

Editorial

Vatican-branded science communication

The summer now gone has reported two episodes we would like to bring to the attention of the JCOM readers. Two minor pieces of news, unlikely to be in the limelight over the summer, when the media understandably focus on gossips and crime news. Even the experts – especially outside the Italian territory – would probably dismiss these events as minor, wouldn't it be for the people involved. But let's see the facts.

The first event was a congress held in Rome on the past 4th of July about the role of science communication as the way to a sustainable development in Africa. The second one is the announcement, made once again in July, of the launch of a project to produce a documentary on an alleged killer asteroid. It is called *Apothis project*, from the name of the cosmic bullet that might crash into the Earth in 2036 with devastating consequences.

Organised by the students of the “La Sapienza” University of Rome and by the Assumpta Science Centre Owerri Association, the congress saw a debate on the opportunity to build a Science Centre in Owerri, one of the main academic cities in Nigeria. The initiative was supported by Cardinal Paul Poupard [1], President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, a ministry of the Roman Curia.

With respect to the documentary on the killer asteroid, its editor, journalist Laura de Luca, has already guaranteed that a version of the documentary will be broadcast by Radio Vaticana, official broadcaster of the Holy See [2].

In a previous JCOM editorial, we already discussed the interest demonstrated by the Catholic Church in science communication, a topic that requires attention from our readers once again [3].

We stressed that, during his papacy, John Paul II chose to intervene with an unprecedented, incisive public communication strategy, without mediators, on the topical issues in the relation between science and society, including assisted fertilisation, cloning and embryonic stem cell research. Also, we were wondering whether the new Pope Benedict XVI would have emphasised this personal strategy of communication and political intervention in bioethics.

The two above-mentioned episodes – certainly not an exception – neither tell anything about a direct intervention of the ecclesiastic hierarchies, nor refer to hot issues. Two atypical features that offer food for thought. Because they suggest that, beside an intervention strategy that directly sees the involvement of the Pontiffs, there flows an underground one, that involves the complex structure of the Roman Catholic Church, made up of parishes, the community of the believers, the religious congregations and an endless variety of groups among which is somehow spreading an awareness about science communication.

If you analyse the reasons lying behind these communication activities, then you'll discover that many of them resemble those enunciated by the people traditionally considered pro-science. This is quite an interesting fact. For example, we would like to know how a science centre will be implemented – since, according to Cardinal Poupard [4], it wants “to promote the development of science and technology” and to tackle the “shortcomings in schooling and scientific education” in Nigeria – without colliding with the Church on cloning, the use of embryonic stem cells or of condoms for HIV/AIDS prevention (tragically a major current issue in Africa). It's not up to us to question what Popes and Cardinals believe “ethically” sustainable science is, but we'd rather want to stress that its meaning is now negotiated, debated, assessed more and more frequently in the framework of a widespread, diffused and large science communication, addressed to a miscellaneous group of interlocutors. It's the Church as a whole that, from our viewpoint, wants to provide its interpretation of science, claiming its prominent role in the contemporary system of social redistribution of the scientific knowledge. Hence, we shouldn't feel too surprised if the next few years see a new Public Understanding of Science, only this time branded Holy See – Vatican City.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

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Bibliographic references

- [1] The text of the message by Cardinal Paul Poupard and further information on the conference can be found at <http://www.cascowerri.splinder.com/>.
- [2] For further information on the Aphosis Project, visit the website www.apophis2036.it.
- [3] P. Greco, *Ratzinger and (science) communication*, JCOM 4(2) (2005), available at <http://jcom.sissa.it/archive/04/02/E0402>.
- [4] C.f. <http://www.cascowerri.splinder.com/>.