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Places of worship in the urban landscape: The role of participatory processes for their reuse in a European comparative perspective

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Places of worship have always played a crucial role in defining the landscape and character of our cities and villages. Each building has its own story to tell and represents the effort of a whole community in the creation of a common identity. For this reason, as well as for their historical and artistic value, these goods are frequently protected by the legislation of the States as a part of their national cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the problem of their re-signification arises when their religious purpose ceases, as it is happening everywhere in Europe because of secularisation, demographic decline and migrations.

Focusing on the Catholic Church's assets because of their significative presence in Western Europe, this paper aims to provide a vision on the future of these goods, underling their value as "common goods" for local communities.

In fact, the population recognises these assets as having both a use value and a cultural heritage value, which must be considered when identifying the new profane uses. These are goods that evoke a dual belonging, i.e. not only to the ecclesial community, but also to the wider civil community that has the right to be able to express its opinions on the reuse of buildings no longer used for worship.

The comparative study of the legal framework and experiences from Belgium, France and Italy, in search of best practices and replicable management solutions, shows that, in spite of their different legislations, a new awareness is emerging with respect to this heritage, which should not be destined to neglect and abandonment but properly valorised.

Through participatory processes, it seems possible to identify the needs emerging within communities, so that political and ecclesiastical decision-makers will be able to adopt solutions that can generate a positive impact in terms of social, cultural and economic development.

In this way, these assets will be restored to the spatial and cultural centrality they have always had in the neighbourhoods of our cities and in rural villages.

Adaptive reuse; Places of worship; Church; Common goods; Participation; Local communities

1. Introduction: places of worship in the European context

According to authoritative studies, there are about 600,000 places of worship in Europe (Coomans & Grootswagers 2019, 160), most of which are Catholic churches, chapels and oratories. These buildings are immediately recognisable and shape entire neighbourhoods, towns, and villages. Moreover, they are often protected by national laws, as part of the cultural heritage of a country (Tsvolas 2014).

Nowadays, due to secularisation, demographic decline and migrations, the overabundance of places of worship has taken on unprecedented dimensions, raising the issue of their adaptive reuse.

2. The universal framework provided by canon law

Regarding Catholic churches, a common legal framework, namely canon law, applies worldwide. Can. 1222 of the 1983 code of canon law establishes the conditions to reduce a church to profane uses. The first paragraph considers the impossibility of a church to be restored or used any longer for worship, while the second one introduces the notion of grave causes, which are at the discretion of the diocesan bishop, who has to issue an appropriate decree, after hearing the presbyteral council. The reference to non-indecorous uses, although not defined, is intended to exclude uses that are manifestly contrary to the Catholic doctrine or that might conflict with the characteristic parts of the building.

In 2018, the Pontifical Council of Culture issued the guidelines *Decommissioning and ecclesial reuse of churches*, addressed to the episcopal conferences of Europe, North America and Oceania. In this text, a preference is affirmed for intra-ecclesial forms of reuse, followed by cultural, social or charitable activities while a commercial transformation should be avoided (Pontifical Council of Culture 2019, 286). In the light of more advanced international reflection on cultural heritage, one of the suggested lines of research concerns precisely the «engagement with the local religious or civil communities in the processes of consciousness-raising and decision-making» (Pontifical Council of Culture 2019, 281).

3. The international contest

International documents, such as the Granada Convention (Council of Europe 1985), emphasise the importance of the use of cultural heritage, provided that it is compatible with its «architectural and historical character». More recently, the Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005), the Xi'an Declaration (ICOMOS 2005), the Kiev Statement (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2010) and the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS, 2013) have pointed out the importance of the community participation in the attribution of value and in the re-signification of cultural heritage.

In this perspective, it seems useful to interpret buildings of worship under the notion of commons. Moving from a natural science perspective (Hardin 1968) and an economic approach (Ostrom 1990), the doctrine is now trying to provide it with a legal definition, especially in relation to the city and urban governance (Mattei & Quarta 2015; Foster & Iaione 2016; Marella 2017; Iaione & De Nictolis 2021). A point of reference can be found in the attempt made by the Rodotà Commission in Italy which proposed to define «commons» as «goods that express functional benefits for the exercise of fundamental rights and the free development of the individual», including «cultural goods» (Marella 2012, 161-168). A common good may thus be owned by a public body, an ecclesiastical entity, a private legal person or an individual. The key element is that the community perceives it as its own, i.e. as useful to its cultural and social needs.

4. The national legislation in three case studies

In order to better understand this phenomenon, a legal comparative analysis is proposed, concerning three traditionally Catholic countries, namely Belgium, France and Italy, each with a different level of secularisation, but all endowed with a significant religious cultural heritage. It shows that a new awareness is emerging, leading to the community involvement in the identification of the new profane uses, based on its cultural, social and economic needs. The recourse to participatory processes (Forester 1999; Chevalier & Buckels 2013) seems to be the best solution to make well-considered decisions respecting all the values and interests at stake, both civil and religious.

