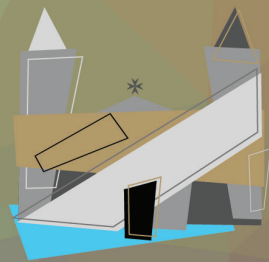


**EUROPEAN  
CATHEDRALS  
MALTA 2025**

**SACRED ART CONSERVATION  
AS A VEHICLE OF  
RE-EVANGELIZATION**

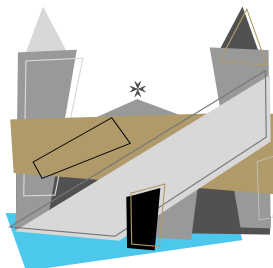


EUROPEAN  
CATHEDRALS  
**MALTA**  
CONFERENCE  
8 - 9 MAY 2025

# SACRED ART CONSERVATION AS A VEHICLE OF RE-EVANGELIZATION

EUROPEAN CATHEDRALS

MALTA  
8 - 9 MAY 2025





## St John's Co-Cathedral

• Valletta Malta •

The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation  
St John's Street  
Valletta

[www.stjohnscocathedral.com](http://www.stjohnscocathedral.com)

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## OPENING ADDRESSES

# The Evangelizing Power of Sacred Art



**Mgr Prof. Emmanuel Agius**  
*President of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation*

It is my pleasure and honour, as President of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation, to cordially welcome you at the official opening of this conference on European Cathedrals which this year will be focusing on "Sacred Art Conservation as a Vehicle for Re-Evangelization."

We are particularly privileged to convene this gathering in co-operation with the Opera della Primaziale Pisana which is responsible for the conservation of the monuments in Piazza del Duomo in Pisa. This conference will eventually be followed with another one with the same theme, to be held in Pisa towards the end of October of this current year.

Across the centuries sacred art and architecture have served as effective channels of evangelization because they expressed, communicated, and nourished the faith of Christian communities. This is, regrettably, no longer the case with contemporary society, because today's generations have lost their affinity with the syntax, grammar, and vocabulary of faith, with the tragic consequence that the visual spiritual message enshrined for two millennia in sacred art has gradually disappeared. The Church thus needs to explore a new syntax, a fresh grammar and an upgraded vocabulary of faith in order to engage today's generations in understanding the spiritual message that sacred art has been transmitting for two millennia.

We are presently faced with a situation where, on the one hand, we have a contemporary society that is completely immersed in information technology, and is fully responsive to the sounds and images of social media as stimulants to man's mind, will, senses, and emotions; while, on the other hand, this same society has become illiterate and estranged in its ability to respond to the visual and sensory expressions of spirituality and dynamic symbolism as enshrined in sacred art and architecture! The challenge for cathedral curators, conservators, and restorers thus lies in bridging this chasm of sensory dissonance that underlies the fragile relationship of contemporary culture to sacred art.

It is claimed that postmodernism, which has challenged social and intellectual patterns of thought and perception, is the major factor accounting for the contemporary illiteracy vis-à-vis the spiritual dimension of sacred art and architecture. It is certainly true that views on truth, rationality and meaning that have dominated the West for the past three or four centuries are being contested by postmodernity. However, one of the main tenets of postmodernism is that feelings and experiences are more important than universal truth claims. Looking from a postmodern lens, one sees more to life than just thinking and being rational. Enchantment, beauty and awe have now returned to the foreground of human experience.

It is this postmodern attitude that embraces the universal language of beauty that Pope Benedict XVI has intuited as the safest bridge between the tangible and the intangible, the seen and the unseen, the earthly and the divine. The shift from facts and logic to feelings and personal experience is, according to Pope

Benedict XVI, the primary force in the new ministry of evangelization for the third millennium. The aesthetic experience and feelings evoked by beauty in sacred art can lead the faithful and non-believers alike from visual perception to contemplation and adoration of God. Spiritual beauty is an invitation for us to delve into the depths of reality, into the heart of truth, and ultimately into the love of God.

It is therefore not an overstatement to say that the conservation of sacred art is an effective pedagogical tool for evangelization, because sacred art restoration brings back to life the pristine aesthetic beauty of paintings, artefacts, and sacred edifices, thereby preserving the experience of spiritual beauty from one generation to another. Conservators of sacred art are therefore duty-bound to be self-critical in their professional career. They need to ask themselves how our vast and varied patrimony of sacred art can best be preserved professionally to be communicated and interpreted meaningfully to contemporary generations in sensory forms in a way that touches people's hearts to yearn for the Divine through the universal language of beauty.

Sacred art cannot be valued and interpreted solely from an aesthetic or socio-cultural perspective at its exclusion of the spiritual level of faith. Curators of Cathedrals and their museums are more than guardians of art collections. They should be recognised as indispensable interlocutors who bridge the gap between historical artefacts and contemporary society. Curators have a pivotal role in educating and engaging the public; but to enhance people's knowledge and appreciation of sacred art, cathedral curators and their teams have to set their goals on the following challenges: How can sacred art and architecture serve to explain the mystery of faith to today's generations as they once did with past generations of both believers and non-believers? Can these works of art and architecture serve as a new catechism and a starting point for establishing new channels of evangelization?

At the outset of this conference, it is thus worth defining the main objectives of this conference on European Cathedrals, which I consider to be threefold:

a) First, this conference should seek to demonstrate, through the example of restoration projects, how works of sacred art and architecture 'speak' to both believers and non-believers alike, at least implicitly, of the Divine; and how, in evoking awe and wonder, these works of art enkindle in the beholder a glimpse of the transcendent divine beauty.

b) Secondly, this conference has to demonstrate how knowledge and understanding of an artwork is achieved through study at the time of restoration. Conservators and restorers discover or update their knowledge of an artwork through diagnostic and technical studies, the analysis of past interventions (additions, removals, rethinking) and an understanding of the creative process of the artists.

c) Finally, this conference ought to showcase, through management strategies and good practices in conservation and restoration, how works of sacred art, preserved in their original places of worship or in museums, continue to transmit a spiritual and religious message to contemporary worshipers and connoisseurs of 'beauty'.

During the last twenty-four years, thanks to the indefatigable initiatives in conservation and restoration that have been undertaken by the Foundation, St John's Co-Cathedral has regained its original splendour in honour of God. The extensive and holistic state-of-the-art programme of restoration and conservation embarked upon by the Foundation at the Co-Cathedral was not intended only to bring forth at its best the overwhelming celebration of Baroque art of this outstanding temple but was also meant to create the right ambiance for the celebration of a Liturgy which nurtures faith and glorifies God. The underlying motive behind every restoration and conservation project at St John's Co-Cathedral is precisely that

of preserving the artistic beauty which opens the path towards the transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God. The celebration of sacred liturgy at St John's Co-Cathedral, within a beautifully restored setting that highlights the spiritual dimension of this temple, has now regained a catechetical experience that evokes and glorifies, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God.

As custodians of our cultural heritage, we have an ethical responsibility to continuously review our current conservation approaches in bringing artwork to its former glory in order to sustain the spiritual and religious dimensions of our historical and cultural sites and their priceless artistic collections. We thus need to continuously ask ourselves: What are the catechetical values of the sacred art entrusted to us for restoration? Why is sacred art and architecture indispensable to the instruction in faith?

I would like to take the opportunity to cordially thank the former member and President of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation, Mr Glenn Micallef, who is now European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport for accepting to address this conference. Your message means a lot to us all since it highlights the European dimension of this gathering!

Thanks also to H.G. the Archbishop of Malta and the Minister for National Heritage, the Arts, and Local Government for their unfailing support.

A special word of appreciation goes to our executive staff for managing all the logistics behind the organization of this conference.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to all the foreign and local speakers who will be addressing us over these two days.

Thank you so much for accepting our invitation to share with us all your expertise, experience, research and good practices on how to conserve cultural objects without neglecting their spiritual significance.

It is my sincere hope that this conference will help raise the level of our consciousness and conscientiousness regarding the importance of the intangible reality of cultural objects as a common heritage that has to be preserved and bequeathed to generations yet to come.

Thank you.

Mgr Prof. Emmanuel Agius  
*President, The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation*

# Sacred Art: Preservation, Purpose, and the Power to Inspire



Colonel Dr Mark Mallia  
*Council Member of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation*

It is with pleasure, as a representative of the Council of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation, to extend a warm and heartfelt welcome to each and every one of you. We are deeply honoured to host this third conference on European Cathedrals which this year will be focusing on "Sacred Art Conservation as a Vehicle of Evangelization."

Gathering here to listen to scientific and academic papers and discuss ambitious projects and innovative good practices related to the theme of this prestigious conference demonstrates the power of sacred art to inspire, teach, and connect us with each other and the divine for centuries. It is a tangible manifestation of how artistic expression can become a potent instrument of evangelization, speaking a language that transcends words and resonates deeply within the human spirit.

This conference, now in its third iteration, has firmly established itself as an important platform for dialogue, collaboration, and the sharing of expertise in the scientific field of art conservation. Its continued growth and the diverse assembly of professionals gathered here today speak volumes about the increasing recognition of the intrinsic value of our cultural heritage. We are particularly heartened to see that the European Cathedrals Conference, in collaboration with the Opera Primaziale Pisana, can act as a dynamic network in the Mediterranean, bringing together such a vibrant mix of local and international participants.

The significance of this conference transcends the immediate concerns of conservation. By focusing on sacred art, we are not merely addressing the physical preservation of pigments, stone, or canvas. We are engaging with the preservation of narratives, faith traditions, cultural identities, and the very soul of communities. These artefacts are not merely objects protected in museum showcases; they are tangible links to our past and present, providing profound insights into the beliefs, values, and artistic expressions of those who came before us. Their survival ensures that these narratives continue to inform and enrich future generations.

Such conferences serve as a vital catalyst for collaboration within the field of cultural heritage. They bring together diverse perspectives — from conservators and art historians to theologians and cultural policymakers — fostering a holistic understanding of the complexities involved in safeguarding and acknowledging our sacred artistic patrimony. Through the sharing of innovative techniques, research, and best practices, we collectively strengthen our capacity to address the multifaceted challenges posed by time, environmental factors, and even human intervention. This collaborative spirit is essential, as the

responsibility of preserving our cultural heritage rests not on the shoulders of a single entity, but on the collective commitment of a *community*.

The theme of this year's conference, "Sacred Art Conservation as a Vehicle of Evangelization," is particularly resonant. It underscores the dynamic interplay between preservation and purpose: we are not merely preventing decay; we must ensure their continued capacity to communicate their spiritual message. From a meticulously restored chapel to a sculpture used for procession, to a contemporary art installation, and these all possess the potential to once again captivate the viewer, inspire contemplation, and deepen their understanding of faith. In a world often saturated with fleeting images and superficial messages, the enduring power of art, thoughtfully preserved, offers a profound and timeless connection to the sacred.

May this conference foster new collaborations, ideas, and further strengthen our collective commitment to preserving and promoting the profound message embedded within our heritage.

Thank you, and we extend our best wishes for a fruitful and enriching conference.

Colonel Dr Mark Mallia  
*Council Member, The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation*

# The Dual Nature of Religious Heritage: Reflections from Malta and Pisa



Dr Anton Sutter

*Acting as representative of Dr Andrea Maestrelli,  
President of the Opera Primaziale Pisana*

Mr President, Mgr Agius, Ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Anton Sutter, and I am the Head of the Material Restoration Sector of the Opera della Primaziale Pisana. It is both an honour and a great pleasure to take part in this event, representing our president, Dr Andrea Maestrelli.

I must begin by extending his sincerest apologies for not being here with us today – his absence was certainly not expected when the dates of this first stage of the European Cathedrals Conference, here in Malta, were originally decided. As fate would have it, these very days in Pisa mark a moment of great significance for our Cathedral: a solemn ceremony will take place for the handover of the archiepiscopal office. Our Archbishop, Mgr Giovanni Paolo Benotto, having submitted his resignation, will be succeeded by the new Metropolitan Bishop, Rev. Saverio Cannistrà. Dr Maestrelli very much hopes you will understand why he cannot be here, as it would be impossible for him to miss the celebrations planned for such an important occasion.

This third collaboration between St John's Co-Cathedral and the *Opera della Primaziale Pisana* reflects the growth and maturity of the European Cathedrals format, which was first conceived in Pisa in 2011. What began as an intuition has since evolved into a respected and well-regarded event within professional circles. It all started with a hunch: the idea that cathedrals are anything but ordinary buildings. They contain collections that are not just artistic masterpieces but also objects of devotion. And they are open to a flow of visitors who are not just the faithful, but not just tourists either.

A cathedral is ultimately a hybrid organism – one that, in both its daily operations and in its long-term prospects, needs to reconcile a wide variety of elements: stakeholders, to use a technical term, but also values, sensibilities, instruments and innovation. And all this must be kept in constant balance. This means that the issues examined in this international conference have gradually evolved – moving away from a strict focus on conservation and the physical materials used in artistic production, in all its varied forms, towards a deeper reflection on the values that these works express, and that need to be handed on to future generations.

The last three editions have indeed focused on this broader vision, thanks to Mgr Agius, who in 2023 proposed the theme “The Equilibrium between Conservation and Spirituality.” The *Opera della Primaziale Pisana* welcomed this proposal with great enthusiasm, hosting four days of discussion: two in Malta, in this magnificent setting, and two in Pisa, under the shadow of the Tower. The objective was

to highlight the values of integrity and authenticity, fostering a spirit of reconciliation between scientific inquiry and the continuity of faith.

The following year, in 2024, the initiative made a further step forward. Marking the anniversary of its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list, the Mezquita Catedral in Córdoba strongly advocated for a joint edition of the European Cathedrals event, together with Pisa, devoted to the theme of Universal Heritage, with the subtitle “Religious Assets of Cultural Interest.” The 2024 conference also took place in two locations – in Pisa and Córdoba – two cities linked by shared stylistic influences.

It is no coincidence that the focus of this international meeting has increasingly turned to the dual nature of religious heritage as cultural heritage (and vice versa). The format is, after all, dedicated to European cathedrals, not to cultural assets in general. As a result, every subject – whether scientific, legal, sociological, or even economic – must be tackled with this distinctive dual nature in mind.

I would like to close by expressing my satisfaction at how far this conference has come. Its geographical reach continues to grow and, each year, increasing numbers of cathedrals join our open and constructive dialogue; the network of partners expands, and the outlook is ever more truly European. I believe we have achieved our goal – even though there will naturally always be room for improvement.

Let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of all those who have contributed to this latest edition. Their expertise, enthusiasm and initiative have been invaluable. The Opera della Primaziale Pisana may have had the initial vision, but without the work of those who are behind the scenes, we would not now be in a position to celebrate the success of this project.

Finally, I extend my warmest thanks once again to the St John’s Co-Cathedral Foundation for their kind invitation, to Monsignor Emmanuel Agius for his great passion, to all those who have made this event possible and organised it so impeccably, and to every guest here present. I sincerely hope you will join us for the concluding days of this year’s event in Pisa.

Dr Anton Sutter  
*Acting as representative of Dr Andrea Maestrelli,  
President of the Opera Primaziale Pisana*

# Shared Heritage: Safeguarding Europe's Spiritual and Cultural Identity

Glenn Micallef

*European Commissioner for  
Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport*



It is a great pleasure to address you today, both as a proud former President of St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation and as the European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport. This year's Malta–Pisa Conference brings together a vibrant community of museum curators, conservators, and academics — all united by the common goal of Sacred Art Conservation.

Before I begin, I would like to pay tribute and bid a heartfelt farewell to His Holiness Pope Francis — a true spiritual leader who touched hearts across the globe with his humility, compassion, and unwavering call for unity.

In remembering his legacy, I want to start by sharing a quote from his address at the Jubilee of Artists and the World of Culture, Pope Francis said:

*“We live in a time of complex financial and social crises, but ours is above all a spiritual crisis, a crisis of meaning. Artists have the task of helping humanity not to lose its way and to keep a hopeful outlook.”*

Through his vision, Pope Francis recognised that artists and cultural workers help enlighten minds and warm hearts. That they build bridges and create spaces for dialogue. That the world needs artists, courageous intellectuals and creators of culture. In just a few lines, His Holiness captured the very heart of the purpose of our work and our efforts.

In today's unstable world, culture and art are a unifying force, bringing people and communities together. Europe's rich cultural heritage embodies our shared past as Europeans, and our common inheritance that we will pass on to future generations. Preserving this shared heritage, including sacred art and religious sites, is key to strengthening our sense of community and belonging.

At the end of last year, in my first visit as European Commissioner, I was fortunate to attend the reopening of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. Thanks to the efforts of the government, private donors, Europe's cultural community, and the dedication of over 1,000 workers, the Notre-Dame Cathedral became not only a restoration project, but a living symbol of protecting the cultural and spiritual identity of our communities.

I am proud that the European Commission continues to place high importance on safeguarding cultural heritage and supporting the work of our community safeguarding Europe's cultural and religious heritage. Through the EU structural funds, we continue to allocate millions of euros breathing new life into churches, monasteries, chapels, paintings, and other sacred artworks and religious monuments.

We also support Member States in digital preservation and curation of cultural heritage because digital technologies can play a vital role in preserving fragile manuscripts, crumbling statues, and traditions that are vanishing with the passing of generations.

Last year, St John's Co-Cathedral opened to the public an interactive Caravaggio exhibit funded by European funds. This is a prime example of how the digitisation of physical heritage enables new experiences for people, while at the same time digitally promoting and preserving cultural artefacts. Our Creative Europe Programme is another example of how we enable religious heritage to be safeguarded for future generations, ensuring it remains accessible, meaningful, and relevant in a contemporary context.

The programme is actively supporting initiatives that protect religious sites, sacred art, and cultural practices that are central to Europe's identity. Many religious sites, whether they are famous, such as the Abbey of Cluny in France; or famously hidden, such as the 'Our Lord in the Attic' Museum and Church in Amsterdam, receive support through the European Heritage Label.

The European Heritage Label acknowledges the unique role of those sites bridging the spiritual and cultural dimensions of European identity. Since its launch, the European Heritage Awards, another Creative Europe Programme, has celebrated 644 winning projects from 34 countries.

Many of the winning projects focus on the conservation and the alteration of architectural religious heritage, such as churches, cathedrals, and cloisters, as well as movable heritage, such as single works of art or objects of historic significance.

The Commission's initiatives highlight and celebrate your achievements. They promote best practice examples for conservation initiatives showcasing the enormous potential of cultural heritage for building an inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable future for the EU. Furthermore, they continue to inspire cultural creation, foster intercultural and interfaith dialogue and understanding for decades to come, so that future generations can enjoy our common inheritance.

Thank you for bringing us together for these discussions.

I hope that you enjoy fruitful exchanges during the next two days.

Glenn Micallef  
*European Commissioner for  
Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport*

## Beauty Will Save the World: Sacred Art as a Mission

H.G. Mgr Charles Jude Scicluna  
*Archbishop of Malta*



What I find a very important and intriguing subject, we are linking sacred art conservation as a vehicle of re-evangelization. It is like rediscovering beauty; because a conservator, a person who uses scientific techniques, state-of-the-art knowledge to bring works of art to their natural beauty, is on a mission, a mission of rediscovery, but also a mission to preserve for future generations. It is a tribute to the glories of the past, a service lived in the present, that gives future to our heritage. And to a certain extent, the work of a person whose mission is to evangelize also needs to rediscover, on a daily basis, the beauty of the message. To adapt it to the challenges of the time and make sure that the beauty of the gospel message is handed down faithfully and in an attractive way.

I am always struck by the fact that when Jesus introduces himself as the Good Shepherd, he uses, in the gospel, the word *kalos* - *ho poimēn ho kalos*, and as you know, that can be translated as the attractive shepherd, not only the Good Shepherd. In a certain sense, the word *kalos* in Greek exemplifies the unity of being as an expression of goodness, truth, and beauty. And so, rediscovering the beauty of a work of art, enjoying cathedrals as spaces of beauty and faith, is actually being enveloped in an experience of goodness, of truth, and of beauty. In his novel *The Idiot*, another Greek word that means a person who has a specific personality, Dostoyevsky has this expression that has become a cliché, but it is so profound: beauty will save the world. And as I give tribute to you, your hard work, your diligence, your professional abilities in being conservators of art in our cathedrals, I would like to confirm you in your mission of being missionaries of beauty and the Good News. Because re-evangelization is almost a sort of restoration, it is for people and nations that have built our cathedrals, these temples of worship and of faith, a rediscovery of our roots. We need a new literacy. We need to engage with our heritage in order to learn the faith that commissioned our works of art.

At times, I realise that people visit our cathedrals, meet the paintings, the statues, the works of art, without having the necessary baggage of narrative and formation to appreciate the depth of what is being communicated. And I also enjoy reading reports by our restorers/conservators, when they engage with the work of art and understand the depth of the theology behind our heritage.

You know that Caravaggio was not the best candidate for canonisation, I hope you know that, but I admire him for his theology, for the profound theology of his works of art, and he is not an idiot in the Dostoyevskian sense, as a loner. The great artists that we enjoy describing, present, and bring forward to our future generations were the people who approached the mission as artists, with depth, philosophy,

with theology. And this is something that we need to rediscover as we preserve our heritage and ensure that future generations are able to appreciate it. So I would like to thank you for all your hard work, for your discussions during these two days, but also encourage you to understand that as you approach sacred art, you are approaching what Benedict and Francis, our popes, called in the line of theology: the *Via Pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty, as an instrument of bringing the Good Message, the *evangelio*, the gospel of beauty, of truth, and goodness.

In his foundational document at the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis, in this *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), paragraph 167, appreciates whatever art can offer as an instrument of the gospel, and he mentions the *Via Pulchritudinis*. And I remember when I used to work in the Vatican, very close to Cardinal Ratzinger and then Benedict XVI, that it was one of his ideas that when we were doing the Compendium, that is the summary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Pope wanted to include works of art as part of the synthesis of theology. It is not only reminiscent of what Gregory the Great would say: that people who could not read the Bible could at least read it on the paintings of the walls. Probably also responding to a controversy in the East, where some were actually wanting to destroy images, the iconoclasm. But today we have a new illiteracy, an illiteracy of spiritual meaning. And we, through our efforts of conserving beauty that we have inherited and assuring that this beauty has a future, are actually inviting people to become literate in the meaning of life.

As we engage in a very public discussion in our country about the end of life, my wish and prayer is that, through your discipline, scientific expertise, and love of art, we may bring forward a culture of life rather than one of death.

Thank you very much.

H.G. Mgr Charles Jude Scicluna  
*Archbishop of Malta*



Oratory of the Beheading of St John - St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta

EXPLORING THE PATH  
FROM CREATION TO RE-ENCOUNTER:  
CASE STUDIES IN SACRED ART

# Conservation and Restoration: A Bridge Between Knowledge and Community

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## Abstract

This paper explores how conservation can serve as a dynamic bridge between sacred art and contemporary communities. It argues that beyond technical preservation, restoration plays a critical role in interpreting, communicating, and revitalizing the spiritual and cultural significance of religious artworks. Sacred art, often created centuries ago for devotional purposes, still holds the potential to resonate with modern audiences when approached through thoughtful restoration and curated presentation.

The case of St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta exemplifies how extensive conservation can transform a deteriorating religious site into a vibrant cultural hub. Restoration efforts here have not only preserved the physical integrity of the artworks but also revived their narrative and theological meaning. The process involves a multidisciplinary dialogue between art history, science, and theology, as seen in the integration of preventive restoration practices.

An in-depth case study of the altarpiece *The Nativity of the Virgin* from Ta' Savina Church in Gozo illustrates the challenges of ethical restoration. Through careful analysis using modern diagnostic techniques, such as X-ray radiography and UV fluorescence, the work's complex history, including undocumented modifications and overpainting, is unveiled. The findings stress that restoration is fundamentally a process of knowledge, not reinterpretation, emphasizing transparency and scholarly responsibility.

Finally, the paper considers strategies for improving communication of sacred art's meaning to increasingly secular and diverse audiences. It advocates for immersive curatorial methods, including storytelling, digital tools, and interactive exhibitions, to reconnect the public with the spiritual messages embedded in religious heritage.

Ultimately, conservation is portrayed as an evolving, interpretive practice that respects the sacred character of the artwork while ensuring its accessibility and relevance for future generations.

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## Introduction

One of the main objectives of this conference is to analyse the impact that conservation and restoration projects can have in promoting the spiritual message of sacred art. It is interesting to explore how these artworks can still communicate the values for which they were originally

created, using a language that remains accessible and capable of resonating with everyone, believers and non-believers alike.

The current challenge for those who manage, care for, and restore religious cultural heritage is to find the right balance between preservation, spirituality, and communication. This balance is a necessary bridge that connects sacred art with the community and is essential in giving voice to the art itself.

Case studies, restoration experiences, and curatorial activities will serve as inspiration for all professionals in this field, encouraging reflection and the development of alternative solutions to support the process of understanding the social, religious, and cultural value of an exceptionally vast and diverse heritage, much of which we no longer fully understand.

Sacred art, whose meaning today can seem difficult to grasp, even when contextualized within churches or cathedrals, still has the potential to convey its significance and become part of our collective understanding. This can be achieved through restoration efforts that preserve the authenticity of each artifact, as well as through the promotion of sacred art via aesthetic experiences. These include the thoughtful display of objects in churches, or their careful arrangement in display cases, illuminated with appropriate lighting to enhance their sense of reverence and meaning. Additionally, curatorial activities play a key role in elevating the value of these objects and in highlighting their educational function.

### **Restoration and Sacred Art**

Whoever arrives in Valletta today to visit St John's Co-Cathedral, the conventual church of the Order of the Knights of St John, can hardly imagine the state of deterioration the complex was in by the mid-1990s. Today, following what were the most ambitious restoration works ever undertaken on the island, the Co-Cathedral stands as one of Malta's most visited cultural sites. The surrounding urban fabric has also experienced a revival, thanks to redevelopment and enhancement projects that the city of Valletta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, truly deserved.

The restorations that have revealed the Co-Cathedral's original decorative scheme now allow us, more than ever, to read and understand the history of the Knights, their deep faith, and the significance of the Order on this island through the material legacy they left behind.

Currently, a new museum project is underway, aiming to give space and voice to this legacy and to the Co-Cathedral's collections, with the vision of creating a specialized hub for professional activity, education, and research.

The goal is to interpret restoration in the most modern sense of the term, as the result of an interdisciplinary dialogue between art, history, theology, and the scientific disciplines.

Those who have the opportunity to walk through the spaces of the Co-Cathedral can observe the ongoing activity of restorers dedicated to restoring the decorated surfaces and all the works of art present here.

Every year, the in-house team of conservator-restorers undertakes challenging restoration projects focused on important and sensitive areas of the Co-Cathedral, as well as on masterpieces that require careful preservation.

There are “silent restorations,” which involve inspections, monitoring, and dusting of the precious marble, gilded surfaces, and paintings, tasks that require the trained eye of a conservator. Additionally, routine and extraordinary maintenance interventions are often carried out behind closed doors to avoid disrupting visitors’ experience; these are usually invisible to the public.

Finally, there are “live” restorations, designed to engage visitors, spark curiosity, and foster interest in the care and preservation of their cultural heritage.

The works, whose data are researched in archives and historical documents, are first subjected to a diagnosis, much like in a medical centre, to understand how the work was created, the artist’s intent, and the commissioning process, in order to reconstruct its history, which is often unwritten. Of course, the diagnosis also aims to understand the purpose of the artifact and to assess its condition.

### **Restoration is a process of knowledge**

Each restoration is a source of knowledge for art history, helping curators and conservators in the correct display of the object, facilitating its contextualization, or enhancing its value when exhibited in a museum setting.

The profession of the conservator-restorer involves a careful understanding of the object in order to restore its readability and the meaning of an artifact that has never ceased to perform its religious and spiritual function, even before its artistic function.

The restorer must operate with great respect for the work. This requires a conservative approach, focusing on maintenance and the recovery of the work’s integrity rather than on its transformation or reinterpretation. Restoration must be carried out in such a way that the work continues to speak to the public, preserving its ability to express the sacred message.

### **Communication**

How can we communicate the meaning of a sacred work of art to the audience? How can we explain Christian iconography to visitors of other religions?

Today, the Co-Cathedral communicates a language that requires translation; it needs to be more accessible in physical, sensory, and cognitive terms. It is important to reflect on the relationship between the Church, artists, and the public.

In recent years, with the growth of cultural tourism, there has been a decline in knowledge of Christian iconography and an increase in frustration among visitors who do not understand the meaning of works with biblical content displayed in the Co-Cathedral.

Recognising symbols and signs has become increasingly difficult. The beauty of the artworks is not always understood. While many remain amazed in front of Caravaggio's famous painting *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*, whose meaning is widely explained and disseminated, the symbolism and iconography of other pictorial representations often remain unknown. As a result, these works no longer seem to possess the same communicative power they once had.

The restoration process can be showcased through guided visits to workshops, which help to understand the dedication involved and the importance of preserving the spiritual and cultural message of sacred artworks.

This approach creates a bridge between the past and the present, illustrating how conservation work can reveal new meanings within these works. Such initiatives can be supported by videos, interactive exhibitions explaining the restoration process, and awareness activities that provide context about the cultural, historical, and religious background of the artifacts.

Tools like audio-visual guides capable of narrating the story of the artwork can enhance engagement. Modern technologies are also useful in attracting new generations to sacred art. For instance, applications that simulate the restoration process, allow detailed exploration of an artwork's history, and explain its religious symbolism can be highly effective. An example is an app that enables users to observe a painting at different stages of restoration, helping them understand how the restorers' choices influence the final message conveyed by the artwork.

And then there is the storytelling.

Every sacred work of art tells a story. Restoration can help reveal and make more evident the hidden narratives within a painting or sculpture, allowing new generations to discover the religious story, as well as the social and cultural context related to the piece. Today, many sacred artworks are the result of complex artistic traditions that have evolved over time, and restoration assist in understanding how a work has changed and adapted to the different needs of communities throughout the centuries.

### **The Case Study: The Altar Painting of Ta' Savina Church**

A valid case study is the altarpiece representing *The Nativity of the Virgin*, an example of a late Mannerist vernacular painting (Fig. 1). This oil painting on canvas was donated to the church of Santa Savina, Victoria, Gozo, in 1622, when the church was consecrated.<sup>1</sup>

*The Nativity* depicts a biblical scene in an intimate domestic setting. It features references to Renaissance art, religious symbolism, and the physical world is portrayed with extraordinary richness of detail, such as the basket and the view of the Castle.

The painting was donated by Fra Riccardo de Nini Claret, Governor of Gozo from 1618 to 1622. Fra Riccardo was a Knight of the Order of St John, originating from the Province of Provence.

A still legible inscription in the lower right corner documents the reason for this donation (Fig. 2). The dedication of the temple to the Blessed Virgin Mary coincided with the period between

the death of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt and the election of his successor, Grand Master Vasconcellos. To celebrate this event, Fra Riccardo offered the altarpiece as a gift to the newly founded church in 1622.

The main interest in this painting lies in its documentary value, as it depicts the appearance of the city walls of the Castle at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Fig. 3).<sup>2</sup>

The church of the Nativity, known as Ta' Savina, has very ancient origins. The first mention dates to a notarial contract from May 1479. Along with other churches, including the Parish Church in the Castle, St George, and St James, Ta' Savina was a parish church from the early 16th century.<sup>3</sup>

The building itself has a history of renovations, reconstructions, and redefinitions of spaces, which are an integral part of the local community's life. The same applies to the artifacts inside. Over the years, the altar painting underwent numerous interventions and modifications. Restorations were carried out without the ethics and standards there are in place today.

After the church was rebuilt in 1902, the painter Gianni Vella (1885-1977) was asked to enlarge the altar painting to fit a new layout and a new stone frame. Gianni Vella created an extension by adding a semicircular section at the top to paint God the Father among the angels, and a lower section, most likely to give the work more verticality. In 1912, Vella adapted his painting to the existing one and vice versa.

In the 1990s, artist Paul Camilleri Cauchi was asked to intervene on the painting,<sup>4</sup> probably because it had deteriorated. He performed some retouches. However, an extensive overpainting has been noted under the UV fluorescence investigation (Fig. 4).

## **The Restoration**

Once the painting was brought to the laboratory, it was immediately inspected and documented to report all conservation issues including the lack of adhesion of the paint layers to the support, particularly in the joint areas between the added canvases and the original one, as well as significant oxidation of the varnishes applied on top.

The painting was documented through direct observation and a comprehensive photographic campaign, both general and detailed, to gather the necessary data and prepare the condition report prior to any direct intervention on the artwork.

Preliminary non-invasive investigations, such as fluorescence UV and infrared imaging, were conducted to examine the area of the original painting concealed by the central angels, although the results were not very clear. These techniques did not allow for the visualisation of beneath Gianni Vella's intervention due to the thickness of the preparatory layers (Fig. 5).

Subsequently, X-ray radiography was performed to verify the presence of underlying paintings, a suspicion already raised by initial stratigraphic and cleaning tests (Fig. 6).

The observations, supported by scientific analyses, revealed that the alteration work carried out by Gianni Vella in 1912 involved not only the addition of fabric and pictorial material but also the covering of the upper part of the seventeenth century painting, where God the Father was depicted among the angels, consistent with the iconography of the period, such as Annibale Carracci and Sebastiano del Piombo's works.

However, the radiography was insufficient to read beneath Vella's addition on the upper part of the painting.

Some *lacunae* guided the decision to open additional strategic windows, which allowed the detection of a red cloth executed in oil on canvas, as well as a fragmentary depiction of a sword and the face of a young woman. This indicates that Gianni Vella painted on a recycled canvas in poor conservation conditions.

The intervention involving the alteration of the painting carried out by Vella presents a problem. The original painting remains completely intact but incomplete due to the coverage of the original iconography. Both interventions are historically documented.

Considering that such intervention is deemed unacceptable today, a critical and responsible decision must be made.

Restoration is a process of knowledge, not interpretation. Therefore, every choice must be shared, explained, and documented in order to truly preserve the artifacts and communicate their significance.

## **Conclusion**

The conservation of sacred art operates at the intersection of material care and spiritual transmission. As affirmed by ICOM's code of ethics and E.C.C.O.'s professional guidelines, the role of the conservator-restorer transcends mere technical execution and encompasses responsibilities of research, documentation, interpretation, and public education. The restored object must retain its ability to communicate its sacred message, while also serving as a document of historical memory and artistic practice.

