In Memoriam Marcello Rodonò

Catania, Oct 23, 2005

Marcello Rodonò (Jan 29,1941 - Oct 23,2005)

Santo Catalano and Gaetano Belvedere - SOC Chairmen
Carlo Blanco - LOC Chairman

We should have inserted here the welcome speech given by Marcello Rodonò at the Opening Ceremony of the XLIX Annual Meeting of Società Astronomica Italiana, but with deep sorrow we must announce his sudden disappearance. He died on Sunday 23 October 2005, and so he could not release his contribution to this volume. He was very proud that the national meeting of the SAIt would have taken place again in Catania, after ten years.

Marcello was born in Agira (Enna), in the earth of Sicily, on 29 January 1941, studied at Catania University where he got the degree in Physics (Astrophysics branch) in 1965. Soon after the degree he started his scientific career at Catania Astrophysical Observatory where he remained till 1982, when he moved to the University of Catania as an Associate Professor. In 1986 he became full professor of Astronomy. In the mean time he was appointed as "Libero Docente in Astrofisica" (1971) and taught Astronomy at University of Messina (1972-1982).

Marcello has been Director of the Catania Astrophysical Observatory from 1987 to 2001, when he moved to Rome to serve as director of the INAF Department of Astronomical and Astrophysical Observatories till April 2005. Back in Catania he took again the direction of the Observatory. He was also appointed as Director of the Institute of Astronomy, Catania University (1982-1992).

Marcello's scientific interest was completely devoted to stellar physics. He started with studies on eclipsing binary systems, but in an unusual way. He was interested into luminosity variations out of eclipse more than into the eclipse behaviour itself, the investigation topic originally suggested by his tutor Prof. Mario Girolamo Fracastoro. The light curve of the system RS CVn he obtained for the thesis work showed unusual annual variations, which were critically analysed by Marcello and stimulated him to pursue subsequent observations. This binary system turns out to be the prototype of magnetically active binary systems, the so called RS CVn binaries, whose main characteristic is the presence of huge spots on the stellar surface. We would like to recall how proud he was of this discovery, which was also a reference for the new field of research suggested by Prof. Giovanni Godoli, i.e. the study of solar-like magnetic activity in late type stars.

Marcello, with his enthusiasm and organization ability, became soon a dragging engine within the group of young astronomers cooperating in this new field. The systematic photometric observations of "flare stars" and "spotted stars" became a distinctive characteristic of the Catania

Observatory over the seventies, improved later on with the installation at Serra La Nave station of the first Automatic Photometric Telescope outside the US. Promoting robotic telescopes was a must of Marcello.

As soon as new facilities for studying stellar activity at different wavelengths and also at different stellar atmospheric levels became available, Marcello organized the first multi-wavelength observations of the flare star EV Lac involving optical and radio ground based observatories and the IUE satellite. Afterward he promoted several international campaigns on flare stars and active binaries, coordinating a plenty of facilities from Catania to China and ESO, Jodrell Bank and VLA, satellites such as IUE and the X-ray observatories from the SAS-2 to EINSTEIN, ROSAT, BeppoSAX and RXTE. Within these campaigns he established a great number of collaborations with colleagues spread all over the world, from the USA to China and Japan, Russia and almost all countries in Europe, the so called Cool Star Consortium. In 1982 he organized in Catania the first meeting completely dedicated to stellar magnetic activity, the IAU Colloquium nr. 71, ”Activity in Red-dwarf Stars”, still a milestone in the field.

Marcello’s ability in selecting key observations to deep investigate the stellar activity phenomenology and atmospheric processes was accompanied by a rare skill in data analysis and modelling. The large collection of lightcurves of active stars was carefully analysed in the framework of the ”spot model” in order to identify spot cycles and spot migration in several active binaries, while the multi-wavelength flux variation analysis allowed him to investigate the 3D structure of stellar surface inhomogeneities. We would need much more pages to summarize Marcello’s scientific activity reported in more than 380 papers, 35 reviews and invited contributions and 8 edited proceedings books, but we cannot avoid mentioning his investigations on the basic mechanism of magnetic activity and his recent achievements on magnetic field and magnetic cycle effects in the dynamics of active binary systems.

Marcello’s teaching was not less intense than his scientific activity. He was very much involved in the education/training of students, for whom he wrote notes and a complete book of Basic Astronomy. He was thesis tutor of several students, many of which, thanks to his continuous stimulating suggestions and encouragements, are now active and appreciated researchers. Marcello’s commitment toward the national and international astronomical community was very intense. His contribution started with the discussion on the need of a national coordination of Italian astronomical research during the seventies and eighties, continued later on as a member of the Consiglio delle Ricerche Astronomiche from 1991 to 1999. He has been President of the ”Consorzio Nazionale per l’Astronomia e l’Astrofisica” from 1996 to 2001, which he chaired with competence and dedication, paving the way for the announced creation of the National Institute of Astrophysics (INAF). Within the INAF, from 2002 to April 2005, he has been a very appreciated Director of the Department of Astronomical and Astrophysical Observatories.

He was more than a simple member of professional Associations, such as SAIt, SIF, EPS, RAS, EAS, IAU (Comm. 27, 36, 42). He gave important contributions as a founding member of EAS, as member of the Organizing committee, vice-President and then President of IAU commission 42, as a member of the Board of Directors of IAU Division V (Variable Stars), as the Italian National Representative of the IAU and as member of the Council Board of the OPTICON European network.

As Director he demonstrated his full ability of organizer and planner, characterising all his actions with the sense of responsibility, and deepest attention to the dignity and respect of the people he met. In addition to his breadth of knowledge, his deep interest in all topics of astronomy and scientific merits, Marcello was known within the world astronomical community, as a man with great sense of balance, nice sense of humour and a very pleasant personality full of enthusiasm, with whom it was a pleasure to collaborate. Marcello will be surely missed not only by his students and collaborators but also by all those who knew him.