Redundant religious heritage: from burdensome legacy to plentiful resource

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Introduction: 'Lonely' Heritage
The issue of underuse, abandonment, alienation or reuse of Catholic religious heritage is widely discussed in the secularized Western world. In Europe in particular, the matter becomes delicate with regard to historical buildings of significant artistic interest, the conservation of which is considered culturally unavoidable, despite the discontinuation of liturgical use and the consequent lack of daily maintenance.

The system of religious cultural heritage presents a variety of challenges, because it has a pervasive consistency and distribution, historically rooted in the remotest countryside as well as in the most densely populated cities. Masterpieces of Romanesque or Baroque architecture were the product of construction processes promoted by a number of now extinct historical patrons (monastic and canonical communities, dynasties and noble families, lay confraternities and guilds), while today's parish communities are unable to guarantee their use or proper maintenance. Many of these buildings – whether monumental or vernacular – are now in a 'lonely' condition, due to the fading away and disappearance of communities that cared for them. At the same time, neither state nor regional authorities have enough financial resources for maintenance and restoration, which are considered socially non-essential.

The risk is the loss of significant historical and artistic heritage, but also the loss of community places (historical, current, and potential): therefore, international theoretical reflection (on conservation, ecclesiology, and liturgy, or on religious sociology) coexists with discussions and debates at local level, involving the life choices of every community, be it urban or rural, touched by the problem in its daily activities and affections.

From Theoretical Debate to Pandemic Emergency
The debate has become particularly intense over the last twenty years, beginning with experiences in Quebec, extending to the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and then on to the Latin Mediterranean countries.[1] The debate has involved both

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[1] Lucie K. Morisset, Luc Noppen, Thomas Coomans (eds.), *Quel avenir pour quelles églises?* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2006); Thomas Coomans et al. (eds.), *Loci sacri. Understanding sacred places* (Leuven University Press: Leuven, 2012); Büchse Angelika, Herbert Fendrich, Philipp Reichling and Walter Zahner (eds), *Kirchen. Nutzung und Umnutzung. Kulturgescichtliche, theologische und praktische Reflexionen* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2012); Claude Faltrauer, Philippe Martin, Lionel Obadia (eds.), *Patrimoine religieux. Désacralisation, requalification, réappropriation : le patrimoine chrétien* (Paris: Riveneuve, 2013); Jean-Sebastien Sauvé, Thomas Coomans (eds.), *Le devenir des églises. Patrimonialisation ou disparition* (Québec: Presses Universitaires du Québec, 2014); Albert Gerhards, Kim de Wildt (eds.), *Der sakrale Ort im Wandel* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2015); Luigi Bartolomei (ed.), *The future of churches. Themes,* and *Landscapes,* monographic issues of *IN_BO*, vol. 7, n. 10 (2016) and vol. 8, n. 11 (2017); Benjamin Chavardès, Philippe Dufieux (eds.), *L'avenir des églises. État des lieux, stratégies et programmes de reconversion* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2018). Bartolomei, Luigi, and Sofia

academic and religious institutions. Awareness that the problem is linked to the secularization and regression of sacramental life has not prevented the consideration of a variety of different factors and dynamics, of an urban, sociological and anthropological nature.

The most intense point of reflection, at least in the Catholic world, was the Vatican symposium in November 2018, followed by the publication of the first Guidelines on *Decommissioning and ecclesial reuse of churches*, a key document for institutional, supranational, circumstantial and competent instruction in relation to such a complex phenomenon.[2]

About a year after the *Guidelines* were published, however, the world was rocked by the Covid-19 pandemic, which deeply affected the sensitive relationship between individuals, communities and spaces of collective use, including churches.

Can the post-pandemic reflection on the relationship between health, community and spirituality change the approach towards a better use of underused and decommissioned churches?

From Pandemic Experience to Research
At the moment, it is premature to propose a spatial analysis of the uses of churches during the pandemic, as the phenomenon is too recent. But while it may be premature, it is possibly also late at the same time, and it may never be possible to propose this analysis in the absence of systematic documentation initiatives during said pandemic (some attempts, developed within the framework of research projects,[3] have yielded unsatisfactory results).

Every country suffered restrictions to liturgical use, but individual access to churches for private, personal spiritual activities usually remained permissible. In Italy, for example, churches continued to be the only collective buildings that were always open for individual attendance, even at the most critical times,[4] and many people - even non-worshippers - appreciated their space and environmental values, precisely at a time of great spiritual and emotional suffering, regardless of religious aspects in the strict sense.

