



## Nichi: a champion in transversal skills at the helm of INAF

Filippo Zerbi<sup>1</sup>

Scientific Director

Istituto Nazionale di Astrofisica – viale del Parco Mellini, 84, I-00136, Roma, Italy  
e-mail: [filippo.zerbi@inaf.it](mailto:filippo.zerbi@inaf.it)

**Abstract.** The first three contributions of this Volume are memories of Nichi D'Amico written by the three leading figures of the current INAF, who also worked with Nichi, in the context of the management of INAF, during his first Presidency. This third writing is from the Scientific Director of the Institute.

I first met Nichi in 2006 at the old premises of the Cagliari Observatory in Capoterra, during my first working experience at INAF Headquarters. At that time I was making a survey of all the laboratories in each INAF Structure. There was actually no meaningful laboratory at the wonderful Capoterra site, but I was at first sight impressed by the Director of the Observatory, Nichi, a small white-bearded man literally irradiating enthusiasm.

Nichi and I had another couple of interaction over the years until October 14th 2015 when I received the news Nichi was appointed President of INAF. The news was a great relief to all of us, not only because of the undisputed scientific and managerial leadership of the President selected, but also because INAF was without a legal representative since August. Among other outstanding issues making all us at HQ uncomfortable, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi was scheduled to visit ESO at Cerro Paranal in Chile on October 24th, supposedly accompanied by INAF President.

We couldn't make it to Paranal, but we agreed we would have visited ESO and Chile at the earliest possibility. Such possibility came

with the ceremony of marking the first stone of the European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT) on May 26th 2017, attended by the President of the Republic of Chile Michelle Bachelet Jeria.

Nichi not only was an over-the-clock worker but also a champion in transversal skills, from policymaking through budget and accounting to the type of flowers best suited for the park at Villa Mellini.

He has been a sailor in his younger years. This formed him confident at the helm, with a clear port of arrival but with great knowledge of the seas and the winds, always ready to change mood and direction in order to make the trip safer, or more comfortable or more profitable for the entire INAF crew.

Without diminishing the great work done by his predecessor, the role of INAF as global player in astrophysics bloomed under his presidency. The SKAO Intergovernmental organization, where he led the Italian delegation for the writing of the Convention and he represented Italy in the governing bodies until his departure, or The E-ELT, that moved major



**Fig. 1.** Nichi d'Amico and myself attending the ceremony marking the First Stone of the ESO Extremely Large Telescope at Cerro Paranal Observatory on May 26th 2017 (*left panel*), attended by the President of the Republic of Chile Michelle Bachelet Jeria (*right panel*).

steps ahead when he represented Italy in the Council, as well as many others.

In July 2018 we flew to South Africa with him representing Italy at the unveiling of the MeerKAT radio telescope in the Karoo desert, attended by the Deputy President of South Africa David Mabuza. It was the second time, the first was in Chile at Paranal, for us to step on the desert uncomfortably dressed with elegant suit and shoes. Not to mention the flight on a single-propeller airplane from Cape Town the airstrip in the middle of nowhere and the emotion in hearing the audience singing “Nkosi sikelel’ iAfrika” in perfect harmony.

Probably the highest recognition of the role of Nichi was achieved with the visit to INAF Headquarters of the Governor-General

of the Commonwealth of Australia Sir Peter Cosgrove on June 27th 2018, solicited by the same Governor-General. In the same day Sir Cosgrove visited President Mattarella and Pope Francis. Never before a person ranked Head of State was received at INAF Headquarters.

With the departure of Nichi we have lost a high-profile polyhedric personality; a scientist, a Manager and a policymaker with a global view of astrophysics and a clear idea of the position INAF should aim to in the international scenario. Many of us have also lost a guide, a mentor, a support. Some of us have lost a friend.



**Fig. 2.** The Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, Sir Peter Cosgrove, congratulating with Nichi D'Amico, during the visit on June 27th 2018 at the INAF Headquarters. From left to right: Lady Cosgrove, Hon. Sir Peter Cosgrove, Prof. Nichi D'Amico.