In this light, restoration is not a final act but a continuum, an open-ended dialogue between the object and its community, between past traditions and future custodians. Through careful conservation, contextualised communication, and critical reflection, sacred artworks may continue to fulfill their function as vessels of meaning across time, space, and belief systems.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See BUHAGIAR, M., “Painting in Gozo: Patronage in a Small Island Community,” in *Essays on the Knights and Art and Architecture in Malta* (Malta: Midsea, 2009), 116.

<sup>2</sup> See MUSCAT, P., “Religious art in Gozo (1500-1900): A Study on Patronage Patterns”, *The Gozo Observer* 21 (2009): 3-12.

<sup>3</sup> See VELLA, L., “L'Eucaristia,” *Bollettino delle Opere Eucaristiche della Chiesa della Natività della B.V. Vulgo di S. Sabina*, Numero Unico (1913): 4.

<sup>4</sup> Verbal communication with Camilleri Cauchi.



Figure 1 - *The Nativity of the Virgin*, oil on canvas painting, 327 x 162cm, anonymous seventeenth century. Photos under visible diffused light, 2024



Figure 2 - Detail of the inscription



Figure 3 - Detail of the city walls of the Castle



Figure 4 - *The Nativity of the Virgin*, oil on canvas painting, 327 x 162cm, anonymous seventeenth century. UV Fluorescence before restoration, 2024



Figure 5 - *The Nativity of the Virgin*, oil on canvas painting, 327 x 162cm, anonymous seventeenth century. Infrared photography before restoration, 2024



Figure 6 - *The Nativity of the Virgin*, oil on canvas painting, 327 x 162cm, anonymous seventeenth century. X-Ray Radiography of the painting, before restoration, 2024

# **Felix Culpa: Restoration as a Meta-Narrative of New Evangelization**

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## **Abstract**

In an era dominated by idealised and polished imagery and a culture that can be considered post-Christian, restoration of sacred art offers a unique entry point for re-engaging with sacred spaces. This paper proposes a phenomenological and narrative reading of the restoration process, taking cues from the restoration project on the ceiling paintings within the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato at St John's Co-Cathedral. Restoration is presented as a meta-narrative of new evangelization. The act of restoring sacred art interrupts the artwork's life-cycle, drawing it out of the sacred space and into the human hands of restorers. The process of restoration becomes an interim phase that generates curiosity, interest and empathy, foundational attitudes to the rediscovery of the evangelical narrative that sacred art conveys.

The visibly aged surfaces and imperfections that emerge through time are not merely signs of decay but are transformed into symbols of redemption. Artworks in a poor state of conservation reveal a break from the conventional, inviting viewers to witness a dialogue between fragility and resilience. The restoration process itself becomes a pedagogical event, where the *felix culpa* or *happy fault* is reinterpreted as a necessary prelude to renewal. There is effectively a deep resonance between the paschal mystery at the heart of the evangelical narrative, the restoration process and the mystery of human experience.

By generating a dialogue between the technical aspects of conservation and a theological and cultural narrative, this paper argues that the restoration of sacred art is not solely an act of preservation but an intervention that revitalises the encounter between faith and contemporary culture. In doing so, the restoration project serves as a microcosm for the broader process of re-evangelization – a journey marked by patience, vulnerability, and promise of transformation. Ultimately, this analysis suggests that restoration can be viewed as a metaphoric interruption, reintroducing faith (narrated in images) into modern life and offering insights on the interplay between art, faith, and human experience.

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## **Introduction**

“We are no longer in Christianity. Today we are no longer the only ones who produce culture, nor the first, nor the most listened to.”<sup>1</sup> These words, uttered by the late Pope Francis, resonate with the rationale of this year's *Malta Conference on European Cathedrals*. The topic chosen for

this conference is both prophetic and pertinent. It brings together two realities – sacred art conservation and re-evangelization – which are seldomly put next to each other in dialogue.

The authors of this paper come from these two different perspectives, a conservator-restorer and a theologian. As a conservation and restoration company, Prevariti has for the past twenty years been engaged in several conservation projects of sacred art. It is not the aim of this paper to present yet another conservation project. We will instead revisit a project to gain insights into the conversation triggered by this conference. What is the “problem” of evangelization today? What does the conservation of sacred art have to say about this issue? The highlighted project will be the conservation of three ceiling paintings by Mattia Preti (1613-1699) within the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato at St John’s Co-Cathedral in Valletta (Malta).

This paper’s title also alludes to the ancient paschal hymn of the *Exsultet*, which poetically proclaims that the reality of sin, corruption (dare we say *damage* in conservation terms), is a felicitous event that opened the door for the salvific mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ:

“O happy fault (*O felix culpa*)  
that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!  
(*quæ talem ac tantum méruit habére Redemptórem!*)”

### **Paschal Overtones**

We need to go back to the fourth century A.D. when the first Christian communities started making use of art, more specifically sacred art. Christian sacred art emerged in the Roman catacombs. The first of such examples has an e. They are imbued with paschal overtones, tapping into symbols and prototypes of Christ’s death and resurrection. Examples include *The Prophet Jonah being thrown into the sea*; *Moses striking the rock in the desert*; *The Crossing of the Red Sea*; and *the Raising of Lazarus*.

These biblical narratives were chosen as expressions of the same mystery, points of association between the old and new covenant, between the life of Christ and the lives of Christians. In the place normally associated with death narratives of the resurrection started emerging. Christian art was not chronologically antecedent to the Christian experience. It was the latter that gave the impetus for art to be created. A new form of life beckoned to be represented. More generally and from an anthropological perspective, the human being can be seen as a *homo depictor* (man the image-maker), who according to Jack Groody engages in artistic representations that are “mediums through which societies express and negotiate their values, beliefs and contradiction.”<sup>2</sup>

For the Christian community, art had a catechetical function, expounding the mystery of the Christian life, the concrete manifestation of which were the Christians themselves. The *Letter to Diognetus* is one such testimony of this life:

“[Christians] are obedient to the laws that have been made, and by their own lives they supersede the laws. They love everyone and are persecuted by all. They are not understood and they are condemned. They are put to death and made alive.”<sup>3</sup>

As probably the first articulator of the Christian faith, St Paul would proclaim that “if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1Cor 15:14). It is in the background of this proclamation that any attempt at re-evangelization, encouraged by Church teaching and promoted by this conference, cannot bypass or exclude the theme of the paschal mystery. By way of symbolic overtones, the calling and responsibility of the art conservator resonates with this paschal mystery. One can perhaps even assert that every conservation attempt participates in a process that allows sacred art to go through its own paschal mystery.

### **Conservation’s *Felix Culpa***

Conservation of art always occurs in the context of a well-known truth; all works of art are made of organic materials and therefore are subject to damage and decay. Every work of art finds itself in the same mortal registry like humanity, which is undoubtedly also subject to physical, psychological and spiritual decay. And while conservators earn their living from the fact that works of art do get damaged, at a deeper level they engage in an activity that resonates with the regeneration brought about for humanity in the paschal mystery. On the level of narrative and phenomenologically speaking, every act of conservation becomes a remembrance of the paschal mystery.

By participating in the regeneration and renewal of sacred art, conservators implicitly proclaim the central *kerygma* of the Christian faith. Every ethical project of conservation starts from a thorough state of conservation of the analysed artwork. However, every assessment provides a treatment proposal, implying that every damage and decay has an opening, a possibility of renewal. Narratively speaking this could be considered a story of salvation implicitly proclaimed.

The theory of conservation has gone through many phases since its formal inception as an ethical and scientific practice. The founding figures of the practice of conservation did not just provide practical, aesthetic and scientific parameters. Giorgio Bonsanti, former Superintendent of the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure* and Restoration Laboratories of Florence, speaks of an attitude of conservation articulating it as “a way of being.”

Conservation is such not because it is practised upon artworks, but because the operations involved in its development match that complex attitude – almost a way of being – which hangs halfway between innovation and tradition, and which is made up of technical, methodological, scientific and professional factors; an attitude that we, the people in the conservation world, know well and acknowledge as ours.<sup>4</sup>

### **An Ecclesial Calling**

Another particularity about the conservator’s work on sacred art is that most of the time the client is not an individual. The ecclesial community calls upon the conservator in times of need to handle an object that belongs to many. The object of sacred art is treasured by a community of faith. As mentioned in the introduction, the object of sacred art does not have a merely decorative purpose. It eloquently articulates the faith of the community, and sometimes it also has a direct liturgical purpose.

There is a collective encounter that takes place in the commissioning of a conservation. The conservator receives the privileged responsibility of entering in the sacred space of the *ecclesia*, not only in the physical space of the church that hosts the work of art, but in the life of the *ecclesia*. It is significant that from the outset, the Christian community saw *itself* as the temple of God, prior to considering the physical and architectural meeting place to be the temple (cf 1Cor 3;16). Cesare Brandi, another founding figure of the modern concept of conservation, calls for conservation as “a true historical event” that is sensitive to the context in which it operates, in this case, the ecclesial sensitivity that brings an object of sacred art in the conservator’s hands:

“The act of restoration, in order to respect the complex historical nature of the work of art, cannot develop secretly or in a manner unrelated to time. It must allow itself to be emphasised as a true historical event – for it is a human action – and to be made part of the process by which the work of art is transmitted to the future.”<sup>5</sup>

By taking on the conservation of an object of sacred art, the conservator implicitly agrees to participate in the story of the *ekklesia*; its journey, joys, sorrows and challenges. One may also see how the conservator, to a degree, also participates in the challenge of re-evangelization which this conference is focusing on. The Christian community, called to be a witness of the Gospel, has been handed the obligation of proclaiming the Good News to the world, the *kerygma* that Christ has died and risen from the dead. With pastoral sensitivity, the Church embraces the story of humanity which in many ways severed its ties with ecclesial affiliation and participation.

Almost a hundred years ago, Russian philosopher and theologian, Sergej Bulgakov was already noticing the evangelical parable of the prodigal son playing out in society which “claims [its] share of the inheritance and departs from the Father’s house, journeying to a distant land in pursuit of freedom.”<sup>6</sup> In exile, the prodigal son begins to yearn in the depths of his heart for the home that he departed from, where the Father patiently waits to embrace him back. In this call to evangelize, the Church finds itself in the same place, seeking and waiting to be able to embrace those who have strayed away from the Father. This return also carries paschal overtones through the Father’s words about the son who “was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Lk 15:32).

### **Highlights from Oratory**

How does all that was said so far concretely manifest itself in a conservation project? A tentative answer can be gleaned by taking into account a concrete restoration project i.e. the conservation of the ceiling paintings by Mattia Preti within the Oratory of the Beheading of St John at St John’s Co-Cathedral in Valletta (Malta). Under the supervision of the Foundation of St John’s Co-Cathedral, Prevarti undertook the challenging project of conserving and restoring three paintings attached to the oratory’s soffit which depict central scenes from the paschal mystery. In a place that proclaims with full force the martyrdom (from the Greek *martyria* i.e. giving witness) of John the Baptist through Caravaggio’s painting, Mattia Preti complements the witness given by the precursor with the self-offering the Messiah, the one whom John the Baptist gave witness to and shed his blood for. Mattia Preti captures three instances from Christ’s passion; the *Crowning of Thorns*, the *Ecce Homo* and the central and larger piece of the *Raising of the Cross*.

This conservation project has been taken as a prototype and a testimony of how the conservation of sacred art symbolically (and therefore concretely) participates in the mission of evangelization of the Church, by being a manifestation of the paschal mystery. We will therefore reflect briefly on some of the stages of conservation to highlight this connection.

### **Disassembly from the Oratory**

The first challenge of this conservation project was the need to remove these paintings from their location. A block and tackle double pulley system (Fig. 4) through which the paintings could be safely brought down to the ground and taken to Prevarti's laboratory. This seemingly simple yet complicated gesture was the first step in the process of conservation, where the painting is *removed* from the sacred space, leaving behind an empty space, a loss of something that is important for the community. This eloquent vacuum is the first sign that a process of renewal has started. In this sense, the whole conservation process is an interim phase, a moment of suspension, in view of a transformation. This removal generates curiosity, a sense of questioning and also expectation, which spiritually also happen to be the primary attitudes required for evangelization to take place.

### **A Truthful Documentation**

Before any intervention, an ethically performed conservation process requires a thorough documentation process. The ceiling paintings were transferred to the documentation area to undergo a process whereby the conservator is asked to visually listen to what the painting is saying, its story from the moment it was produced by the artist and hung in the sacred space down to the present moment. A mapping of the artworks was performed, giving an accurate picture of the extent of losses, abrasions, retouching and overpainting which each artwork contained (Fig. 4). Documentation is symbolically a process of truth-finding, looking at the surface but also beneath it. This process of conservation cannot be effective and well-guided unless information is provided regarding the type and extent of the damage, which evangelically resonates with Jesus' words that only "the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32). In the case of these Mattia Preti paintings, raking light and exposure under Ultra Violet reflectography underlined the deformations and cupping of the paint layer and the extent of overpainting respectively.

### **Cleaning Phase**

As with every painting that has been exposed to air, humidity, dust and the oxidizing effect on its varnish, the conservator performs the first cleaning tests to understand how the painting can be freed from the encrusted layer that becomes a veil between the beauty produced by the master and the eyes that witness it. The paintings of the Oratory have also gone through a veiling process which made the effect of the cleaning procedures very clear. This laborious process is phenomenologically and theologically resonant with one of the fruits of evangelization, what the Greek fathers of the Church call *metanoia*, translated in English as conversion. Clement of Alexandria, in the second century AD, used the image of the sculptor in his *Stromata* (7:10) for Christ who "acts like a chisel that removes the rust of ignorance and vice from the soul, restoring the beauty of the original image."<sup>7</sup>

### **The Delicate Act of Facing in View of Relining**

Before any structural work could be done on the paintings, they went through a process of facing to protect the fragile areas of the paint layer. This delicate process, involving the application of Japanese tissue to the surface of the paintings, held together the most fragile parts of the painting until other interventions could be done. This is symbolically resonant with one of the principles of the work of evangelization, which is the care of those who are most vulnerable. In his magisterium Pope Francis used the metaphor of “field hospital” to describe the evangelizing mission of the Church who is “concerned more with those who suffer than with defending its own interests... in order to be more faithful to the Gospel.”<sup>8</sup>

This supporting intervention in conservation is seen again on a structural level and was also used in the conservation project on the ceiling paintings at the Oratory. Both strip-lining (in the lateral paintings) and relining (in the central painting) were used to provide additional support to the canvas. The conservator develops an innate sensibility towards the weakness of the painting specifically in the canvas, and addresses these weaknesses with targeted interventions.

The innovation in this conservation process was that these paintings, after being stretched to the modified original strainer frames, were attached to conservative-grade sandwich panels made from a lightweight aluminium honeycomb structure and fibreglass. This innovative procedure ensured that the canvas would be protected from all elements and environmental agents of deterioration after hanging.

### **The Return to Community**

Following the final phase of the conservation process which tackles the more aesthetic elements of the process, every object of sacred art returns to the community that commissioned the work. The same happened to the three paintings of the Oratory, which thanks to a team effort between Prevari and representatives from the Foundation of St John’s Co-Cathedral, could be brought back up in the same manner in which they were brought down. Using the same block and tackle double pulley system with the addition of supporting beams from the back, the conserved paintings could return to their original designated place.

Symbolically, the community welcomes back its treasured object, now transformed. The baptismal imagery of regeneration again finds resonance with the restored object of sacred art. As the artwork is regenerated, its identity is retained but the fruit of the process of conservation becomes one with the original painting. Time and again, Prevari’s experience at the Oratory but also in many other parish communities, has shown that the return of a revered object of sacred art is always an experience of joy, expectation and renewal for the whole community. This reaction is not only caused by the fact that an awaited project is completed, but perhaps because “deep calls unto deep” (Ps 42:7) and one regeneration calls unto another one. That is why the link between the conservation of sacred art and re-evangelization is profound, even though it might not seem immediate.

## Conclusion

This paper has revisited a conservation project which Prebarti carried out at the Oratory in St John's Co-Cathedral. It has tried to engage with the process of conservation beyond the technical perspective, but as a narrative imbued with paschal overtones. In this sense, the quality of conservation resides not only in ethical conservation decisions, but also in a disposition and attitude of care. Like every evangelizing initiative, conservation starts from compassion, understanding and listening/observing.

We have also tried to navigate through the resonance between conservation and conversion (*metanoia*). These words do not only share a similar sound, they are both processes leading to renewal and regeneration. The science of conservation is constantly making leaps forward, with new and innovative methods becoming available. There is however a further leap in quality which conservators of sacred art are being called to make and that is to see themselves as part of a larger process i.e., the mission of the Church to share the Good News. Each conservation project of sacred art manifests a speckle of that regenerative hope which was given through Christ's saving gift.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, "To Participants at the International Pastoral Congress on the World's Big Cities (27 November 2014)," [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141127\\_pastorale-grandi-citta.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141127_pastorale-grandi-citta.html) (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> June 2025).

<sup>2</sup> François Boespflug, *Il pensiero delle immagini. Conversazioni su Dio nell'arte con Bérénice Levet* (Magnano Biella: Qiqajon, 2013), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Epistle to Diognetus, 5:10-12, in *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume II: Epistle of Barnabas. Papias and Quadratus. Epistle to Diognetus. The Shepherd of Hermas*, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman. Loeb Classical Library 25 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 141

<sup>4</sup> See Giorgio Bonsanti, "Riparare L'arte," *OPD Restauro* 9 (1997): 109–171.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Stanley-Price, Mansfield Kirby Talley, and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro, *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage, Readings in Conservation* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 232.

<sup>6</sup> Sergej N. Bulgakov, *Lo Spirituale della Cultura*, trans. Maria Campatelli (Roma: Lipa, n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies* (Aeterna Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> "Pope Francis: Church a 'field Hospital for Vulnerable' - Vatican News," May 14, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-francis-audience-village-of-francis.html> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> June 2025).



Figure 1 - Early Christian art from the Roman catacombs. Top left (The Prophet Jonah being thrown into the sea), top right (The Crossing of the Red Sea), bottom left (Moses striking the rock in the desert), bottom right (The Raising of Lazarus)

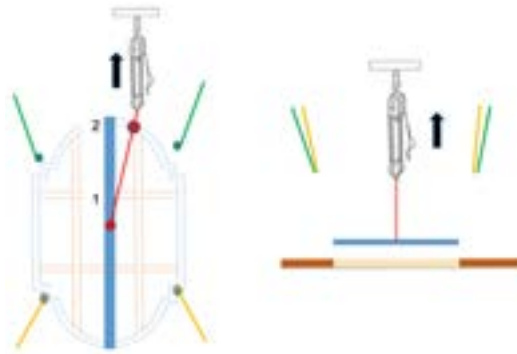


Figure 2 - A diagram showing the block and tackle double pulley system utilized for disassembly and reinstallation of paintings



Figure 3 - One of the paintings being lowered down to the floor to be taken to Preverti Lab

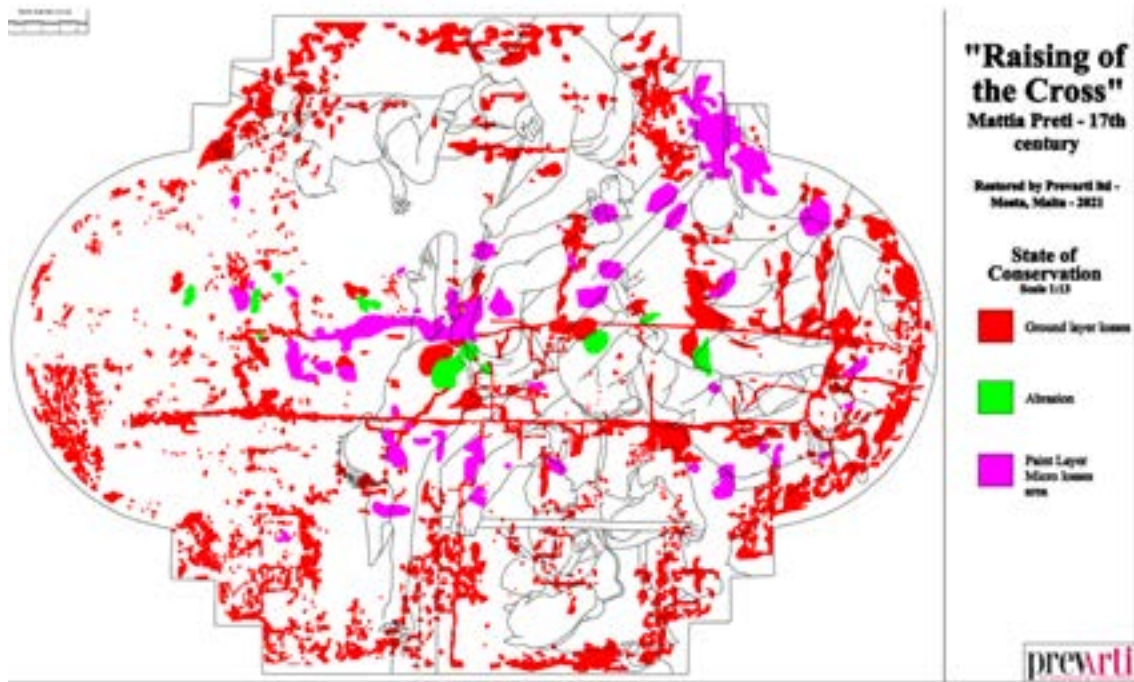


Figure 4 - Mapping of the state of conservation of the central painting depicting the *Raising of the Cross*



Figure 5 - Head conservator and Prevariti Director Pierre Bugeja carrying out the final stage of retouching on the *Ecce Homo* painting



Figure 6 - Detail of the effect of cleaning during the initial stage of conservation



Figure 7 - Before and after conservation images on the painting of the *Raising of the Cross*

# Reviving the Sacred: The Restoration of a Neapolitan Crib as a Path to Re-Evangelization

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## Abstract

The Neapolitan crib (*Presepe Napoletano*), a masterpiece of artistic craftsmanship and religious symbolism, has long been a central element of Naples' cultural and spiritual life. Its intricate depictions of the Nativity and everyday life reflect the profound intertwining of faith, art, and tradition in Southern Italy, and its influence has since spread across the world. However, as this artistic representation ages, its physical deterioration threatens to diminish its power as a living testament to the Christian message. This paper explores the ongoing restoration of an eighteenth-century Neapolitan crib and its permanent installation in a purposefully designed display at the Mdina Cathedral Museum, focusing on how the conservation process can serve as a catalyst for re-evangelization within local communities and beyond.

Restoring this crib is not merely an act of preserving art, but a means of reviving a sacred tradition that continues to address contemporary spiritual needs. As these works of art are carefully renewed, they provide an opportunity for reflection on the profound theological themes they convey, such as the Incarnation, humility, and the sanctification of everyday life. The paper examines how the restoration process itself can reinvigorate devotion and encourage a deeper engagement with the Christian message, transforming sacred art into a living vehicle for evangelization. Through the preservation of the Neapolitan crib, we are not merely conserving an object but revitalising a lasting pathway for faith and the renewal of community.

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## Introduction

The Neapolitan crib (*Presepe Napoletano*) stands as one of the most vivid expressions of popular religiosity and artistic ingenuity in early modern Southern Italy. Characterised by its dynamic fusion of sacred narrative and daily life, this art form reflects a theological vision that brings the mystery of the Incarnation into the realm of ordinary human experience. In the context of Naples, the eighteenth century marked the height of this devotional tradition, where nativity scenes were not only tools for catechesis but also embodiments of a theological anthropology, demonstrating how divine grace permeates the everyday.<sup>1</sup> This vision of grace incarnate in human life is central to the Christian understanding of salvation. Today, as many of these cribs face physical degradation, the question arises: can their restoration become more than a technical process and instead serve as a form of spiritual revitalisation?

This study explores the restoration of an eighteenth-century Neapolitan crib, currently undergoing conservation and curatorial preparation in anticipation of its imminent display at

the Mdina Cathedral Museum (Fig. 1). Drawing on research that situates the crib within both Neapolitan and Maltese religious heritage, this paper argues that the conservation of sacred artworks is not merely concerned with preserving cultural *objets d'art*. It is also about renewing their theological potency and reinvigorating faith communities through aesthetic and spiritual engagement. In this light, sacred art becomes what Pope John Paul II described as “a bridge to the experience of God,”<sup>2</sup> providing a tangible connection to the divine.

Re-evangelization—a term often associated with the Catholic Church’s mission in increasingly secular societies—implies a renewed proclamation of the Gospel that speaks to contemporary sensibilities.<sup>3</sup> In a visual culture where traditional religious practice may be in decline, sacred art, especially when restored and thoughtfully contextualised, offers a potent entry point for spiritual dialogue and contemplation.<sup>4</sup> As such, the Neapolitan crib functions not merely as a museum artefact but as a living catechetical tool, rich in theological symbolism and capable of awakening wonder, devotion, and reflection.

This paper proceeds in five sections. It begins by outlining the historical and cultural significance of the Neapolitan crib, followed by an examination of its theological symbolism. The third section delves into the conservation process of the Mdina crib and its implications. The fourth discusses how sacred art contributes to re-evangelization today, and the conclusion offers reflections on future directions for the integration of conserved sacred heritage into contemporary faith practices.

### **Historical and Cultural Significance of the Neapolitan Crib**

The Neapolitan crib emerged during the Baroque period as a highly sophisticated and deeply theological form of art, capturing both the sacred narrative of Christ’s birth and the daily life of Neapolitan society. Unlike other European nativity scenes, which tended to focus primarily on the holy family and the divine, the Neapolitan crib became a sprawling microcosm of the human experience. Figures representing peasants, artisans, and even nobility populate the scene, each contributing to the portrayal of an idyllic, albeit humble, Bethlehem where the sacred and the secular converge (Fig. 2 and 3). This combination of the religious and the everyday was intended not only to reflect the Incarnation’s impact on the world but also to invite the viewer into the mystery of Christ’s birth as something that touched all aspects of life.<sup>5</sup>

The origins of the *Presepe Napoletano* are typically traced to the work of Neapolitan friars in the seventeenth century, who began assembling small, figurative representations of the Nativity scene in churches and monasteries. However, it was during the eighteenth century, under the patronage of the Bourbon monarchy, that the art form flourished and became a public display of Naples’ religious and cultural identity. The Bourbon kings, recognising the potential of the crib as both a devotional and political tool, encouraged its production, and Naples soon became the epicentre for the craft. Artists and artisans, some of whom were trained in the prestigious Neapolitan art schools, developed sophisticated techniques in creating figures that were not only religious symbols but also reflections of social reality.<sup>6</sup> This tradition of nativity devotion was not confined to artistic circles or popular piety alone; it was also shaped by the

contemplative spirituality of priests and religious figures. Among them was St Cajetan of Thiene, whose profound devotion to the mystery of the Nativity reflects the broader ecclesial fascination with the Incarnation as the heart of Christian life.<sup>7</sup> His example illustrates how the crib, even before its widespread artistic elaboration, served as a focal point for theological meditation and pastoral imagination.

In these cribs, the divine figures—representing the *Mistero* of the Incarnation through the Virgin Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus—are often placed among the ruins of ancient Roman architecture (Fig. 4). This setting symbolises the demise of the pagan world and the birth of Christianity, while the surrounding scene features richly detailed depictions of everyday eighteenth-century Neapolitan life. The *Presepe Napoletano* thus functions as a theological tableau, where Christ’s entry into the world is depicted as part of a broader cosmic drama involving ordinary people. This reflects a specific theological emphasis on the sanctification of everyday life. The restoration of such cribs serves as a reminder that holiness is not confined to lofty spiritual realms but is deeply rooted in the material world—a vision that aligns with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasised the universal call to holiness in all aspects of life.<sup>8</sup>

The Neapolitan crib’s evolution is also inextricably linked to the socio-political developments of the time. The Bourbon monarchy, eager to promote a sense of unity and cultural pride, adopted the crib as a symbol of Naples’ distinctiveness within the broader context of Italian culture. The nativity scenes, often elaborately staged in noble households, were a symbol of both the piety of the ruling class and the deep-rooted Catholicism of the Neapolitan populace. These cribs thus functioned both as devotional art and as affirmations of cultural identity, designed to assert the city’s importance as a spiritual and artistic hub in the Mediterranean.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to their religious and political roles, these cribs were vehicles for social commentary. The detailed figurines representing a range of social classes and occupations provide a snapshot of the urban landscape of Naples at the time, reflecting the city’s complex social stratifications (Fig. 5). The artisans who created these cribs, often from humble backgrounds, imbued them with intricate details that revealed not only artistic skill but also a deep understanding of human life. In this way, the Neapolitan crib is not just a religious artefact; it is also a historical document that offers insight into the culture, politics, and social life of eighteenth-century Naples.<sup>10</sup>

The cultural significance of the Neapolitan crib extends far beyond the borders of Italy. As Naples became a nexus for artistic production during the eighteenth century, the influence of the *Presepe Napoletano* spread throughout Europe and beyond, influencing the development of nativity scenes in other Catholic regions. The allure of these cribs lay not only in their artistic beauty but in their capacity to engage viewers on a deep spiritual and emotional level, inviting them to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation in a way that was both universal and intimately personal. Through their intricate depictions of daily life, these cribs made the divine accessible and relatable to the ordinary person, a feature that continues to resonate today.<sup>11</sup>

As the restoration of the Mdina Cathedral’s eighteenth-century Neapolitan crib progresses, it becomes apparent that these cribs are not merely historical objects; they are living symbols of faith and culture, capable of sparking renewed reflection on the nature of the Incarnation and its implications for contemporary life. By reviving these sacred objects, the restoration project at

the Mdina Cathedral Museum seeks not only to preserve artistic heritage but also to reawaken the theological and cultural resonance embedded in the entire sacred composition.

### **Theological Symbolism and Spiritual Function of the Neapolitan Crib**

Far more than a decorative representation of the Nativity, the *Presepe Napoletano* functions as a visual theology in miniature. As a form of sacred art deeply rooted in Roman Catholic tradition, it communicates essential truths of the faith and becomes a medium of catechesis, contemplation, and spiritual renewal. Its vibrant depiction of the Incarnation within the daily rhythms of eighteenth-century life reflects a theology that finds the sacred in the ordinary. The careful restoration and forthcoming display of such a crib within the Mdina Cathedral Museum reinvigorates its spiritual function, enabling it to engage new generations of viewers in a process of re-evangelisation.

#### ***The Neapolitan Crib as a Theological Symbol***

At the heart of the Christian mystery lies the Incarnation. Catholic theology upholds this as the central moment of divine self-revelation and redemption. The Neapolitan crib represents this moment artistically, as “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”<sup>12</sup> Within the crib tableau, the infant Christ—surrounded by Mary, Joseph, angels, and shepherds—embodies the theological paradox of divine majesty revealed through human humility. Born in a manger, a place associated with animals and poverty, the Christ child symbolises the radical nature of God’s descent into the world.

The manger itself is transformed into a theological symbol: a feeding trough becomes an altar of divine nourishment, foreshadowing Christ as the “Bread of Life.”<sup>13</sup> This imagery aligns with the Catholic understanding that grace is not confined to grandeur but often revealed through simplicity. Theological reflection on this motif suggests that Christ’s presence sanctifies the mundane, reminding the faithful that holiness is encountered within the ordinary.<sup>14</sup>

#### ***The Crib as a Vehicle for Spiritual Reflection and Evangelization***

The Neapolitan crib, beyond its visual beauty, serves as a spiritual locus for meditation. Each figure is embedded with doctrinal meaning. Mary, as *Theotokos*, signifies openness to divine will, expressed through her fiat,<sup>15</sup> while Joseph exemplifies humility and protective obedience.<sup>16</sup> These representations offer believers models of lived faith. The shepherds, the first to receive the message of the Messiah’s birth, reflect the Catholic teaching on the universal salvific will of God, expressed through the inclusion of the humble and marginalised.<sup>17</sup>

Installed within the context of a museum with ecclesiastical roots, the crib assumes a renewed role in evangelization. While the Mdina Cathedral Museum is not a sacred liturgical space, its historical and theological context enhances its function as a reflective environment where visitors may encounter the sacred in a contemplative, non-liturgical setting. Thus, the crib continues to communicate its message to contemporary society, not through preaching, but through the quiet language of beauty and symbolism.

### ***The Eucharistic Symbolism of the Manger***

Further deepening the theological meaning of the crib is the Eucharistic symbolism embedded in the manger. This Eucharistic reading has deep roots in Christian tradition. As early as St Augustine, the manger was seen as a place where the faithful are spiritually nourished, anticipating the banquet of the Eucharist.<sup>18</sup> In Catholic doctrine, the Eucharist is the true presence of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine. The manger, a place of nourishment, prefigures the altar on which the Bread of Life is offered. This Eucharistic foreshadowing connects the Incarnation to the ongoing sacramental life of the Church. Pope John Paul II emphasised the centrality of the Eucharist in Christian life, calling it the “source and summit” of Catholic existence.<sup>19</sup> The Neapolitan crib thus becomes an artistic catechesis of sacramental theology, linking Christ’s birth to His enduring presence in the Eucharist.

### ***The Role of the Neapolitan Crib in the Spiritual Life***

The Neapolitan crib also performs a vital role in the spiritual life of the community. Its restoration is not solely an act of conservation but a gesture of spiritual restoration, mirroring the renewal it seeks to inspire in the hearts of the faithful. By restoring and presenting such sacred works, the Church reaffirms its theological and cultural heritage, offering the faithful new opportunities to reconnect with the mysteries of the faith.<sup>20</sup> Through meditative engagement with the crib, Catholics are drawn into a personal encounter with Christ, guided by the humility, simplicity, and joy of the Nativity.

### **The Restoration Process as a Spiritual Act**

The restoration of sacred art is frequently approached as a technical endeavour concerned with preserving historical and aesthetic heritage. Yet, in the context of the eighteenth-century *Presepe Napoletano* currently undergoing conservation at the Mdina Cathedral Museum, this process transcends material preservation alone. It constitutes a re-sacralisation of the object—an act that re-engages both the faithful and the broader community with the theological depth embedded within the work. The restoration is not simply a return to a former aesthetic state; rather, it is a renewal of purpose, allowing the crib to serve once more as a medium of evangelization and spiritual reflection.<sup>21</sup>

Before conservation, the crib was in a state of visible deterioration. Several figures displayed structural instability, pigments had faded or flaked, and accumulated dust and surface grime dulled the vibrancy of the original composition (Fig. 6). According to documentation by the Mdina Cathedral Museum, the materials—primarily polychrome wood, terracotta, and textiles—were suffering from age-related fragility and previous unsympathetic interventions.<sup>22</sup> These issues necessitated a comprehensive restoration strategy that would respect both the historical integrity and theological symbolism of the piece.

