



Draft for the drafting of a training model of Agape Ecumenical Centre

by the Working Group on Training¹

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Introduction: Agape as a *permanent building site*

Opting for the ethics of love means living all the dimensions of love in daily life: care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge. To do so, it is indispensable to cultivate one's awareness, the capacity for critical analysis that enables one to understand how to care for others, how to be responsible, respectful, and always willing to learn.

BELL HOOKS, *All About Love. New visions*

The ethics of care is outlined as a *concrete, contingent and contextual* ethics: it prioritises attention to the uniqueness of the other, to the specificity of the situation, to the relationships in which the subject finds himself from time to time inserted and of which he cannot help but take into account insofar as they are significant for his own identity and life project.

ELENA PULCINI, *The Care of the World*

One of the strongest images to convey an idea of how training is understood at Agape comes from the very birth of the centre: volunteers from the most diverse backgrounds contributing actively - each according to his or her possibilities - to the realisation of a common project. That worksite followed a project that scanned the spaces according to a precise philosophy, developing according to times and modalities to which participants themselves gave shape. Nor can it be overlooked that the work started in the aftermath of a collective historical tragedy (World War II), after the deepest fears had materialised in unprecedented and terrifying forms. The reaction to those horrors caused the gap between *imagining* and *doing*, i.e. *building, to be* bridged.

The worksite nature of Agape certainly did not end after the centre's inauguration. On the contrary, it is a permanent condition of a worksite *in fieri*, in which the acknowledgement of the fears and vulnerabilities of the individual is answered by taking charge of the community, by shared responsibility and service. A construction site is not always about construction, but also about consolidation, recovery, maintenance. In a word, *care*.

Today's fears and vulnerabilities - not ignored, but taken as a starting point for the encounter with the other - are thus responded to with a common construction site based on precise cornerstones: service, co-responsibility, care.

I. Context analysis

Agape is a place of encounter, reconciliation and intercultural dialogue, characterised by being an inclusive, ecumenical and international space. The centre aims to be a laboratory of experimentation for building a different world, through community life, voluntary work, theological and political debate and the practice of non-formal education.

The project was born in the middle of the last century from the ideas of Waldensian pastor Tullio Vinay, with the main objective of being a place of encounter and reconciliation. Located in the Waldensian Valleys in Piedmont, Agape is part of the centres and works of the Waldensian Church in Italy.

Agape has, since the 1950s, been a place of fruitful social, political and theological debate both nationally and internationally. Numerous camps were held here dedicated to dialogue between Europe and Africa, contact with socialist countries, the Middle East question, gender and sexual orientation.

Today, Agape offers community life and voluntary work and organises camps that provide a space for discussion on various topics related to current political and social issues, gender issues, spirituality, theological debate and education, as well as camps for children and adolescents. The international dimension characterises the Centre, which every year gathers volunteers from all over the world and organises specifically international camps for people from different countries.

II. How we do formation in Agape

Agape has been involved in training and non-formal education since its inception. Thanks to a pedagogical and philosophical approach based on the exchange and confrontation between different subjects, Agape proposes to its community paths of research and individual and collective growth, offering tools to critically confront different themes. Agape camps deal with political, philosophical, theological, pedagogical and gender issues, offering paths of reflection and tools to develop a critical awareness of society and the world around us.

There are three nodes that qualify the ways in which the community organises its educational activity and the values that guide its approach to non-formal education: the spaces and times of the educational experience, the balance between unity and diversity, and the community-responsibility pair.

II.1 Spaces and times

At the core of the learning experience that eachø lives in Agape is first and foremost immersion in a specific and determined spatial and temporal environment.

The educating space is not only configured as the material context within which the educational experience takes place, but must be interpreted from its multiple configurations:

- as an *existential* space, i.e. as an explorable context in which the person experiences being in the world as a *body*, understood as the first place of learning and relationship, as the first lived space, in relation to the space to be inhabited;

- as a *transactive* space, in which each person enters into a relationship with the physical, human and symbolic environment; this environment can also put him/her in crisis, solicit him/her and present him/her with problematic situations to which he/she reacts with perceptive, intellectual and operational transactions;

- as a *natural and at the same time social* space;

- as a *cathartic* space, within which everyoneø can interact with symbols and meanings;

- as an *expressive* space, in which it is possible to traverse one's own instances through different languages;

- as a communicative space, in which communicative freedom, the presence of balanced transactions and relationships can prevail;

- as an *institutional* space, allowing for pedagogical self-management, establishing the collective space;

- as a *technological* space, i.e. equipped for interaction between people and between people and the environment.

