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Press Release n. 76
35th Edition
Meeting for Friendship amongst People
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The fascination of research: from the specifics to the universal

Testimonies of "marginal" sciences confronted with the abundance of reality

Rimini, August 27th, 2014 – “From a single clue to the meaning of everything, until we go beyond what is already known without lose the contact with reality, as Pope Francis has invited us to do,” said Marco Bersanelli, Professor of Astrophysics at the University of Milan, at the conference held in Auditorium Intesa Sanpaolo D5 about the method and the meaning of scientific research. Bersanelli introduced the other scientists: Yves Coppens, French Paleontologist and Paleoanthropologist, and Honorary Professor at the College de France; Laurent Lafforgue, Professor at the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques, France; and Christopher Impey, University Distinguished Professor and Deputy Head of the Department of Astronomy at the University of Arizona, USA.

Impey said that “everyone is born a scientist, every child is born with a certain curiosity. However, it is necessary to elaborate a common language capable of interesting and involving everyone in science.” Coppens, whom Bersanelli invited to narrate his experience of anthropology, recounted that “when you are young, there is the desire to discover. But my motivation has changed over the years. I remain close to the object of my research, to the scrap of the bone, to the piece of crockery and to all the information I can obtain from it on the social context, and on to dating the evidence in order to recreate a more general system.” Lafforgue shares Bersanelli’s theory which connects mathematics to the good, so that even mathematical research is motivated by the search for the good. Like Coppens, the French mathematician considers it necessary return to the object. In the case of mathematics “it is about material objects, but with an objective nature that exists outside us, and doesn’t depend on us.” Lafforgue added that “comprehension happens suddenly and consists in receiving an independent truth and recognizing it. No scientific discipline seems more poor than math, yet even this has an infinite wealth.”

Bersanelli exhorted the speakers to address the second part of the title of the Meeting: “destiny has not left man alone.” Speaking of the successes of modern astrophysics, Impey said that “nature is complex, not linear and deterministic. However each scientific statement challenges the idea that we live in a meaningless world. We have the opportunity that is a duty; thinking about our position in the universe is particular prerogative of the human being.” Coppens, after tracing the origin of the universe until the appearance of the first humans, agrees with Impey: “What we think we can understand will not be everything, but we must explain it nevertheless. And it is always a great pleasure.” Lafforgue explains the irony in his scientific work: “Working on a Langlands’ programme – the research area that earned him the Fields prize – means to be at the periphery!” Responding to Bersanelli’s provocation, he reveals that “the more we know reality, the more abundant it seems. The scientific process itself dispels the dream that man can know everything.”

Lafforgue quipped that even two mathematicians cannot understand each other, because of the excessive specialization of knowledge. Therefore, “all our experiences, the people we meet, the knowledge we have become marginal, and one not sufficient to fulfill us.” However, “this marginality reveals that we lack something, it is the nostalgia of a center that we carry inside of us. We want a center, and we carry the hope that destiny has not left man alone. The fact that we are able to investigate, with our creativity, all the sickness of reality, is a sign that supports this hope.”



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For that reason Bersanelli, remembering that “the edges are a point of encounter with the inexhaustible wealth of reality,” mentioning Dostoevskij: “The horizon of the infinite and the immense is as much indispensable to man as that small planet he lives on.”

(A.C.,F.Pi.)

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