Technically, the restoration followed conservation ethics grounded in minimal intervention and reversibility. Deteriorated areas were stabilised using appropriate consolidants, original colour schemes were recovered through careful cleaning, and missing elements were reconstructed only where essential to theological or narrative coherence.<sup>23</sup> The use of traditional materials and methods was preferred, thereby maintaining continuity with the original artisan’s intent.

Moreover, the curatorial approach aimed not merely to restore visual clarity, but to safeguard the theological message communicated through each element—be it the Holy Family, the angels, or the surrounding Neapolitan vignettes of everyday life. This act of restoration mirrors, in theological terms, the Church's broader mission of renewal. Within Catholic tradition, the restoration of sacred objects is paralleled by the spiritual regeneration the Church seeks in the lives of its faithful: the reinvigoration of liturgical life and the reawakening of personal relationship with God. The process becomes a metaphor for salvation itself, wherein humanity is continually restored to grace through divine mercy.<sup>24</sup>

Theologically, Catholic teaching affirms that all creation bears intrinsic goodness, and that sacred art participates in this sacramentality of matter. The preservation and restoration of such art, therefore, are not secular acts but spiritual responsibilities. Pope Benedict XVI, in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, underscores that reverence for sacred objects in ecclesial contexts is a gesture of theological continuity and liturgical fidelity.<sup>25</sup>

This perspective elevates the role of the conservator from a mere technician to a theological custodian, positioning them as agents of spiritual renewal. Through their work, the theological content embedded in the crib is made accessible once more—not simply by restoring its physical appearance, but by revitalising its spiritual purpose.<sup>26</sup> The conservator's engagement with the object is a profound spiritual investment, recognising that each figure and element is not merely being restored but reintegrated into a living theological dialogue.

The restored Neapolitan crib, with its intricate depictions of the Nativity set amidst daily life, provides an occasion to reflect on the constancy of Christian witness across generations. It reclaims its role not merely as art, but as a visual theology of the Incarnation. Just as the mystery of the Incarnation brought renewal to a fallen world, so too does the renewed crib hold the potential to revive dormant spiritual consciousness in those who encounter it.

The installation of the restored crib within the Mdina Cathedral Museum positions it as more than just a seasonal artefact. It becomes a locus of communal evangelization, where sacred art continues to communicate timeless truths to contemporary audiences. In this museological context, where theology and visual culture converge, the crib becomes a silent witness to the enduring relevance of the Gospel message. Through its intricate depiction of the Nativity and everyday life, this devotional tableau invites all who behold it to rediscover the divine narrative that continues to shape human history.

At the same time, its presence within a public museum invites broader cultural and spiritual engagement. While the crib remains an instrument of evangelisation primarily within the Catholic context, its reach extends beyond the Church. Sacred art, particularly in a public, non-liturgical setting like the museum, has the capacity to transcend religious boundaries.

For those unfamiliar with Catholic devotion, the crib presents a universal story of humility, hope, and divine presence within the human experience. By juxtaposing the divine with the ordinary, it becomes a powerful tool for spiritual reflection that can speak to anyone—regardless of faith tradition. In this way, the restored Neapolitan crib acts as a bridge between the sacred and secular, offering an opportunity for dialogue, reflection, and even conversion, inviting viewers to contemplate the deeper mysteries of the Incarnation and the enduring relevance of sacred narratives in modern life.

## Re-Evangelization Through Sacred Art in the Modern World

In the post-Christian, secular context of contemporary Europe, the task of re-evangelization—reawakening the Christian faith in a world that has distanced itself from traditional religious beliefs—is both urgent and profound. As Charles Taylor articulates in *A Secular Age*, modern societies have undergone a profound shift, moving from a time when belief in God was a natural and universal element of existence, to a reality in which religious belief is seen as a personal, conscious choice. In his analysis, Taylor notes that modernity, with its emphasis on individual autonomy and the “buffered self”—a self insulated from transcendence and the porousness of earlier belief systems—has resulted in the marginalisation of religious faith in public life.<sup>27</sup> This secularization process has created a disconnection between the sacred and the secular, thereby challenging the Church to find new ways to engage with the modern world.

One of the most powerful tools the Church possesses for re-evangelization is sacred art. Sacred art, such as the Neapolitan crib, does not merely serve as an aesthetic or decorative object; it plays a significant role in catechesis—the instruction of the faithful in the truths of the Christian faith. The intricate craftsmanship and theological symbolism embedded in the crib represent the Incarnation—the central Christian mystery where God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. In a secular age where the divine is often relegated to the periphery, art like the Neapolitan crib becomes a tangible means of mediating the sacred, drawing people back into a deeper reflection on Christian truth.<sup>28</sup>

As Hans Urs von Balthasar emphasises in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, beauty and art are not merely superficial aspects of the Christian tradition; they are integral to the communication of divine truth. Von Balthasar argues that art, especially sacred art, serves as an “epiphany” of the divine—an accessible manifestation of the transcendent. He suggests that the beauty of sacred art has the unique ability to engage the human person at the level of the imagination, inviting a deeper encounter with the mysteries of faith. The Neapolitan crib, with its vivid depictions of the Nativity, speaks not only to the intellect but also to the heart, inviting the viewer to contemplate the profound mystery of the Incarnation. The beauty inherent in the crib draws individuals into reflection on the humility and simplicity of Christ’s birth and, by extension, on the profound mystery of God’s salvation of humanity.<sup>29</sup>

In this way, sacred art functions as a catechetical tool in a secular world. Sacred imagery, as Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) notes in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, plays a pivotal role in engaging people with the Christian mysteries in a way that words alone cannot achieve. For Ratzinger, liturgical art serves as an invitation to participate in the divine drama of salvation, a participation that is both intellectual and emotional.<sup>30</sup> Art, in this sense, has the power to open the human soul to divine realities, creating a space for personal encounter with God. In the context of the Neapolitan crib, this is not simply about preserving an object of historical interest but ensuring that the spiritual and theological truths it conveys are accessible to modern audiences. The crib, as displayed in the Mdina Cathedral Museum, becomes not merely a relic of the past but a living testament to God’s presence in the world, offering a means of reconnecting with the sacred in a time of increasing secularisation.

This renewed emphasis on engaging the modern world through beauty and culture echoes the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, which called for the Church to read the signs of the times

and embrace new modes of evangelization, including through sacred art and cultural dialogue.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, museums, such as the Mdina Cathedral Museum, play an increasingly significant role in re-evangelization. Though not a traditional sacred space, the museum offers an opportunity for the Church to engage with a broader audience—both the faithful and the secular—through the medium of art. As the Neapolitan crib is curated and displayed, it becomes part of a modern mission field where the Church can encounter individuals who may not frequent churches but who are still drawn to the beauty, history, and symbolism of sacred works of art. This mirrors the argument of David L. Schindler, who contends that the role of art in a post-Christian world is to invite people to reconsider the meaning of beauty and its connection to divine truth.<sup>32</sup>

In this sense, museums are not simply places of cultural preservation; they have the potential to serve as contemporary sanctuaries, places where the sacred can be encountered anew. Through the display of sacred works like the Neapolitan crib, the Church offers the world a chance to encounter the sacred beauty that speaks beyond the limits of secularization. The museum setting provides a bridge between the world of the sacred and the modern world, allowing individuals to engage with faith through a non-verbal, aesthetic means. This provides an opportunity for re-evangelization, whereby the beauty and symbolism of sacred art—such as the Neapolitan crib—become a gateway to a renewed encounter with the Christian message.

Finally, the act of engaging with such sacred art—whether in a museum or a traditional church setting—has the potential to reawaken a personal encounter with the Christian faith. Aidan Nichols in *The Art of God* discusses the way in which the Catholic aesthetic draws the viewer into a profound contemplation of divine truth, emphasising that beauty is never an end in itself but a means to engage the viewer with the sacred.<sup>33</sup> Through the act of contemplating art like the Neapolitan crib, viewers are invited to reflect on the Incarnation and its implications for their lives. This personal encounter with sacred art serves as a means of catechesis, allowing individuals to experience and internalise the deeper theological truths of the faith.

In sum, the Neapolitan crib—as displayed in the Mdina Cathedral Museum—functions as a powerful vehicle for re-evangelization. By revitalising sacred art and presenting it in a museum setting, the Church offers a way for individuals in a secular world to reconnect with the mysteries of the Christian faith. As secularization continues to challenge the Church's mission, sacred art remains a critical means of reaching people, helping them rediscover the profound truths of the Incarnation, salvation, and divine beauty that transcend time and culture.

## **Conclusion**

The preservation of the Neapolitan crib transcends the mere conservation of an artefact; it upholds a theological legacy that has shaped Catholic devotion for centuries. Rooted in eighteenth-century craftsmanship, this crib embodies profound theological truths, particularly those of the Incarnation and the humility of Christ's birth. As part of the Catholic tradition, the crib continues to communicate the Christian message through sacred art, which has long served as a visual catechesis. The careful restoration, alongside meticulous documentation and the planned installation in a purposefully designed section within the Mdina Cathedral Museum, will integrate modern museum interpretation tools, ensuring the crib's theological significance remains accessible to contemporary audiences.

The restoration process highlights how sacred art can serve as a channel of divine communication. As Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests, beauty in sacred art is not merely aesthetic but a means through which the divine is made tangible to the viewer.<sup>34</sup> The Neapolitan crib, through its depiction of the Nativity, invites reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation, acting as both a visual encounter with Christ and a means of spiritual reflection. The crib's restoration thus becomes more than physical preservation; it renews the dialogue between past and present, making the sacred ever more relevant in a modern context.

Sacred art plays a vital role not only in personal spiritual reflection but also in the renewal and strengthening of community. The restoration and public display of the Neapolitan crib at the Mdina Cathedral Museum creates a shared space where individuals—both devout and secular—can reconnect with the central mysteries of the Christian faith. As a visual embodiment of the Incarnation, the crib invites communal reflection on Christ's humility and presence, fostering a sense of spiritual continuity and belonging. As John Paul II affirms, sacred art has the power to unite communities, cultivating shared devotion and deepening the faithful's connection to their religious and cultural heritage.<sup>35</sup> In this way, sacred art becomes a living tradition, not confined to churches but expanding its reach into public institutions such as museums, where it continues to evangelize through beauty. Looking forward, this capacity for engagement makes sacred art an effective tool for catechesis and evangelization within parishes, schools, and public settings—offering the wider community opportunities to encounter the beauty of faith and the transformative message of the Gospel.

In conclusion, the documentation, conservation, and installation of the Neapolitan crib at the Mdina Cathedral Museum affirms that the conservation of sacred art is not merely a curatorial undertaking; it becomes a form of spiritual renewal—reviving the theological meaning of the Nativity, deepening contemporary faith, and ensuring that the sacred continues to speak meaningfully to today's audiences and those yet to encounter it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Anna Dolfi, *Il Presepe Napoletano: Tradizione e Simbologia* (Naples: Electa, 2003), 15–18.

<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), §14.

<sup>4</sup> See David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 26–30.

<sup>5</sup> See Dolfi, *Il Presepe Napoletano*, 22–25.

<sup>6</sup> See Edgar Vella, *An Eighteenth-Century Neapolitan Crib in Malta* (Malta: Mdina Cathedral Museum, 2021), 7.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964) §39.

<sup>9</sup> See Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 35–40.

<sup>10</sup> See Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 48–50.

<sup>11</sup> See Vella, *An Eighteenth-Century Neapolitan Crib in Malta*, 5–8.

<sup>12</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>13</sup> John 6:35.

<sup>14</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), paragraph 525; Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 68–69.

<sup>15</sup> See Luke 1:38.

<sup>16</sup> See Matthew 1:18–25.

<sup>17</sup> See Luke 2:8–20.

<sup>18</sup> See Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 189*, in *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner, trans Siegfried S. Schatzmann (New York: Harper & Row, 1997) (no page numbers available).

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), §55.

<sup>20</sup> See Vella, *An Eighteenth-Century Neapolitan Crib in Malta*, 16, 45.

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, 47–54.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> See Ana Ribeiro da Costa, “Christian Sacred Art: A Conservation Challenge,” *Studies in Conservation* 51, no.3 (2006): 7–11.

<sup>24</sup> See Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (London: SPCK, 2013), 113–114.

<sup>25</sup> See Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), §39.

<sup>26</sup> See Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963), §122.

<sup>27</sup> See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 27.

<sup>28</sup> See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 1:102.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, 150.

<sup>30</sup> See Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 55.

<sup>31</sup> See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), §62.

<sup>32</sup> See David L. Schindler, *Art and the Christian Mind: The Life of the Imagination in the Age of Technology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 200), 15.

<sup>33</sup> See Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God: A Catholic Aesthetic* (London: Burns & Oates, 2000), 78.

<sup>34</sup> See Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:102.

<sup>35</sup> See John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 5.



Figure 1 - Neapolitan Crib, eighteenth century. Currently under conservation and curatorial preparation for display at the Mdina Cathedral Museum, Malta. Mixed media. Copyright Mdina Cathedral Museum. Photograph by Joe P. Borg, 2020



Figure 2 - Figurines and ornamental textiles, including embroidered garments, within the eighteenth-century Neapolitan crib. Mixed media. Copyright Mdina Cathedral Museum. Photographs by Joe P. Borg, 2011 and 2025 (collage of three images)



Figure 3 - Two close-ups illustrating everyday life in eighteenth-century Neapolitan society as represented within the nativity scene. Mixed media. Copyright Mdina Cathedral Museum. Photographs by Joe P. Borg, 2020 (collage of two images)



Figure 4 - Three images showing the divine figures symbolising the Mistero of the Incarnation, positioned within a setting of ancient Roman architectural ruins. Mixed media. Copyright Mdina Cathedral Museum. Photographs by Joe P. Borg, 2020 and 2025 (collage of three images)



Figure 5 - Four close-up images showcasing the intricate detailing of a selection of nativity figurines, focusing on facial expressions, facial hair, hairstyles, and headwear. Mixed media. Copyright Mdina Cathedral Museum. Photographs by Joe P. Borg, 2011 and 2025 (collage of four images)



Figure 6 - Three images showing selected figurines and elements of the nativity scene prior to conservation. The crib exhibited visible deterioration: several figures displayed structural instability, pigments had faded or flaked, and accumulated surface grime had dulled the original vibrancy. Mixed media. Copyright Mdina Cathedral Museum. Photographs by Joe P. Borg, 2025 (collage of three images)

# As Long as They Take Effort

Franz Zehetner

*St Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna, Austria*

## Abstract

Restoration of Sacred Art is actually a public task to preserve monuments as part of collective memory and national heritage. In history, the vitality of religious practice and the beauty of religious monuments had a tight connection and parallel development, due to touristic interest and awareness of cultural heritage decoupled these topics. In our modern societies, religious monuments of historic importance seem to be well preserved, while Christianity often loses importance. But we cannot be content to preserve beautiful but empty shells of religious buildings without serving their basic function. However the actual crisis is not the first of Christianity in European history.

Austria had been Christianised in ancient times, but after the collapse of the Roman Empire, only a few testimonies of Christendom remained. In the early Middle Ages, the Church tried to refer to this old tradition and restore and reuse antique churches to fill them with new spirit. Baroque art was used to show the contents of belief in an aesthetic, easily accessible and popular way, be it in theatre or in fine arts. Baroque art was not the result of a triumphant Church but an essential contribution to success, in the struggle not so much against other denominations, but against grievances in the church and lukewarm Christians. Early examples are restorations of Trinity Churches in areas under Ottoman threat as part of theologic confrontation with Islam.

Enlightened absolutism, revolution and Napoleonic wars caused a movement to restore mediaeval churches, but also a renaissance of piety and catholicism. In Vienna, the popular *Saint Clemens Maria Hofbauer* who was frequently spied on by the police, was in opposition to official "Josefine" politics. The gothic church of *Maria am Gestade* (St Mary on the shore) was saved from demolition and restored. It became the seat of his order and a centre for pastoral care in the growing city in industrial times.

In 1945 the destroyed Viennese cathedral became a symbol of the restoration of the country and managed to make the church attractive to people having been in opposition to supranational Christianity in the 1920s and 1930s as materialists or nationalists. In our times we have to face the challenge of preserving cultural heritage and its original intention by making clear the Christian content in Christian art and fighting grievances in the churches.

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## Introduction

St Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna is the main church of Austria and the country's most important landmark. Founded in 1137, it got its essential form in the fifteenth century, with Baroque additions and changes, which were made mainly to the interior. The cathedral workshop, which

is part of the “Intangible Cultural Heritage” of UNESCO and has an unbroken tradition dating back to the twelfth century, carries out most of the restoration and conservation work.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, the restoration of religious buildings has a much longer tradition: Salomon’s Temple in Jerusalem had an important function as the centre of faith in Yahweh, but the history of destruction and restoration of the Temple were both traumatic and essential for the religious tradition and the confidence in the durability of the chosen people. The destruction of the Temple meant (for both enemies, the Babylonians in 586 BC and the Romans in 70 AD) as well the destruction of the Jewish People and its religious core. And the Temple was used by Jesus Christ as a metaphor for His body when he predicted his death and his resurrection: “Tear down this temple and I will restore it within three days.”<sup>2</sup>

The restoration of a sacred building is not an end in itself or merely for aesthetic value only, it is connected to the possibility of religious practice and to the vitality of faith. A prominent figure, who symbolised this connection was St Francis of Assisi. The connection between the restoration of a religious building and the revival of the religious spirit was also the subject of Pope Innocent III’s dream in 1210. He saw St Francis supporting the architrave of a dilapidated church and interpreted this as a support not only for a single building, but for the entire institution of the Church. This image (painted so impressively by Giotto or his vicinity) led Innocent to confirm the rule of the Franciscan Order.

In our time, the restoration of a church is primarily considered an important preservation activity for a cultural monument, but cultural heritage consists of both the material and the spiritual, and the spiritual aspect is particularly important when the object of cultural heritage is a church.

Churches are, of course, landmarks that represent their respective cities. They serve as symbols of identity for the inhabitants as well as eye-catchers for tourist advertising because they are unique and form a bastion against uniformity of modern life. However, beyond their distinctiveness, Churches have a function other than tourism. We have had to get used to churches, being crowded with tourists longing for quick aesthetic satisfaction or to fulfil their educational obligations, while being empty during Holy services during the week and even on Sundays.<sup>3</sup>

But the churches should not only mark the geographical centre of a city, but they should also be their spiritual centre.

### **Discontinuity in the Religious Development of Austria**

Although the crisis of Christian faith is evident, this is not the first crisis in history. Although Austria was Christianised in Roman times, the religious tradition was lost during the Barbarian Invasions, and the country had to be re-evangelized in the tenth century, when the country became part of the Holy Roman Empire. Antique traditions were inconsistent but had to be re-established, for example, the veneration of St Florian, a high Roman civil servant, who was drowned in 304 AD during the Diocletian Persecution of Christians. To commemorate the antique history, the mediaeval monastery of St Florian was built over his grave, still being an important religious and cultural centre to this day.<sup>4</sup>

Even in Vienna the idea of continuity is fictitious: While older legends claimed that at least a part of the oldest church in Vienna, St Ruprecht, dated back to Roman times, it had been proven, that the city was abandoned for two centuries and the church was built without a direct Roman predecessor.<sup>5</sup>

The Middle Ages saw several movements of “Restoration,” “Renovatio” and “Renaissance,” most of them aiming to revive a special aspect of antique culture and having a romantic touch of fascination with the past. A turning point was marked by St Francis of Assisi, who looked forward while referring to the past and was able to address the challenges of his time.

As I mentioned before, he was driven by the social changes of his time, yet he was still able to bring their heretical potential into the mainstream of the Church, energising it and giving new directions and aims. In social change and Church crisis, St Francis achieved both: to restore traditional religious artwork and to find new forms of organisation, proclamation of the gospel and spiritual renewal. St Francis of Assisi was ordered by Christ on the Cross of Monte Subiaco to rebuild the Church in both senses: to give it a new spirit and to give it a new, renovated home.<sup>6</sup>

His restoration of the Subiaco Chapel marked the beginning of a new spiritual movement, respecting new urban social groups, and continues to have a significant impact on Christian life to this day.

### **Inter-Religious Discussion Visible in Architecture and Restoration**

An interesting input on the shape of churches to be renovated emerged from the confrontation with Islam from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. This confrontation was not only a military one but also theological. In Austria, the Turkish wars culminated in the two sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683, but there were also long periods of peace, and of minor skirmishes to test the strength of the defenders and the attackers alike. An interesting monument documenting all sides of this contact is the Church of the Holy Spirit, originally a cemetery church outside of the walls of Bruck/Mur, a small trading city in the Austrian Alps.

In 1480 a Turkish patrol troop – too small to conquer the city itself, but strong enough to destroy unwall settlements or suburban areas – destroyed the cemetery church. It was rebuilt in 1495/91 thanks to donations from a few citizens of Bruck. The new church had a basically triangular shape, representing the three persons of the Holy Trinity.<sup>7</sup> This is a clear statement in confrontation with strict monotheism in Islam and the discussion on the nature of the Trinity, that had peaked in Christianity around 300 AD and was settled in the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. In Austria churches consecrated to the Holy Trinity sort of highlight locations of confrontation with Turkish troops in the years before the two sieges of Vienna 1529 and 1683. The furthest point of Turkish advance is marked by the Basilica of Sonntagberg, a pilgrimage church founded and dedicated in 1440 to the Holy Trinity and rebuilt – after the victorious end of the wars – in monumental Baroque style 1751-1757.<sup>8</sup>

## Reformation, Counter-Reformation and Restoration

In Central Europe, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were characterised by war and religious insecurity, caused not only by the confrontation with Islam but also by tensions inside Christianity. Both, Reformation and Counter-Reformation changed requirements for churches, altering the rules for their restoration. Adaptions helped the proclamation of faith in both confessions.

The two monumental altars of St Stephen's Cathedral illustrate the change of paradigms: The gothic *Wiener Neustädter Altar*, a winged altar commissioned in 1447, shows 72 Saints with their attributes on its Sunday side, combines different requirements: In terms of its size, colour and fine artistic execution it was conceived as the monumental and representative centre for the church, but with its multitude of small-scale illustrations it encourages personal devotion and contemplation as well.

In contrast the Baroque altar depicts a single scene, the martyrdom of the patron saint, St Stephen. Framed by larger-than-life sculptures and a monumental architecture it dominates the entire church uniting the community of the faithful as a whole.

The change in attitude towards faith and in the expectations people had of religion – at least in the form of religious illustrations – can be seen in the church of St Charles in Vienna (1716-39). It is not a restored church, but its concept is so multi-layered, showing so many aspects of crisis and consolidation of faith, that it is helpful to take a closer look at it. Not only is it a monument of defiance and denial (the donator, Emperor Charles VI)<sup>9</sup> had been King of Spain, but – after the death of his brother Joseph and his succession in both the thrones of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire – he lost the British support and subsequently the hope for the Spanish Crown. But he placed the symbol of the Spanish monarchy, the Columns of Heracles, in front of this monument, amalgamating many styles from various regions of his former multicultural kingdom. But in the first place, it should be a devotional gift to thank for putting an end to the last plague in Vienna in 1713.

The pediment relief illustrates, that the position of God and religion had got a new perspective: while the tympanum of St Stephen's depicts Christ as a glorious judge, this relief depicts the illness and its overcoming through divine help. People are praying not only for eternal life but for earthly salvation from the plague. It is not only the longing for the salvation of the souls in eternal life, but also for a modern SOS, that religion stands for.

Inside the building in the Baroque ceiling painting shows a triumphant, generously practising *Caritas*, donating to the poor, nursing the sick and caring for those in need. The fight against vices is shown only at the edge of the illustration (but still present), as well as the fight against her enemies and the burning of their writings. Illustrating the virtues and benefits of Christianity in a very forceful and catchy way, art is an important vehicle of proclamation. This method of *propaganda fidei* was not only used in new buildings, but it was also widely practised in the field of restoration and adaption of medieval churches.

The medieval illustration of Christ at the last judgement is a vision of justice and redemption in the coming ages, the baroque painters open the heaven allowing spectators to imagine the presence of God and his heavenly hosts in our world.

## Enlightenment and New Orientation: Fall of the Holy Roman Empire

The institutional separation of Church and state – an important index theme and achievement of mediaeval history, albeit often blurred in reality – became obsolete in most reformatory churches, which were formally led by the respective sovereign. This concentration of power also appealed to Catholic rulers: Joseph II, Catholic Archduke of Austria and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (1765/80-90), admired the Prussian king Frederick II, who had been the nemesis of Joseph's mother, Maria Theresa, and the efficiency of Prussian military and administration. Joseph tried to harmonise and modernise the countries under his rule, and religious policy was a key aspect in his policy, driven by rationalism and Enlightenment. Different confessions and religions were tolerated, and an important aim was to reduce the power of Catholic Church – in conflict with the pope – and to re-organize it. Many churches and monasteries were closed, on the other hand, he tried to improve pastoral provision: his goal was to have one parish church per 700 inhabitants, reachable on foot in one hour. Instead of complex and exuberant baroque illustrations, easy-to-understand concepts, combining both religion and enlightenment should be used. For his court churches, he preferred neo-Gothic forms to demonstrate his distance to Rome, which was represented by the Baroque style.

At the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1803/06 not only did the formal continuity of institutions rooting back to Antique institutions, adopted by Charlemagne in 800, break down, but many religious structures ended and were closed. One prominent example is the Church of *Maria am Gestade – St Mary-on-the-shore* – in Vienna.<sup>10</sup>

In 1803 the “Principal Conclusion” of the Extraordinary Imperial Delegation sealed the end of the Holy Roman Empire and of many ecclesiastical principalities. St Mary's, the former representation of the Prince-Bishop of Passau in Vienna was closed and lost its function. It was to be destroyed, the painted windows were already brought to the romantic Imperial Castle in the park of Laxenburg, a beta-version of Neuschwanstein. The newly built historicist building was to be furnished with originals of vanished buildings to enhance its historical significance, a practice, that became usual in nineteenth century Austria, with the most prominent example being Vienna's city hall, which was equipped with sculptures and windows from St Stephen's Cathedral.<sup>11</sup>

## Romantic Spiritual Recovery

However, St Mary's was preserved, because demolition work was too expensive. The church was filled with new life. The crucial person was Clemens Maria Hofbauer, born in 1751 near Znojmo, now the Czech Republic. He was a member of the Redemptorist Order, which was not permitted in Austria at that time. Nevertheless, he managed to come to Vienna where he became a popular preacher, addressing mainly the ordinary people. His spirituality was an important input to German Romanticism; his endurance gave hope and orientation to the people in a post-war period breathing new life into religiosity in the early nineteenth century. He was called “Apostle of Vienna” before he died in 1820. Canonised in 1909, he is now the city-patron of Vienna. St Mary however was restored (even the windows came back) and became the new seat of the Redemptorists in Austria and a new centre of religiosity in Vienna.

The restoration of St Mary's was one of the earliest examples of the historicist restoration of a medieval church, reinterpreting Gothic motifs in a more humanistic, and easily accessible way.

To summarise history in brief: the actual situation of churches in Europe, if we call it a crisis, is not a unique one, the first wave of urbanisation, the appearance of heretics in the High Middle Ages, Reformation, enlightenment, industrialisation and nationalism all doubted the power of the Christian message, and tried to give their own solutions to actual human demands and questions, which seemed to be insufficiently answered by the churches. However, after each drawback new ways of proclaiming the Gospel have been found, new ways of addressing people, and new ways of using works of art to create space for the proclamation and to support it.

### **1938/45 Christianity vs. *Gottgläubigkeit* (Believers in God)**

#### ***Destruction and Restoration***

During the 1920s and 1930s, Austrian society was characterised by a strong polarisation between traditionalist Catholics (mainly atheist), socialists and (anticlerical German) nationalists, culminating in a civil war, dissolution of the parliament and eventually the *Anschluss* to the Third Reich. Many people left the Church for political reasons. However, after the war, it was possible to fill the trenches, and not only to restore damaged monuments – most prominently St Stephen's – but also to rebuild a tolerant and cooperative society and to bring back many people to church and faith.

Not to discuss war period and the unbearable crimes committed in this time, we have to see the parallel recovery of the church and the country. The destroyed cathedral symbolises the destruction of material and immaterial goods. The reconstruction of the cathedral is a unifying goal and a symbol for the re-establishment of the country and faith.<sup>12</sup>

Reconstruction focussed on restoring the cathedral and gave room to a new need. There was enthusiasm for a new, again Christian country. The revival of the cathedral gave hope, orientation and continuity, ending the class struggle, that had dominated Austrian history in the 1920s and 1930s.

#### ***Modern Restoration Serving the Need of the Religious Community***

A key objective of actual restorations is to provide a low-threshold access to the church. Acoustic and climatic regulation and enhancement, better visibility through new illumination, comfortable seats and other improvements are necessary and justified, but they do not convey the message of Christianity.

As with the mentioned historic examples, Christian art has to respond to new needs of spirituality. For spiritual people an individual approach is more important than in earlier times, when shared experience and commonality had a higher range.

Our cathedrals – caused by their changeful history – offer a wide variety of rooms for different needs. Reorganising the churches to provide opportunities for private contemplation and for small, intimate gatherings seem to be helpful.

Furthermore, the visibility of historic Christian art can promote the content of Christian message. The opening of the medieval porch of the south portal (*Singertor*), previously closed and used for storage, replacing the massive copper gates with glass, made the impressive illustration of the conversion of Saul to Paul, his way to faith, clearly visible in public space.

The fragmented window of St Michael in the remote chapel of St Bartholomew was hardly legible. Supplementing the fragment with a modern composition made the story of the Last Judgement, the pondering of souls and redemption understandable again.

### Recovering Abandoned Churches

By way of conclusion, I would like to take a closer look at the aforementioned Trinity Church in Bruck/Mur. Closed under Joseph II., it was used as a stable and barn. In 1817, it was converted into a guest house and, from 1955 to 1999 it was used as an apartment building and afterwards left empty. In 2012 an association was founded to support restoration work, led by Philipp Harnoncourt.<sup>13</sup> The chapel could be reopened on the 7th of June 2020, Trinity Sunday. All changes made after 1794 were removed, the modern windows were bricked up, the roof was rebuilt to its original steepness and the chapel was set to its original shape, wherever possible. Medieval inscriptions were found and restored, but no traces of the original interior could be found. The windows have been redesigned in their original forms, a bench in a tri-leafed shape follows the architecture and offers the opportunity to rest. Amidst the manifold of aimless concrete strips, on which cars and their passengers rush and hurry, in the confusing maze of freeway exits the church now offers hold for the eyes, and – admittedly not easy – the opportunity of rest for traveller’s bodies and souls, and to find an orientation, which is not fixed by a certain city, not by man-made satellites, but by something way beyond.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Wolfgang Zehetner, “The Workshop of St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna,” in *Europäische Bauhütten, Immaterielles Kulturerbe der Menschheit*, ed. Sabine Bengel et al. (Neulingen: Klotz Verlagshaus, 2020), 137-141.

<sup>2</sup> John 2:19.

<sup>3</sup> St Stephen’s in Vienna has got about 6 million visitors a year, and still has 7 daily masses on weekdays and 9 on Sundays.

<sup>4</sup> See Welt des Barock, *Oberösterreichische Landesausstellung 1986*, ed. Helga Litschel (Linz: Land Oberösterreich, Amt d. Oö. Landesregierung, Abt. Kultur, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> See Franz Zehetner, *Studien zur Baugeschichte von St. Ruprecht in Wien* (Vienna: 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas de Celano, *Vita prima di S. Francesco d’ Assisi* (Roma: Tipografia della Pace, 1880), chapter VIII.

<sup>7</sup> See Christian Brugger, “Wandlungen eines Denkmals- die Heiligen-Geis-Kapelle in Bruck an der Mur,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Kunst und Denkmalpflege* LXXI, 2/3 (2017): 254-258.

<sup>8</sup> See Heimo Cerny, “250 Jahre Prandtauerkirche Sonntagberg 1729 – 1979,” in *Festschrift anlässlich des 250jährigen Jubiläums der Kirchweihe* (Sonntagberg: 1979).

<sup>9</sup> He was born as the second son of Leopold I. In 1685, he was proclaimed king of Spain in 1703, as heir of the extinct Spanish Habsburgs, fighting the Bourbon Philipp V. After his brother's death in 1711 he became Ruler of Austria and the other Habsburg countries and was elected Roman Emperor.

<sup>10</sup> See Arthur Saliger, *Maria am Gestade in Wien* (Salzburg: Verlag St Peter, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> See Géza Hajós, *Der malerische Landschaftspark in Laxenburg bei Wien* (Wien: Böhlau, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> See Karl Koncki, *Die Zerstörung des Stephansdomes und sein konstruktiver Wiederaufbau 1945-52* (Wien: 1993), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Philipp Harnoncourt (1931-2020) was an Austrian Theologist, brother of Musician Nikolaus Harnoncourt. He was especially engaged to intensify the dialogue with orthodox churches and granted a founded the art award "1+1+1=" with a focus on artistic representations of the Trinity.