Leonardo Ricci's architecture and the territorial location of the structure have a fundamental pedagogical value in the relationship that is created with the community. The entire community is constituted in a journey, in a path that ascends the external stairs to the third little house, then continuing along the mountainside. This ascent to the mountain recalls another ascent, the one towards the Kingdom of God or towards the common utopia, recalled by the roofs turned towards the sky and by the openness of the church in the open air. Likewise, the very shape of the hall recalls that of the ark, the vehicle of salvation for all mankind. A second reference is to the dialectic between human being and nature, between inside and outside, between the *solids* of the stone partitions and the *voids* of the large windows, through which the sunlight enters, shaping the forms of what happens inside.

Agape is also a community space that proposes itself as a place for meeting and sharing between different subjectivities. Motivated by this ideal, in an attempt to be a welcoming place open to all diversities, for some years now the centre has deemed it necessary to equip itself with tools capable of facilitating, and at the same time protecting, the encounter experience. Starting in 2019, in particular, the reflection of certain camps regarding the establishment of a "(safer) space" has been extended to all the groups that act and move in Agape in an attempt to find a balance between a construction of the space aimed at guaranteeing free self-expression and one aimed at protecting the respect of all the subjectivities at play, aware that the space of the relationship is still a "risky" space and therefore subject to protection.

Also determining the environment that qualifies the Agape educational experience is the time variable. Agape's educative time is a constantly shared and collective time, characterised by a great separation from external time.

This all-encompassing time allows for a deepening of the community and educational experience that is marked by a ritualisation of common time: there is no separation between the different times of the day (work time and activities, meal time, rest time, party time) but they all contribute to the reworking of concepts and experiences, to the building of bonds, to meeting and listening, to self-expression and putting oneself into play. Time seems to flow differently at Agape than in other places. Clearly this is revealed not in a chronological sense, but rather in the dynamics that this place generates in relational terms. At Agape, which lives on relationships like all places of aggregation, the perception of time lived changes, precisely because of the spaces of sharing it proposes. It is the intensity of the time lived in the space of encounter, generated by the formulation of the internal and external space itself, that allows a possible experience of transformation as a generator of change. The times at Agape can be transformed, better understood: how can they be more consciously declined at the service of the vocation to be an

Educating Community? How can they become useful times at the service of building such a community, with a view to constructing spaces of attention and care for individual educational experiences?

II.2 Unity through diversity

The ecumenical insight of theologian Oscar Cullmann is that *unity* should not be understood as uniformity, but as a communion of diverse identities. In his perspective, churches are bearers of different charisms, and their diversity cannot be considered a hindrance to unity, just as the diversity of the members is not a hindrance to the unity of the body. Unity is not created in *spite of* diversity, but *through* diversity. In Agape's perspective, ecumenism must not be limited to the boundaries of Christianity, but must overcome divisions and barriers between different communities and memberships.

In our modern pluralistic society, diversity is the norm. People differ significantly in their values, their political views, their religious affiliations, their socio-economic classes, the identities they identify with, the experiences they have lived. To these diversities are added those in perceptions, learning styles, interests and skills. Everyone's experience has an individual dimension: each person has different needs and perceives experiences in different ways.

Agape believes that it is essential to ensure that each person has meaningful access to the proposed experiences. To this end, it is necessary to design a flexible environment that allows everyone to access the proposals in different ways. The differentiation of objectives, contents, processes and evaluations is fundamental in order to stimulate both the intellectual dimension, the affective-emotional dimension and the bodily dimension, which in the end are not separable, but make up the person in his or her entirety and fullness.

Agape does not aim to deny or hide the differences between people, but on the contrary tries to recognise and value them as a source of enrichment and learning. In this sense, the educational experience at Agape is not based on homologation or uniformity, but on the ability to grasp and appreciate the cultural, linguistic, religious, social, cognitive, skill and gender differences of the people who participate. This implies addressing the dissonances and tensions that can arise from encountering diversity, but at the same time, it allows for the creation of an authentic and inclusive educational environment, where differences are seen as a resource, a source of mutual enrichment, through which it is possible to grow together and build a project for a common future.

Agape therefore offers an *ecumenical pedagogy* insofar as it aims to build an educational experience that is unified not despite differences, but through the

differences of those who participate. Through the creation of an inclusive environment that respects differences, the aim is thus to build an educational community based on the appreciation of differences as a tool for growth and development.

