

For an interreligious comprehension of sustainable development
The experience of the «Casa Famiglia Rosetta» Association (ACFR)

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This speech during this international conference on «Religions and Sustainable Development Goals» is on behalf of the «Casa Famiglia Rosetta» Association Onlus that I am representing today. Fr. Vincenzo Sorce, President and founder of the Association, should have been here in my place, but he passed away during the night between the 3rd and 4th of March and is now, asleep for ever, in the arms of our Lord. He was 74 years old and had been a priest for 48 years. The whole of the Association with over 200 staff members assisting more than a thousand people is, in this moment, experiencing a profound sense of grief and loss as if all of a sudden we have been left orphans even though in our hearts resound echoes of encouragement of his words published just a week ago: «The Future is a right that everyone should possess, especially the youngest and the weakest among us. The right to live in dignity and to die surrounded by love, respect and comfort. The right to build a future together through the power of sharing. The right to hope founded on the truth of the Resurrection of Christ, the beginning of a new world, of a new society, of a new future».

Fr. Vincenzo Sorce was convinced that the approach towards those he called «the new poor» of our age – people suffering from physical and mental disabilities, people with substance abuse dependence, alcoholics, people living with Hiv/Aids, street children, adolescents involved in criminal trafficking, young or old people and women suffering from all sorts of psychological difficulties, young unmarried mothers, families in poverty, refugees and emigrants – had to be essentially a holistic approach which closely integrated the therapeutic dimension with psychological help, pedagogic support with spiritual proximity: all these dimensions would reciprocally complete each other. His holistic approach to treatment was at the heart of his teaching and remains a founding principle of the «Casa Famiglia Rosetta» Association philosophy.

The human being remains at the heart of every activity. In a beautiful page from the novel *Conversazione in Sicilia* Elio Vittorini recorded as early as 1941, a reflection which apparently non-religious, can be used to interpret the anthropology elaborated by fr. Vincenzo Sorce: «Thus, not every man is a man. One pursues and one is pursued. The humankind is not the whole of the humankind, but only those who are pursued. Kill a man: he will be more of a man. Thus a person who is ill or hungry is more of a man: the humankind of those who are starving is the real

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humankind». For fr. Vincenzo in the light of the Gospel, this was the truth. The human being who was at the heart of his dreams and of his projects, of his joy and hopes, of his worries and reflections, was the poor man, that person who does not seem to have anything in common with us: good mental and physical health, economic independence, that network of relations that support us, a home to live in, a nation to consider your own. The poor man is exactly that person who seems different to us. That person whose condition seems different to ours. That person whose condition we feel is so distant to ours. It's that other being. That is why he is so close to God who is totally that person. The French anthropologist Michel de Certeau wrote, along these lines: «Religious faith has always to face the necessity of recognizing God as different, in a sense that he is present in the fields (cultural, social, intellectual) in which he was believed to be absent».

We too, as people who have a religious experience, know that we cannot do without God. This also applies to the poor: of this other than us, we cannot do without. This awareness is the basis of the commitment of the «Casa Famiglia Rosetta» Association, which has always carried out its work in obedience to a polar criterion: “take the other inside” and “take inside in the other”. It is, on the one hand, to bring others near and even within us, involving them and hosting them without reserve and without half measures in our well-being. On the other hand, it is a question of descending into the condition of others, even if it is uncomfortable. Taking inside in the other and taking the other inside means, in short, experiencing the human and religious impossibility of remaining and even thinking without the others, as well as without the Other. This does not mean uncritically accepting what others think and do differently, but accepting that others can think and act differently from us, to come to realize that we cannot think about it and cannot live without others.

The «Casa Famiglia Rosetta» Association was born in Caltanissetta, in the centre of Sicily in 1980. And began to open facilities in other Sicilian cities in 1985. Since then it has extended its activities to the rest of Italy (Rome) and abroad. It has existed in Brazil for more than 20 years and in Tanzania since 2005 treating substance abuse disorders, disability, Hiv/Aids orphans. It has carried out many training activities in Afghanistan, Eastern Europe (Russia, Belarus, Moldavia), North Africa (Algeria and Libya) and Sub Saharan Africa (Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique).

