

## Housing Pilgrims, Clothing the Naked...

The title of our little book could become the title of the work of Brother Ettore: the man denuded of everything, physically and morally, the man who did not have a home, who did not have a place 'to lay his head', would find at the central station a meal, clothes, the gift of some words, a bed...

What some people defined as 'the little cathedral of the poor of Brother Ettore' was a space that changed and adapted to everything: it could become a dining hall, then a dormitory, even a church when a Holy Mass was celebrated there and the beds were transformed into benches for the guests and visitors.

But the 'Shelter' was above all else a cathedral of welcome; it was the tent of Abraham which became a magnet for the misery of this world. In that place, 'with the ceiling that shook with the passing of the trains and the rattling of the carriages which deafened the guests, there were people in extreme need who in their thousands over the years were able to find human warmth, enveloped in infinite love by Brother Ettore who saw them as his brethren, with a dignity the same as every other man or woman...people from different social backgrounds, with few studies behind them, made ugly by need, of different ages, all of them in need: from food to services involving hygiene, from a bed to personal cleanliness, from clothes to clean underwear and the need to speak to someone...'

In 1980, immediately after the 'Shelter' was opened, it had fifty beds. Ten years later, when by now Casa Betania had come into existence in Seveso, built in large measure thanks to the real and manual help of the guests of the station, another ten places were found. But the increasingly dramatic needs grew. At the end of the 1980s the AIDS emergency, a disease that frightened and ghettoised, compelled further thought: for those sick people promiscuity was not a good thing; they were fragile, they had to be protected against infections with care that was not possible at the 'Shelter'. For them and for other complex situations, the Village of Mercy of Affori was born. It would come to take in 112 guests.

In 1990 the migratory flows from Africa became increasingly heavy and at the 'Shelter' space became less: the number of beds became 79 and then 84.

Until the end of the 1990 there was a constant increase in the numbers taken in: there were hundreds of people, from all social backgrounds, women and men, taken in for a day, for a month...many prisoners who were released after the amnesty asked for hospitality from Brother Ettore who worked, ran, strove and above all prayed – because nothing in his life was done without prayers. Those who witnessed the public ceremonies in Milan during the 1980s and 1990s will not forget the presence of that strange man with a cassock on which there was a giant red cross: he arrived with a half broken-down car on which was placed a statue of Our Lady of Fatima. Without any reserve, he sang songs to Mary in the streets of the metropolis, unconcerned about the looks – at times scandalised and at times entertained – of the people who passed by and stretched their necks to watch.

For that matter, that man who went down the ladder to the last of this world and made himself 'unwatchable' with them, what shame should he have felt, what reserve should he have had?