

Monsignor Atuire, director of the Pilgrimage Office: public funds and tax breaks are not privileges
We add value to the tourism industry and we plug the gaps in State funding for welfare, immigrants and the poor.

Church uses public money for the common good: Italy should be grateful



By Curzio Maltese | Translated by Graeme A Hunter

La Repubblica's investigation into the cost to Italian taxpayers of maintaining the Church has provoked an incredibly wide and varied reaction, from the "Let's stop this" of the Vatican Secretary of State to the campaign of insults from L'Avvenire (the bishops' official journal) and the Catholic magazine, Famiglia Cristiana. Comment from the most obvious source has been absent until now; however, a request to clarify its position was received, and this came from Father Caesar Atuire.

Born forty years ago in Ghana and ordained to the priesthood only ten years ago, Fr Atuire studied engineering in London and gained a degree in Philosophy from the Pontifical University. For six months now Fr Atuire has held the key role of Administrator-Delegate of the Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi (Roman Pilgrimage Office), at the behest of Cardinal Camillo Ruini. The ORP is the largest pilgrimage organisation in the Vatican, a department of the Holy See and handles millions of visitors each year. Fr Atuire could be a government minister in any European country, speaks half a dozen languages and has a breadth of knowledge from medieval history through to the latest marketing techniques. For a successful politician, at least in Italy however, his only fault is to have a strong sense of humour.

Where would you like to start, Father Atuire? With Luciano Moggi?

"Ok, let's start with Luciano Moggi."

His celebrity endorsement of the agreement between the ORP and Mistral Air saw him sitting next to Cardinal Ruini on the inaugural flight to Lourdes. Do you deny he was there?

“No, he was in Lourdes but I deny that he was aboard the inaugural flight of Mistral Air and that it was, in any way, an endorsement. We don’t seek celebrity endorsements.”

What else about the investigation do you dispute?

“The figures. Five million visitors managed by the Vatican each year; that is good news indeed. Where did you get these figures?”

From the *Wall Street Journal*, which was quoting *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

“Well, the *Wall Street Journal* is a serious paper, but it is not the Bible.”

It’s more reliable for financial data than the Bible.

“That aside, I don’t agree with those who maintain that religious tourism enjoys tax breaks, that it exploits black-market and casual labour, that it doesn’t pay taxes and damages competition.”

Many religious buildings, which became proper hotels with their own websites after the Jubilee, use casual and voluntary labour. Do you not find this to be a contradiction to Pope Benedict XVI’s denunciation of job insecurity as a “social plague”?

“As far as we are concerned, our staff are properly employed. It is true that we are governed by the Vatican and there is no trade union representation, but this doesn’t mean that we don’t look after our staff. For example, we provide three years’ maternity cover. Generally speaking, the Church is a very caring employer. Pope John XXIII was once asked how many people worked in the Vatican. He replied: half.”

What about the tax exemptions, the unpaid buildings tax (ICI) and the value added to religious buildings paid for by taxpayers?

The ORP doesn’t manage buildings. We use tourism structures, in Italy as elsewhere, for our pilgrims, and in every case we pay the taxes and VAT that are prescribed by the laws of the various countries.

Even with the best will in the world, it is difficult to imagine that you don’t have links with APSA [the Vatican’s Department of Administrative Affairs which is responsible for buildings].

But it’s true. If we occupy a building managed by APSA, we pay like any other client. I remind you: the ORP does not manage buildings, but services.

Can we move away from the argument about figures and look at a much wider issue? What do you actually offer the Italian people in return for the tax privileges and public funding?

