

Leonardo Ricci

“My life as an architect is but an episode of my inner life, an ordinary act like so many acts make up our day”: a Letter to Tullio Vinay

This letter written by Leonardo Ricci to Tullio Vinay was published in Italian in the monthly journal Gioventù Evangelica on November 15, 1947. The journal was established in 1946 by the Congress of the Federazione Gioventù Evangelica's efforts. Later on, the text was embedded in the chapter four of the book L'amore è più grande: la storia di Agàpe e la nostra (translated in English: Love is Greater: Agàpe's Story and Ours) edited in 1995 by the Waldensian pastor, theologian, and Italian politician, Tullio Vinay.

For Pastor Tullio Vinay, guide of the Waldesian community in Florence since 1946 and later commissioner of Ricci's "Monte degli Ulivi" Village in Riesi (1962-1968), the Ecumenical Village of Agàpe had to represent an Ecumenical centre and be the place of religious and cultural (and holiday) meeting point of the following Evangelical communities, it had to be an architectural monument dedicated to the brotherly and Christian love, built by the young Waldesians. To Ricci Agàpe represented "a realized utopia" that followed an original existential formula, that community ideal that he constantly pursued. In Ricci's mind Agàpe had to be a community for the local population. Indeed, the link with the local dimension was evident in the use of local materials, in the reference to the vernacular, in the participatory project because it was carried out with the collaboration of more than a thousand volunteers and in the search for a relationship with nature.

Vinay firstly commissioned the project to the engineer Claudio Messina, but then both agreed on entrusting the project to an architect. The choice fell on Leonardo Ricci, who already knew Vinay since he taught catechism to his brothers Alberto and Arnaldo because Ricci's mother, Giuditta De Giorgi, was Waldesian, and had an intense correspondence with the Pastor since 1946, when Vinay was impressed by Ricci's project "Firenze sul Fiume" exhibited in Palazzo Vecchio (1946). Ricci had been writing and talking for a long time with Vinay about the Pastor's dream to build an ecumenical village where the reconciliation ideal (agàpe) had to be realized. Therefore, Ricci got involved in the project some years before effectively designing it.

The realization of the project was possible thanks to the work of Giovanni Klaus Koenig, architecture student at the end of the Forties, and his brother, Gianni Koenig, an engineering student, who elaborated all the executive drawings from the 1:200 scale starting from Ricci's sketches (see the archival record in this issue dedicated to the project). In the archives only a few letters by Ricci to Vinay tell the concern of the architect about the correct ongoing of the building process.

Claudio Messina, who worked with Giovanni Klaus Koenig on the executive project and in the building site coordination, reported the story of the Agàpe project in an interview with Corinna Vasič Vatovec and stated that the particular fan-shaped plan of the complex had to allow a convergence of the spaces. On one side, a fireplace as a meeting place and, on the other, the large window that looked at the external community space and captured the light. After a visit to most of the Unions of the Valleys and in Turin, Vinay declared that the village had already arose before its construction, from the love of its builders, because it was born from the participatory union of the workers who would have built it and from the volunteers' work, almost all young and belonging to the generation that wanted a new life. In this laid the existential matrix of Agàpe project for a new reality to be reformed and rebuilt. At the same time, it presented both the characteristics of the mountain village and those of the community reality, without falling back into the imitation of the models of the past.

To build on this earth is to build in the Kingdom of Heaven. The walls we erect of stone and lime, laboured and loving conquest, will be destroyed, but we will find them, together, beyond earthly death. Dear Vinay, the article you asked me for turns into a direct letter to you, my beloved friend, who are so much a part of my life, because with you, as with very few others, I feel objectivised and realised that human brotherhood that we try in vain, through our weakness, to achieve with all the men around us, be they perhaps murderers or prostitutes. You invite me to speak of the Agàpe project. All I will do is repeat to you what I told you in the hours of waiting, when to begin seemed to take a leap in the dark and to end a dream of visionaries who do not want to or cannot adhere to the reality of everyday life. Now Agàpe is rising and it is not an adventure at all, it is really everyday reality because day by day we dig a pit, we wall up a stone and day by day we overcome a difficulty. Difficulties that others do not know about, but which you above all know and which also made you cry like a child not long ago in the Prali tent. And at that moment I did not know whether I was like a mother who had to console you or one who needed the consolation of your weeping. But it is now easier to talk about Agàpe's project. You know very well that I am an architect who struggles against the terrible contrasts presented by today's society, a society in crisis that only selfishly asks for a bit of glitz that hides material and spiritual misery, just as one seeks a frivolous dress or a bow to flatter oneself, without understanding the real values of architecture. Architecture that could instead create a loving city where men live joyfully in prayer in both work and rest. And here the discourse would become too long, and it is best to leave it at that. Architecture needs a defined civilisation for it to assume universal value. Otherwise, we arrive at most at a few isolated 'episodes' after an effort disproportionate to the result. And for this reason, my dear Vinay, and you know it well, that I can honestly and deeply love what I design but then remain completely detached from it. The realisations are but a very small part, flaky and flaky, of what I have loved. Things that no longer have any value for me. So, my life as an architect is but an episode of my inner life, an ordinary act like so many acts make up our day. And I am only interested in what is within me, which is on the contrary complete unity tending continually towards the great and loving arms of God. This is building for the world. To sow a seed without caring where it will fall and how it will be born. And that is all we can do. But building for Agàpe is different. To build for Agàpe is to know that the ground on which you sow the seed is fertile, that it is continually ploughed and leavened by men like you, that the reapers are young people who wait and need the fruit that springs from the earth. That is wonderful and joyful. For Agàpe everything else is worthless. The pride of the architect no longer exists. It is a complete reliance. I have no means at my disposal, I lack the materials that I would perhaps like, I have no specialised workers, I do not, in short, have in my hands, that exact machine that I can control in all its organs so that the work turns out as it was born in my mind. And yet, it is the first time that I feel that I am building for a real, real thing. And that is why I feel that we will build in pieces and with mistakes, perhaps, but we do all we can, and the result will be beautiful because it is the