Figure 1 - St Stephen's, "Wiener Neustädter Altar", 1447, © Archiv der Dombauhütte St. Stephan, Nikolaus Studnicka



Figure 2 - Damaged Cathedral, April 1945 © Archiv der Dombauhütte St Stephan

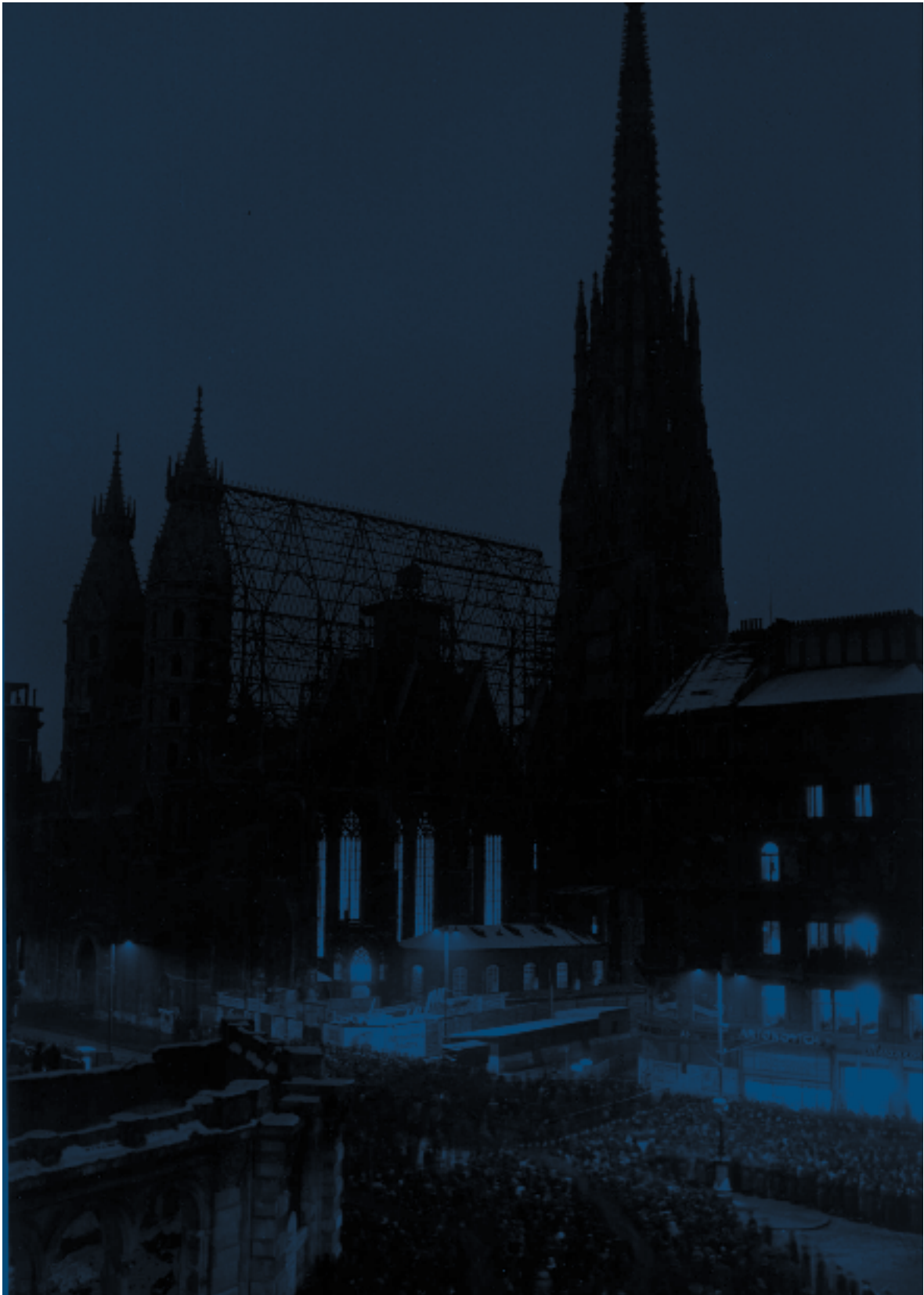


Figure 3 - Believers celebrating the opening of the Cathedral's Nave 1948, while the choir is still closed and the roof under construction. © Archiv der Dombauhütte St Stephan

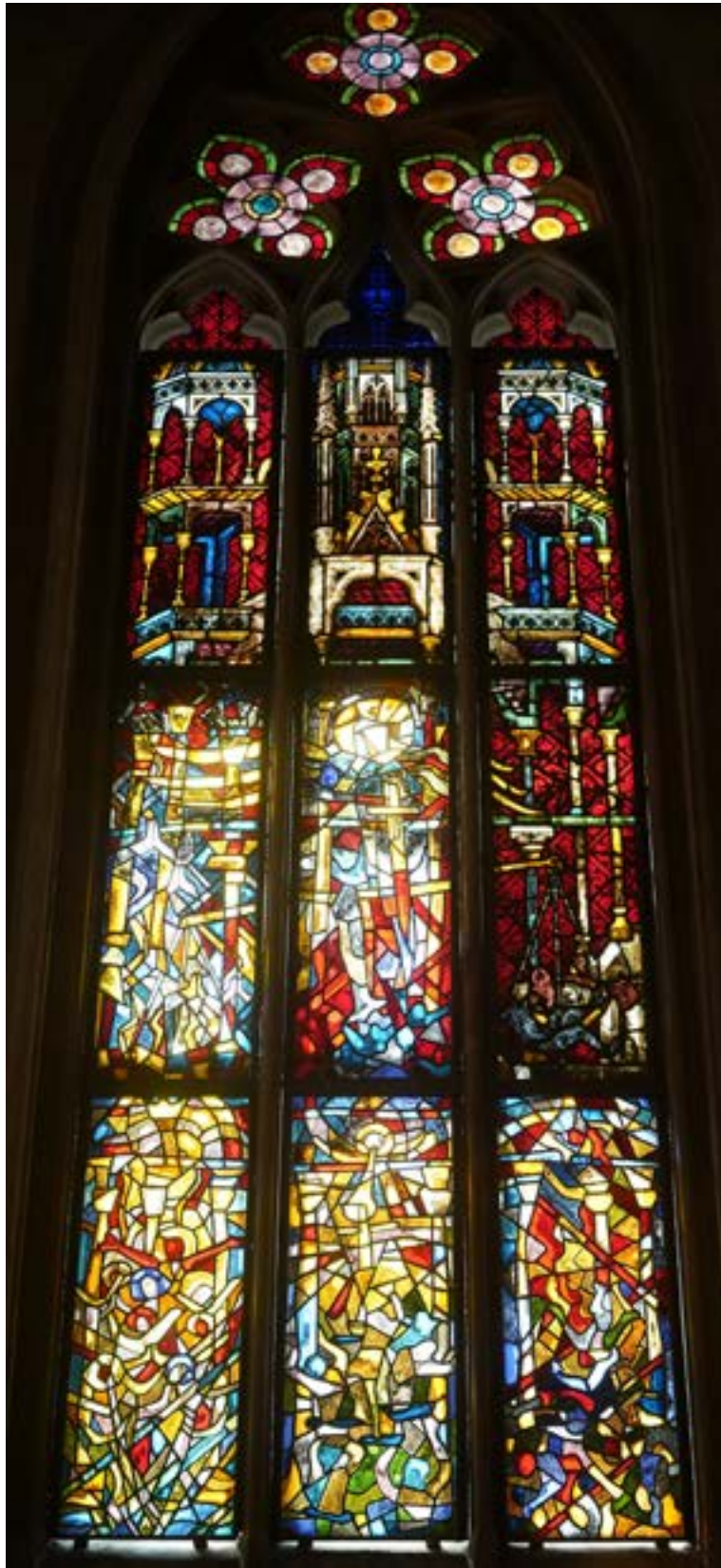


Figure 4 - St Michael's Window, St Stephen's, Chapel of St Bartholomew, 1380, supplements by Peter Baldinger, 2025. © Archiv der Dombauhütte St Stephan, Franz Zehetner



Figure 5 - Singertor, Porch, Glas doors and relief (1365) showing *Paul's transformation on the road to Damascus* © Archiv der Dombauhütte St Stephan, Franz Zehetner



Figure 6 - Trinity Chapel in Bruck/Mur, Austria, after the restoration, 2020 © Andreas Theiner CC-BY-SY4.0



Figure 7 - Trinity Chapel in Bruck/Mur, Austria, after the restoration, 2020 (Alternative: © Leonard Enge CC-BY-SY4.0)

# Out of the Earth [Job 28:5-6]: Making & Conserving our Cultural Mandate

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## Abstract

“God creates *ex nihilo*”; he “speaks and nature comes to be.”

“As for the earth, out of it comes bread; but underneath it is turned up as by fire. Its stones are the place of sapphires, and it has dust of gold.”

“The biblical narrative... calls us to nurture and develop the creation that God has affirmed as good.” Our task of evangelization is communication, a communication embodied in sacred art, rooted in imagination, faith and meaning. “The discipleship of the [maker is shaped through] calling, mentoring, training, and empowerment as uniquely gifted and vital parts of the Body of Christ.”

“Humans create *ex naturam*... out of the pre-existing natural material that God creates.”

“At the Guards’ Chapel, [they] strive to draw closer to God and to each other; memories are honoured, healing is sought and strength is found to carry on.”

Drawing on an affirmation of the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 AD, that “We preserve intact all the written and unwritten traditions of the Church... in the production of representational art,” and noting Old Testament craftsmen nurtured their capacity to take raw material and craft it in the “beauty of holiness,” even as Bezalel fashioned the tabernacle c. 600 BC, this paper reviews the literature on our Cultural Mandate, then draws lessons from the creation of the Guards’ Chapel, its embellishment by George Edmund Street, its destruction and survival, its renewal initially by Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendel, and substantial recreation by Bruce George. These three designers shaped meaning and evangelization, in the context of which Jonathan Louth expands his hypothesis from ECC Malta 2023, that spirituality underlies belief, belief enables confidence, confidence fosters stability, and stability warrants conservation and remembrance, embodied in the building, the artefacts, and in his own work for the chapel since 2020.

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## Introduction

Thank you for this privileged invitation to the Malta European Cathedrals conference. This paper is dedicated to the soldiers of the Brigade of Guards, Household Division on this 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe, with gratitude to all peoples who endure in war or adversity.

## **Maker and Evangelist**

The last of the five Councils of the Church which deliberated development in Sacred Art met in 787AD.<sup>1</sup> Considering sacred icons, this Second Council of Nicaea affirmed, “We preserve intact all the written and unwritten traditions of the Church... entrusted to us. One... consists in the production of representational art, which accords with the history of the preaching of the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> [Whereby faith is a human response engaging intellect, heart, senses, emotion, memory and will.] ... Sacred architecture and art engage the senses so that evangelization and catechetical formation involve the whole human being, [moved] to lifelong conversion and discipleship.”<sup>3</sup>

The biblical narrative first introduces us to God as creator, maker, author and imaginer of all creation. In modern times, we easily think of God as a creative powerful individual, “rather than as a loving community of three persons creating in relationship.”<sup>4</sup>

At the Lausanne forum in 2004, cited here, a ‘Redeeming The Arts’ group tabulated three Trinitarian attributes, to which we can append a set of analogous human characteristics(Fig. 7).<sup>5</sup> As the Trinity embodies Revelation Incarnation Reconciliation, Humans embody Imagination. Because the Trinity is Rational Sensual Relational, so Humans are Responsive.

Where the Trinity engenders Education Discipleship Transformation, Humans are called to Conservation.

Trevor Hart posits an inseverable link between Divine and Human making, since Jesus “takes our flesh with all of its limiting factors and inherent flaws, and through a work of supremely inspired (Spirit-filled) artistry, transfigures it, before handing it back to us in the glorious state which its original maker always intended it to bear.”<sup>6</sup> The early Genesis narrative calls us to nurture and develop a creation that God has affirmed as “good.”

The intrinsic value of the arts, what they contribute to faith communities, is the unique ways in which they move our spirit and shape our thinking: this all falls to our care. The arts enable cross-cultural, inter-generational communication and contextualization. Social and economic barriers are overcome with collaborative art. Art therapies invigorate health and healing.<sup>7</sup> Our human endeavours synthesise imagination, with creative response, then conservation. This synthesis lies at the heart of evangelization. The “cultural mandate”<sup>8</sup> calls us to practice shaping culture and caring for the created order – in effect by conservation and conversation. Conservation is an act of Remembrance; Remembrance evokes Reminiscence, which involves an act of Conversation.

When conserving sacred art, as artists, conservators and architects, we engender dialogue, re-evangelizing those who come into contact with our making. Consistent with the cultural mandate, this includes the natural order around us and the cultural order that we create.<sup>9</sup>

“At this level

creation,  
redemption, and  
re-creation

are shown to be interwoven as activities of the same divine Poet.”<sup>10</sup>

In an analogous, mirror-reflexive, fashion, the artist interweaves

manufacture,  
conservation, and  
restoration.

“So we are to take seriously not only what God has made, but also human making”<sup>11</sup> even as Bezalel fashioned the tabernacle c. 600 BC. “Bezalel and [his deputy architect] Oholiab were called and equipped to lead the faith community in artistry for the tabernacle.<sup>12</sup> ...Bezalel had the ability to take raw material and craft it into something beautiful.<sup>13</sup> But he went further than his mere creative abilities; he also had the skill of collaboration, recognising his need to be complemented by other skilled persons... [by which] he obtained the highest level of workmanship. .... The Lord put in his heart the desire and ability to teach others.<sup>14</sup> The.... discipleship process of Bezalel was to reproduce his knowledge in other gifted people, thus multiplying what the Lord had given him.”<sup>15</sup>

Here in Malta in 2023, I spoke about Mark Dowd’s remarkable book *My Tsunami Journey*:<sup>16</sup>Dowd recalls local villagers faithfully saying, “When all this [destruction of our village, our boats, our livelihood] happened, we thought this temple would be a good place to come to ...[as] a source of stability.”<sup>17</sup>

My hypothesis is that

spirituality underlies belief,  
belief enables confidence,  
confidence fosters stability,  
and stability warrants conservation and remembrance.

Conservation is a consequence of decay and destruction: so, we take part in a transfiguration of God-given yet hand-wrought sacred artefacts, offering them back to God in the “glorious state” of their first creation.<sup>18</sup>

## History

The Royal Military Chapel exhibits just such a sequence of manufacture, conservation, restoration engaging a succession of artists and craftspeople through the generations: known as the Guards’ Chapel, we see a transfiguration from creation, embellishment by George Edmund Street, via destruction and partial survival, to renewal by Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendel, then finally recreation by Bruce George (Fig. 3).

These have shaped both meaning and evangelization. Even the ordinary edifice of 1838 was made glorious not in decoration but in the “Beauty of Holiness,” the spirit with which it was purposed.<sup>19</sup>

When Wellington Barracks was constructed in 1834 a site was allocated at its east end for a place of worship, thanks to Dr William Dakins, Chaplain to the Brigade of Guards. The original Chapel was probably by Sir Frederick Smith with Philip Hardwick.<sup>20</sup> The interior was plain until, “In 1850 a small committee of officers and their friends put up a block of tenements in the nearby Francis Street and made them available at very cheap rents to married soldiers with families... until someone pointed out that it was illegal for officers to rent accommodation to soldiers.”<sup>21</sup>

The War Office bought the building from the committee, which decided “to restore the interior of the chapel and the distinguished architect, George Edmund Street, was commissioned to prepare plans for the construction [in 1877/9] of an apse to form a chancel and re-design the chapel in the Lombardo Byzantine style.”<sup>22</sup> The sacred was made manifest and artistic foundations laid, worthy of listing as a scheduled monument in 1970.

The roof was badly burnt by incendiary bombs in 1940. Then on Sunday 18th June 1944, the chapel was hit by a V1 flying bomb, killing 121 soldiers and civilians. “The chapel was completely destroyed with the exception of the apse, but the six silver candlesticks were unremoved by the explosion and the candles remained burning (Fig. 1).”<sup>23</sup>

The destruction and decay of the place, wrought by human warfare, is remembered because it recalls the loss of those killed here, and the many lost in conflicts elsewhere: “a symbol for an important truth from which we can all draw comfort and hope,”<sup>24</sup> the Chapel embodies love between comrades in battle and adversity.

The Chapel Committee now has the care of a building that is fundamentally a new construction and a new architectural conception.<sup>25</sup> Goodhart-Rendel’s new Cloister of 1956 commences memorialisation and initiates renewal.<sup>26</sup> He determined to retain Street’s polychromatic, narrative<sup>27</sup> apse, original altar and font: yet, perhaps in the hubris of comprehensively clearing the bombed remnants, perhaps in the patriarchal grandeur of Goodhart-Rendel’s Lutyen-esque Edwardianism, his scheme fitted neither the spirit of the Post-War age, nor the seismic change in social order to which war had brought the congregation. Furthermore, it did not sit well with the ‘Re-evangelization of Society’ in an utterly, inescapably changed world.

It fell to Bruce George c.1960 to forge together past and future, to manifest that which preceded him – apse, altar, font, memorial cloister, cenotaph, and John Clayton’s stained glass – and to proclaim that which was to come<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 3).

## **Significance**

These designers – G.E. Street, H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, and Bruce George – are the three particular phases of special interest that warrant heritage listing as Grade II\*. Whilst the two surviving “fragments” technically permit the listing in 1970, it is the skill of Bruce George’s 1963 Chapel that forms the fundamental matter in our story of conservation and remembrance forming a basis for re-evangelization.

He enshrines the many shattered tablets and monuments into the new foundations, literally constructing the future on an honouring of the past. He inscribes the names of those pre-war persons into the limestone of the West wall (Fig.1 Bottom), making permanent their memorialisation.

George's whitened box is simultaneously a backdrop for the muted polychromatic regimental colours (Fig. 4), which he knew would successively occupy the walls of the nave, together with the successive accretion of commemorative crosses in his distinctive design.

The subject of some archival research – by Robert Bowles, structural engineer – it is inconceivable that George kept any of the east quire wall. What was a diagonal plan of two attached pillars and a central shaft, either side of the apse (Fig. 2 Middle & Bottom), connected Street's new apsidal arch to the original alignment of an open chancel/transept arcade. George converts that bundle of pillars into a plain architrave arch. The marble facets of the new musicians' galleries are set back by a specific distance, in front of which George erects a monumental proscenium screen wall.<sup>29</sup> There is now an absolute zone of architectonic influence, perceived immediately upon entering the Chapel, establishing a 'First Layer of View', which cannot be encroached upon (Fig. 4 Top Left).

In this *First Layer of View*, Bruce George creates a scene-setting with almost no other visual complexity: the Apse, sacred Sanctuary, secular Choirstalls, become the focus of the Chapel. The extent of this cone-shaped view from the narthex was described first by Jonathan Louth, and then agreed with Harrison & Harrison's representatives during the new organ project.

George's *Second Layer of View*, filled with subtle complexities, is revealed as one proceeds up the nave from the west end (Fig. 4 Top Right). The gradually emerging wider-angle reveals the new organ front, nestling respectfully behind Bruce George's proscenium containing two vast, cast aluminium sculpture screens by Geoffrey Clarke (Fig. 4 Bottom). Clarke's screens – *Passive Standard* to the North and *Active Standard* to the South – were originally day-lit from both faces. They recall the regiments in Barracks and on battlefield at the drumhead altar. Thus it was incumbent upon me, in assisting a new organ project, to improve the legibility of Clarke's work.

The previous organ, which sat behind the northern sculpture, had occasioned brown-gold pierced hardboard panels, backing the screens, blocking the sense of light and space, obscuring the contrasts of the sculpture (Fig. 5 Top Left). I introduced an acoustically neutral, white-coated, aluminium mesh, which allows the sculptural forms to read as if there were daylight behind, while minimizing the view of musicians moving around behind each screen (Fig. 5 Top Middle & Right). The mesh, allowing a view through, restores the original perception of the entire volume of Bruce George's hall church.

Two consequences of the organ project gave me a chance to honour Bruce George's period in a manner that develops his twentieth century style as Chapel architect with my own twenty first century imprint.

Where George's guard rails on each gallery were just 72cm high, Chapel Committee was obliged to raise this to 110cm. Above the considerable solid black painted steel section of George's gallery, I developed a clamped balustrade in mirror-polished stainless steel, tensioned with minimally thick, stranded, cables (Fig. 5 Bottom left). The stainless steel continually, ephemerally, changes between materiality and immateriality, between Christ on Earth and Christ in Heaven: the immateriality modulates with daylight and the viewer's position,<sup>30</sup> so the original white marble and black gallery frontage remain the permanent and dominant features.

The old organ was located above the gallery: the timpanist and tuba player had previously sat there, with the main brass ensemble on the other gallery. The new organ filled the North gallery so extra space was needed on the South side. I created a temporary timber structure, with demountable balustrading enabling the timpani to be lifted on and off the new playing platform: the platform 'sat' above the headroom of the gallery stairs. Once the size and efficacy of the platform had been proved, I obtained listed building consent to create a permanent steel structure, with a swing-gated balustrade (Fig. 5 Top & Bottom Right). Metallic grey elements, set high at the back of the gallery, merge with the chapel walls, articulated by hardwood facings to chime with the lacquered tin and stained wood of the new organ pipes.

These design interventions gave me opportunity to develop a cruciform motif recalling George's unique 1960s design while unmistakably signifying a fresh period in the Chapel's architectural development (Fig. 5 Bottom Left & Right).

These embellishments become liturgical emblems within the Chancel, in the spirit with which "Pope Benedict XVI called attention to the relevance of sacred art for the new evangelization..."<sup>31</sup> From 1880, further embellishments had been continually added as memorials by Chapel Committee: so too, since George's reconstruction, Committee has overseen a continual memorialization of campaigns and sacrifices of war: a remembrance of love and relationship between humans in times of desperate conflict. Establishing Chapel as a place of recollection, then conserving it decade-for-decade, creates a home for the grief and for the thankfulness of subsequent generations, re-evangelizing the descendants of those who have gone before.

## **Adverbs**

This 190 year story of Guards' Chapel embodies what David Stancliffe describes as a language of shaping and becoming.<sup>32</sup> Trevor Hart writes, "Imagination is capable of moving us closer to the truth about the world as we look through the lens of Scripture. As an imaginative activity, art too can open our eyes to see old things in new ways. [Faith communities need to cultivate] an imagination well rooted in the biblical narrative and the images of Scripture."<sup>33</sup>

Our calling, experienced also as conservators and architects, is elegantly described when Pope Paul VI, speaking to artists, not just Catholic artists, said, "We need you... in order to carry out our ministry ... Your art consists in grasping treasures from the heavenly realm of the spirit and clothing them in words, colours, forms —making [these heavenly treasures] accessible."<sup>34</sup>

Stancliffe warns us to be vigilant and diligent in our care. He sees hurdles in the realities of information and artistic media surrounding our environment. Where today's digital

photographs, sound recordings, visual art, and a high proportion of architectural drawings are computer-generated, shaping and becoming now “sit uncomfortably”. He fears communication has overtaken the orator, leaving us needing the artist.<sup>35</sup>

“Why do I tell you all this?” says Stancliffe, rhetorically, “To remind us of the entwined, imaginative constructs behind the way in which we have come to celebrate and interpret what its author, Theodore Andrea Cook, called *The Curves of Life*.<sup>36</sup> ...Cook describes the way in which the open-ended curve of the spiral [and helix lie] at the heart of life, evident in the curves of water and light in the natural world,<sup>37,38</sup> then in the horns of animals and the structure of shells,<sup>39</sup> and then taken up in architectural drawings [on] the Golden Section by Leonardo and Dürer, in analysis of the human skeleton, and realised in constructions like [a] spiral staircase<sup>40</sup> and springing of a vault <sup>41</sup> (Fig. 6 Right).” <sup>42</sup>

These “curves of life” intrinsic to creation, the stuff of humanity even in the form of our DNA molecules, are manifest in rites of the Church as expressions of baptism<sup>43</sup> (Fig. 6 left) and new life integral in Easter celebrations.<sup>44</sup>

Stancliffe stresses, “We must state here that art, in and of itself, cannot transform; only Christ can transform the human condition. With that clarification [we see] the arts allow for diversity as they “witness” in verbal and nonverbal ways to the truth about the human condition and incarnationally ‘show’ God’s redemptive purposes.” <sup>45</sup>

Stancliffe cites *The Master and his Emissary* by Iain McGilchrist,<sup>46</sup> “Much can be learnt about the difference between the two spheres [of the human brain] from those who have had one part destroyed by physical accident... or lobotomy... The difference between the two spheres, [McGilchrist] posits, seems to be not one of function <sup>47</sup>– [not] what each can do [as the nouns of life] – but... [of manner] in the adverbs of life... – the how we do things rather than what we do – being important in discovering the essentially distinctive nature of our human existence...”<sup>48</sup>

So, Stancliffe’s question for us is this: “is the craft that [we] practise purely functional? Or is it in some way sacramental, embodying the seeds of growth, development and change?<sup>49,50,51</sup> In [Stancliffe’s opinion],<sup>52</sup> it is undoubtedly sacramental, and [we]... are the midwives, the priests and the guardians of the becoming world. ...As with so many human acts, the clue is not so much in WHAT is done as in HOW it is done.<sup>53</sup> Do [we] work respectfully, attentively and graciously?”<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

Contemporary images, words, sounds engulf the mind, will, senses and emotions. Modern liturgy, catechesis and evangelization “are often bereft of beauty.” While the surrounding culture constantly invades sensory experiences, sensory expressions of faith within the Christian community have decreased significantly.<sup>55</sup>

Because of that decline in what were once commonly and widely shared understandings of sensory symbols, I talked in 2024, at Pisa,<sup>56</sup> about how the Carmelite Order in Britain meets the decline in traditional pilgrimage with a programme of “Carmel in the City”: a modern dialectic of spirituality; bound less to “sensory place”; aimed towards the “verbs and adverbs of life”; converting pilgrims to retreatants, retreatants to supporters.

Building relationships with latent and nascent supporters, often new migrants bringing energy and fresh cultural perspectives, we can engender intricate sensory interactions and collaborations between clergy, craftspeople, artists, congregations and visitors,  
who, being offered a sense of ownership,  
are brought to a place of understanding,  
and respond with a spirit of responsibility,  
which forges a legacy of adherents:  
a legacy that is God-centred and sustainable into the future.

James Bowder<sup>57</sup> describes the new Guards' Chapel organ as a symbol sustaining into the future, an honouring of a long tradition of permanence, crafted beauty, and liturgical significance, that could last for 90 years before needing refurbishment. In this he evokes an on-going dialogue between generations, a conversation across time encompassing reminiscence and remembrance.

### **Endpiece**

We can see the organ project, its manufacture, conservation, restoration fundamentally as human reflection of the Divine Poet, at the heart of the Cultural Mandate and the Sacred Arts, and thus at the heart of Re-Evangelization.

### **Re-Evangelization**

The biblical narrative as I first described introduces us to God as author of all creation, “as a loving community of three persons creating in relationship.” The tabulated Trinitarian attributes, can be matched with a set of analogous human characteristics.<sup>58</sup> (Fig.7)

Jim Memory, writing for the Lausanne Movement, touches on an emerging, sustainable, God-centred future when he states that “Many see Europe as thoroughly post-Christian or secular, yet the reality is much more complex than that.” He is talking in a post-pandemic age, when “out of the spotlight, an extraordinary re-evangelization of Europe is taking place” that arises from energy and fresh cultural perspectives.<sup>59</sup>

His article continues “The migration of Christians from other locations and the formation of diaspora churches are nothing new in Europe. European diaspora churches are part of European history. Many towns and cities across Europe have substantial European diaspora communities and historic diaspora churches.”<sup>60</sup> Jim Memory relates how “over the last two generations, migration from the Majority World has seen a significant number of new diaspora churches being planted across Europe.”<sup>61</sup>

“Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there [were] signs that diaspora and native European Church leaders in towns and cities across the continent have been supporting one another. These connections may prove to be an important stimulus to further collaboration going forward.”<sup>62</sup>

I recall that David Stancliffe also refers to the pandemic exposing how human relationships of collaboration and support were proven in ‘togetherness’ when he writes, “But in the years of Covid lockdown, where technicians pieced together various individually recorded tracks... , were we fooled?...We were longing for real music, art we could see and touch, and sacraments where a congregation was experiencing corporate transformation...”<sup>63</sup>

“This sensory dissonance offers one, among many, challenges for the new evangelization. For clearly the sensory dissonance between the immersive experience of a visual culture on the one hand, and the Church’s life of faith on the other, touches the very heart of the Church’s mission to evangelize the culture.”<sup>64</sup>

Jim Memory adds “Europe’s younger generation seems so fragile and confused, and their future so uncertain. Yet perhaps this is precisely what God needs: a younger generation who are willing to look beyond human politics for the answers to what abundant life looks like. They need our prayers, our encouragement, and the freedom to use their gifts for God’s glory. It will not have escaped your attention that most of the Christian diaspora community in Europe are also young.”<sup>65</sup>

Whether speaking to believers or non-believers, Jim Memory provides a last word: “The future of the Church in Europe may well depend on the emergence of a truly European intercultural Christianity.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, our assertion here today, is that the continual making, re-making and conservation of Sacred Art could, *prima facie*, play its part to evangelize and re-evangelize this youthful intercultural Europe in the 21st century.<sup>67</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Deacon Paul O. Iacono, *Bernini’s Bronze Sculpture of Four “Giants” of the Church*, <https://fraangelicoinstitute.com/2019/05/02/berninis-bronze-sculpture-of-four-giants-of-the-church/> (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2019).

<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1 Top Right) The Guards’ Chapel mosaics closely follow the Byzantine style in the half-dome, then the European tradition in the narrative panels

<sup>3</sup> Jem, Sullivan, “The Beauty of Holiness: Sacred Art and the New Evangelization,” cited in *Tools for the New Evangelization*, <https://stpatrikstudios.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/new-evangelization.pdf> Gen.Ed. Michelle K. Borrás, Catholic Information Service, The New Evangelization series, Tools for the New Evangelization Appendix A (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> September 2012). See also, *The Witness of Christian Art History* (Catechism of the Catholic Church CCC, 1160).

<sup>4</sup> *Lausanne forum, Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God’s Creational Intention*, <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/redeeming-arts-restoration-arts-gods-creational-intention-lop-46>, Lausanne forum, online paper, by the Issue Group on this topic at the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization hosted by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, kn Pattaya, Thailand, September 2 to October 5, 2004 (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> September 2025). Cf. *A Trinitarian Foundation*.

<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 7) Ibid as expanded by Jonathan Louth with translations

<sup>6</sup> Trevor, Hart, *Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth*, cited in *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*. <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/redeeming-arts-restoration-arts-gods-creational-intention-lop-46> (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 1-26. cf. Lausanne, 2004 *Art and Incarnation*.

<sup>7</sup> *Lausanne forum, Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention. Cf. Transformation.*

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 1:28.

<sup>9</sup> *Lausanne forum, Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention. Cf. Art and Creation.*

<sup>10</sup> Hart, *Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth, Cf. Art and Incarnation.*

<sup>11</sup> *Lausanne forum, Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention. Cf. Art and Creation.*

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 31:39.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 31:3.

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 35:34.

<sup>15</sup> *Lausanne forum, Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention. Cf. The Work and Walk of Bezalel the Artist.*

<sup>16</sup> Mark, Dowd, *My Tsunami Journey: The Quest for God in a Broken World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock 2022), 84.

<sup>17</sup> Louth, *Unless the Lord build the House - Conserving Spirituality in a Busy Space*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Hart, *Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth. Cf. Lausanne forum, Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention. Art and Creation.*

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 96:9.

<sup>20</sup> Images of the early chapel and embellishment may be found online at <http://salviatimosaic.blogspot.com/2013/06/royal-military-chapel-wellington.html> - it may be presumed that there will have been some Roman Italianate model in mind, in much the same way that the Royal Military Chapel at the army's officer training academy in Sandhurst was conceived and constructed by the Royal Engineers.

<sup>21</sup> Deiniol Morgan, <https://www.householddivision.org.uk/guards-chapel-about> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid (Fig. 1 Top Left) in remembrance, these candles are lit at all liturgical services in Chapel.

<sup>24</sup> Deiniol Morgan, <https://www.householddivision.org.uk/guards-chapel-welcome> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025).

<sup>25</sup> Historic England's listing description entry number 1066441 is among one of the best, cf. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/advanced-search> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025).

<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 3 Top Right) The Memorial Cloister now forms a daily entry to chapel from Birdcage Walk.

<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 1 Top Right also visible in Top Left image) Bearing of the Cross, The Crucifixion, Descent from the Cross; cartoons by John Clayton, mosaics by Salviati.

<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 3) Bruce George's Chapel slightly enlarges the nineteenth century chapel footprint to create a modern Hall Church.

<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 4 Bottom Left & Right) The modern Chancel Proscenium sub-divides the Hall Church and frames the Sanctuary Arch and Apse.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Fig. 5 Top Right with Fig. 4 Bottom Left to see the change in visual materiality of the new stainless balustrading.

<sup>31</sup> Sullivan, "The Beauty of Holiness: Sacred Art and the New Evangelization." Cf. *From Seeing to Contemplation to Adoration*.

<sup>32</sup> David Stancliffe, *Preserving the Roots of Craftsmanship and Creativity in a Digital Age*, <https://www.mastercarvers.co.uk/events.htm> paper presented on 1st August 2022. Art & Ornament colloquy at Belfrey Hall, York, held by the Master Carvers' Association for the tercentenary of Grinling Gibbons' death (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025).

<sup>33</sup> Hart, *Through the Arts: Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth*. Cf. *Lausanne forum, Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God's Creational Intention. Art and Creation*.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher West, *Art and the New Evangelization: How Beauty Will Save the World*, <https://media.ascensionpress.com/2018/04/24/art-and-the-new-evangelization-how-beauty-will-save-the-world/#:~:text=Beauty%20has%20the%20ability%20to,real%20beauty%20to%20do%20it> April 24, 2018, Ascension Press West, 2018 (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025). Cf. *The Need for Art in Evangelization*.

<sup>35</sup> Stancliffe, *Preserving the Roots of Craftsmanship and Creativity in a Digital Age*.

<sup>36</sup> Theodore Andrea Cook, *The Curves of Life* (London: Constable, 1914 reprinted 1979 Dover).

<sup>37</sup> Stancliffe, *Preserving the Roots of Craftsmanship and Creativity in a Digital Age*. Cf. *A rainbow over Montegiove GR, Italy*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Cf. *A Waterfall Near the River Neda* (Greece: Figaleia).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Fossil Shell in the Collection* (Dorset: Ford Abbey).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Cf. *The Spiral Staircase, Salle Capitulaire, Cathedral of St Lazaire* (Burgundy: Autun).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Cf. *The Springing of the Vault in the Vladislav Hall of Prague Castle (1493-1502)*.

<sup>42</sup> Stancliffe, *Preserving the Roots of Craftsmanship and Creativity in a Digital Age*.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Cf. *The Spire of Borromini's St Ivo della Sapienza in Rome*.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2009), cited in Stancliffe, *Preserving the Roots of Craftsmanship and Creativity in a Digital Age*.

<sup>47</sup> Emboldening by author, italic emphasis as cited source

<sup>48</sup> Stancliffe, *Preserving the Roots of Craftsmanship and Creativity in a Digital Age*.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Sculpture by Emily Young*.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Christ figure, Peter Ball*.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Pastoral staff, Musée de Cluny, Paris*.

<sup>52</sup> These verbal and non-verbal ways intersect with what Stancliffe terms “the adverbs of life – the how we do things rather than what we do.”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Capitalization emphasis as cited source.