4.1. Belgium

Belgium is a federal state, divided into three communities (Dutch, French and German) and three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital). The latter are competent in dealing with the management of the material aspect of worship.

Places of worship built before 1802 (Concordat signed between Napoleon and Pius VII) are owned by municipalities (parish churches) and provinces (cathedrals). They are managed by public bodies, the *fabriques d'église*, composed of the parish priest, a representative of the municipality and lay people (Coomans 2006, 54-58).

In 2016 in Flanders, the local government introduced the instrument of “strategic plan”, a written document approved by the bishop and the municipal council, offering a long-term vision for all the buildings intended for worship on the territory. Elaborating on this document, it also made conditional the granting of contributions for the restoration of monumental places of worship. As a result, almost 180 out of 300 Flemish municipalities had drafted this text by early 2019 (Danckers et al. 2019, 427).

Indeed, a classification of uses has been adopted concerning cultural valorisation, mutual use, mixed uses in space or time and adaptive reuse (Danckers et al. 2016, 154-158; Collin & Jasper 2019, 173-177). 181 churches were decommissioned in Flanders from 2011 to 2021 (Somers & Diependaele 2021, 3).

Searching for the best solution, communities can rely on PARCUM, a centre of religious heritage expertise, supported by the Flemish region, to intervene in the plan drafting. Its members organise meetings with local communities, administer questionnaires and may be asked by the municipality and the *fabrique d'église* to collaborate in writing the document, before the final approval of the bishop and of the community council.

4.2. France

In France, the ownership of places of worship was exactly the same as in Belgium until the 1905 law of separation. This law unilaterally terminated the Napoleon Concordat and abolished the *fabriques d'église*, replacing them with *associations cultuelles*, governed by private law. Since the Catholic Church refused to create these associations, the ownership of the churches built between 1801 and 1905 was transferred to the municipalities (Flores-Lonjou 2001, 27-34).

With regard to publicly-owned churches, there is a legal constraint on the use for worship, the *affectation cultuelle*, which entails the right of the Catholic community to dispose of this property free of charge, exclusively and perpetually. Since this bond can only be terminated under the conditions set out in Article 13 of the law of separation (*désaffectation*), activities other than worship would theoretically be excluded.

According to the French Bishops' Conference, only 255 churches were reduced to profane use and civilly *désaffectées* from 1905 to 2016 (Conférence des Évêques de France 2016, 2-3). Mixed-use solutions in space and time have begun to emerge in praxis, going beyond the text of the law. In the urban area of Lyon-Saint-Étienne, a doctoral student in architecture invited the municipalities of Montarcher and Givors to activate participatory processes to identify hypothesis for the co-use or reuse of their churches (Meynier-Philip 2018, 469-474; 512-526). This experiment shows that the best technical, economic and management solutions can only be adopted by taking into account all the values related to the good (Maynier-Philip 2018, 493).

4.3. Italy

Compared to the other two countries, Italy has a very different system, as most churches are owned by civilly recognised ecclesiastical bodies, while the public ownership appears to be residual. According to some estimates, there are about 95,000 Catholic places of worship in Italy, 91,600 of which belong to parishes and religious institutes, while 2100 belong to public bodies (Santi 1995, 66). The majority of these goods are recognised as cultural heritage, falling within the scope of the 2004 Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code. Overall, the Italian Catholic Church holds most of the national cultural heritage, accounting for 70% of the protected assets (Assini & Cordini 2006, 79).

At the moment, the reduction to profane use can be estimated as affecting at least one thousand subsidiary, non-parish churches, located in rural and peripheral areas, where it may be more difficult to find a new suitable function.

A possible way forward can be found in the approach adopted by the Italian Bishops' Conference with regard to the construction of new churches. More specifically, participatory processes were activated to involve all the community concerned, through the distribution of questionnaires and the organisation of practical activities, held under the guidance of an interdisciplinary group of facilitators, providing ideas for the drafting of preliminary design documentation (Longhi 2021). The same approach and expertise could easily be transferred in relation to the reuse of existent places of worship, seeking the widest involvement of the population.

5. Conclusions

In a future perspective, the participation of local communities will increasingly be a crucial element in addressing the issue of redundant places of worship in Europe, as shown by the Flemish strategic plans, a best practice that should be adapted to other countries.

Participatory processes can be induced by the civil authorities, the academia or the Church, but they must be genuine, not a legitimisation of decisions already made elsewhere (Bartolomei 2021, 127). To avoid this risk, the management of the processes must be left to independent facilitators. By doing so, political and ecclesiastical decision-makers would receive proposals that are truly representative of the community's needs and expectations.

In fact, the problem of reusing redundant churches is not only a matter for the Church or the State, but for the whole community. For this reason, the intervention of the municipality is essential, as it is the body closer to citizens and the guarantor of the public interest. For its part, Church should facilitate new uses compatible with the history of the buildings and its own mission. Only through dialogue, it will be possible to truly transform a potential burden into a unique opportunity for the cultural, social and economic development of local communities.

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