result of a thing loved by all. Agàpe is the place where men meet and stay for a short time. They seek brotherly love. Then they return to their homes. They are generally young men. They form a momentary community that lives religiously detached from the routines of daily life. In every community, there must be a twofold relationship of the individual: one to God, the other to God's creatures, first among them mankind. Consequently, the individual needs a state of absolute solitude, suitable for meditation and contemplation, in addition to the normal condition of contact with other men. The lack of either of these relationships atrophies the complete and harmonious life of the community. But these relationships vary in quantity depending on the act that man performs at a given moment; and architecture is affected by this variation in function and therefore quantity. In Agàpe, given the character of voluntary meeting of men and souls and the temporary permanence, the balance weighs more heavily on the collective value, all the more so because for solitude there are mountains, streams, meadows. But my aim was never to nullify this possibility. We want a Christian and not just a bourgeois community. Hence the architectural vision of Agàpe. Neither the nice little hotel, nor the comfortable, graceful barracks. Agàpe is an organism. A complete organism and not an addition of parts for individual functions. It must represent for the host community what an ancient monastery represented for the monks. The example is not unorthodox. As an organism, it begins its life by adhering to the nature that surrounds it. Agàpe is born on a mountainside that opens up to the sun, at a point where the slope softens and then becomes steeper again to the valley floor. It grafts itself with nature not violently and brutally in a neo-classical manner, nor does it submerge and hide in a casual and falsely romantic manner. It remains a closed unit while having maximum freedom of articulation. On two sides, the same buildings with their walls and retaining walls of terracing delimit it from the surrounding meadows. The other two are enclosed by a strip of woodland that follows the contours of the land. Whoever arrives there finds neither closed gates nor just any meadow where there are any constructions. Agàpe is open to all and opens its arms to all; to go there, one must climb ramps and feel 'agapini', even those who do not even know what it is. Outside and inside Agàpe is an outflow and a return to and from the community. There is a place for the lone individual, for the small group of individuals, for the family, for the complete community. Outside the forest and the terraces, the small squares, the natural amphitheatre for meetings, the terracing for sports games, the church for the whole community. Inside, the cells, the classrooms, the hall for meetings, lunch, theatre, study, and worship for the entire community. These are the general concepts that it is impossible for me now, for reasons of space, to detail. Agàpe is built with the poorest materials. The stones found on site, the wood from the forests, the lime that the rocks gave and that the young people tore with their hands. Traditional materials but which are called upon to express a new concept and a new architectural form. Agàpe is built by the young people themselves

1 "Agapini" was the name of the inhabitants of the Agàpe community.

with an effort beyond their means out of love. They are young people who come from various cities, various habits, almost all of them not from the trade. Yet, I have never loved workers as much as I love these young people, and I cannot forget, for example, one of them [Gianni Cassetti, editor's note] who for months, ten hours a day, with a sack stuffed with straw, made into a hood, until it almost covered his face, with his head bowed, tirelessly, with an equal, shuffling step, carried stones and rocks of an incredible weight. I have never spoken to this young man, I have only shaken his hand two or three times, and I have seen him smile with a child's good mouth, I too love him with a brotherly love. I cannot name all these young people, I may not even know the name of some, but I want to thank you all the same for all the good you have done me with your work given out of love. And I want to remember my direct collaborators. First of all, engineer Nino Messina, who helps me with the technical part with a lot of expertise and at the sacrifice of his personal work. And Gianni König and Claudio Messina, the inseparable and unsurpassable 'macchiette'², this time still together and seriously committed to the direction and continuous supervision of the work. And then what about you, dear Vinay, you who were the real builder of Agàpe? Nothing, because everyone loves you and everyone knows. I embrace you fraternally, your 'Archileo'³.

2 Person who has something bizarre and singular, who arouses laughter and sympathy.

3 Nickname encompassing the contracted forms "arch" for "architect" and "Leo" for "Leonardo".