It's exactly in Africa especially in Tanzania that the Association has carried out a great interreligious experience being its population principally Muslim. In 2005 in Tanga the Association opened a home called *Home of Hope* which houses around 30 Hiv/Aids orphans as well as a rehabilitation residential and day Centre for disabled children which was opened in 2011 together with a training Centre which has also carried out microcredit projects especially for women financed by the CEI. The experience of the Association in Tanga represents an example of sustainable local development with authentic interreligious exchange with the families of most of

children coming from Muslim backgrounds. Life in the community is marked by Christian and Muslim prayer sessions in the unity of the compassion and providence of God.

Like in Tanga, interreligious dialogue, begins with prayer, continuing in the daily life of the community collaborating with the local institutions in carrying out a whole series of projects in various fields: humanitarian, health, social, economic. Interreligious dialogue becomes cooperation both at the international and local level. For example in 2001 the «Casa Famiglia Rosetta» Association invited disabled children from Libya together with their families, to be treated in its centers in Sicily free of charge including diagnosis and all the necessary neuro-psycho-motor rehabilitation.

Yet another form of dialogue experimented by the Association in various parts of the World rotates around education and training which has been especially effective in developing countries. Cultural confrontation through the contact of different visions of the world helps knowledge to circulate registering the different religious sensibilities and creating the humus for interreligious experiences.

In all these years the «Casa Famiglia Rosetta» Association has promoted training projects financed by diverse international organizations like the European Union (EU), US Department of State, CEI (Italian Episcopal Conference), the International Caritas, United Nations (UNODC), etc. There follows a description of just a few of the projects carried out by the Association.

In 2005 in collaboration with the Apostolic Vicariate of Tripoli, with the Gheddafi Foundation and with financial support from ENI, the Association carried out in Sicily, a training session for 20 professionals from Libya working in substance abuse treatment and prevention. In the same year in collaboration with the National Caritas Association, it carried out a training project for professionals working in substance abuse in the Tripoli Hospital.

In 2006, thanks to the support of the US Department of State, a *Forum for Africa* took place in Palermo on Hiv/Aids prevention and treatment, with the participation of numerous diplomatic delegations in Italy as well as leaders of different religions, doctors and NGO health professionals from Angola, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria and Tanzania.

Yet another example of international collaboration, in 2008 in Tanga the Association carried a *Training for Trainers* (TOT) for doctors, psychologists and health professionals coming from both the private and public health sector of Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tanzania on substance abuse disorders financed by the US Department of State.

In recent years in collaboration with the US State Department and the Colombo Plan from Sry Lanka, *Casa Famiglia Rosetta* in Sicily, has organized a residential training course called *Directing the rehab of women*, for 34 Afghan women lasting 3 weeks. All the women were Muslim health professionals in different roles and levels working in the field of substance abuse especially as

regards girls and women in Afghanistan. The Association has carried out other training courses on drugs (TreatNet) for UNODC involving health professionals from many African countries.

During these intercultural activities which are at the same time interreligious, all the people involved become aware and appreciate the common bond of ‘universal fraternity’ which holds everyone together beyond those barriers and walls which can be erected on the basis of ethnic, social, cultural and economic differences. In close and amiable contact every *quarrel* is naturally transformed into *dialogue*.

Today “development” can not be conceived as a high speed train and neither can inclusion be understood as the attempt to get as many people as possible to jump on that train. In that light of experience in meeting and confrontation (even at the interreligious level) matured in these 30 years, the «Casa Famiglia Rosetta» Association, pioneered and inspired by its founder fr. Vincenzo Sorce, has realized that we need a profound change in which inclusion for everyone, especially for the most vulnerable, has to coincide with that train that will lead us towards forms of development based on sustainable solidarity for the whole World.