<sup>54</sup> Stancliffe, *Preserving the Roots of Craftsmanship and Creativity in a Digital Age*. Cf. Anthony Gormley, sculpted figure in the crypt of Winchester Cathedral.

<sup>55</sup> Sullivan, “The Beauty of Holiness: Sacred Art and the New Evangelization.” Cf. *The Challenge of a “Sensory Dissonance.”*

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Louth, *Though the mountains may be removed - material and immaterial significance at the Friars Aylesford, transactions pending from Patrimonio Universale - Beni Religiosi di Interesse Culturale, proceedings of the European Cathedrals Pisa Conference 17-18 November 2023*.

<sup>57</sup> James M.H. Bowder, OBE - the serving Major General Commanding the Household Division and hence Senior Officer London District on the Guards’ Chapel Committee - during a Service of Thanksgiving for Donors to the Organ Fund in the presence of HRH Princess Anne, the Princess Royal on 27th March 2027.

<sup>58</sup> (Fig. 7) *Lausanne forum, Redeeming the Arts: The Restoration of the Arts to God’s Creational Intention*. Cf. *A Trinitarian Foundation: the human responses and translations are added by Jonathan Louth*.

<sup>59</sup> Jim Memory, *Europe 2021: A Missiological Report* <https://lausanne.org/about/blog/the-extraordinary-re-evangelization-of-europe> article extract, 14 October 2021 (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025), emboldened emphasis as cited source cf. Will European churches wake up to what God is doing across the continent?

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Intercultural Christianity: The Future of Europe?*

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Stancliffe, *Preserving the Roots of Craftsmanship and Creativity in a Digital Age*.

<sup>64</sup> Sullivan, “The Beauty of Holiness: Sacred Art and the New Evangelization.” Cf. *The Challenge of a “Sensory Dissonance.”*

<sup>65</sup> Memory, *Europe 2021: A Missiological Report*. Cf. *Releasing the Next Generation into Leadership*.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Cf. *Intercultural Christianity: The Future of Europe?*

<sup>67</sup> Further research expanding this short paper are also cited in online articles listed in the bibliography: Memory, 2017, and Moyo, 2021.




Figure 1 - Nicaean Artistry and Remembrance, Top Left: The High Altar Candlesticks , Top Right: G.E. Street's Polychromatic Apse Bottom: HRH Princess Anne & Organ Team, Top Left: Jonathan Louth ArConsulting, Top Right: Jonathan Louth ArConsulting, Bottom: Guards' Association APOLOND


Thursday, June 20, 2013

### Royal Military Chapel, Wellington Barracks


The chapel was built in 1838 and it has served the seven Regiments of the Household Division. It is the only remaining military chapel in London.



G.E. Street remodeled the chapel in 1877-78.



1882 Interior drawing



1899 photograph

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By 1867, Antonio Salviati had already installed Venetian mosaics in more than fifty Catholic and Protestant Churches in England including on the altars, the walls, the choirs, the pavements, and the baptismal fonts. - Sheldon Barr, Venetian Glass Mosaics: 1860-1917 p. 28

#### Company Nomenclature

1859-66 Salviati Dott. Antonio fu Bartolomeo (est. 1861)

1866-72 Societa Anonima per azioni Salviati e. Compagnie (Anglo-Italian partnership)

1872-77 Venice and Murano Glass and Mosaic Co. Ltd. (Salviati and Company) (renamed only)

1877-83 Salviati e. Co. (or sometimes Salviati and Burke) for mosaics & Salviati dott. Antonio for other artistic glass

1883-96 Salviati dott. Antonio was sold to and operated by Barovier without Salviati, but sold wares exclusively to Salviati e. Co.

1883-1890 Salviati e. Co. continued to make mosaics and sell the Barovier made artistic glass. Upon Antonio Salviati's 1890 death, his sons and daughter continued operations as Dott. Antonio Salviati e. C.

1896 The Barovier operated Salviati dott. Antonio was renamed Artisti Barovier. Giulio Salviati & Co. was established to make glassware, while the retail shop Salviati & C. opened.

1903 Giulio Salviati & Co. and Dott. Antonio Salviati e. C. merged into Erede dott. A. Salviati & C. after Giulio's death.

1920 Firm renamed Salviati & C. when Silvio Salviati left.

1965 After WWII, the firm was reorganized as Salviati & C. s.p.a.

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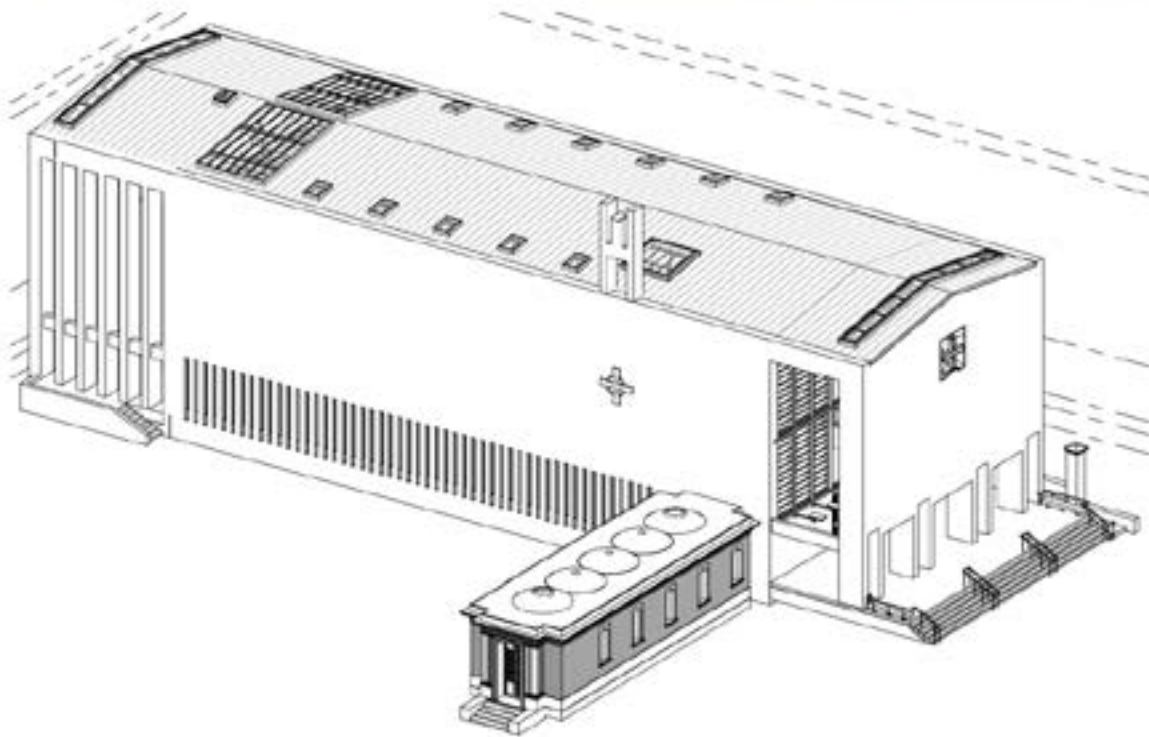


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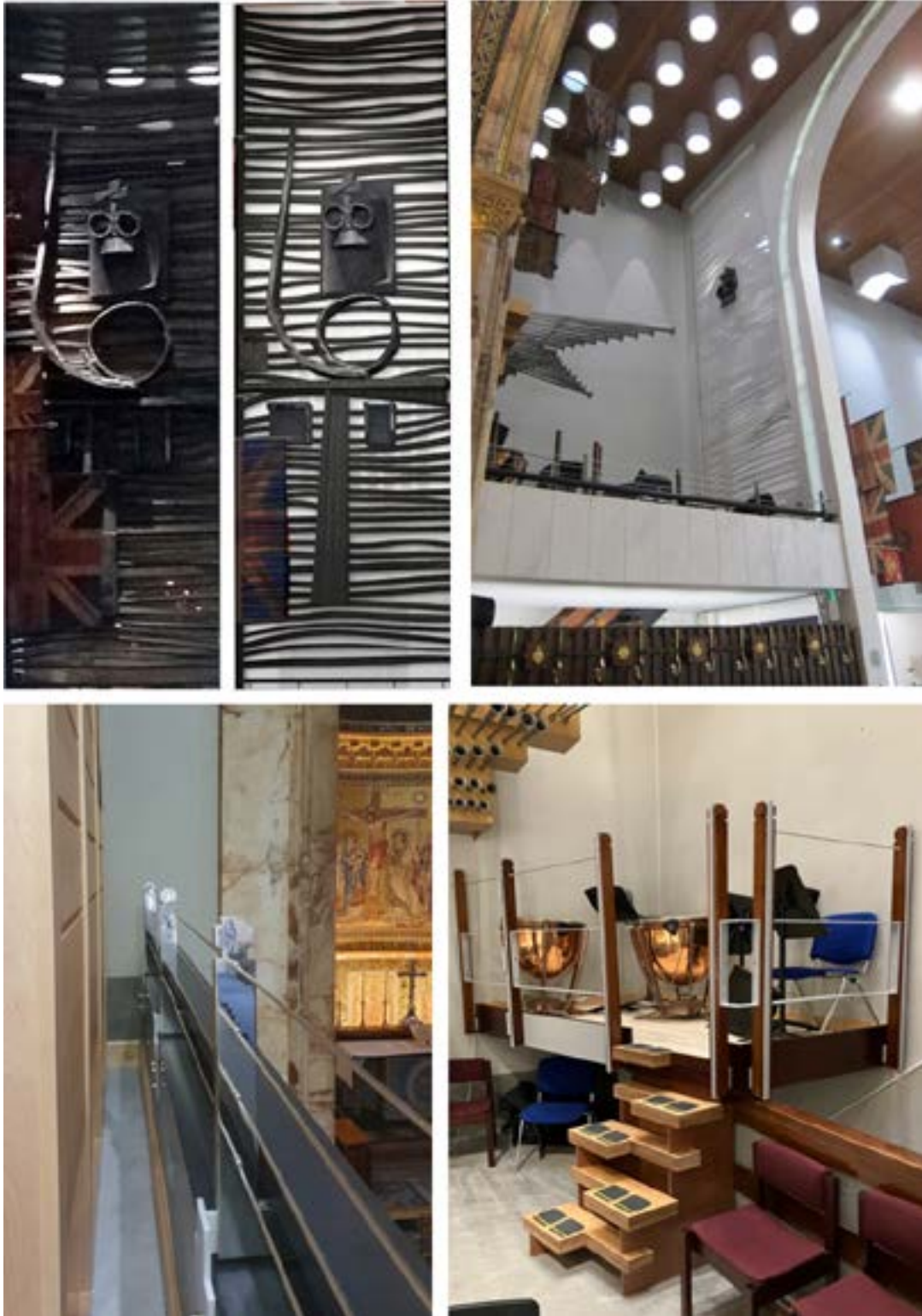


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<b>Father</b> ☼ Padre ☼	<b>Son</b> ☼ Figlio ☼	<b>Holy Spirit</b> ☼ Spirito Santo ☼	<b>Humanity</b> ☼ Umanità ☼
<b>Revelation</b> ☼ Rivelazione ☼	<b>Incarnation</b> ☼ Incarnazione ☼	<b>Reconciliation</b> ☼ Riconciliazione ☼	<b>Imagination</b> ☼ Immaginazione ☼
<b>Rational</b> ☼ Razionale ☼	<b>Sensual</b> ☼ Sensuale ☼	<b>Relational</b> ☼ Relazionale ☼	<b>Responsive</b> ☼ Responsivo ☼
<b>Education</b> ☼ Educazione ☼	<b>Discipleship</b> ☼ Discepolato ☼	<b>Transformation</b> ☼ Trasformazione ☼	<b>Conservation</b> ☼ Conservazione ☼

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Jonathan Louth from <https://lausanne.org>

# Sacred Art – Sacred Mission: The Spiritual Legacy of Giving Back. A Decade-Long Collaboration between Bastioni, Association for the Study and Research of Artworks, and the Mircea Maria Gerard Foundation

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*Mircea Maria Gerard Foundation, Florence, Italy*

## Abstract

This paper explores a decade-long collaboration between the Florence-based Bastioni Association and the Mircea Maria Gerard Foundation, established in memory of Flemish conservator Mircea Maria Gerard. Through a series of restoration projects carried out between 2016 and 2024, this partnership has used sacred art conservation not only to safeguard cultural heritage but also to re-engage spiritual narratives for a contemporary audience.

Rooted in Christian values, each conservation project proposed by the Foundation encouraged both established and emerging professionals to reflect on themes such as humility, death, life, faith and healing, charity, and prayer—without imposing doctrine. The result was an unexpected openness among conservators to engage with faith not as ideology, but as meaning.

Contrasting historical patronage—once rooted in devotion and salvation—with today’s often image-driven sponsorship models, the paper invites reflection on how acts of giving can be rooted not in visibility, but in vulnerability. Through this lens, the act of conservation becomes an act of re-evangelization: not by preaching, but by revealing beauty, humanity, and the sacred through silent, meticulous care.

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## Introduction

Each year, the themes proposed by the International Conference on European Cathedrals grow increasingly thought-provoking. The 2025 edition, titled *Sacred Art Conservation as a Vehicle of Re-Evangelization*, presents a particularly challenging topic for those trained in the rigorous, empirical field of cultural heritage conservation. While theological discourse may fall outside the formal scope of conservation practice, it would be disingenuous to deny that decades spent restoring sacred images have not shaped a deeper understanding of how Christian iconography is perceived and internalised by the public.

This paper explores the theme of re-evangelization through sacred art from the unique perspectives of a conservator-restorer and an arts benefactor. The term re-evangelization implies a renewal of faith among those who have grown distant from religious traditions. Yet faith, by its nature, is personal and intimate. Attempting to trace or measure another's faith journey lies outside the boundaries of technical expertise. Therefore, this reflection is rooted in lived experience, offering a narrative grounded in conservation work undertaken in ecclesiastical settings.

Malta, the conference's host, has long held a personal resonance for the author. It was within the hallowed walls of St John's Cathedral that a formative conservation experience took place—the restoration of the Auvergne Chapel—where art, history, and belief were in quiet dialogue.

### **Bastioni Association and the Mircea Maria Gerard Foundation**

Based in Florence, the Bastioni Association for the Study and Research of Artworks was founded in 2005. It functions as a multidisciplinary space combining scientific methodology with the creative insight needed for complex conservation tasks. The Association provides a platform for emerging conservators, welcoming collaboration across experience levels.

In 2016, a young Flemish conservator named Mircea Maria Gerard completed a formative training period at Bastioni. He was deeply sensitive and talented, leaving a lasting impression on all who worked with him. Tragically, Mircea took his own life later that same year.

Following his passing, the Mircea Maria Gerard Foundation was established by his husband, Luke Olbrich—then serving as director of PayPal. Though professionally immersed in the corporate world, Mr Olbrich had a longstanding passion for history, art, and culture. Seeking to honour Mircea's memory in a meaningful way, he approached Bastioni with a proposal: to collaborate on conservation projects dedicated to safeguarding sacred artworks, and in doing so, commemorate the life and spirit of a beloved partner.

Thus, began a joint initiative: the Foundation would sponsor cultural heritage interventions, while Bastioni would propose and coordinate the projects, manage their execution, and promote the results. Under Mr Olbrich's guidance, themes for each project cycle were drawn from core Christian values such as humility, death, life, faith and healing, charity, and prayer. These themes, reflective of both mourning and hope, framed each conservation proposal submitted by Bastioni's members—from young graduates to experienced professionals.

As articulated by Olbrich, “We must give back, in both tangible and intangible ways—the tangible being the beauty of recovering a fading narrative, and the intangible, the healing that doing so symbolizes.”

### **A Meeting of Two Worlds**

The early stages of the collaboration between Bastioni and the MMG Foundation were marked by a subtle tension—a quiet, respectful contrast between two worldviews. Luke Olbrich approached conservation from a place of profound conviction. He viewed the restoration of sacred artworks

as acts imbued with spiritual and emotional healing. In his vision, the themes—faith, humility, death, life—were not abstract ideals, but lived truths.

For Daniela Murphy, founder of Bastioni, conservation work must be approached through the lens of the scientific method. Treatments are guided by analytical precision, material evidence, and ethical protocols. To integrate spiritual meaning into this process initially seemed to her like an intrusion of subjectivity.

The founder of Bastioni herself recalls responding to Luke’s early suggestions with quiet scepticism—feeling both moved by the sincerity of his vision and uncertain about its place in conservation practice. Yet it was precisely in this tension that the collaboration found its strength. The dialogue that unfolded between empirical expertise and personal belief allowed the work to evolve in unexpected, beautiful ways. Over time, scepticism gave way to trust, and trust to shared purpose.

This convergence did not dilute the science—it deepened the meaning. It reminded the conservators that every brushstroke, every layer of varnish removed, could carry not only technical significance but emotional resonance. And for Luke, the steady discipline of conservation grounded his grief in action and gave shape to memory.

### **Rethinking Patronage**

Historically, patrons commissioned sacred art as acts of devotion or penance. In contrast, modern benefaction is often driven by branding, visibility, or fiscal incentives. While corporate sponsorship remains vital to cultural heritage preservation, the meaning of the art itself can be compromised when its sacred dimension is obscured by commercial aims.

The MMG Foundation’s projects diverge from this trend. Their focus lies not in publicity, but in quiet reflection, vulnerability, and meaning. The spiritual themes proposed for each project are not imposed but offered as contemplative frames. The conservators’ responses have often exceeded expectations, embracing the challenge with thoughtfulness and depth.

### **Selected Projects (2016–2024)**

*Humility*: Fountain Putto with Dolphin. Michelozzo courtyard, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. During World War II, the original Putto with Dolphin by Andrea del Verrocchio was relocated indoors and in 1959 a replica by bronze sculptor Bruno Bearzi was installed in its place.

**Head Conservator:** Daniela Murphy Corella

**Fabbrica Palazzo Vecchio:** G. Caselli, P. Ferrara, P. Contini, S. Ragazzini

A replica of Verrocchio’s Renaissance bronze sculpture sits atop a fountain in the Michelozzo courtyard. Annual maintenance, often overlooked by sponsors for its lack of spectacle, became the first project under the MMG Foundation. The quiet, repetitive work of preservation served as an expression of humility—a foundational yet often invisible virtue in conservation.

*Death: Funeral of St Albert of Trapani, 1613 by Bernardino Monaldi, pupil of Bernardino Poccetti. Oil on panel. Basilica of *il Carmine*, Florence, Italy.*

**Head Conservators:** Daniela Murphy Corella, Caterina Canetti.

**Scientific Investigations:** Ottaviano Caruso, Thierry Radelet, Marcello Sampinato.

**Art Historian Superintendency Florence:** Daniele Rapino.

This oil painting depicts death not as rupture, but as passage. Restoration coincided with public engagement, as scaffolding was opened to visitors. Many were visibly moved by witnessing the re-emergence of beauty from beneath layers of grime—a poignant metaphor for the redemptive power of conservation.

*Life: Nativity, by Francesco Gambaccani 1782, Oil on panel. Basilica of *il Carmine*, Florence, Italy.*

**Head Conservators:** Nicholas Castelli e Natalia Materassi.

**Scientific Investigations:** Ottaviano Caruso.

**Art Historian Superintendency Florence:** Maria Maugeri.

Restored in Bastioni's laboratory by a recent graduate and his mentor, this painting emphasises light as a symbol of divine presence. The act of collaboration between generations underscored the continuity of life and learning in the field of conservation.

*Faith and Healing: Archangel Raphael and Tobias, bas-relief in marble and stucco, 1698, by Giovanni Baratta, *Santo Spirito*, Florence, Italy.*

**Head Conservators:** Chiara Piani, Ana Gomez Prieto.

**Scientific Investigations:** Ottaviano Caruso.

**Art Historian Superintendency Florence:** Maria Maugeri, CRCH Alberto Felici.

This bas-relief, depicting Tobias' healing journey guided by the Archangel Raphael, mirrored the personal bond between the head conservator and the memory of Mircea. It underscored how faith, like restoration, often involves invisible guidance, trust, and companionship.

*Charity: Statue of Mother and Child, 1578 ca., by the Flemish artist Jean de Boulogne, (Giambologna), raw earth, Basilica of *la Santissima Annunziata*, Florence.*

**Head Conservators:** Emanuela Peiretti, Paola Rosa.

**Scientific Investigations:** D. Zikos, F. Petrucci, F. Caglioti, J. Taylor, A. Macherelli, F. Biani, E. Pecchioni, T. Radelet, A. Fialová, P. Pianigiani, O. Caruso, L. Saccenti, C. Chiarusi.

**Art Historian Superintendency Florence:** Jennifer Celani, CRCH Alberto Felici.

**Fabbrica Palazzo Vecchio:** G. Caselli, P. Ferrara, P. Contini, S. Ragazzini, P. Mannucci.

Dedicated to Luke Olbrich's mother, Phyllis Olbrich, a civil rights pioneer and devout woman of faith, this sculpture personifies selfless love. The project celebrated maternal care and enduring acts of compassion as essential elements of both charity and cultural preservation.

*Prayer: Portable prayer triptych, 1333, by Bernardo Daddi, Museum *della Misericordia*, Loggia del Bigallo Florence.*

**Head Conservators:** Federica Corsini, Daniela Lippi, Roberto Buda.

**Scientific Investigations:** Azzurra Macherelli, Teobaldo Pasquali, Ottaviano Caruso.  
**Art Historian Superintendency Florence:** Lia Brunori.

This intimate devotional object required slow, silent treatment, its scale demanding a working posture akin to that of prayer. The triptych enabled contemplation not only for its original owner, but also for the conservator engaged in its recovery.

### **Reflections and Closing Thoughts**

Since 2016, the MMG Foundation has funded not only restoration projects but also professional development opportunities. Its legacy lies not merely in the treatments undertaken, but in the courage to intertwine vulnerability, grief, and faith with technical practice.

A decade into this collaboration, what began as an act of mourning has matured into a model for how sacred art conservation can serve as both professional craft and spiritual encounter. As the partnership continues, it challenges assumptions within the field, urging conservators to consider the deeper meanings behind the works they handle.

To borrow from Shelley, whose words continue to resonate: “Death is the veil which those who live call life; They sleep, and it is lifted.”

Perhaps, in restoring sacred artworks, conservators help to gently lift that veil—revealing truths not only about the past, but about the present need for beauty, love, and belief.

The collaboration’s ongoing evolution continues to invite broader questions—not only about sacred art, memory and beauty but wider moral questions we all face today. The following further reflections from Luke Olbrich, co-author and founder of the MMG Foundation, expands on this horizon.

### **Epilogue – Christianity, Cultural Heritage Conservation and Climate Change**

In May 2015, early in his papacy, Pope Francis published *Laudato Si’* (On Care for Our Common Home),<sup>1</sup> an encyclical addressing the moral responsibility of Christians—and all humanity—to confront environmental degradation. He emphasised the need to change hearts and minds as a foundation for transforming human behaviour. This message has remained central to his papacy, resonating strongly with younger generations in the Church and inspiring a renewed sense of purpose in the face of one of the greatest existential challenges of our time.

*Laudato Si’* shows that the Church is not static but evolves in dialogue with the changing world, rooted in the teachings of the Gospel. Crucially, Pope Francis links ecological and cultural heritage preservation:

“Together with the patrimony of nature, there is also an historic, artistic and cultural patrimony which is likewise under threat... Ecology, then, also involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense.”<sup>2</sup>

This recognition identifies a path for both the Church and the field of conservation: to use the preservation of cultural heritage as a means to inspire environmental awareness and spiritual reflection.

In 2023, I explored this connection as the basis for my dissertation at the University of Bologna.<sup>3</sup> The research focused on how climate change is impacting the cultural heritage conservation community in Florence, Italy—a UNESCO World Heritage Site. I aimed to document how conservators, restorers, site managers and the institutions that support them were responding to new and escalating environmental stressors—both in practice and in broader social or spiritual terms. While many acknowledged the urgency and the opportunity to act, the findings revealed limited integration of climate-related concerns into conservation practice or public engagement—whether technical, social, or spiritual.

The Mircea Maria Gerard Foundation was established to honour a deceased loved one by continuing his work as a restorer. From the beginning, however, it aimed to go beyond memorialization: to become an active expression of care. In its early days, the Foundation provided empathy and solace in a time of grief. Over time, this ethos of compassion became a guiding force, shaping a mission that touches everyone involved and everyone reached through its work.

This example points to a broader vision: that conservation—especially when aligned with spiritual values—can help humanity reconnect with both the divine and the shared human spirit expressed in our cultural legacy. Heritage can be a catalyst for emotional and spiritual engagement with the climate crisis, not just an intellectual one.

As climate change accelerates suffering, poverty, and displacement, it presents not only an environmental challenge but a moral imperative. This responsibility transcends faith traditions. Cultural heritage can serve as a unifying platform to meet this moment—inviting solace, reflection, and ultimately action. Every visitor to a historic site or work of art is offered an opportunity to consider their role in the problem—and, more importantly, their power to help shape the solution.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Pope Francis. (2015). Encyclical on climate change and inequality: On care for our common home. Melville House. And online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. II.143.

<sup>3</sup> See Olbrich, *Cultural Heritage in a Time of Climate Change, A Florence, Italy Case Study*. Laurea Magistrale Scienze Storia dissertation, Università di Bologna, 2023. Online: [https://www.academia.edu/121835427/Cultural\\_Heritage\\_Conservation\\_in\\_a\\_Time\\_of\\_Climate\\_Change?source=swp\\_share](https://www.academia.edu/121835427/Cultural_Heritage_Conservation_in_a_Time_of_Climate_Change?source=swp_share) (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2025).



Figure 1 - Death. Funeral of St Albert of Trapani, 1613 by Bernardino Monaldi, pupil of Bernardino Poccetti. Oil on panel. Basilica of *il Carmine*, Florence, Italy. Photo by O. Caruso



Figure 2 - *Life. Nativity*, by Francesco Gambacciani 1782, Oil on panel. Basilica of *il Carmine*, Florence, Italy. Photo by D. Murphy



Figure 3 - *Faith and Healing: Archangel Raphael and Tobias*, bas-relief in marble and stucco, 1698, by Giovanni Baratta, *Santo Spirito*, Florence, Italy. Photo by O. Caruso



Figure 4 - Charity: Statue of Mother and Child, 1578 ca., by the Flemish artist Jean de Boulogne (Giambologna), raw earth, Basilica of *la Santissima Annunziata*, Florence. Photo by D. Murphy



Figure 5 - Prayer: Portable prayer triptych, 1333, by Bernardo Daddi, Museum *della Misericordia*, Loggia del Bigallo Florence. Photo by O. Caruso

THE LIFE AND ROLE OF SACRED SITES:  
COLLECTIONS, COMMUNITY  
& CONTINUITY

# **A Glimpse into God's Light. Preventive Conservation of Sacred Art in the Vatican Museums<sup>1</sup>**

*Dr Marco Maggi  
Vatican Museums, Vatican City State*

## **Abstract**

In 2008, the Vatican Museums set up the Conservator's Office with the task of developing and realizing strategies aimed at guaranteeing the prevention of risks of deterioration of the works that constitute the historical, artistic and archaeological heritage of the Holy See. The Office is steeped in the long Vatican tradition – dating back to 1543 and to Pope Paul III Farnese - consisting of care and maintenance interventions inside the Apostolic Palaces. In a passionate process lasting several years, a new model of “global and sustainable integrated conservation” has been defined: a model that runs both protection and prevention, with a special focus on the monitoring of the exhibition spaces and storerooms and good practices such as the execution of regular and extensive maintenance plans.

In the full awareness that a broader public appreciation of sacred art is closely tied to its conservation in its own context, our care begins with the study of their immediate environment, in order to know the dynamics that activate the processes of deterioration and tackle the causes directly or contain the speed of their effects. By lowering risk profiles and preventing degradation processes, we aim at raising the level of quality of the heritage, as well as offering a glimpse into God's peculiar Light, that Source of Eternal Beauty which deeply inspired so many artworks now displayed inside the Vatican Museums. So, Preventive Conservation becomes a key tool to safely guarantee open to all visitors our collections and their powerful message of Faith, in a well-controlled balance between the spirit of conservation and the spirit of communication. Definitely, it is one of the most important resources we can rely on to offer the best possible conditions for a meaningful and enriching experience to today's people and to pass on such a right intact to future generations.

From a practical point of view, this paper will focus on two examples of our commitment: the “Care and Conservation Plan” for the entire decorative cycle of the Sistine Chapel and the “Regular Maintenance Plan” for the Matisse Room, which displays the large preparatory cartoons that, in his old age, Henri Matisse created for the Rosary Chapel at Venice, in Provence. In both cases, conservator-restorers, scientists and technicians of the Vatican Museums carry out operations of dust removal, control and documentation of the state of conservation of the artworks, as well as diagnostic investigations and measurements/calibrations of both air conditioning and lighting systems and monitoring networks.

Finally, outside the Museums and the Vatican City State, the services of the Conservator's Office are called as required wherever the Holy See is represented: that is the case of the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome, which enshrines the Blessed Icon of the Virgin Mary – *Salus Populi Romani*. To preserve the Icon, the Conservator's Office adopted a permanent display case in order to isolate the artwork in a passively controlled microenvironment. The display case has also been studied with the aim of ensuring minimal invasiveness and fostering the communication of the spiritual meaning of the Icon, through the use of high-performance glass and a specifically calibrated lighting system.

## Introduction

In a perpetual dialogue between past, present and future, the Vatican Museums – the Pope’s Museums – “live” in a daily commitment to protecting, conserving and sharing their huge heritage of Art and Faith. Comparable in terms of size and number of visitors to the major museums in the world, the Vatican Museums are not the result of a unitary project, but a system of courtyards, rooms, galleries, chapels and narrow passages not originally conceived for the display of artworks. The collections have been constantly enriched since the beginning of the sixteenth century by gathering together Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and Roman, Christian masterpieces, epigraphic documents, great frescoes’ cycles, medieval, modern and contemporary paintings, decorative arts, terrestrial and celestial globes, liturgical vestments, textiles and tapestries, papal carriages, ethnological collections.

Open to the world and to the public under Pope Pius XI, the Vatican Museums are a continuous exhibition that unfolds over 7 kilometers of precious halls, displays thousands of works, conserves more than 100,000 of them in about 60 storage rooms, and welcomes more than 6 million visitors each year. The conservation policy of an institution such as the Vatican Museums cannot be based only, nor primarily, on restoration, but on good practices of preventive conservation.

Now, preventive conservation is a complex concept. As ICOM-CC (International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation) reminds us, it involves “all measures and actions aimed at avoiding and minimizing future deterioration or loss. They are carried out within the context or on the surroundings of an item, but more often a group of items, whatever their age and condition. These measures and actions are indirect - they do not interfere with the materials and structures of the items. They do not modify their appearance.”<sup>2</sup>

So, preventive conservation implies risk assessment and taking appropriate countermeasures, both in protection and prevention. In 2008, the Vatican Museums set up the *Conservator’s Office* with the task of developing and realizing strategies aimed at guaranteeing the prevention of risks of deterioration of the works that constitute the historical, artistic, and archaeological heritage of the Holy See.

The Office is steeped in the long Vatican tradition – dating back to 1543 and to Pope Paul III Farnese – consisting of care and maintenance interventions inside the Apostolic Palaces. Over the years, the Conservator’s Office has developed a global integrated sustainable conservation model based on collection care, study and monitoring of exhibition, working, and storage areas, post-restoration protocols, and maintenance plans of systems and settings (Fig. 1).

As regards the conservation of sacred art masterpieces, our work has the potential to help spread their spiritual message. In fact, by lowering risk profiles and preventing degradation processes, we aim at raising the level of quality of the heritage as well as offering a glimpse into God’s peculiar Light, that Source of Eternal Beauty, which deeply inspired so many artworks now displayed inside the Vatican Museums.

First, the Sistine Chapel: with more than 6 million visitors a year, it is the object of desire for every visitor of the Vatican Museums, a mandatory destination for pilgrims from all over the world. It is the heart of the Church's life, the shrine of the human body, and a treasure of art and faith (Fig. 2). Our goal is to guarantee today's visitors and pilgrims the best visiting conditions, and to ensure that the same right remains intact for the generations of tomorrow. That is why, as of 2011, the Sistine Chapel is the subject of special attention by the Directorate of Vatican Museums in terms of environmental study and monitoring and regular maintenance.

The new air conditioning and purification system, designed by Carrier, enables the treatment of the Sistine Chapel's air in terms of temperature, relative humidity, concentration of carbon dioxide, pollutants, and dust. Since the installation of the system in 2014, the Conservator's Office has been responsible for continuous remote monitoring with a synoptic network of radio sensors. Recently, the same network has been upgraded and implemented with new-generation sensors (Fig. 3).

So, despite the increasing number of visitors, both the air-conditioning system and the monitoring network ensure the control of parameters of temperature, relative humidity, carbon dioxide concentration, and many others. That makes it possible to limit the occurrence of situations that may favour degradation phenomena (like whitenings) that, beyond conservation issues, would hinder the correct reading of the paintings and, consequently, of their message.

Equally, absolute importance has been given to the new lighting system designed by Osram. The system is composed of more than 40 luminaires and 7,000 LED diodes, in order to obtain the best light distribution and two different scenarios – one related to the “museum use” of the Chapel and the other one for “gala and liturgical occasions” – as well as an optimised spectrum of high-quality light, calibrated according to the Sistine paintings and thus able to faithfully reproduce their colours and, again, encourage the transmission of the underlying theological meaning (Fig. 4).

In summary, the conservation of the Sistine Chapel is a never-ending task of continuous monitoring and painstaking care, culminating each year in 6 weeks of evening work where restorers, diagnostic professionals, and conservation technicians gather to bring to life the “Regular Maintenance Plan.” During these weeks, conservator-restorers, scientists, and technicians of the Vatican Museums and Governorate of Vatican City State carry out operations of dust removal, control, and documentation of the state of preservation of the artworks, as well as diagnostic investigations and measurements/calibrations of the air conditioning and lighting systems, and monitoring networks. It is the most reliable strategy we can rely on to ensure that the Chapel remains open to all in the best conditions of use, safety, and preservation, to maintain and share its deep theology, and to try to take our gaze beyond, into the peculiar Light of God who saves and cares.