I declare that we do not enjoy any privileges. We contribute a great amount of work towards reviving the Italian tourism industry. There is a lot of talk about tourism as an economic resource and as promoter of environmental protection and quality of life, etc. What are the actual figures? Italy used to be the top tourist destination in the world and now has dropped to fifth place, and could slip even further. There is no real political will in this area as shown by the lack of a Tourism Ministry. Italy's tourism still hinges on its ski and seaside sectors which are not very competitive. There are other Mediterranean countries, and I'm thinking of Croatia and Egypt, which offer good value for money, and the same goes for Alpine countries. The real and inestimable wealth lies in the Italy of a thousand wonderful little towns and villages, inimitable and largely undervalued, and often allowed to go to rack and ruin. The relaying of the Pilgrims' Ways is one way of saving them and creating opportunities and jobs and spreading knowledge about them. The pilgrimage is a slow, gentle, environmentally-friendly form of tourism which respects local traditions. It is thoughtful, as in Dante's reference to the "thoughtful pilgrims" [Purgatory, XXIII]. It is also a movement which is enjoying huge growth, and our project to recreate the ancient Via Francigena will attract millions of people and will overtake the Santiago [de Compostela] pilgrimage within only a few years. Does this seem to you no small advantage for Italy? Moreover, for Europe? I'm not interested in adding to the argument about inserting our Christian heritage into the European Constitution; I want to reaffirm the role of the pilgrimage which was for centuries the only means for Europeans to meet, talk to and understand each other during the brief interval between one war and the next."

The context you draw for religious tourism is true in substance, but a little idealised. Frankly, when I went to Padre Pio's shrine in San Giovanni Rotondo [in Puglia], I didn't find it a thoughtful place, but more like a money-making machine.

"It will surprise you, but we too, and the Church, must protect ourselves from those who exploit holy sites and believers merely for financial gain. We have to repeat forcefully to our people not to fall for false-gods nor amulets. The meaning behind a pilgrimage is elsewhere, it is the search for a humane, spiritual experience. How many times have we said that at Lourdes it is certainly not the water which is miraculous. This goes for any other place, from Fatima to Guadalupe. In this way, our pilgrims who go to Padre Pio's shrine are following a path which differs greatly from the laborious hunt for souvenirs and the race for real or fake relics. It is mainly businesses who speculate in a sometimes shameful way."

There has been controversy, albeit not of the same nature, even in places like the Holy Land where you exert a large amount of control. The Israeli government is accusing you of expecting tax breaks and monopolies, such as in the choice of tour guides.

"We have good relations with the government of Israel. The truth is that the presence of pilgrims represents the main source of economic support for the Palestinians; the taking of believers to Bethlehem, possibly to buy things from the artisans and shops, creates various jobs for Palestinians. This aside, it is true that we use our own guides. We train them, and

being Catholic, they know how to talk to other Catholics. They go to the holy sites to get to know where Jesus lived and the places mentioned in the Bible, and they don't take unilateral positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict. In short, our aim is to be messengers of peace in the Holy Land."

Father Atuire, you were born in Africa, have lived in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Spain. You know Germany well and have travelled throughout the globe. Do you not find that, in respect to other countries, even Catholic ones, the relationship between the Italian State and the Catholic Church is full of ambiguities, where the respective roles are confused, privileges are exchanged without the knowledge of the people, and although it is mainly for a good cause, there is no democratic control over it and it is shrouded in a rather suspicious silence?

"Naturally I don't see it like that. As a foreigner, it is not easy to understand the history and nature of relationships that have been forged over time. What I do see, however, is that, whilst other European nations have more evolved welfare states, in Italy helping the poor and taking in immigrants has been delegated to the Church, its dioceses and parishes. Relations between the Church and the State in Italy are regulated by the Concordat, but this is not the only example which exists in the world. The German version works well, as does the American one. I have great admiration for Italy's history. There is no doubt that in many other countries, including non-Christian ones, religious bodies are largely funded by voluntary donations. Italy's history is unique: for example, we don't know of any other country which was created out of the abolition of a pontifical state. For this and other reasons, there are many who see the Church as a political institution rather than as a reality which forms part of the lives of the people. There are historical motivations in every nation which have brought about the defining of models like this. If there are, then, real motivations behind them, then we are intellectually responsible for assessing such situations without jeopardising the public good."

In order to do that we should rewrite the Concordat...

"I don't know, I do know that we need to discuss it and not shout about it."

I don't know how far your opinion is shared amongst the Catholic hierarchy.

Nor do I, but are you really sure that yours is shared more widely amongst the Italian secular community?

No, but we can start a discussion.

"In Italy you get the impression that having a normal, civil discussion is becoming ever harder. There is always someone, somewhere with a stencil ready to label everything. You say one thing and immediately you are labelled 'pro-clergy'. Say something else and you are

'anti-clergy', 'fascist', 'communist' and so on. For centuries Catholics and secularists have had dialogue. I am in favour of bringing back the pilgrimages, not the Crusades".

La Repubblica 28 November 2007