greek crisis and the massive arrival in Italy, France is the first country in terms of the relocation of migrants. It organises 30% of the European relocations and is also first concerning the «reinstalled» from Turkey. Obviously, a number of countries does not play the game, but this is more of a political debate.