Let us change period and style and move on to consider the so-called “Matisse Room.” Set up in 2011 thanks to the collaboration of different professionals from the Vatican Museums, the Directorate of Technical Services, and renowned external companies, the Matisse Room

displays – within one of the oldest rooms of the Vatican Palaces, the *Sala Marescalcia* - the preparatory cartoons of the Chapel du Rosoire de Vence in France, entirely designed by Henri Matisse shortly before his death and donated by his son Pierre in 1980 (Fig. 5a).

In his mature age, Matisse dedicated 3 years of intense work (1948-51) to the creation of the Chapel, with the support of his friend Sr Jacques-Marie of the Dominican Congregation of Vence and other members of that Religious Order. Matisse wrote: “This chapel is for me the culmination of a lifetime of work, and the coming into flower of an enormous, sincere and difficult effort. This is not a work that I chose, but rather a work for which I was chosen by fate, towards the end of the road that I am still continuing according to my researches; the chapel has afforded me the possibility of realizing them by uniting them. I foresee that this work will not be in vain and that it may remain the expression of a period in art.”<sup>3</sup> The artist himself wrote again: “When the stained-glass window is finished, I want to donate the preparatory cartoons to a museum. It would be madness if the cartoons and the stained-glass window remained in the same place.”<sup>4</sup> The old Master thus approached the world of faith through his friendship with a Dominican nun, Sr Jacques-Marie, and created this monument in which everything professes art and beauty and light becomes language and expression of the relationship between Creation and Salvation.

The Vatican Museums are glad to present to pilgrims and tourists this set of Matisse’s works on their way to the Sistine Chapel, as a preparation for a dialogue that questions the faith and spirit of men of all times, believers or not, beyond any different conditions related to eras, age and personal sensibilities. It is definitely a unique experience and, in order to guarantee it, resources and time must be devoted to environmental monitoring and maintenance.

Therefore, again, a regular maintenance plan has been established: under the coordination of the Department of XIX Century and Contemporary Art,<sup>5</sup> it involves the Paper Restoration Laboratory (they work on dusting and documentation of the state of preservation of the cartoons), the Conservator’s Office (through checking the airflow of the air conditioning system, together with the quality and quantity of light), and the Cabinet for Scientific Research (their work consists in colorimetric measures and aerobiological analyses) (Fig. 5b). Outside the Museums and the Vatican City State, the services of the Conservator’s Office are called as required wherever the Holy See is represented. That is the case of the most blessed icon in Rome, beloved by the late Pope Francis: the *Salus Populi Romani* of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major.

In January 2018, upon its return to the Basilica after a restoration work carried out by specialists from the Vatican Museums’ Painting and Wooden Materials Restoration Laboratory, the Blessed Icon of the *Salus Populi Romani* was placed inside a new, specially designed display case, above the altar of the Borghese Chapel (Fig. 6a).

The new climabox meets the highest requirements in terms of non-invasiveness and safety and it is equipped with special glass with high optical-aesthetic qualities and transparency, which guarantee an optimal view of the Sacred Image.

The climabox, perfectly sealed, also has a passive conditioning system that, through the use of a special “buffer” material, is able to stabilise fluctuations in relative humidity and maintain the

parameters recommended by the conservation standards. Microclimatic monitoring, performed through a datalogger equipped with a microprobe in direct contact with the rear side of the Icon, allows the technicians of the Conservator's Office of the Vatican Museums to continuously verify its condition (Fig. 6b).

The *Salus Populi Romani*, protected from mechanical stress and vibrations, can thus be moved in total safety directly inside the new climabox, for all liturgical occasions. Moreover, a new LED lighting system has been realised: the adopted sources, devoid of the harmful ultraviolet and infrared components, have a complete and uniform emission spectrum, with such characteristics in terms of quality as to allow the faithful restitution of the colours rediscovered by the recent restoration. The new climabox is the result of pursuing the right compromise between exhibition and enhancement – better, evangelization – instances and conservation ones. Finally, once every two years, a regular maintenance plan is carried out, with the active participation of restorers, conservation technicians, and professionals from the Vatican Museums: a series of operations that include opening the climabox, the documentation of the state of preservation of the Icon, the replacement of the buffer material.<sup>6</sup>

Recently, in February 2025, in the context of the cultural initiatives promoted for the *Jubilee of Artists and the World of Culture*, the Vatican Museums has been involved in the International Conference *Sharing Hope. Horizons for Cultural Heritage*. The event - jointly organised by the *Holy See Dicastery for Culture and Education* and the *Governorate of Vatican City State – Directorate of the Museums and Cultural Heritage* - brought together the most diverse “preachers of Beauty”<sup>7</sup>. From the representatives of the most prestigious Italian and international museums to the most relevant institutional figures from the world of art and culture, from renowned artists to important associations of gallery owners. One of the results of that meeting has been undoubtedly the *Manifesto on the Transmission of the Religious Cultural Code*.

The Jubilee itself is in fact “an opportunity for spiritual renewal”:<sup>8</sup> a special time, during which we can re-discover and be aware of the unique responsibility entrusted to us. I mean, the responsibility of preserving our cultural heritage and “sharing the beauty of the arts”<sup>9</sup> – and the sacred art in a peculiar way – like “a privileged witness of faith.”<sup>10</sup> “It is not just about preserving the past”<sup>11</sup> and the tangible signs of our tradition, “but about making them relevant to our common future,”<sup>12</sup> to the lives of the people of today and tomorrow. For, if we consider and believe that “Sacred Art Heritage is a living resource and a starting point for imagining the future,”<sup>13</sup> then the Conservation of Sacred Art can be a meaningful vehicle of re-evangelization and a “valuable evidence of faith, resilience and hope.”<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt thanks go to Barbara Jatta, Director of the Vatican Museums, as well as to all the Directorate of the Vatican Museums, who allowed me to participate in the Malta Conference. And to my wonderful colleagues, Alessandro Barbaresi and Matteo Mucciante, irreplaceable friends and travel companions.

<sup>2</sup> International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation, Terminology to characterize the conservation of tangible cultural heritage, 15th Triennial Conference in New Delhi, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> J. Flam ed., *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 197.

<sup>4</sup> From a letter by Henry Matisse to his son Pierre (1952), conserved in the archives of Morgan Library, NYC.

<sup>5</sup> My greatest thanks for help and support go to all the Department of XIX Century and Contemporary Art: Micol Forti, Curator of the Department, and her Assistants, Francesca Boschetti and Rosalia Pagliarani.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank His Eminence Card. Rolandas Makrickas, Archpriest, and all the Chapter of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major for authorizing the publication of the images of the *Salus Populi Romani*.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Speech to the Artists*, Summit “Fondazione Vitae,” September 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Jatta, *Sharing Hope. Horizons for Cultural Heritage, International Conference, February 2025*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Manifesto on the Transmission of the Religious Cultural Code,” in *Sharing Hope. Horizons for Cultural Heritage, International Conference, February 2025*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1 -The global integrated sustainable conservation model of the Vatican Museums



Figure 2 - The Sistine Chapel

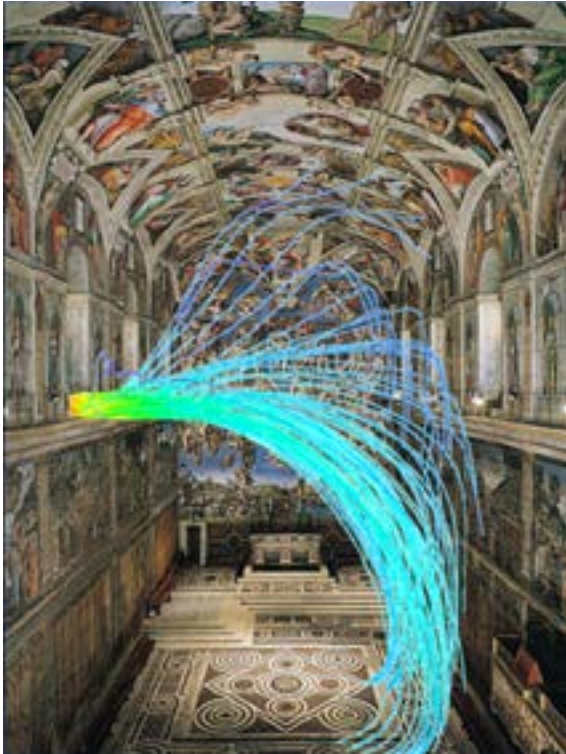


Figure 3 - The new air conditioning and purification system of the Sistine Chapel

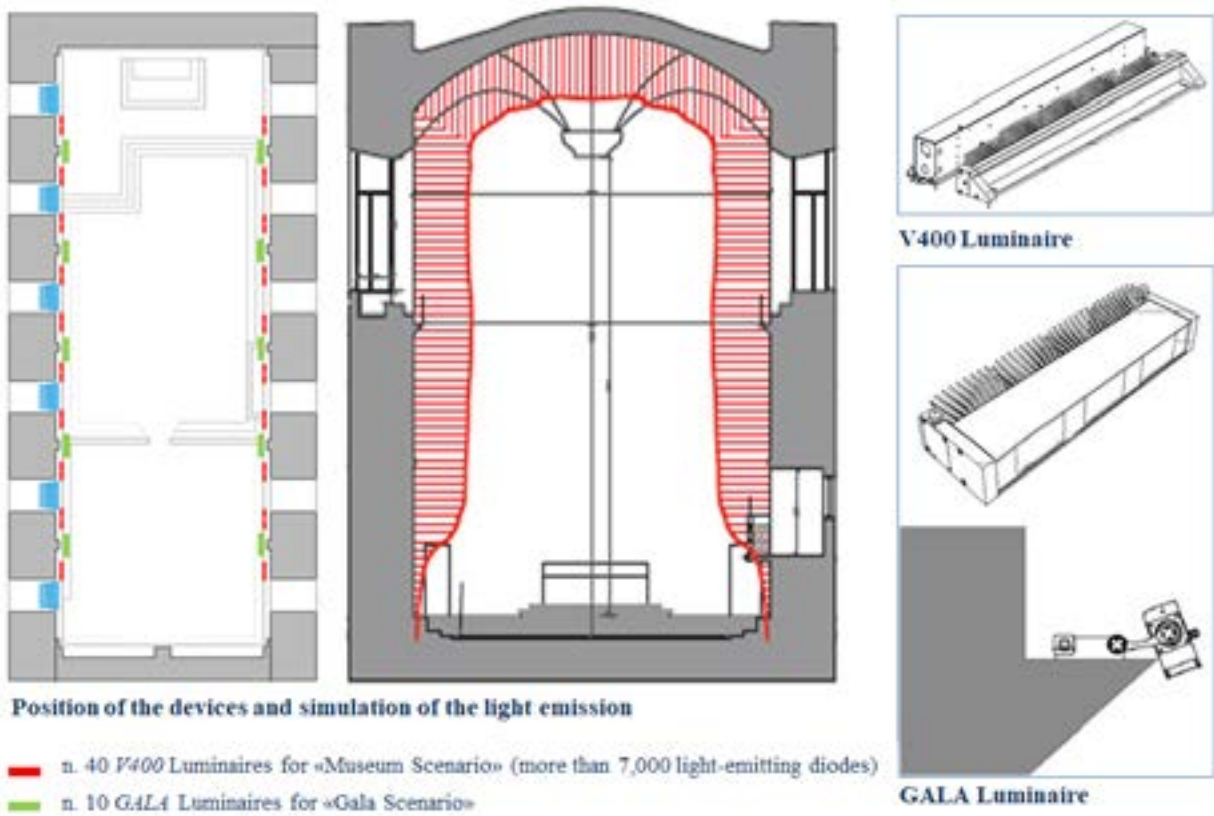


Figure 4 - The new lighting system of the Sistine Chapel



Figure 5 - The Matisse Room of the Contemporary Art Collection



Figure 5b - Periodic maintenance of the Matisse Room. Dust removal, control and documentation of the state of preservation



Figure 6 - The Blessed Icon *Salus Populi Romani* in the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome

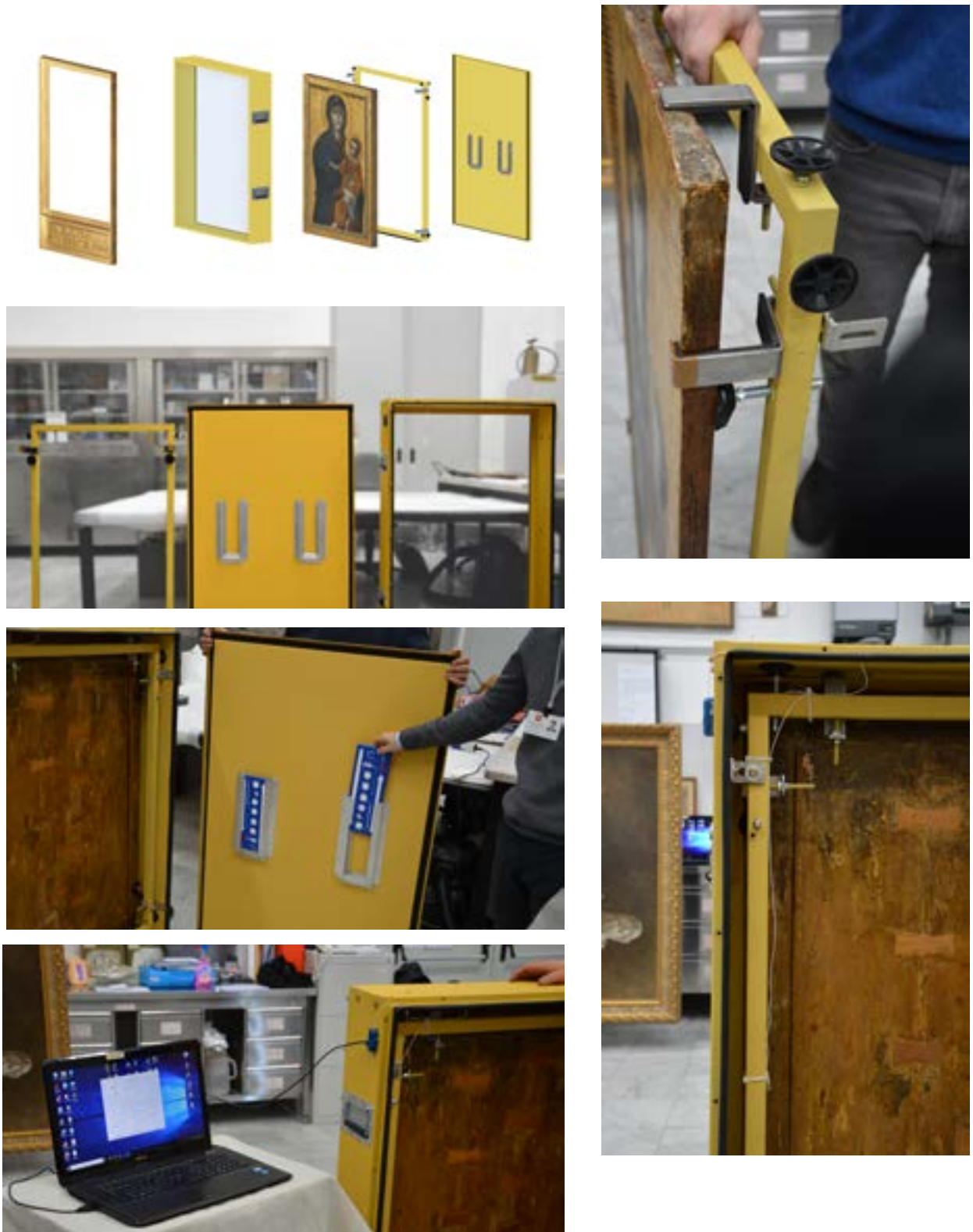


Figure 6b - Behind the scenes: the new climabox for the *Salus Populi Romani*

# ‘Cathedral Thinking’ in Burgos Cathedral to Know the Treasure of Faith

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## Abstract

‘Cathedral thinking’ is a current concept based on a way of acting from the past. It refers to the construction of cathedrals in the Middle Ages, when the norm was to plan their construction with a view to completion 150 years later. In short, it is a long-term plan, a project initiated by one person and picked up by several generations later. This is the context of ‘cathedral thinking’ for Burgos Cathedral, after celebrating its 800th anniversary (1221) and 40 years since it was declared a World Heritage Site (1984).

After a 40-year effort, the cathedral enjoys an excellent state of conservation throughout. In 2024, a €500,000 investment has been made in the *Sala Beato Valentín* Palencia for the development of internationally significant exhibitions (e.g., *Legatus Fidei* in 2025; *Picasso and the Bible* in 2026). It is also working on the restoration of the stained-glass windows by Arnau de Flandes, created in the fourteenth century and lost to the vicissitudes of time. The Cathedral Chapter, with calm and foresight, is considering a long-term scenario not only for the preservation of the building, but also for bringing to light the legacy of faith transformed into culture in Spanish and Burgos society.

In this paper, the main focus is on the cathedral’s evangelizing potential. With a tourist attraction of nearly 500,000 visitors by 2025 and recognition from the city’s cultural, political, business, academic, and social institutions, the cathedral remains a temple with a living liturgy: daily sacramental celebration (Eucharist and confessions) with special attention to pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago; a temple open to new generations (educational visits from schools and institutes from Spain and Europe) and to emerging culture (dialogues on current issues and the meaning of life in its Dialogues in the Cathedral); a temple that recovers and projects its legacy: with musical initiatives for research, recovery, and performance of unpublished music, *La Música Dormida* (15 concerts since 2021).

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## Introduction

Burgos Cathedral has a legacy of more than 800 years. Behind the word *legatus* lies the treasure passed down from generation to generation as a principal part of the *traditio* or culture of a people. But *legatus* originally refers to the military general, of senatorial rank, who led a military campaign. To do so, he had to be invested as a *legatus pro praetorium*, that is, by right. This *legatus* was only superior to the *dux*, or governor of the province. Therefore, when we speak of *legatus* (‘legacy’) we capture the dual meaning of ‘tradition and leadership’ in a single word.

I would like to speak of Burgos Cathedral as a *legatus*. After 800 years, its cultural treasure (*tradition*) continues to grow, while its ‘leadership’, not only in the field of history or

religious culture, but also from the *exemplum*, is consolidated. When we think of a cathedral, we immediately think of its treasure, its architecture, its art, etc., but a cathedral is much more than preserving the *Mirabilia Dei*. It is an *exemplum*, a symbol of the memory of history. That is why, in the Gothic style, they were built with such excessive height (Fig.1).

Not to accommodate more people, but to be an *exemplum*. If a cathedral (*catedra*) is not *eximia* (*exemplum*), it loses all its interest, either because it's just another temple of the diocese, or because it is just another museum in the city, at most the best archaeological and ethnographic museum; a very interesting and attractive place, with thousands of tourist visits, but having lost its soul, its status as a *legatus*. And the problem is that whoever loses their memory immediately distorts future history with anachronisms.

This reflection I propose today, which was born in part from the Pisa Congress last October, is what we are trying to make in Burgos, in northern Spain, whose cathedral is a palimpsest from the eleventh to the twenty first century. The Cathedral Chapter is responsible for its management, admirable because it has been fully restored since 2019. It is not just a matter of preserving the material as *mirabilia*, but of preserving its memory so that it can be understood as such at every moment in history. Hence the importance of applying what is known today as 'cathedral thinking' precisely to the understanding of the cathedral. Thinking presupposes, initially, knowing and investigating history, but immediately afterwards, it involves projecting.

Curiously, when Burgos Cathedral was built, like so many other Gothic cathedrals, the clock as we know it today did not exist. For many centuries, time was measured in hours. In the eighteenth century, it began to be measured in minutes, and in the nineteenth century, in seconds. This means that times were 'longer,' and now time accelerates. Now we measure time in nanoseconds to be able to measure with maximum precision who has won a Formula 1 race. Today, the most famous piece in the cathedral is, in fact, an eighteenth-century automaton. Many people enter the cathedral to hear Martinillo chime the hour and quarter-hour. And they take a selfie as best they can because it's more than 15 meters high. It is time, or rather, this way of measuring time that has led us to understand time as something fleeting and requiring immediate response. We pay more attention to immediacy than to the quality of the response. In this way, the response is short-sighted and focused more on stimulating well-being than on deep understanding and future achievement.

This brain is becoming more accustomed to demanding satisfaction than to thinking. Its structure does not allow for understanding or thinking, much less taking future generations into account. The philosopher Roman Krznaric in his *The Good Ancestor* inspired some of the lines in the presentation we are about to give.

### **Why 'Cathedral Thinking'?**

Cathedral thinking is the ability to conceive and plan projects with a very broad horizon, perhaps decades or centuries ahead. Something like what they did when they planned a medieval cathedral. People began building it and knew in advance that they would not see it finished.

This was the case with Burgos Cathedral. It began in 1221, and by 1260 it was practically finished, but a significant number of chapels, portals, staircases, and towers were later added, making it a palimpsest that is difficult to interpret. It is about creating something with a vision, for the long term, that is a legacy, as has been the case with constructions such as the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu in Peru or any Gothic cathedral.

Hence the need for experiences of beauty in the profound (*numinous*) rather than the immediate. Contemplating an element like the dome is to understand the meaning of the Renaissance: the first one fell, and the city's courage led to the rise of the new one. The cathedral could not be without a crown. Even King Philip II wanted to see it as it was before. Today, we have marshmallow brains, which force us to a certain extent to press the button and "buy now" (Fig. 2).

Hence, cathedrals, in themselves, can fulfil a much deeper mission than that of linear or "logical" thinking, marked only by technique, to a more systemic one, where art and ingenuity intertwine. Discovering these systems, creative ecosystems, they say today, would be one of the best contributions to "re-evangelization." For many artists, cathedrals are a source of inspiration as "makers." However, it is not just about understanding the technique, but the system in which art and ingenuity developed. The great authors have their signatures in the Renaissance, but much of their technique was already known before and they did not sign their names, but they were equally geniuses and artists, as is the case in Romanesque and Gothic.

This key to understanding and planning lies in Burgos Cathedral and its cathedral project, which goes beyond conservation, already achieved, and the implementation of activities. I now outline the axes of this "cathedral thinking," a foundation for future generations. Let us not be forgotten by distance or supplanted by functionality. A cumulative and adaptive process is possible without falling into supplantation. The important thing is to understand the palimpsest that lies beneath. Let us look at some examples.

### **LIGHT: Stained Glass, Stella, and Mathematics**

One of the most important elements in Gothic architecture is light. Curiously, during this period, they did not know what light really was, how colours were formed, and so on. Certain pigments were key to colouring stained glass, paints, or enamels. Colours like blue and purple were very expensive, yet necessary given their primary status. They are abundant colours in nature (blue sky) or in the fruits of the field (ripe fruit), but difficult to obtain and capture.

Now, light is more than colour. Colour is light in nature, but in cathedrals, that light comes from outside and passes through rose windows, triforiums, lancets, etc. The Sarmental rose window in Burgos Cathedral spent 80 years letting light pass unhindered, beyond the geometric shapes and the combination of numbers. What lies behind the light that penetrates the rose window? They are the pure forms or archetypes of Neoplatonic philosophy that penetrate the sacred temple. That is why the rose window is oriented toward noon or sunset and, in many cases, is unique: God from God, light from light, true God from true God. Many of these geometric shapes contain within themselves a theological content seasoned with the proportions of numbers.

The first project involves the restoration of the stained-glass windows in the Constable's Chapel. These windows were created in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries by Arnaldo de Flandes. Over the centuries, they have undergone numerous unsuccessful interventions. In 1813, Napoleonic troops blew up the city castle located on San Miguel Hill, causing more than half of the windows to collapse. The Cathedral Chapter carefully collected the pieces that had fallen to the ground. 210 years later, the Spanish Ministry of Culture wanted to contribute to the celebration of the 8th Centenary by funding both the design and execution of the project. The restoration is scheduled to be completed in 2026 with an investment of 1.5 million euros. This restoration will be an opportunity to better understand the significance of this chapel-pantheon, known in the city as "the cathedral within the cathedral." Recovering the iconography of Gospel themes, the stained-glass windows depicting saints, and its theological significance will be a new opportunity to bring the thought of the fourteenth century closer to today's people. In this case, it is the light of the resurrection, the eternal light, that illuminates this chapel. Also, the meaning of the Saints. Several are known, but for others we have received only indications (Fig. 3).

This has led to a second project called *Stella*, a narrative for the nighttime visit in which Light is the protagonist of the story of the cathedral's creation. From Bishop Mauricio who glimpsed the idea to King Fernando III who helped it materialise, the Light is what provides intelligence to Maestro Enrique, director of the first bars of the cathedral, just as it inspires Diego de Siloé and Felipe Bigarny in the images of the altarpieces or Juan Vallejo in the construction of the dome (Fig. 4).

The third project is "Mathematics in the Cathedral." A group of mathematical experts have studied the different geometries that are now on educational display in the *Sala Beato Valentín Palencia*. At the same time as the exhibition, lectures with on-site demonstrations are held in important spaces such as the Constables' Chapel and the Golden Staircase. The challenge is to illuminate, through forms, the theological content implicit in proportions. The *horror vacui* leads not only to finding narratives in images (figurative art), but also in geometric or abstract forms, but more divine because they crown the height. Light is the interpretive key (Fig. 5).

## **Balance Between Liturgy and Sightseeing.**

### ***Tourists, Pilgrims, and the Faithful Coexist... In Silence***

Burgos Cathedral completed a restoration and conservation process in 2024 that lasted approximately 40 years (1984-2024). At the same time as significant efforts have been made in this conservation, the unexpected growth and subsequent regulation of tourism have occurred. Soon, more than half a million tourists will visit the cathedral. Added to this is the daily participation of Burgos faithful and pilgrims on the *Camino de Santiago* or Jubilee Pilgrims who come to the cathedral to celebrate their seasonal Mass.

It is a challenge for the Chapter of a fully restored Cathedral to attend to the diversity of its customers and achieve perfect harmony with minimal disturbance. Some key points:

*Daily Liturgy as a Sign of Identity:* Whether morning or evening, the celebration of the Chapter Mass is key. It is not just another Mass, as in a parish, but rather a concelebratory celebration accompanied by the organ and the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours. A significant number of faithful participate in the evening celebration daily, especially during the period from April to October (7 months).

*Religious Tourism Service:* Most days of the year, groups of religious tourists come to *Santiago de Compostela*, to Marian shrines such as Fatima or Covadonga, or to Rome (Jubilee Year). In 2024, more than 300 groups requested a chapel to celebrate the Eucharist. They come from many parts of the world, although the majority are from Eastern Europe, Korea, and Latin America, etc. They celebrate the Eucharist, they pray... In Burgos Cathedral, they find a connection with their identity, with the history of faith transformed into culture.

*Diocesan Church for Liturgical Celebration:* Burgos Cathedral remains the preferred location for the bishop to preside over the celebrations of the liturgical seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent (*Via Crucis*), Holy Week (processions), Marian celebrations (Assumption of the Virgin, 15 August, and Immaculate Conception, 8 December) and other feasts of Saints: Patron of the city (Saints Peter and Paul, Exaltation of the Cross, Saint James the Apostle, etc.). The cathedral is also a celebratory space for civil institutions such as the National Police or the Civil Guard (12 October), associations (Friends of the Way of St. James) or others of a folkloric nature (Cidiano Weekend).

*Universal Accessibility:* Motor, cognitive, and symbol comprehension. The large and diverse number of visitors has led the Cathedral Chapter to study and develop the concept of “universal accessibility.” Until recently, “accessibility” was identified with the elimination of architectural barriers, that is, linked to the user's mobility. Later, “accessibility” was also extended to include cognitive diversity, implementing channels in various languages, including Braille. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, major cultural institutions have been concerned with making content more accessible to “cultural diversity.” Hence, Burgos Cathedral is embarking on “universal accessibility,” reviewing and combining the three fronts:

*Accessibility for functional diversity:* Overcoming architectural barriers in most spaces.

*Accessibility for cognitive diversity:* This is the largest recent effort at this time. Through applications, services are provided in several languages, while also being accessible to visitors with vision problems.

*Accessibility for cultural diversity:* Significant attention is paid to opening the door to visiting topics such as the sacred for people of other, non-Christian cultures. Rethinking the approach is necessary for those of Western culture who lack significant knowledge of biblical culture and Christian history. We spoke about this in Last Jubileo of Cultura (Rome, 14th February 2025).

## **Culture of Encounter**

From 2019 to 2022, the 800th anniversary of Burgos Cathedral was celebrated with more than 500 events planned by the foundation that bears its name. This anniversary has allowed the

Cathedral Chapter to make a significant commitment to culture. Without losing its identity, as we have mentioned, the cathedral has become a cultural powerhouse, with the participation of numerous organizations, serving as an example of the “culture of encounter” emphasised time and again by Pope Francis.

In 2025, the Chapter worked on a sustainable cultural project. Already in 2024, more than 50,000 people participated in one of the cultural activities. While this is very important, the greatest achievement has been the synergies achieved for this purpose between both private and public institutions, including academic ones. The cathedral has become a place of celebration and a cultural space. The diversification of spaces has allowed chapels not dedicated to worship to be used for concerts, book launches, virtual tours, etc. In this way, the cathedral has not lost its identity and has become the city’s cultural landmark. Hence the need for a long-term cultural project that integrates the following elements:

*Renovation of the Beato Valentín Palencia Hall as an exhibition space:* Located in the lower cloister of the cathedral, this hall has independent access. An investment of more than 550,000 euros has been made to host international art exhibitions and facilitate small executive meetings for the city’s companies. In this way, private institutions also contribute to the promotion of culture. The hall opened in November 2024 with the exhibition “Painting Without Fear” (Joaquín Sorolla). From *Geometry to Stone* is currently being developed as part of the Mathematics in the Cathedral project. In 2025 a major exhibition on Picasso’s “Biblical Roots” (2025) will be held. In this process of opening and dialogue with contemporary art, new doors by Antonio López and a conference on them will be opened.

*Dialogues in the Cathedral:* Four dialogues on current topics related to the meaning of life, held in the Constables’ Chapel. ‘Conversations in the ‘Cathedral’ and the ‘Mesa de la Concordia’ (2021) have also been held at this same venue (Fig. 6).

*Sponsorship of artistic projects:* The following projects are being developed in collaboration with other organisations:

- *Quick Painting Competition* (27 editions),
- *Mathematics in the Cathedral* (with frequent exhibitions and lectures),
- *Artist and Cathedral:* Fran Herreros: Contemporary art project with a local artist. (Fig. 7)
- *National Organ Competition for Young Artists* (3 editions),
- *J. L. Solabarrieta: Festival Music and Organ Festival of Miranda de Ebro* (collaboration).

*Introduction to new technologies and languages:* Virtual tour of the cathedral’s roofs and video game for new generations (Fig. 8).

*Concerts with international orchestras and ecumenical dialogue.*



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

# A Working Collection, Letting Objects Tell the Story: Opening a New Museum at Westminster Abbey

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## Abstract

This paper, entitled, *A Working Collection, Letting Objects Tell the Story: Opening a New Museum at Westminster Abbey*, describes the processes involved in creating a new 9000 square foot exhibition space within Westminster Abbey. It demonstrates the efforts made to enable sacred art and architecture to ‘speak’ to visitors, by examining the steps taken to understand the viewpoints and interests of the visitors and by exploring the competing agendas for the space. The paper describes some of the steps taken to help visitors deepen their appreciation of the Abbey’s historic and religious function and to showcase, through design and interpretation, how the objects and art on display continue to evoke a spiritual message.

The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Galleries at Westminster Abbey were opened by HM Queen Elizabeth II and HRH Prince Charles in 2018 to provide a new museum for visitors to Westminster Abbey, where they could enjoy wonderful views and appreciate sacred objects in a contextual way through four thematic displays: Building Westminster Abbey; Worship and Daily Life; The Abbey and the Monarchy and The Abbey and National Memory. The exhibition seeks to help visitors appreciate the deep religious and national significance of the Abbey, together with the original functionality of objects for a ‘congregation’ no longer familiar with religious artefacts, or who originate from a different culture or belief system. The project sits at the intersection of religion and culture, attempting to broaden public appreciation for the medieval works of art which are part of the historic working collection of Westminster Abbey, all of which derive their functionality from use on the Abbey floor.

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## Introduction

As project lead and Curator of Westminster Abbey, I was keen to participate in the European Cathedrals Malta Conference because of our shared concerns that an increasingly secularised society fails to understand and relate to religious objects. Because of this, visitors require more assistance, context and explanation to facilitate their appreciation of the use, relevance and functionality of works of art. In addition, amongst the visitors to any religious space, many of them will be non-believers – or people of other faiths, which complicates the presentation of sacred objects. The task of a display of religious objects is to understand its audience – to be inclusive and thoughtful about how or what might engage the visitor and how he or she might want to learn.

Any building or development project that takes place at Westminster Abbey is governed by a number of important factors, beginning with the fact that the site is part of the ‘UNESCO World Heritage site of the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey,’ which understandably imposes multiple constraints. Secondly, and equally importantly, Westminster Abbey has the

rare status of *Royal Peculiar*, which indicates its unique relationship with the monarch, whereby the Dean of Westminster reports directly to the King or Queen and not to any other ecclesiastical official. Despite these privileged relationships, however, the Abbey receives no funding from any external source, governmental, monarchical or religious, relying for financial support entirely on its 'gate receipts', that is to say, money from paying tourists. The institution sometimes seems to struggle with this inbuilt duality, whereby it functions as a major heritage site and tourist destination but is also 'the Nation's church' (the place where medieval monarchs were buried, and all British monarchs are crowned). The Abbey is pulled in many directions, holding an undisputed deep cultural significance for the British and Commonwealth nations, but serving primarily as a church which serves a local community and occasionally an international one through the medium of television (the total estimated audience for the coronation of HM Charles III on 6th May 2023 was two billion viewers across 125 countries worldwide).

We must turn now to The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries which opened in June 2018.<sup>1</sup> The Galleries are situated in a beautiful, formerly untouched medieval space built between about 1250-1270 by the Plantagenet King Henry III (reigned 1216-72).<sup>2</sup> They are part of the 'Triforium' level of the Abbey, located fifty feet above the Abbey floor and occupy nine thousand square feet at the east end, beyond the high altar. They look down onto the Shrine of St Edward the Confessor at the historic heart of the Abbey, with a view that soars over the Quire and across the nave to the Great West Door. The space is believed to have been intended originally to provide additional chapels for the monks – although it is believed that these were never completed. Engravings show that this part of the triforium was used in the seventeenth century – and probably earlier – as a place from which to watch coronations, but in more recent years it was simply used to store abandoned objects.