II.3 Community and co-responsibility

The theme of responsibility plays a special role within Agape's pedagogical vision, in which voluntary work and the community dimension are configured as the contexts for putting into practice a sense of responsibility that extends from the personal to the social sphere. In a social and political context in which the loosening of ties, apathy and indifference are more and more present, in which the extension of relational networks, the primacy of technology and consumerism contribute to distancing us from a sense of responsibility towards the other and the community, the challenges that Agape sets itself to face are precisely the reconstruction of ties, caring for the other and commitment to a common project.

The dimension of voluntary service in Agape is a form of caring for the community of which one is a part, but it is also a space for sharing and mutual exchange, which allows participants to come into contact with the different needs and realities present in Agape, and to make their skills and experience available for the construction of a common vision.

The community thus becomes a place of formation and personal growth, in which everyone is called upon to participate actively and responsibly. The community is not configured as a collection of isolated individuals working in the same context, but as a system of relationships in which everyone has a specific role and responsibility. The relational dimension and co-responsibility thus constitute the foundation for building an authentic and supportive community.

Responsibility implies an ethical constraint towards the other and the community, in which power and relationality assume an important role. Responsibility becomes a response to the call of the other and involves taking an action that stabilises and initiates a path, thus becoming a challenge that involves not only the personal but also the social sphere. In this way, a dialectic is defined between community and service to Agape, rooted in shared responsibility and the sharing of experiences and skills, with a view to mutual personal and community enrichment and growth.

A community such as Agape can only be defined as educating and relational if it takes for granted and applies a new meaning of *responsibility*: a *co-responsibility*, or a *responsibility for*, where "the retributive and symmetrical logic of legal (and criminal) responsibility, which essentially requires accountability, taking responsibility for one's actions, is replaced by the relational and asymmetrical logic

that favours care for the other"² . Underlying this vision is the idea of a community of interdependent persons, who in their autonomy, always taking care of themselves, at the same time show care for others.

² Cf. Elena Pulcini, *La cura del mondo. Fear and Responsibility in the Global Age* , Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2009, p. 224.

III. The pedagogical lines of Agape

Agape's pedagogical vision, broadly understood as a vision of educational and training processes that last for the entire duration of a person's life, is geared towards promoting personal growth through individual and collective research. This approach is based on respect for the perspectives of others and the exchange of ideas. Agape's emphasis is not on providing ready answers, but rather on encouraging the community to engage in critical thinking and reflection on various topics from the encounter with diversity. Central to Agape's pedagogical tension is exchange, dialogue and reflection, as well as the cultivation of skills that promote peace, cooperation, conflict management, gender sensitivity and active listening. The basic principles underlying the Agape approach were elaborated by Franca Bezzi in 1996 in the five pedagogical lines, which relate to motivation to work for Agape, education for adulthood, education for the relationship with others, education for freedom as responsibility and the encounter with the Gospel.

III.1 Motivating people to Agape's work

Franca Bezzi writes³ :

Motivating people to work in Agape: the difficulty lies in doing so by clarifying well the concrete dimension of agape. In fact, we have verified that Agape is often perceived in terms that are too individual ("Agape is us working in it") or in terms that are too idealised ("Agape is the place where worldly values are overthrown, the topos of the perfect society" communist or Christian does not matter). This year we have done a lot of work to put people in a concrete relationship with the various 'pieces' of Agape, but it is a very long job and obviously always to be done again.

The focus of this first (emblematically) pedagogical line is the *community*. If the dimension of *service* is constitutive of the Agape project, since it is precisely work that creates the community and triggers relational and caring processes, all pedagogical efforts must strive for this in the first place. It is no coincidence that, in all Agape camps, regardless of the target audience, ε campistsε must take turns serving meals: taking charge of community care is one of the qualifying elements of the Agape experience and is the basis from which all other elements are determined. Political struggle, collective reflection, the construction of utopia cannot be separated from a concreteness that shapes experience and relationships.

The first direction in which the training processes activated in Agape move (in the minorε camps, in the adultε camps, in the training proposals for the resident group,

³ All quotations are taken from Agape Information Service No. 5/1996.

the workcamp, the staff) is therefore awareness-raising and involvement in the dimension of service, understood as a *gateway to the community* and the utopia of Agape. In this way, each can recognise themselves as part of a continuum extending in time and space, endowed with political, social and anthropological relevance.

III.2 Educating for adulthood

Educating for adulthood: many staff members often perceive themselves more as cadets and pre-cadets than as adults. A big job is to make them aware of the distance in age and maturity that separates them from the campers and their educational responsibilities to them. It's not a matter of dulling the inimitable authenticity of each person, but of being aware of what we put in place with our attitudes and our way of entering into relationships. It is about working on ourselves to be as 'like ourselves' as possible, to get closer to our truest authenticity, without confusing this with spontaneity, pure instinctiveness. With only an apparent paradox, I would say that only those who have worked on themselves for a long time can afford to act spontaneously. The stakes are high. I would venture to say that here at Agape it has often been a winning bet.