In broader terms, however, the pandemic experience can help to positively reconsider and reassess the potential of underused religious heritage. Community activities resumed more quickly only where large spaces were available, allowing adequate space between people. The large, often empty spaces of historic churches made it possible to reconcile people's safety and the perceived unity of liturgical and spiritual space, overcoming an individualistic approach. Extending this observation to the period after the pandemic, those spaces that were considered redundant and an unnecessary economic burden on shrinking communities until 2018, can, from 2020, be revalued and appreciated as spaces of abundance, surplus, freedom, for different forms

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Nannini (eds,), *La casa comune/Common house. Nuovi scenari per patrimoni monastici dismessi*, monographic issue of *IN_BO*, vol. 12, n. 6 (2021).
[2] The document *Decommissioning and ecclesial reuse of churches* is available in http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/it/pub/documenti/decommissioning.html. The complete documentation of the preliminary investigation and conference proceedings is published in Fabrizio Capanni (ed.), *Doesn't God dwell here anymore? Decommissioning places of worship and integrated management of ecclesiastical cultural heritage* (Roma: Artemide, 2019). See Andrea Longhi, "Ecclesial Reuse of Decommissioned Churches: Historical and Critical Issues in the Recent Document by the Pontifical Council for Culture (2018)," in *Architectural Actions on the Religious Heritage after Vatican II*, ed. Esteban Fernández Cobián (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 313-26.
[3] http://www.mnemonic.polito.it/
[4] Davide Dimodugno, "Libertà religiosa e pandemia: verso un nuovo paradigma di relazioni tra Stato e confessioni religiose?," *Federalismi.it Rivista di diritto pubblico italiano, comparato, europeo,* 3 (2023): 57-70. See *Ius Ecclesiae* 1 (2021) for broader comparisons.

of spiritual experience? Can the pandemic event suggest new possibilities for redundant churches of historical-artistic interest, devoid of mere utilitarianism? Are there social functions that can combine care for the artistic heritage, care for the community and attention to the spiritual dimension of spaces?

Methodology: A Retrospective Interpretation
In the absence of systematic data on the pandemic use of churches, a retrospective method is proposed. Previous experiences of communities reusing disused or underused churches are reinterpreted according to the research question identified above: through which design interventions can the extensive historical spaces of churches become 'active shelters' for communities in search of space? Communitarian spaces that are broad but relational, multifunctional but distinctive?

The reinterpretation mainly focuses on the relationship between different historical-cultural values[5] and different potential purposes, considering whether these historical values are an obstacle to transformation, or on the contrary are a quality element to better characterize the use transformation, in terms of local identity and personal spirituality.

The research considers the critical literature existing on the subject (i.e. case studies that have already been selected with scientific criteria by academic research in the last five years[6], for a total of about 170 case studies), from the last *lustra* before the pandemic, according to three selection criteria: i) historical artistic-architectural relevance, which present the greatest conservation problems (also for 20th century heritage); ii) densely populated urban contexts; iii) community or collective uses (no private commercial or residential use was considered).
The analysis of the cases selected defines some recurring scenarios and does not aim to create a catalogue of best-practices (each case is unique), but rather to highlight a sort of methodological abacus with respect to the potential for the best use of churches. The criterion of adaptability/resilience in the face of emergency situations, not just pandemics, but also natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, heat peaks in cities) or those of a humanitarian nature (migrations, social or health crises) is central. This abacus considers the historical-architectural aspects, interwoven with critical issues and potential for social reuse, prioritising the possible permanence and coexistence of traditional liturgical activities, or spiritual needs of a different nature.

Outcomes: Functions and Forms Between Hospitality, Safety, and Spirituality
Two lines of research are explored:
- a. which reuse activities allow the preservation of a spiritual and transcendent reference and allure, linked to the history of the place? Is it a matter of preserving and enhancing