In 2015 the Dean and Chapter of Westminster received Planning Approval from Westminster City Council and Historic England to build a new Lift Access Tower outside the south-east corner of the Abbey on a piece of land called Poets' Corner Yard, where the visitor toilets had previously been located. This was an historic moment because it was the first new building on the site of the Abbey since the completion of the West towers two hundred and fifty years ago, in 1745.

The objective of The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries is to provide the public with a new museum that offers a better opportunity to enjoy the Abbey Collection, in a location which looks down over the spot where the objects were first used. This speaks to one of the most important features of the Galleries, namely that they provide an opportunity to explain the objects in their original context – to hypothetically 'put them back' into their original location. Unlike in other museums, these are objects that have always been in the Abbey and which therefore have a close relationship with the location where they were originally used. Visitors can attend a service and see objects performing their original function and then come up to the Galleries with an enhanced understanding of their sacred purpose. Another unique quality of the Abbey collection is its status as a 'working collection'. Vergers regularly request objects to be removed from showcases for specific services, for example, the Edward the Confessor chalice (made in 1925 by English silversmith Omar Ramsden), which is removed for use during the October 'Edwardtide' pilgrimage that takes place in the Shrine of St Edward.

There are approximately three hundred mixed-media objects on display in the Galleries, including textiles, paintings, wood, metal and stained glass, and these showcase the best and most interesting pieces in the Abbey Collection. All the exhibits relate to one of four themes, beginning with 'BUILDING WESTMINSTER ABBEY'. This section includes items such as a model of the Abbey commissioned in 1715 by Abbey Surveyor and architect Sir Christopher Wren and made in the Works Department; a pair of obelisks designed by Wren and produced by Grinling Gibbons for the Abbey Quire Screen around 1710, but removed by 1730.<sup>3</sup> The oldest and most important altarpiece in Britain, the 'Westminster Retable', can also be found in this section, commissioned by King Henry III for the Abbey's High Altar and installed there in 1269. Theme two represents WORSHIP & DAILY LIFE, which seeks to showcase 'Abbey Treasures' such as the highly decorated 'Litlington Missal' – the Service book commissioned in 1383 by Abbot Nicholas Litlington and produced by the Abbey's Benedictine monks;<sup>4</sup> and the Abbey's Altar plate – pieces of which were used at King Charles III's coronation in 2023.

The third theme is WESTMINSTER ABBEY AND THE MONARCHY, in which the Abbey's unique collection of royal funeral effigies is displayed. Individual effigies in this so-called 'Ragged Regiment' were created on the death of each monarch for use in their funeral procession, the earliest of which is the effigy of King Edward III, who died in 1377.<sup>5</sup> And finally, the last theme, THE ABBEY AND NATIONAL MEMORY examines the sculpting and administrative processes behind memorialisation in Westminster Abbey, including a film of the installation of the memorial stone of poet Philip Larkin.

We turn now to an exploration of the thought processes involved in creating the Galleries and the steps that were taken to deepen the connection of the Abbey's audiences to its sacred art and architecture. The principal client for the project was of course the Dean and Chapter of Westminster whose emphasis on respect for the Abbey as a 'working church' was a constant theme that underpinned the Galleries' creation and which saw expression in attempts to communicate an understanding of the daily worshipping pattern of Benedictine life.

Two elements in particular were fundamental to the success of the project: firstly, the choice of designer and secondly, rigorous thinking about the interpretation of the exhibits in light of the messages we wanted visitors to take away and what media we would use to communicate them. The 'Client Brief' for the Designer sought:

“above all else to preserve the atmosphere, contemplative character and spiritual quality of the experience and light in the triforium by ensuring that the exhibition design and the building envelope...exert minimal impact on the quality of the space.”<sup>6</sup>

The Abbey also wanted to respect “the views externally towards the Palace of Westminster and internally to the Abbey floor below.”

The appointed designers 'MUMA LLP' (McInnes Usher McKnight Architects), responded with great respect for the site. In their 'Competition Submission Sketchbook' they noted: “We are struck by the unique, unexpected characteristics of the space – the crankiness of the timber, the beauty of the stone, the contrast between sunbeams and shadows, patterns of light and patterns of structure, unfolding spaces with intriguing glimpses... In this context it is important that the making of a modern museum display; the technology of display, of interpretation and lighting

and of showcases, does not interfere or compete with the quality of the triforium. We consider that we should protect and cherish the otherworldly nature of the space.”<sup>7</sup>

They further recommended that: “Rather than creating a prescribed route, the visitor is invited to explore – the layout allowing for choice, exploration and discovery. The visitor will be drawn through the series of unfolding spaces, framed vistas and views focusing on key artefacts or displays”.

The sensitivity of the design helps to integrate the experience of the Galleries into the rest of the Abbey, rather than creating an environment that makes them stand out because they feel different.

The second vital element of the new Galleries is their interpretation, meaning the collaborative, researched thoughtfulness about how to explain the objects – in other words – what messages and media to use to help visitors appreciate the context of these sacred objects.

As part of the planning process, a valuable Visitor Focus Workshop was conducted, which helped to determine the four display themes discussed above. In their responses, visitors communicated that the beauty of the space was the biggest draw for them and had the most powerful impact on them. They stressed that any interpretation should feel authentic and evocative to enhance engagement and it should be ‘light-touch’. They believed it was important not to disrupt the ambience and natural beauty of the space by introducing too much digital technology.

Visitor feedback also emphasised an interest in royal ceremonies as a topic to explore, together with the Building of the Abbey. This helped to reinforce the message that architecture, history and links with the monarchy hold the most appeal for Abbey visitors, in other words, the historical as opposed to the religious aspect of ‘worship and daily life’. Although the Abbey was recognised as the ‘National Church’, visitors were not interested in content relating exclusively to Christianity and the church.

The workshop, combined with our market research programme, helped us to identify four or five key messages that we wanted visitors to absorb for each of the four themes (reproduced below):

#### Building Westminster Abbey

- The Abbey has evolved over 1000 years and continues to change
- The Abbey stands close to Parliament and the offices of government
- The Abbey is one of the great medieval churches
- Most generations have left a distinctive mark on the Abbey’s appearance

#### Worship and Daily Life

- The Abbey is a working church with daily worship at the heart of all it does
- The views from the triforium enhance understanding of the spaces below
- Many objects on display remain in use, as required, for services or other events
- Special services and other occasions make the Abbey the focus of national attention
- All are welcome and the Abbey provides an opportunity for reflection

### Westminster Abbey and the Monarchy

- The Abbey has been the Coronation church since 1066
- The Abbey has been the burial place for many monarchs
- The Abbey contains the Shrine of St Edward the Confessor
- The Abbey is a Royal Peculiar and has a special relationship with the monarch
- Much of the collection has grown from the relationship with the Crown

### The Abbey and National Memory

- The Abbey is a repository for the Nation's memory
- People representing many fields of endeavour are buried or commemorated here and commemoration takes many forms
- The Abbey contains a major collection of monumental sculpture
- The Abbey has been a 'visitor attraction' for many centuries

A second part of the interpretation planning process involved hosting a conference as part of the British Art Network Seminar on Ecclesiastical Art to explore the essential differences between objects exhibited in their original setting as opposed to in a museum. Dr Vernon White, the Abbey's former Canon Theologian, delivered the keynote speech, reflecting on how museum objects can evoke a spiritual message.<sup>8</sup>

Canon White saw the Abbey as a complex multi-partite entity: a) as a tourist attraction; b) as a cultural exhibit and c) as a museum. He recognised that Abbey visitors are multi-cultural and from a *wide mix of religious backgrounds* – or none; with a wide demographic profile of age and social background – many of them from overseas. He suggested that a significant proportion of people who visit Westminster Abbey have no formal feeling, interest or personal commitment to religion and that they reflect the 'plural, post-Christian, semi-secularised, yet still spiritually alert world we now inhabit'. He perceived these visitors to have a 'low level of religious literacy' but at the same time to have varying levels of personal spiritual sensitivity and receptivity.

Canon White's address helped us to frame questions of how to display and interpret the objects: "when they are not only functioning for general cultural or historic interest but when they are also functioning as signs with religious meaning – a meaning still alive and contemporary for some visitors, but not for all."

He asked:

"Should that affect the way they are displayed? Should it make a difference? What does it mean to display them with a sense of integrity when they still have this function as religious signs?"

He argued that:

"What sharpens this question is displaying them in a building still actively celebrating the religion in which this art functions as an active religious sign (i.e. a Church). It sharpens the issue because the building itself, not just particular artefacts within it, is also functioning as a work of art with religious meaning."

He continued:

“Paying attention both to what our visitors know and do not know, and to who they are, is important. We should avoid making easy assumptions. Even for those who choose to visit an exhibition of religious artefacts, even in a church building, their basic religious literacy may well be very low (irrespective of general education and intelligence).

At the same time, their spiritual, moral and aesthetic sensitivity and curiosity will be varied and may be high.

...To be honest to both our artefacts and our visitors we cannot avoid the need for offering explicit explanation of religious meaning.

We should not make these signs one-dimensional, nor dilute them, pretending they are not what they are.”

The conclusion of this reflective process is that our visitors come with ‘a disposition and willingness to appreciate the spiritual or theological’ significance of what they are seeing. They are prepared to be engaged but are resistant to over-dogmatic interpretation – meanings can be offered to them but not imposed on them. In other words, as cultural custodians and museum-makers we must respect each visitor’s personal level of ‘spiritual receptivity’.

This paper does not pretend to be comprehensive, but in it are presented aspects relevant to the creation of The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Galleries at Westminster Abbey. The Galleries sit at the intersection of religion and culture and seek to broaden public appreciation for medieval works of art which are part of the historic working collection of the Abbey, and which derive their functionality from use on the Abbey floor. Our research has enabled us to think carefully about the visitor information we offer to reflect the mix and interests of our visitors. (Information provided includes a leaflet in several languages; six introductory graphic panels; six explanatory films and a label for each object). Our measure of success is the positive feedback we receive, as visitors open themselves to this beautiful medieval space, where holy music wafts up as you gaze down the awe-inspiring gothic nave.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> See S. Jenkins and T. Trowles, eds. *The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries, Westminster Abbey* (London: Scala Publications Ltd, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See S. Jenkins, "Sunbeams and Shadows: Exhibiting the Collection at Westminster Abbey," in *The Burlington Magazine* 161, no. 1390 (January 2019): 4-8.

<sup>3</sup> See G. Higgott, "Sir Christopher Wren's Failed Project for a Crossing Tower and Spire at Westminster Abbey (1713-25)," in *The Burlington Magazine* 161, no.1390 (January 2019): 44-57.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Wackett, "Royal Ceremonies in the Missal of Abbot Nicholas Litlyngton," in *The Burlington Magazine* 161, no. 1390 (January 2019):18-25.

<sup>5</sup> See S. Jenkins and K. Blessley, "Royal Wooden Funeral Effigies at Westminster Abbey," in *The Burlington Magazine* 161, no. 1390 (January 2019): 26-35.

<sup>6</sup> *Westminster Abbey Library*, unpublished 'Client Brief' for The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> *Westminster Abbey Library* unpublished document, MUMA Competition Sketchbook, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Unpublished Keynote Speech, Westminster Abbey, 2015 (publication forthcoming).



Figure 1 - Aerial view of Westminster Abbey



Figure 2 - The coronation of HM King Charles III at Westminster Abbey, 6th May 2023



Figure 3 - View of the Abbey from The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries



Figure 4 - The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries with the Wren model (background) and Quire screen obelisk



Figure 5 - The Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries with the effigy of King Edward III (right)



Figure 6 - Manuscript illumination of a coronation, detail from the Litlyngton Missal, 1383

# Case Studies of Conservation, Restoration and Fruition of *Santa Maria del Fiore* Heritage in 2024

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## Abstract

The *Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore*, founded by the Florentine Republic in 1296, is the monumental complex including the Cathedral (Duomo), the Baptistery of St John, Giotto's Bell Tower, Brunelleschi's Dome, and the *Opera del Duomo* Museum. This monumental complex is one of the most significant religious sites and cultural landmarks in Florence, attracting over two million visitors annually. The *Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore* is an institution whose principal mission is the conservation and enhancement of the historical, artistic, and architectural heritage under its care. It aims to transmit religious values through art and beauty to a global audience. Each year, the *Opera* develops and implements conservation and restoration projects to safeguard its monuments and artworks in alignment with this mission. In this paper, the Collections' Manager presents recent case studies related to the maintenance and restoration of artworks within the Cathedral, as well as a special project planned for the Jubilee celebrations at the Museum.

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## *Sacrestia delle Messe*, Maintenance and Conservation

Throughout 2023 and 2024, a widespread infestation of xylophagous insects was identified affecting paintings, wooden sculptures, and wooden furnishings within the Cathedral. Thanks to regular monitoring activities, timely interventions were carried out and treatment operations are currently still in progress (Fig. 1). This infestation also extended to the splendid *Sacrestia delle Messe*, an entire room richly decorated with fifteenth century wooden furnishings.

The *Sacrestia delle Messe* constitutes the only nearly intact Renaissance-style interior within the Cathedral. This space constitutes a true artistic gem and an extraordinary compendium of fifteenth century Florentine art; it is still regularly used by the Canons of the Cathedral and accessible to scholars and selected visitors exclusively by appointment. Severely damaged during the 1966 flood, it underwent an extensive restoration campaign which was completed in 1982.

The project to furnish the *Sacrestia delle Messe* with cupboards for vestments and sacred objects dates back to the year 1432; the earliest intarsia panels, on the right-hand wall entering the Sacristy, date back to 1440 and were created by a team of master artisans – Agnolo di Lazzaro d'Arezzo, Bernardo di Tommaso di Ghigo, and Francesco di Giovanni di Guccio – based on designs by the painter Giovanni Ser Giovanni, known as Lo Scheggia, the younger brother of Masaccio. Five years later, the opposite wall was entrusted to Antonio Manetti Ciaccheri, associate of Filippo Brunelleschi, with a certain Nanni di Nardo.

(Fig. 2) This project introduced an entirely new concept: the use of linear perspective in intarsia designs to create the illusion of half-open cabinets containing typical sacristy objects. The idea likely originated with Brunelleschi himself, who had pioneered perspective a quarter of a century earlier and, until his death in 1446, oversaw all major projects in the Cathedral. Between 1462 and 1463, Giuliano da Maiano was commissioned to decorate the far, or window-side, wall of the sacristy using the same technique. He enlisted his brother-in-law, Maso Finiguerra, to design the figures of San Zanobi and the deacons Eugenio and Crescenzo for the lower portion of the wall.

The painter Alessio Baldovinetti was tasked with colouring Maso's drawings, guiding the woodworkers in their chiaroscuro modelling of the faces. Two prophets in the upper section may have been designed by Antonio del Pollaiolo, while the large central Annunciation scene – set in the courtyard of a contemporary Florentine palazzo – is entirely the work of Giuliano da Maiano, who was also a renowned architect.

In 1465, Giuliano received another commission to complete the intarsia work on the final wall, which includes the entrance. This panel features scenes of the Nativity and the Presentation in the Temple, likely executed with the collaboration of Cosimo and Francesco Rosselli, and possibly with the young Domenico Ghirlandaio among the workshop assistants. During the inspections effected in 2024 evidence of woodworm infestation was identified through surface traces at several distinct points throughout the room, observed at various heights.

(Fig 3.) Given the considerable dimensions of the space, difficult to isolate and still in continuous use by the clergy, the usual method of using an anoxic chamber—commonly applied to panel paintings and wooden sculptures— was ruled out, as was the option of microwave treatment, let alone dismantling and treating each individual inlay and piece of furniture. Fortunately, it has been found the only method considered both viable and effective in settings of such complexity and artistic significance: the use of specialised UVA lamps. These lamps, which must remain continuously operational, emit heat and ultraviolet radiation that attract insects residing within the wooden structures. Once drawn toward the light and heat, the insects become trapped on adhesive sheets positioned within the lamps. These sheets must be replaced every three months, and the light source is typically renewed once per year. To ensure sustained effectiveness, the lamps are required to remain active for approximately four years. Based on the number of insects present on the trap sheet, it is possible to determine whether the infestation is still active or nearing its conclusion.

Thanks to this gradual reduction, over the course of the following months, the percentage of deposited eggs progressively decreases until complete elimination. The adhesive sheet replaced on March 31, 2025 still shows the presence of active insects. This method has also been recently employed within a large display case in the *Opera del Duomo* museum, specifically dedicated to the wooden tools used on the construction site of Brunelleschi's Dome, where large-scale instruments and objects are exhibited.

### **San Giuseppe by Lorenzo di Credi, Painting Restoration**

(Fig. 4) The second case study concerns the restoration of a panel painting by Lorenzo di Credi located in the Chapel dedicated to *San Giuseppe*, positioned above the altar in the Tribune of the Cross within the Cathedral of *Santa Maria del Fiore*:

Lorenzo di Credi (1456–1537) was a pupil and long-time collaborator of Andrea del Verrocchio, working extensively in his workshop.

In the painting, St Joseph is depicted barefoot, standing within a niche, holding a flowering stick in his left hand, upon which a dove is perched. He is dressed in a blue tunic and enveloped in an ochre mantle rendered with deep, flowing folds. The work—mentioned by Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists*—was commissioned to Lorenzo di Credi to adorn the altar of the Chapel of *San Giuseppe*, founded in 1520, and located in the Tribune of the Cross in *Santa Maria del Fiore*. It belongs to the artist's late production and is firmly attributed to him, as confirmed also by other sources.

Since its foundation, the chapel has been a place of great devotion for the faithful devoted to St Joseph. In 1686, Pope Innocent XI granted the request of Cosimo III de' Medici to establish a special celebration on January 23rd, commemorating the Betrothal of the Virgin Mary to St Joseph. Still today, on the occasion of the January 23rd celebration, the painting of the *Betrothal of the Virgin*, by an anonymous Florentine painter, is displayed in the showcase on the altar.

The display case on the altar was purposefully designed to contain the two paintings, positioned one behind the other. Through an opening at the back, it is possible to alternate their placement, bringing either painting to the front for viewing. After the Betrothal celebration, the *San Giuseppe* by Lorenzo di Credi is displayed again to the front in the showcase throughout the rest of the year. On March 19, the feast day dedicated to the Holy Spouse of Mary, the chapel is further adorned with flowers and decorations.

Before restoration, the *San Giuseppe* panel was in a state of mediocre preservation. The protective varnish exhibited moderate photo-oxidation, evident in a yellowish hue likely exacerbated by the presence of wax. These conditions distorted the perception of the chromatic fields and compromised the overall visual unity of the composition.

Numerous overpaintings were present, many of which had undergone significant chromatic alteration, especially on the saint's garments – evidence of previous restoration campaigns. In the central area, on the saint's chest, a conspicuous burn mark caused by proximity to a votive candle had damaged the original paint layer. This area had been retouched crudely. Paint lifting was especially concentrated in the central region, and recent exit holes from wood-boring insects were also visible. The frame exhibited widespread insect damage, structural losses, and detachment of gilding and preparatory layers, particularly at the corners.

The intervention, undertaken by the restorer Luigi Orata, began with the consolidation of the flaking paint layers (Fig. 5). A preliminary examination of the surface under visible light, as well as ultraviolet (UV) fluorescence, confirmed the presence of an oxidised and uneven varnish layer. Extensive areas of discoloured overpainting were also identified. A decision was made to gradually reduce the varnish layers and remove altered, non-original materials. Solubility batten tests were conducted to determine the least polar solvent mixture capable of dissolving the superficial varnish. The initial tests produced promising results, indicating that the uppermost layer was composed of lipophilic material, likely wax.

After surface cleaning, further UV observation confirmed the persistence of a thick, uneven, photo-oxidised varnish layer. Additional solubility testing enabled continued thinning of the varnish, while the process was monitored under both visible and UV light. Chromatically dissonant overpainting – likely from earlier interventions – was removed, revealing an original pictorial surface that had suffered significant erosion due to overly aggressive past cleanings.

Subsequently, treatment of the back of the panel was executed. The dovetail battens were gradually removed, their housing was carefully cleaned, and paraffin was applied both to the bases and inside the housing to reduce friction. The entire panel support was treated with a double application of anti-woodworm agent for preventive purposes, followed by a wax coating to buffer sudden thermo-hygrometric fluctuations.

Paint losses were filled with a filler material textured to match the surrounding surface morphology. These areas were subsequently retouched with tempera. Woodworm exit holes were plugged and surface-filled with gesso and glue. The painting was varnished by brush, and chromatic reintegration of the lacunae was carried out using pigments suspended in the same resin.

(Fig 6. ) In heavily degraded areas a neutral-toned inpainting approach was adopted – limited to tone-matching the original colour without speculative reconstruction of forms or chiaroscuro modelling. A final protective varnish layer was applied to complete the restoration process. This intervention has restored the painting's full legibility, both in terms of its compositional integrity and its recovered chromatic harmony.

### **The Gates of Paradise as a Sacred Pilgrimage Site during the Jubilee Year**

The Jubilee Year 2025 represents a moment of deep spiritual significance for the Catholic Church and for believers around the world. It is a time of grace, forgiveness, and renewal, during which pilgrims are invited to pass through the Holy Doors of the major basilicas – a symbol of reconciliation with God and with one another. This Jubilee, proclaimed by the late Pope Francis, is centred on the theme “Pilgrims of Hope”, and calls everyone to rediscover the beauty of faith, the importance of solidarity, and the urgent need for peace in a world marked by profound challenges. The Holy Year is also an opportunity to appreciate the artistic, cultural, and spiritual heritage of the participating cities, in a spirit of hospitality and brotherhood.

Within the framework of the Jubilee Year, the Holy Door carries profound symbolic and ritual significance. Traditionally sealed and reopened only during ordinary Jubilees, it represents the transition from sin to grace, from spiritual indifference to conversion. The rite of the opening of the Holy Door – solemnly presided over by the Pope at St. Peter's Basilica and mirrored in other Roman basilicas and numerous sanctuaries worldwide – is rich in liturgical and theological meaning. Passing through the threshold becomes an act of inner pilgrimage, a visible expression of the desire for reconciliation and renewal. From a historical and anthropological perspective, the Holy Door can also be interpreted as a narrative and spatial device, marking sacred time and guiding the faithful along a path oriented toward salvation.

Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise*, created for the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence (1425–1452), stand not only as a masterpiece of Renaissance art, but also as a potent theological symbol. Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise*, commissioned 600 years ago, are currently one of the main masterpieces housed in the *Museo dell'Opera del Duomo*. Unlike the two earlier doors of the Baptistery, by Andrea Pisano and by Lorenzo Ghiberti which both feature 28 panels, Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* are composed of only ten large reliefs. Each panel depicts multiple interconnected scenes, forming a highly original and unified iconographic structure that is at once complex and narratively rich.

Although the initial iconographic scheme of 28 panels was proposed by Leonardo Bruni – humanist and chancellor of the Papal Curia – Ghiberti significantly reinterpreted both the narrative logic and the compositional framework. The ten scenes were conceived with an expanded visual field, allowing for a more immersive storytelling approach. The eight prophets, initially planned as central figures, were instead repositioned along the borders of the panels. The ten gilded bronze panels, depicting scenes from the Old Testament, form a visual narrative of salvation history culminating in Christ. Through its rich iconographic program, it invites viewers – both lay and learned – to engage with the beauty and coherence of the divine plan as expressed through sacred history.

(Fig. 7) In this sense, the *Gates of Paradise* can be interpreted in parallel with the Holy Door of the Jubilee: both represent a threshold – not merely architectural but spiritual – through which the faithful are invited to enter a redeemed dimension. Ghiberti's work, through its remarkable iconographic power and its placement at the entrance to the Baptistery – a site emblematic of sacramental rebirth – lends itself to a symbolic reading that anticipates the meaning of the Holy Door as a passage into mercy, forgiveness, and new life in Christ.

Throughout the Jubilee Year, the Archbishop invites the faithful from the parishes of Florence and other Catholic groups to undertake a pilgrimage of study, reflection, and prayer by visiting Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* at the *Museo dell'Opera del Duomo*. Given that the narrative illustrated by Ghiberti is drawn from the Old Testament – a text shared by all Christians – the invitation is extended to the “sister Churches”: Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, and Evangelical communities.

Responding to the Archbishop's proposal, the *Opera del Duomo* Museum offers free guided visits to the *Gates of Paradise*, throughout 2025, presenting it both as a masterpiece of sacred art and as a monumental artistic achievement. The *Gates of Paradise* thus emerge as a sacred work with a deeply religious yet broadly popular appeal. Ghiberti's narrative mode reflects the spirit of humanistic faith, and the structure of the scenes elevates biblical events into the register of Renaissance humanism.



Figure 1 - *Sacrestia delle Messe, Santa Maria del Fiore*



Figure 2 - *Sacrestia delle Messe, Santa Maria del Fiore*, detail of tarsia



Figure 3 - *Sacrestia delle Messe, Santa Maria del Fiore*, in daily use of the clergy



Figure 4 - *Cappella di San Giuseppe, Santa Maria del Fiore Lorenzo di Credi, San Giuseppe, ca. 1520-23, oil on poplar panel*



Figure 5 - Lorenzo di Credi, *San Giuseppe*, UV fluorescence before the restoration



Figure 6 - Lorenzo di Credi, *San Giuseppe*, after the restoration



Figure 7 - Lorenzo Ghiberti, *Porta del Paradiso*, Sala del Paradiso, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo

# The Burges Maquettes of St Fin Barre's Cathedral

Orla O'Byrne

*St Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork, Ireland*

## Abstract

St Fin Barre's Cathedral in Cork City, southern Ireland was, in 1863, the first major commission for the English architect, William Burges. He undertook its design with the same fervent commitment and rigorous attention to detail that consistently characterised his architectural oeuvre. Today, St Fin Barre's is considered a triumph of Gothic Revival architecture, its three spires a dominant feature of the city skyline (Fig. 1). For Burges, it was to be his *tour de force*, a focal point for his own passion for the 'truth' and 'beauty' of the art of the Middle Ages. Such were the Romantic yearnings of the brief High Victorian period with which he is associated. To ensure unity and harmony throughout, great attention was paid to all the decorative elements of the building, and detailed plans were drawn up for the stained-glass windows, mosaics, furniture and other features.

Over 1,200 sculptures adorn the building, inside and out. These, too, were first drawn on paper before being made into full-size plaster maquettes at the workshop of a renowned London-based sculptor. The finished maquettes were shipped to Cork, where they were used as templates by the cathedral stonemasons. According to this process of production, the maquettes should have been destroyed when the cathedral was finished. However, in this case, by a twist of fate, they have survived.

This paper will give an account of the Burges maquettes, from their creation, function and improbable survival, to their recent 'rediscovery' and the groundbreaking conservation project which is now underway. Creative public engagement has included an exhibition of partial maquettes in a side chapel. This exhibition, which made use of the powerful visual language of fragments, has been the catalyst for conversations between people from both inside and outside the formal structures of faith. As the project gathers pace, it is intended to keep these conversations going and to build upon this synthesis of conservation, curation and spirituality.

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## Introduction

St Fin Barre's Cathedral is built on a raised limestone outcrop in the southwestern part of Cork City, in the province of Munster in southern Ireland. The current nineteenth century cathedral is by no means the first ecclesiastical structure on this ancient site, which is in fact associated with the first Abbot-Bishop and founder of Cork, St Fin Barre.<sup>1</sup> According to the many written accounts of the life of the saint, it is here that he established a monastic settlement in the year 606AD.<sup>2</sup> As was the case with many early Christian monasteries in Ireland, the community flourished. It became a densely populated hub of education, craftsmanship and religious devotion, and out of that hub, Cork City was born. John Colgan, the seventeenth century hagiographer, recorded in his *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 'seventeen holy bishops and seven hundred prosperous monks' buried alongside St Fin Barre at 'Corcach Mór na Mumhan'.<sup>3,4</sup> The monastic site extended westward to include the grounds of the present day

University College Cork, whose motto is 'Where Finbarr taught, let Munster learn,' an indication that Cork's identity is still very much shaped around its beginnings on the site of St Fin Barre's.

There is no reliable record of how many buildings have previously stood where the current cathedral stands. Centuries of political turbulence, particularly since the twelfth century, have left behind scant material evidence of life in Cork in the Middle Ages and historians can but guess how many times a church has been built to St Fin Barre, only to meet its end smashed, broken or burned. The last cathedral on the site before the current one was built in 1735. This building incorporated the central tower of a yet older church as part of its structure, along with a twelfth or thirteenth century ornate archway and a number of fourteenth or fifteenth century carved stone heads. Luckily, the new cathedral architect, William Burges, had a great appreciation for all things medieval and, during the demolition of the old 1735 cathedral, all these artefacts were preserved. Today they form part of the cathedral's collection and help to illuminate its centuries-old story. While Burges showed respect for these medieval fragments, there was no suggestion that he might include them in the fabric of his new cathedral. His architectural design, selected from a pool of sixty-eight hopeful applications, demonstrated a stunning vision: a total integration of architecture and decoration which would resonate with all the colour and character of the finest medieval French churches. As author Hilary Pyle put it in her essay on the decoration of St Fin Barre's, 'the binding thread of the total concept is Burges's understanding of the ecclesiastical iconography as worked out by the French medieval mind.'<sup>5</sup> Burges' mission was to capture the spirit of an age through one complete and totalising style and, to that end, he maintained unyielding control of every element of the design.

### **Process – Paper, Plaster, Stone**

St Fin Barre's Cathedral captivates visitors through the remarkable craftsmanship and intricate detailing of its stone carvings. Nowhere is this truer than at the west front (Fig. 2), which Burges declared from the outset, "should be a specimen of the best architectural sculpture the age can produce."<sup>6</sup> Its design (Fig. 3) included a clustering of statuary around each of the three portals. This is reminiscent of the Early French architectural style of the twelfth to thirteenth century<sup>7</sup> and is highly effective as it means that from the moment of entering the cathedral, the visitor is quite surrounded by a lively iconographic scheme – a theme which then continues through the cathedral, culminating in a highly decorative sanctuary ceiling.

During the design phase, detailed drawings of the proposed stone carvings such as those in Figure 3 were sent to the workshop of a well-known sculptor and long-time associate of Burges called Thomas Nicholls, who was based in Deptford in southeast London. Working from these two-dimensional designs, it was Nicholls' job to create three-dimensional plaster maquettes, mostly in full size.<sup>8</sup> These maquettes were then shipped to Cork and brought to the cathedral to be copied into limestone by Irish stonemasons. In order to create a faithful facsimile in stone, stonemasons used a precise measuring tool known as a pointing machine. This way of carving – working from drawing to maquette to stone – is known as the 'indirect carving method' and, using this method of production, it was common practice to destroy the maquettes once the stone-carving was complete. They were considered dispensable: an important part of the process, certainly, but not of particular artistic merit in themselves. Another reason for their

destruction was to avoid the undesirable situation of having them fall into the hands of someone who might make further copies. There were sound reasons to destroy maquettes but in the case of St Fin Barre's, that did not happen.

### **Survival Through Forgottenness**

In the cathedral archive, there is a document which gives estimates for the work to be carried out by the Irish stonemasons. Prices are listed for various sculptures such as gargoyles, full figures and relief panels. Also included are the terms of the agreement regarding the maquettes:

“The prices given in these estimates to include all expenses connected with the work such as carriage, material, scaffolding, fixing but it will not include any expenses connected with the models beyond depositing them in some place directed by the committee as soon as they shall have served their purpose.”<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, the stonemasons in Cork did not want the responsibility, the inconvenience or any costs associated with the disposal of the maquettes. And therefore, a large number of maquettes were duly dumped in the damp basement of a building on the cathedral grounds, where they have mostly sat for approximately 150 years (Fig. 4). A number of others were brought to a room inside the southwest tower of the cathedral (Fig. 5).

After the stone-carving was finished, cathedral life carried on and the maquettes in storage presumably came to occupy that liminal space between being forgotten and being remembered. Out of sight, out of mind, perhaps. But not entirely. On at least two occasions, exhibitions have been organised in Cork around the theme of St Fin Barre's Cathedral and its world famous architect. “Got Cork!” was a 1981 exhibition at Cork's Crawford Municipal Art Gallery, organised to commemorate the centenary of William Burges. 'Conserving the Dream: Treasures of St Fin Barre's Cathedral' was held at Cork Public Museum in 2005. Both featured Burges maquettes, which were removed from the tower and basement and cleaned in preparation for exhibition. This small group within the collection remains clean and dry and in good condition to this day.

One of the most intriguing characteristics of the collection is that the individual pieces exist in a variety of states of deterioration due to the nature of their storage and treatment. Their unlikely survival means that the cathedral is now in possession of a collection of international interest, not to mention enormous pedagogical value for plaster conservation. Pieces range from extremely humid and so broken as to be almost unidentifiable, to perfectly dry, clean and intact. In some cases, the salt crystallisation within the gypsum has created a crumbly second skin beneath the outermost layer, which is now beginning to come away completely. Each maquette is replete with the marks of its own making. Tiny little pinprick holes dot the surfaces of many. These have been left by the aforementioned stonemasons' pointing machine. Inside the hollowed-out interiors of the full figures, there are deep grooves – these are the fingermarks of Thomas Nicholls or his workshop assistants. There are pencil marks and annotations on the surfaces of some, offering a compelling glimpse into the artisans' process.

There are several maquettes in the collection that have no stone counterpart on the cathedral. Never having ‘made the cut’, these now exist simply as ideas in plaster, three-dimensional sketches of what could have been. Over time, the stone carvings on the cathedral's exterior have

fallen victim to the Irish weather. The statuary on the west front has deteriorated quite badly in some places. Of the twenty-seven stone figures of the portals, we have twenty-four of the original maquettes. When, at some future date, restoration of the stonework is carried out, the conservator-restorers will have most of the original templates from which to work, meaning that the maquettes will fulfil their purpose for a second time – provided, that is, that we can save these maquettes and ensure their survival into the future.

### **The Beautiful Maquette Hospital**

By November 2023, the situation in the basement was critical: humidity levels had reached almost one hundred per cent. If these fragile objects were to be preserved, the drying process needed to begin immediately –but with extreme care. The risk was that if they dried too quickly, the gypsum crystallisation could weaken the structure, potentially even turning the maquettes to dust. Working with limited resources, we had to think creatively and, in consultation with our conservator, an idea began to form. The ambient humidity inside the cathedral was sufficiently high to allow for a slow and quite controlled drying process. A proposal was made to the Dean of Cork for an unusual exhibition inside the cathedral, which he warmly accepted. A small side chapel called the Dean's Chapel was made available for display (Fig. 4). This was an exhibition with a very practical function. It was a fluid, moving exhibition. The plaster fragments on display were monitored as they dried and once stabilised, transferred off-site to continue their conservation journey. This rotation allowed for more critical cases from the basement to take their place. In essence, the chapel became a kind of beautiful maquette hospital – quietly functional, but visually striking.