In contrast to the previous one, the second pedagogical line focuses on the *subject* and its personal dimension. Within Agape's reflection, autobiographical work is foundational to every educational process, since all formation is necessarily formation of one's own person. This path entails certain political implications: respect for others and for the planet, the fight for social and climate justice, cannot be achieved exclusively through normative impositions, but necessarily emerge from an anthropological *reconstruction*, a rediscovery of the personal and collective self. Responsibility does not qualify, therefore, as self-restraint and containment, but rather as a process of self-knowledge, unveiling and self-recognition. *Adulthood*, in Franca Bezzi's lexicon, is configured as a maturity defined not in an anagraphic sense, but in a perspective of self-discovery and of others and of conscious action. Education and training, in this perspective, are configured as *maieutic* processes, capable of making each person work on their latent knowledge, enabling them to bring it to light and manipulate it, giving it new forms and functions.

III.3 Educating for relationship with others

Concerning education in relation to others, writes Franca Bezzi:

In theory we all agree, in practice it is much more difficult. We have done a lot of work on listening, on roles and dynamics within a group, on decision-making, on the pedagogical nature of relationships in Agape.

Within relationship education, the topic of educating for differences is of particular importance to many and many of us: difference between the sexes, between classes, between races and cultures. Much friction has been aroused by the subject of sexual difference in particular: for some it is absolutely inessential, indeed counterproductive; the majority admits that it is very important, but in practice one either forgets about it or does not know how to do it, or one feels threatened in one's identity (for some of the males) or one is afraid of making unwelcome speeches, of being a nuisance by 'sinning' excessive feminism (for some of the females). How to move forward?

If at the centre of the first pedagogical line we found the community and at the centre of the second the subject, the third pedagogical line places its focus on the element of synthesis between these two aspects: the relationship with others. An excessive focus on the community would lead to dynamics of assimilation of the individual to the group; conversely, an excessive focus on the subject would risk leading to fragmentary individualism. In Agape's pedagogical and social proposal, the element that makes it possible to maintain a healthy balance between these two polarities consists in an education in relationships, which knows how to enrich itself with the insights gained from the trans-feminist, anti-racist, queer and post-colonialist reflections that have passed through this place over the years.

The Agape community is therefore urged daily to question itself on issues such as active listening, non-violent communication, conflict management, building cooperative dynamics, preventing abuse, and identifying power structures.

III.4 Educating for freedom in terms of responsibility

Educating for freedom in terms of responsibility: there is in many people a terrible confusion, I mean a psychological confusion, about what it means to be free and free precisely because they are responsible. Often the first word is understood as rebellion and the second is experienced as an excessive, crushing burden. Even here it is quite easy to come to a theoretical agreement: the problem is then the correspondence between ideas and behaviour, since we reject double morality as a way of life.

A paradigm of the difficulty of concretely addressing this issue is the long-standing discussion on 'the culture of getting high', where Agape is often accused of excessive moralism or hypocrisy. Here the positions are the most varied: some of us are explicitly rigid, others more liberal, others cannot stay within the limits they give themselves.

The issue, I repeat, is not indifferent from an educational point of view, in a place where coherence and authenticity are sought.

Paulo Freire wrote⁴ that 'it is necessary to make it clear, with lucid discourse and democratic practices, that only those subjects that recognise their limitations will be able to express an authentic will. A will without restrictions is a despotic will that denies other wills and, strictly speaking, even itself. It is the illicit will of the selfish and arbitrary 'masters of the world', who see only themselves'. The process of recognising and defining limits, personal and collective, is fundamental not only for the construction of safer spaces and the establishment of relationships of respect and care, but also for the authentic exercise of freedom.

The pedagogical proposal of Agape is therefore part of the attempt to overcome the false dilemma between freedom and limit. Agape is configured as a space of relational, moral, experiential freedom for all those who cross it, and the claim of this freedom takes on a profound political value. At the same time, the institution of this space of freedom has its genesis in the negotiation of limits: limits shared by the community, limits agreed upon in interpersonal relationships, limits internalised and elaborated at the subjective level. Agape thus becomes an instituting context, in which limits are not set by a normative authority but are claimed by a community on the move.

