



Report on the European ACATs meeting in Rome and the 30th anniversary of ACAT Italy

10th to 12th March 2017

The annual meeting of the European ACATs was held in Rome from 10 to 12 March 2017, thanks to ACAT Italy's invitation and organisation. This meeting coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of both ACAT Italy and FIACAT.

Friday 10th March 2017

The meeting officially began on Friday 10 March at 1.45 p.m., with the opening address by the FIACAT President, Paul Angaman.

Following that, working meetings and discussions alternated with moments of reflection in the form of joint prayers: after all, action and prayer have always been the driving forces behind the work of FIACAT and the ACATs.

Christine Jeangey (representative of Cardinal Turkson's justice and peace dicastery) also took part in the opening of the meeting. Her speech was an important basis to go further in the debate on the various perspectives and strategies for action put forward by the Roman Catholic church and other religious confessions present within the ACATs (which, it should be reminded, have an ecumenical). Amongst other arguments, the subsequent debate centred on a plea to the Catholic church to speak out more strongly against torture and the death penalty (at the time there was still a reference in the Catechism which, in certain extreme cases, tolerated the death penalty).

During the afternoon, the European ACATs adjourned to visit the city centre and certain sites of artistic and historical interest, finishing with a pleasant dinner in a typical Roman restaurant, where quite a few ACAT representatives continued unofficially to discuss the topics tackled during the Conference. This was characteristic of the way this initiative developed: formal and informal meetings followed on from one another.

Saturday 11th March 2017

The next day, the meeting focused on the activities of FIACAT's International Secretariat, presented in detail by Sabrina Bignier (Executive Director of FIACAT), Lionel Grassy (Permanent Representative of FIACAT to the European Union) and Marie Salphati (Permanent Representative of FIACAT to the United Nations in Geneva).

Following that, Professor Marina d'Amato (Professor of the Sociology of Communication at the Roma Tre University) gave a talk on communication strategies for young people¹.

This is a subject dear to the European ACATs, and ACAT Italy in particular, since our associations had been aware of a lack of interest and of involvement among young people (contrary to what seems to be the case with the African ACATs, for obvious sociological reasons). The discussion continued well after Professor d'Amato's talk. The ACAT representatives continued to reflect on which are the most widespread forms of social activism nowadays and with which forms the younger generations can identify.

On the Saturday afternoon, FIACAT President Paul Angaman (who is also in charge of ACATs from Western Africa) presented a document on the activities of the African ACATs. Next, with the support of an interesting video, Lionel Grassy showed us details of the APD project, for which he is the international coordinator, designed to fight against abusive pre-trial detention in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, a project for which he is responsible.

Sunday 12th March 2017

The final day began with an address by Father Paolo Benanti (Professor at the Gregorian University) proposing an analysis - based on the theories of the Prenski school - of the so-called "digital" era and all the generations which live in it.

At the end of the morning, there was an ecumenical celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of ACAT Italy, an ecumenical prayer in which - among others - a Catholic bishop, an Orthodox priest, a Protestant pastor and a Waldensian pastor took part.

The annual meeting of the European ACATs concluded with the presentation by Emilie Petitguyot, (a member of the FIACAT International Bureau), of her proposed informatics project to improve communication among the ACATs.

Ecumenism, communication and personal contacts seem to be the keywords with which the European ACATs inaugurated their new business year.

ACAT Italy then gave a lunch to end this fraternal meeting in Rome.

¹ Annexe 1

Annexe 1 – Presentation by Marina d'Amato (Professor of the Sociology of Communication at the Roma Tre University) during the European ACATs meeting

What motivates or demotivates young people today, especially in Italy and in the Mediterranean zone?