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[5] Andrea Longhi, "Calling 'Values' by 'Name'. Historical Analysis and Critical Discernment for the Interpretation and Regeneration of Underused Religious Heritage," in *Regenerating Cultural Religious Heritage : Intercultural Dialogue on Places of Religion and Rituals*, ed. by Olimpia Niglio (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 9-25.
[6] Wüstenrot Stiftung (ed.), *Kirchengebäude und ihre Zukunft. Sanierung – Umbau – Umnutzung* (Ludwigsburg: Wüstenrot Stiftung, 2017) [Germany]; Jan Jaspers, Jonas Dankers and Dimitri Stevens, *Leven in de Kerk. Valorisatie, Medegebruik, Nevenbestemming en Herbestemming van onroerend religieus Erfgoed in Vlaanderen* (Brugge: Vanden Broele-CRKC, 2018) [Belgium: catalogue updated in https://www.parcum.be/nl/herbestemming-kerken]; George Resenberg and Walter Zahner, *Zusammen spiel. Kunst im sakralen Raum. Neubau, Umbau, Künstlerische Aufträge* (Regensburg: Schnell + Steiner, 2018); Albert Reinstra, Frank Strolenberg (eds), *Kerkgebouwen. 88 inspirerende voorbeelden van nieuw gebruik – van appartement tot zorgcomplex* (Wageningen: Blauwdruk 2020) [Netherlands].

artistic evidence linked to historicised devotions and spirituality, or also of inserting new spatial and artistic elements, or innovative spaces for silence and reflection, even in historic contexts?
- b. What architectural forms and technical solutions make it possible to maintain the legibility of the spiritual history of the site, its visual memory, while marking the termination of ordinary worship and favouring new uses, and engaging the role of a new type of community, be it patrimonial or spiritual?

The following categories of experience emerge for question a):
a.1. spiritual dimensions linked to the installation in disused churches of contemporary art galleries or events linked to the world of artistic expression;
a.2. spaces for religious use that remain combined with activities of social commitment, with particular attention to ecology and the environment;
a.3. prayer corners in spaces dedicated to social activities of care for the sick or elderly;
a.4. hybrid or extensive transformations of use, in which the official liturgy remains confined to dedicated and recognisable spaces within large multi-functional spaces;
a.5. historical churches dedicated to new and different forms of spirituality.

For question b), the following design issues emerge:
b.1. research into the access system: for the new purposes, design of access methods different from those used for worship (to avoid ambiguity with respect to the original function), without damaging the legibility of previous thresholds, visual passageways, portals, etc;
b.2. research into interior partitioning methods, in order to respect the legibility of the original volumes and masses, either by means of transparent transversal separations, or by partitioning the aisles, or with volumes arranged longitudinally respecting the scanning of the naves;
b.3. insertion of totally autonomous volumes, with deliberately extraneous forms, in order to favour the recognisability of the previous liturgical and spiritual layout;
b.4. work on the natural lighting system, opening new sources in the transformed volumes or enhancing the historical system.

Paradoxically, the historical 'shell' is better respected physically by more invasive functions (space for social events, festivals, catering, markets), which nevertheless denature the spirituality and the collective memory of the place in their use. Instead, the preservation of elements of history, devotion and spirituality requires a more articulated architectural design, the inclusion of elements that allow the correct reading of the historic building but also the appropriate setting of the new functions. Listening to history and spirituality requires greater awareness.
Specific attention to the themes of hospitality in the event of a crisis or catastrophe (the theme that generated the research) also requires care in organising design interventions and interpreting the historical container.

Perspectives: Spaces of Plentiful Grace for Communities?
The research proposes a change of perspective from considering redundant churches only as a burden on small Christian communities, whose priority is - quite rightly - the proper liturgical and ecclesiastical life of worshippers, and not the preservation of the artistic heritage, which involves high costs and technical expertise.

The pandemic highlighted how every society needs empty, open, available spaces to cope with emergencies (relating to health, war, climate), spaces of "grace" and hospitality: the use of provisional, generic, multifunctional or prefabricated buildings does not meet the emotional and spiritual needs of people who have been shaken or whose affections have been touched.

The critical reinterpretation of pre-pandemic experiences teaches us that sustainable and far-sighted planning of social uses of disused historical churches can offer new perspectives for interaction between cultural heritage and spiritual heritage. The main design challenge is to take care to ensure the utmost rigour in terms of conservation and restoration criteria, while promoting those technological interventions and environmental aspects that guarantee possibilities of better use.

It is also necessary to consider the aspects of economic and social sustainability of the process: which new communities (patrimonial, spiritual, civic?) can ensure the sustainability of new uses? The outcome of the research is therefore an open abacus of criteria and highlighting of sensitive issues, which can flank the Vatican Guidelines in this specific process of reflection, and which can be used to identify and guide new communities capable of combining historical-architectural conservation, social innovation and spiritual care.