III.5 Encountering the Gospel

Finally, Franca Bezzi writes about the fifth pedagogical line, the encounter with the Gospel:

This objective is vague in formulation and not systematically pursued in practice. There are often in the camps, especially cadet camps, moments of biblical report or worship, sometimes very engaging, moments of very clear and passionate witness, but in general we are ill-equipped to deal with this issue. The moments of biblical reflection or faith are sometimes a little 'tacked on' to the camp, not organic, certainly the fruit of a genuine desire on the part of those proposing them, but lacking the strength to enter fully into the construction of a common path. Here too the challenge is both difficult and exciting: to speak of God in a secular way, to bear witness to the faith to those who do not go to church, accepting the risk of superimposing our projections on the word of God. How can we equip ourselves to face it all together, believers and non-believers?

⁴ Cf. Freire, Paulo, *The right and duty to change the world. For a pedagogy of indignation*, Il Margine, Trento, 2021.

Many years have passed since Tullio Vinay, at the end of the Second World War, began travelling around Italy distributing leaflets on which one could read in large letters 'Let us carve the face of Christ on the rocks of our mountains'. Today, Agape lives a secular and contaminated spirituality, and the opportunities to encounter the Gospel (understood both as a Christian sacred text and as a proclamation of God's love and promise of salvation) have certainly thinned out. This fifth pedagogical line poses all the complexity of an extended and inclusive ecumenism, such as that of Agape, within a globalised and, at least in appearance, secularised world.

Precisely for these reasons, this pedagogical invitation is particularly relevant at this time. Firstly, thanks to the multiplicity of gazes and experiences, Agape can approach the Gospel with a completely different outlook than the traditional educational agencies of a religious matrix, enhancing a triple signification of the text: religious, cultural, narrative. The Gospel is, in the first place, a religious object: a reference of faith that daily urges and accompanies Christians throughout the world and that inspired the first nucleus of volunteers who, starting in 1947, built Agape. But it is also a cultural object, a body of myths, legends, philosophies, anthropologies that allow one to immerse oneself in the history and art of many parts of the world and that have been tattooed on the identity of millions of people. Finally, the Gospel is a narrative object: a product of the experiences of human beings of the past, it allows human beings of other eras, with different experiences and multiple affiliations, to activate processes of identification in the Gospel stories, recognising these stories as 'their own stories', in a dimension of autobiographical rediscovery.

Secondly, Agape can offer an alternative to the *ivory towers* in which both religious and secularised realities are often enclosed. The spirituality of Agape authentically offers itself to all those who in their daily lives do not usually cultivate a spiritual or religious dimension. In particular, in Agape an encounter with the Gospel is also possible for all those subjectivities that, throughout history, have been excluded from the traditional churches and that have experienced the Gospel for centuries as the axe by which all non-statutory identities were marginalised, discriminated against, killed.

IV. Conclusion: Agape as an *educating community*

It is not easy to identify a formative model for Agape. The complexity and pluralism within the community qualify Agape as a container of different models, different vocations, different practices that meet, intersect and sometimes come into conflict. In the elaboration of this text, an attempt has been made to take a snapshot of this richness in the conviction that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, i.e. that the interaction between these different portfolios leads to the emergence of new and generative forms.

As this snapshot was constructed, it emerged how certain agapine experiences and practices seemed to *indicate* a certain form of the educational experience, which was outlined between the lines and at the margins of the elements we wanted to focus on: the structural aspects of the experience (space and time), the pedagogical management of pluralism and diversity, the responsibility urged by the dimensions of service and care for the community.

Furthermore, a direction emerges towards which Agape's activities move and which places the whole project in a pedagogical perspective. This direction can be found within the five pedagogical lines of Agape elaborated by Franca Bezzi.

Finally, we would like to conclude by opening up to a future perspective. The best hope for the future lies in the commitment to recover to the full that 'constructive' spirit that has characterised the Agape experience since its inception, that nature of a permanent building site in which the very practice of service and responsibility becomes in itself a relational and community-based training and educating experience.

Agape's character as an educating community aspires to translate into a circular care of all its components, which implies not only the provision of a physical structure and various services, but above all a permanent support also in terms of group consolidation, facilitation of relationships, personal and formative growth.

Considering Agape as an *educating community* means taking the courage to partly subvert this notion. Agape's community is positioned as a non-homogeneous and non-territorially based community, which makes diversity and internationality its qualifying features. It is not territorial, normative or cultural constraints that establish the community but the mutual care of its members. The form of the Agape experience is configured as a *pedagogical mediator* between the specific Agape community and the social, political and territorial communities of which we are all part.

In this mediation, Agape can be salt of the earth and light of the world: that is, it can embody a utopia in its own practices and in the exercise of mutual care, co-responsibility and service; but it can at the same time work for a change and transformation of society and the world within which it fits, while pointing to *another*.