This is the generation descended from the baby-boomers (of the sixties and seventies): characters acting out a story unknown to young people before them. They have a way of thinking, understanding, dressing in the firm belief that people are free to do as they wish. It is the baby-boomers, a generation which has now reached adulthood, that have allowed their children everything in the belief that everything was obtainable. Communication has also contributed to a change of mentality, making young people expect everything as of right. Yes, it is true that this has opened up a breach between parents and children, between the parents, who had struggled and studied because it was regarded as a necessary condition for assuming future responsibilities, and the children, to whom everything was due and for whom everything was expected to be easy. There are young people who have never opened a book, have never had occasion to think or study, perhaps because no one has ever taught them to think, reflect or study. Simplification has taken the place of erstwhile learning. From their earliest years, young people have come to pursue their own narrative and rights, ignoring their obligations.

In a recent survey of young people aged 14 to 15 in the province of Rome, the question "When did you start to think and with whom?" elicited the response: "with my grandparents", followed by the social media, friends ... What is striking is that parents are not mentioned.

We wonder why young people do not revolt against the distortions in our society, the inequalities, the blockage of upward social mobility, as happened, for example, in 1968. 25% of young Italians are adrift, apathy is the keyword. They have missed out on their adolescence, they lack parental figures to take as rôle-models and heroes to emulate. Take the world of fable: the figures of Hansel and Gretel, or Cinderella, on which whole generations were brought up. They served an educative, developmental purpose: Hansel and Gretel, abandoned in the forest, learned to develop survival techniques and their (abominable) parents thus became parents who had the wisdom to give their children space, trusting in their resourcefulness. It is no coincidence that this fairy-tale was born far from the Mediterranean, Latin, Italian world and culture. Nor is it any coincidence that our culture has Pinocchio, the eternal scamp, good-for-nothing, cunning, lying and lazy. All fables (Andersen, Grimm, Perrault) arrive at a catharsis which causes the characters to move on to a later stage of growth, the archetype of eternal human development. In short, one identified with a model. What is different now, since the 1970s, is that young people all have the same heroes, but in an unending and repetitive series of television episodes which last up to five years before we move on to others.

We have cyclical stories, which never come to a conclusion, devoid of any climax or cathartic phase, without any trauma which could prevent the next episode of the long television series. Young people no longer identify with the hero's character, but with objects associated with his character, objects which you can buy, since everything can be bought nowadays. These are the children of parents who have passed on this message, undiscerning parents, who swamp their children with toys and all-day-long activities - swimming, football, etc. - which sometimes last only a few months, and are then replaced.

These are the children of well-off parents who load activities onto their children in an attempt to off-load their own responsibility, under the illusion that filling up all the free time in the day can make up for their absence. Anxiety is the watchword of a generation of parents that has abdicated its role. Moreover, parents want their child to be a genius, a super-hero, they do not accept children "as they come", despite their spending a fortune on his/her activities from earliest childhood.

In our Mediterranean world, our culture, the father's glaring absence makes room for the mother figure: mummy is always there, mummy who buys everything, understands everything, justifies and forgives everything: the “great” Mediterranean mother.

We sometimes wonder why young people don't vote, don't get involved, but do we wonder what value politics represents? We wonder why they don't revolt. Young people who have grown up in this society do not even have the strength to rebel. In the repetitive stories they see 365 days a year on television, the hero does not embody an ideal of renewal, liberation and revolt.

71 % of respondents to the question on happiness reply "feel good"; 25 % would accept manual work, (better to clean the streets than work in a call centre). There is a wish for action, without knowing to what end - thought comes afterwards. The persons influencing them are, in descending order, their mothers (the main influence, their allies), their friends, their partners, their fathers, religious figures. In fact, they are looking for people who do not judge them. They have great confidence in the social media, the police, the school and the Catholic church. The political parties and associations come later. Most do not know that the public administration exists. Europe is seen as a failure, and they do not feel themselves as European citizens, even if they have friends abroad.

Practical activity attracts, appeals to them. This can be the leverage to get their interest and involvement. This is a generation that has to be taught to think, step by step, progressing from doing to thinking. Involving them means motivating them, suggesting projects to them, giving them a place in society, devising different paths for each age group.

There is a lot of work to be done, but it is worth getting down to it.