While the primary objective was conservation, the exhibition quickly generated public interest. Visitors were drawn to the fragments in particular. There is something compelling about being in close proximity to extreme fragility, especially when paired with a narrative of survival. The resonance was immediate. Recognising this curiosity, we began to organise public talks. Given my own background in the visual arts, these events naturally attracted an audience that included many practising artists and art students. There was great interest – not only in the story of the maquettes, but in the broader questions they raised about material, memory, and meaning.

One such event, titled 'Rock, Paper, Scissors,' took the form of a two-part talk. We began at the cathedral, with a discussion focused on the maquettes and their conservation. We then walked together, just 300 metres, to a nearby gallery for the second part of the programme, which explored artistic responses to the conservation project. The accompanying exhibition included drawings, photographs, and sculpture. The outcome was striking: attendees from both within and beyond the church community engaged with both elements of the event. It felt like a natural and meaningful synthesis of two often-separate worlds.

### **Looking Forward**

At this early stage in the conservation project, we are still exploring how best to proceed – how to act in a way that serves both the integrity of the collection and the mission of the Church. I believe we have made a strong start. But the challenge now is to deepen these emerging connections – between conservation, curation, art, and spirituality.

To help frame this next phase of thinking, I want to briefly highlight two recent and significant developments: one within the Church, and one within the field of conservation. First, within the Church – specifically in the UK – there is growing evidence of a renewed commitment to the arts and to creative collaboration. In 2023, the Association of English Cathedrals appointed Jacqueline Creswell as its first Arts Curator. This newly created role, as Ms Creswell has explained, aims “to bring to the cathedrals of England an approach to installing art that’s respectful and sensitive to each environment, and creates a narrative between the exhibited work and the cathedral.”<sup>10</sup> She makes an important distinction: Cathedrals aren’t, she says, “exhibition spaces for decorative art – they’re sacred spaces that can be used to communicate wider thoughts and ideas.”<sup>11</sup>

Secondly – and this is a theme that will be familiar to many attendees of the Malta-Pisa Conference on European Cathedrals, 2025 – there is increasing public interest in conservation itself. One example that stands out is the ‘Kings and Scribes’ exhibition at Winchester Cathedral. Overseen by curator Eleanor Swire, this award-winning display includes medieval carvings and an in-depth presentation of a conservation project involving the bones of Saxon kings and bishops. It is a powerful demonstration of how thoughtful curatorial practice can make complex conservation work accessible and engaging to a broad audience.

It is at the intersection of these two trends – the Church’s renewed engagement with the arts, and the rising visibility of conservation – that I see real potential for productive collaboration. In particular, I would advocate for the inclusion of curators and artists-in-residence within conservation projects. These individuals can play a crucial role in building bridges across disciplines, contexts, and communities. This interdisciplinary conversation is, I believe, at the heart of what artists are uniquely positioned to support.

At St Fin Barre’s, we are committed to continuing in this spirit, which means maintaining an interdisciplinary approach and seeking out the places where shared purpose can be found. And where is that common ground? Well, I would suggest that whether we are conservators, curators, artists, or clergy, we all share something fundamental: an appreciation of the extraordinary power of a good story to bring people to our message.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Variations of his name include Finbar, Fionn Barra and Bairre.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Richard Caulfield, *The Life of Saint Fin Barre: First Bishop and Founder of the see of Cork* (London: Russell Smith, Soho Square, 1864); T. A. Lunham, “The life of Saint Fin Barre,” *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 12, no. 71 (1906): 105-120; Charles Alexander Webster, “St. Fin Barre of Cork,” *The Irish Church Quarterly* 6: no. 24 (1913): 314-326.

<sup>3</sup> Corcach Mor na Mumhan, from which the name of the city of Cork derives, translates from the Irish to “The large marsh of Munster”. Munster is the name of the southernmost province of Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> See Lunham, “The life of Saint Fin Barre,” 4.

<sup>5</sup> Hilary Pyle, "The Decoration of Cork Cathedral," *The GPA Irish Arts Review Yearbook* (1989), 33.

<sup>6</sup> David Lawrence & Ann Wilson, *The Cathedral of Saint Fin Barre at Cork, William Burges in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 111.

<sup>7</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Note: 'in full size' here means in 1:1 ratio with the finished stone-carvings.

<sup>9</sup> The word 'models' here refers to the plaster maquettes. From the 'Book of Estimates', archive of St Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork.

<sup>10</sup> Terence Handley MacMath, "Interview: Jacqueline Creswell, Art Curator for English Cathedrals," *Church Times*, 5 July, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1 - Cork City skyline showing St Fin Barre's Cathedral from the north, 2025



Figure 2 - West front of St Fin Barre's Cathedral, 2025



Figure 3 - Burges's drawing for the sculpture of the central portal of the west front, 1867, in St Fin Barre's Cathedral Archive



Figure 4 - Maquettes in the basement, 2023



Figure 5 -Maquettes in the southwest tower, 2024



Figure 6 - Exhibition in St Fin Barre's Cathedral, 2024

# Presenting Sacral Heritage in Contemporary Society: The Case of the Church Heritage Museum of Vilnius Archdiocese

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## **Abstract**

The Church Heritage Museum, opened in 2009, holds the primary mission of safeguarding and showcasing the sacred heritage of the Vilnius Archdiocese to the wider public. The Museum's reach spans across the entire Vilnius Archdiocese, with ongoing efforts dedicated to heritage preservation and educational initiatives. In an era of increasing secularisation, presenting and attracting visitors to Church heritage topics is becoming more and more challenging. The paper will focus on the current debate within our museum community about renewing our activities, identity and ways of communication.

The paper will outline the activities of the Church Heritage Museum, which aims to respond to contemporary issues. In particular, the Museum has a strong focus on communities, organising travelling events in the regional parishes. The museum also organises various educational programmes for families and schoolchildren, and special events for teachers. Another important aspect of the work is the involvement of contemporary artists, and the ambition to transcend interdisciplinary boundaries. Engaging new audiences, especially young people, with the Church's heritage is a very big challenge at a time when the Church institution, in general, is in crisis and its role in society is being challenged.

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## **Introduction**

The Church Heritage Museum of Vilnius Archdiocese was opened in 2009 in St Michael's Church – a mausoleum of the Sapieha family and a beautiful example of Renaissance and early Baroque architecture. It is the place where visitors can see the Treasury of Vilnius Cathedral, which was hidden away in the wall of the Cathedral for almost half a century, the earliest masterpieces of Lithuanian goldsmiths and textile artists. In 2012, the museum installed a new exhibition in the crypts of the Vilnius Cathedral. In 2014, the reconstructed Cathedral Bell Tower was opened to residents of Vilnius and city visitors. The Church Heritage Museum is the only museum institution in Lithuania dedicated to the preservation and presentation of sacred heritage to the public.

Church heritage represents a large and particularly significant part of our cultural legacy. In addition, it links us to our Christian European roots. During the Soviet era, church heritage was more severely impacted than any other. Much of it was irretrievably lost, taken abroad, or fell into private hands. Most importantly, the museum exhibits objects by integrating their

religious, artistic, and historical significance and value, ensuring that respect for religious objects is maintained while enhancing the visitor's understanding of their deeper meaning. Secular museums cannot provide the level of respect and care that sacred objects require. Some of the artefacts housed in the museum are no longer used due to changes in liturgy, while others are old and fragile. However, some continue to be used in ceremonies and special occasions. While most of the exhibits are stored in the museum, they remain the property of the church parishes.

In recent years, the museum has embraced interdisciplinary collaboration by involving specialists and artists from diverse fields. Initiatives such as poetry readings at the museum and concert programmes have broadened the museum's regular audiences. Non-traditional intersections with other disciplines are also explored – for example, a physicist and a mineralogist were invited to give lectures at the museum. Through organized visits to regional parishes, the museum fosters connections with local communities. These visits promote dialogue around the heritage objects specific to each parish and support the museum's broader mission and objectives.

The Museums aim to preserve and present historical sacred heritage and showcase contemporary art that engages with themes drawn from the museum's collection. The dialogue with contemporary art plays a vital role in engaging new audiences. Collaborations with artists lead to the creation of new unique works. Through museum activities, fostering cultural education, supporting public learning, and contributing to positive changes in people's lives.

### **The History of Vilnius Cathedral**

The Cathedral Basilica of St Stanislaus and St Ladislaus in Vilnius is one of the oldest Catholic churches in Lithuania. This shrine is a symbol of Lithuanian baptism from 1387. Vilnius Cathedral was rebuilt multiple times as a result of frequent fires, wars and unstable soil under its foundation. Due to the building's importance, many prominent foreign and local architects and artists led the reconstruction projects. The cathedral took on its current appearance in the early nineteenth century (architect Laurynas Gucevičius). The building currently reflects the Classicist style, but its walls have traces of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque. The cathedral served believers without interruption from 1387 until the mid-twentieth century. In the Soviet period, it was closed as a house of prayer from 1949 to 1989. It was ceremoniously reconsecrated on 5 February 1989.<sup>1</sup>

### **The St Casimir's Chapel**

The Chapel of St Casimir is a particularly holy site in Vilnius Cathedral. Casimir (1458–1484) was the second son of Grand Duke Casimir of Lithuania (ruled 1440–1492). He achieved fame both for his ruling skills and for his pious way of life. He died very young, and was buried in Vilnius Cathedral, where believers soon started to witness various miracles. The canonisation process started not long after his death, but it remained unfinished throughout the sixteenth century. The prince was officially acknowledged as a saint in the early seventeenth century, a fact celebrated with huge festivities in Vilnius in 1604.<sup>2</sup>

The present chapel was built in 1623–1636. It was designed and built by the Italian architects Matteo Castello and Costante Tencalla. The chapel was the first building in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to be decorated mainly with marble. Its exterior was embellished with slabs of sandstone, which were rare here. The prince's remains were transferred to the chapel in 1636. In the late seventeenth century, the dome and the altar were adorned with magnificent works of stucco.

In the earliest (sixteenth century) image of the patron saint of Lithuania, St Casimir is depicted with three hands. Legend has it that the artist decided to change the position of the right hand, and painted another one on top, directed towards the chest, but the over-painted hand shone through the new layer of paint. In fact, the three hands symbolise the generosity of the Holy Prince, and the abundance of grace experienced here. The painting is decorated with a silver frame made in the early eighteenth century.

St Casimir's sarcophagus was made in the mid-eighteenth century, presumably by the Vilnius goldsmith Johann Christoph Groneman. In the sculpture, the prince is represented holding a cross, a symbol of faith, in his right hand, and a lily, symbolising purity, in his left hand. The stucco composition behind the sarcophagus (by Giovanni Pietro Pertti) depicts the saint's triumph in heaven: angels and clouds surround the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the Infant Jesus greeting St Casimir.

### **The Treasury of Vilnius Cathedral**

The Treasury of Vilnius Cathedral is the oldest and the largest among all treasuries held in the churches of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Upon founding the Cathedral, rulers, magnates and bishops donated magnificent liturgical implements: crosses, chalices, reliquaries and monstrances. During the wars, the treasury was hidden, and for the last time it was stored in a hiding place on the eve of World War II.

In the fall of 1939, the contents of the Vilnius Cathedral treasury were hidden in a wall and bricked over. The treasure was discovered just in 1985 but was not shown to the public until 1999. At the time of the discovery, Lithuania was still under Soviet occupation, so it was reasonably assumed that if the Soviet authorities found out about the discovery, all the treasures would go to Moscow. During the Soviet era, Church heritage was more severely impacted than any other. Much of it was irretrievably lost, taken abroad, or fell into private hands. The Cathedral's treasure trove has been open to the public since 2009 and is now exhibited in the Church Heritage Museum. The discoveries continue, in 2024 hidden royal treasures were discovered underneath Vilnius Cathedral. The treasure includes crowns, medallions, rings, and sceptres from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many of which are linked to the powerful Jagiellon dynasty. The treasures are currently being restored and will be on public display in 2026.

### **The Church Heritage Museum**

The Church Heritage Museum was opened to visitors, in 2009. St Michael the Archangel Church and the former Bernardine Franciscan Sisters Convent were chosen for the museum. This historic site is an impressive Renaissance-era ensemble. Its construction and decoration were supported by Leonas Sapiega, one of the most prominent noblemen in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the sixteenth - seventeenth centuries. The convent housed strictly cloistered Bernardine Sisters. The church served not only as a house of prayer, but also as a mausoleum for the Sapiega family.<sup>3</sup>

In the Soviet era, the monastery and the church were closed. The buildings were left unused and abandoned for a time and the church's eighteenth-century altarpieces and the pulpit were demolished. Renovated after a fire in 1964, the church was opened as a museum of architecture, while

the monastery premises were adapted to serve as a student dormitory, apartments and industrial workshops. During the Soviet era, this church was not completely demolished but was desecrated in other ways. The Architecture Museum used to host an exhibition of sanitary equipment, and instead of altars, and holy paintings, there were toilets, washbasins, etc.

After the independence of Lithuania, the monastery building was returned to Vilnius Archdiocese in 1993. The condition of the buildings was in a very bad situation. In 2009, the restoration of the ensemble was completed, and the Church Heritage Museum was opened to visitors.

### **The Crypts of the Cathedral**

An invisible part of the building, the crypts present the history of the temple situated on one of the earliest inhabited sites of Vilnius, the development of the building, and the figures of outstanding merit to the state and Church of Lithuania who are buried there. For many centuries the crypts beneath the cathedral were used to bury prominent nobility, rulers, bishops and Chapter members of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The most famous of them were Vytautas the Great, Alexander I Jagiellon, and Barbara Radziwiłł. The exhibition set up in the crypts and corridors introduces the funerary traditions and archaeological finds, and leads to the Royal Mausoleum.

The crypt of the Chapter, located beneath the presbytery of the church, is the largest and most picturesque space in the underground exhibition. The artefacts which shed light on the reconstructions of the cathedral and its decoration can be examined in the Crypt of the Chapter. One of the oldest items found so far is a small silver angel holding a shield with the coat of arms of the Vilnius Cathedral Chapter in its hands. The angel figurine, which was found in a burnt layer from the late fifteenth century, is thought to be a leg of an ornate reliquary that did not survive. A three-dimensional hologram makes it easier to imagine what the reliquary may have looked like.

The crypts of the cathedral contain one of the oldest surviving frescos in Lithuania painted in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. It testifies about a clash between the traditions of Eastern and Western Christianity in the newly baptized country. In the center of the fresco there is the crucified Christ, while beneath the cross stand his mother the Blessed Virgin Mary and his beloved disciple St John the Evangelist. The drawing itself and the Greek letters in Christ's halo reflect the influence of Byzantine art, though Jesus is affixed to the cross with three nails, which is typical of Catholic tradition.<sup>4</sup>

### **Vilnius Cathedral Bell Tower**

The bell tower of Vilnius Cathedral is one of the main vertical landmarks of the Old Town. It rose on the site of the medieval defensive tower of the Lower Castle, which stood there in the thirteenth century. Later it was converted into the Cathedral's bell tower and finally acquired its present appearance in the early nineteenth century. The tower has its authentic constructions, bells, the oldest clock mechanism in Lithuania, interactive visual and audio presentation of the structure's history and impressive views to see.

During the Soviet times, a decision was made to install a carillon in the Cathedral Bell Tower. Bells of various sizes were brought here from closed churches in Lithuania. But despite drilling, milling and grinding, the efforts to tune the bells failed. In 2009 they were restored in the workshop of the Archdiocese of Cologne. Some of the bells have been returned to the churches from which they were taken, others are on display in the Bell Tower.

The ground floor of the medieval defensive tower has survived almost in its entirety. The thickness of the walls varies from 2.8 to 4 metres. During its entire history the bell tower repeatedly suffered from fire, and even today traces of the largest fires – damaged bricks and blackened stones – can be seen. In addition to these historical walls, the visitors can see no less impressive nineteenth century wooden constructions and climb the stairs that have survived from that period.

The height of the bell tower is 57 metres. The visitors can ascend to the top floor (45 metres) and admire impressive views of the city. Those who are fond of modern technologies or unable to climb to the very top can admire the views of Vilnius from a virtual lookout platform with the help of cameras which can be operated by the visitors themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Church heritage – including architectural monuments, works of art and craftsmanship, archival documents, and books – is a vital part of Lithuania’s cultural legacy and its historical connection with Europe. However, for many people today, the religious meanings embedded in these objects can seem distant and difficult to grasp. To bridge this gap, the museum presents a renewed vision under the slogan “More Than You Think,” expressing the idea that exploring its treasures can unveil unexpected perspectives on Lithuanian history and bring to light extraordinary stories. This vision is realized through ongoing research, publishing, educational activities, curated exhibitions, and both scholarly and educational events. These activities not only highlight the artistic and historical significance of the objects but primarily create a dialogue with the museum visitors. The museum not only seeks to spark curiosity, but also to serve as a mediator, conveying messages, becoming a vibrant cultural space for dialogue across various social groups, and revealing what exceptional artistic values say about us and how historical knowledge helps to shape the future.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Cathedral Basilica of St Stanislaus and St Ladislaus in Vilnius: A Guide. Compiled by Alina Pavasarytė* (Vilnius: Church Heritage Museum, 2017), 8–11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 48–50.

<sup>3</sup> *Splendour and Majesty Are Before Him... (Ps 96, 6). Sacral Objects of the Vilnius Archdiocese in the Church Heritage Museum: Catalogue. Compiler Dalia Vasiliūnienė* (Vilnius: Bažnytinio paveldo muziejus, 2013), 31–33.

<sup>4</sup> *The Crypts of Vilnius Cathedral: A Guide. Compiler Sigita Maslauskaitė-Mažyliienė* (Vilnius: Bažnytinio paveldo muziejus, 2014), 124.

<sup>5</sup> *The Cathedral Basilica of St Stanislaus and St Ladislaus in Vilnius: A Guide. Compiled by Alina Pavasarytė* (Vilnius: Church Heritage Museum, 2017), 81–87.



Figure 1 - Vilnius Cathedral Basilica of St Stanislaus and St Ladislaus. Digital archive of The Church Heritage Museum, photographer Evaldas Lasys



Figure 2 - The chapel of St Casimir. Digital archive of The Church Heritage Museum, photographer Evaldas Lasys



Figure 3 - Excursions at the Church Heritage Museum. Digital archive of The Church Heritage Museum, photographer Evgenia Levin



Figure 4 - Activities at the Church Heritage Museum. Digital archive of The Church Heritage Museum, photographer Evgenia Levin



Figure 5 - The crypts of the cathedral. Digital archive of The Church Heritage Museum, photographer Gediminas Trečiokas



Figure 6 - Installation “Vėjalaikis” by Žilvinas Kempinas at the Vilnius Cathedral Bell Tower, 2024. Digital archive of The Church Heritage Museum, photographer Evgenia Levin



Figure 7 - Excursions at the Church Heritage Museum. Digital archive of The Church Heritage Museum, photographer Evgenia Levin

# Conjugate Conservation Needs and Religious Worship of Relics and Artistic Sacred Images

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## Abstract

One of the topics of the 2025 Malta-Pisa conference is how to “engage today’s generations in understanding the spiritual message that sacred art has been emanating for two millennia”. A possible approach is to repropose the devotional worship of the original relics and the sacred images that are now actually confined in museums. This is possible by maximising the protection against the environmental stress during the devotional use and the folkloric processions. In the following, some examples of protective tools that support and allow the perception of the spiritual message transmitted during sacred representations are shown. The anti-seismic bases in the Orvieto Cathedral for the *Annunciazione* by Francesco Mochi on both sides of the Altar, together with the *San Michele Arcangelo* and the Reliquary of the Miracle of Bolsena; the anti-seismic base for the statue of *Madonna con Bambino* on the right transept of the *Basilica di Collemaggio*, L’Aquila; the anti-vibrating base and transport tools for the processional ferulum of the ark of *San Giovanni Battista* in the San Lorenzo Cathedral, Genoa; the devotional folkloristic procession of *San Sebastiano* at Acireale; the “Colonna Santa” at the Vatican Museum.

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## Introduction

The Duomo di Orvieto is one of the most representative cathedrals of the Italian late Middle Ages, where the original Romanesque basilica and the Gothic motifs find a perfect harmony of forms and volumes. This architectonic beauty is enriched by the magnificent frescoes in the Choir, the Transept and the two chapels of *Corporale* and San Brizio, together with the statues of the great Orvietan sculpture cycle, comprising the twelve Apostles and the patron saints of the city, the *Annunciazione* by Francesco Mochi, the *Pietà* by Ippolito Scalza, and the many other liturgical artworks of great historical and artistic value. Among them is the reliquary of the corporal of the 1263 Bolsena miracle, a fundamental religious symbol for the Catholic spirituality of the *Corpus Domini* feast. Both the Cathedral and the sacred simulacra were continuously renewed over several centuries, from the thirteenth to the seventeenth, within a constant synergy between the religious sentiment of the community and the evolution of the liturgical forms.

The iconographic interaction of architectural spaces, artworks, and spiritual expression was interrupted in 1897 when the statues of the sculptor cycle, the twelve Apostles and the *Annunciazione*, were removed from the cathedral. Finally, during the year 2019, after more than one century, all the statues have been repositioned inside the cathedral: the two statues of the *Annunciazione* on either side of the Altar and the twelve statues of the Apostles in their original positions, leaned against the twelve columns of the main nave, symbolising the role of the

Apostles as pillars of the Christianity. Upon entering the cathedral you are accompanied on a mystical journey: the statues of the Apostles accompany, through the two statues of the annunciation, the faithful from the entrance to the altar where the Mystery of Faith is celebrated (see Fig.1), therefore the Cathedral returned to be the place where the community lives and celebrates the Faith, and the gift of the Eucharist is renewed. The return of the statues to the Cathedral is not only a cultural fact but has a deep meaning in the liturgy of the Eucharistic celebration. The Cathedral lives and is functional for the liturgy. These priorities have been recovered with the return to the cathedral of the statues of the Apostles that there under the pillars renewing the meaning of the apostles who support the ecclesial community. Furthermore, the statues have been repositioned adopting anti-seismic presidiums (Fig. 2).

Continuing on this path of giving back to the cathedral its liturgical character, the precious reliquary for the *Corporale* of the Bolsena miracle (Fig. 3) is being repositioned in the *Cappella del Corporale*, restoring this beautiful and precious witness representative of the highest late middle age art craftsmanship to its function as custodian of the sacred corporal stained by the blood that miraculously flowed from the consecrated Host. The Corporal of the Bolsena miracle preserved in the Cathedral of Orvieto is a fundamental religious symbol for the Catholic spirituality of the *Corpus Domini* feast.

### **The Holy Column in the Vatican**

A second example of the safe repositioning of sacred Artwork is the handling and transfer of the Holy Column in a new devotional room in the Vatican Museum within the re-adaptation of the devotional spaces on the occasion of the Jubilee 2025. The Holy Column in the Vatican was considered for centuries, and until relatively recent times, to have come from the temple of Salomon in Jerusalem and Jesus usually leaned on it during his preaching in the temple, conferring at the column the exorcistic power to free the possessed from the afflictions of the evil.

However, recent studies have shown that the magnificent column was realised in the second or third century B.C. and could come from Constantinople or from some other location in the northern Aegean Sea or Asia Minor. Nevertheless, the Column still maintains its devotional value, also because it is linked to the twisted columns that made up the sacred “pergola of St Peter.” Hence, the sacred column is linked to both Christ and St Peter and is one of the greatest treasures of the Vatican Basilica, worthy of the most respectful veneration.

### **Statues and *Simulacra* During Processions**

The devotional (often folkloristic) processions of sacred reliquaries, statues and *simulacra* have involved, over the centuries, both their use in the context which have always been the object of worship, and, on the other hand, the exposition to risks and stresses that processions inevitably entail. However, there are cases in which popular devotion manifests itself with such impetus that the sacred works of art carried in procession are heavily damaged to the extent that restoration work is required after each procession. This is the case of the statue of San Sebastiano in Acireale, Sicily, Italy. The statue is carried in procession each year on January 20th in a very suggestive

way, with a heartfelt popular participation. The procession takes place on foot, running on the very uneven lava pavement. The *ferculum* containing the statue is positioned on a cart with non-steering iron wheels; the procession starts at 11:00 and finishes at 1:30, that is, for 14 consecutive hours. The *ferculum* with the statue and the cart weighs over 30 KN.

The statue of San Sebastiano carried in the running procession is made by *pastiglia*, a typical technique for sacred art statues in Sicily during the sixteenth century, realised with a mix of marble, dust, gypsum and glue: the result is a heavy and fragile artistic object which, and at the end of each procession need to be restored. Besides the religious meaning, the procession is to be considered as an intangible cultural heritage and there is no matter to replace the original statue with a copy. Therefore, a protection system needs to protect the statue against the shock and vibration during the procession.

## **Conclusion**

In this context, the conservation and reintegration of sacred art into its original liturgical and devotional functions must be understood not only as a technical or cultural effort, but as a pastoral act of re-evangelisation. Sacred art, especially when used in processions and public acts of worship, such as the emotionally charged processions or the transport of ancient reliquaries and simulacra, serves as a living expression of faith that speaks across generations. Preserving these fragile yet powerful objects through protective systems ensures that their message of holiness, sacrifice, and community endures, not only in museums, but in the hearts of the faithful. Their presence in the streets and churches, made possible through careful conservation, becomes a tangible catechesis, renewing wonder, fostering devotion, and reawakening spiritual identity in an increasingly secular world. By safeguarding these expressions of popular piety, conservation becomes an essential instrument in the Church's mission to re-engage the faithful through beauty and tradition.

The liturgical and iconographic assets of churches and cathedrals characterise their physiognomy and relationship with the territory, strengthening their sense of identity and belonging, which constitute the main drivers of social cohesion for an effective participation of the communities at public events and sacred ceremonies. As regards to the display and enjoyment of liturgical works of art during the devotional visits of the faithful or the traditional processions of saint's *simulacra* during the patronal feasts, almost all of these artworks of primary liturgical relevance also have an absolute historical and artistic value. However, their display must be accompanied by protective measures to mitigate the causes of degradation due to risks deriving from the act of enjoying them and therefore require dedicated conservation strategies which must allow the perpetuation of the devotional faith over time, engaging today's generations in understanding the enduring spiritual message that sacred art has been conveying across two millennia.

## **Notes**

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Figure 1 - Convergence of the connecting lines of the apostles and the Annunciation towards the Crucifix behind the altar



Figure 2 - Anti-seismic devices on the original bases for the two statues of the *Annunciazione* by Francesco Mochi



Figure 3 - The Reliquary for the sacred *Corporale* of the Bolsena miracle was made in the fourteenth century by Sienese goldsmiths in silver covered with translucent polychrome enamels and is a reposition of the facade of the Cathedral



Figure 4 - The Holy column in the Vatican (ref. Alexis Gauvain: *La Colonna Santa della Basilica di San Pietro: storia, memorie e nuove acquisizioni: Archivum Sancti Petri, Studi e Documenti sulla Storia del Capitolo Vaticano e del Suo Clero*, Bollettino d'Archivio 8-29, edizioni capitol vaticano 2015)



Figure 5 - The protection system of the Holy column during the transportation in the new room in the Vatican within the re-adaptation of the devotional spaces on the occasion of the Jubilee 2025



Figure 6 - Popular devotion often manifests itself with such impetus that the *simulacra* of the saints are heavily damaged



Figure 7 - The statue of San Sebastiano made by Pastiglia in the seventeenth century in procession at Acireale, Sicily, Italy, 20th January of each year



Figure 8 - Damages to be restored after each 14 hours running procession in Acireale, Sicily, Italy

# The Challenge of Reconnecting: 500 Years of a Cathedral in a Secular Society

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## Abstract

The following paper presents the organization of the events arranged by the Chapter of the Cathedral of Segovia to commemorate its 500 years of history in the first half of 2025. The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis and reflection on the celebration of such anniversaries, which are significant for churches or cathedrals within the context of the Catholic Church, but which also face major challenges as well as various opportunities. Among the challenges the Chapter of Segovia has sought to address, are the preservation of a 500-year-old cathedral and the development of the cultural visit model for the future. The opportunities these commemorations offer are many, not only due to the media spotlight and the recognition from local, regional, or national communities. For the Church in general, and for cathedral chapters as centuries-old institutions in particular, a centenary serves as a link and a point of connection with today's society, which is very different from that of 1525, when the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin into Heaven and St Fructus of Segovia was conceived, marked by faith and trust in the ecclesiastical institution. The events organised throughout 2025 have been carefully designed so that the people of Segovia, many of whom are disconnected from their Cathedral both physically and spiritually, are encouraged to visit or rediscover it through a program that combines cultural and religious activities. In the context of globalisation and, consequently, mass tourism, churches are compelled to adapt to this diverse audience, welcome them, and shape both their cultural and religious programming accordingly.

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## Introduction

When visiting major European cities, as well as many mid-sized towns, these cathedrals are often the most iconic artistic and architectural monuments. Beginning in the twelfth century, with the rise of the new Gothic style, there was a construction boom: each city, each bishop and diocese began to compete with one another to surprise the world through the colourful stained glass that illuminated their interiors, larger apses, pinnacles, domes, and spires.<sup>1</sup> This start happening in the flourishing of Europe in the late Middle Ages, particularly during the so-called twelverg century Renaissance, with economic, social, political, and intellectual development.

Guilds, the bourgeoisie, and nobles gained prominence in the city centres, alongside the strengthening and stabilisation of monarchies. These, together with religious authorities, promoted numerous cathedral-building projects throughout the continent. These endeavours fostered the exchange of knowledge, artistic styles, and other crafts, resulting in the immense cultural heritage erected to praise God.<sup>2</sup>

Cathedrals thus emerged at the heart of medieval boroughs, transforming urban centres into what can be referred to as “holy cities.”<sup>3</sup> Today, they are regarded as essential to the social

and collective imagination of the inhabitants who see them daily, as well as of national and international visitors impressed by their artistic, spiritual, and historical magnetism.

Segovia's case mirrors that of other European cities with cathedrals, though its history is chronologically shaped by the well-known Reconquista. In 1088, King Alfonso VI of Castile and Leon (1040/41–1109) conquered Segovia, initiating a necessary process of repopulation that brought an end to Muslim rule. With the arrival of the French Pedro de Agen and his appointment as bishop in 1120, the Segovian diocese was restored, and efforts were made to establish a mother church, to become the centre of religious life for the Catholic population and the episcopal seat housing the bishop's cathedra.

This original cathedral became essential after centuries of Muslim domination, helping to shape Segovia's sociological structure and becoming a spatial point of reference, just as occurred in other European cities. It influenced the city's urban design and ultimately served as the physical expression of its identity.<sup>4</sup> The new settlers of the city needed an identity centred around icons of the Catholic faith, the foremost being their cathedral, which was built between 1117 and 1228. Successive Gothic-era renovations further enhanced and adapted the church, located opposite the Alcázar, to match the growing economic and political significance of the Castilian city.

A turning point in the history of Segovia's Cathedral came in the year 1520, during the uprising of the Comuneros against King Charles V (1500–1558). The original cathedral suffered damage due to its proximity to the fortress, and the victorious Charles V decided to build a new one, farther from the castle, at the highest point in the city. He promised it would be a cathedral that would serve as a symbol and source of pride for the people of Segovia. And so, it was.

On June 8, 1525, the first stone of the new cathedral was laid. A project that, from today's perspective, 500 years later, would be unimaginable. Not because of technical, professional, or logistical limitations, but due to something more intangible: spirituality and values. The Cathedral of Segovia was funded largely by the local community, and people from all trades participated actively in its construction. A decisive factor made this possible: the strength of faith and popular religiosity that inspired the building of a temple to praise God and to stand as a symbol of Christianity.

### **Adapting an Anniversary to a Different Society**

During these times, it is difficult to explain the meaning of a cathedral to today's society, especially to younger generations, who have lost, in part, their connection with sacred spaces. Many do not understand how these temples work, nor do they realise that their structure and inner decoration were the result of centuries of devotion by generations who willingly contributed or donated. Leaving behind a sacred space for the future was a central goal in building a shared identity, where the cathedral would become a place for communal celebration, devotion, and a symbol of resilience.

Today, this heritage remains accessible thanks in part to the work of Cathedral Chapters, Colleges of Priests responsible for the most solemn liturgical functions and for the administration of cathedrals. Institutions as old as the cities themselves. Likewise, the Church as a whole possesses in its historical and religious heritage a powerful tool to raise awareness about the relevance of religion and its historically positive and central role, especially over the past few centuries.

Public trust in the institution has declined in parallel with the process of secularization, a trend closely linked to a lack of understanding regarding its structure, functions, mission, and legacy. A 2025 study by the BBVA Foundation<sup>5</sup> on institutional trust in Spain showed that the Catholic Church received a low level of public confidence: nearly four out of ten respondents rated the Church at the lowest end of the scale (0–2), while only 16% gave it the highest ratings (8–10). For the Catholic Church, the magnetism of its heritage, the beauty, and even the mysteries held within these great temples, serves as a means to bring not only the faithful but also a secularised population closer to the Christian message through art, music and the many treasures these buildings preserve. From a broader perspective, the Church's cultural heritage in Spain is the most extensive, with 3,290 properties listed as cultural assets,<sup>6</sup> around 70% of the total. As well, cathedrals host the most significant devotional and religious events, many of which receive wide public and media attention.

It is also important to recognise that cathedrals, and the ecclesiastical institution, have been drivers of social progress, promoting some of the most important artistic, economic, and technological advancements. For example, Segovia Cathedral housed the city's oldest archive, preserving its civil and ecclesiastical heritage since 1115. The Chapter also founded an educational and cultural training school within the Cathedral.<sup>7</sup> The archive holds the first book printed in Spain and in the Spanish language, the *Sinodal de Aguilafuente*, printed in 1472 when the first printing press on the Iberian Peninsula was founded in Segovia.

And thus, we arrive at the central theme of this chapter: the 500-year history of Segovia Cathedral, managed by the Cathedral Chapter, which despite having a limited budget, must rise to the challenge of celebrating such a significant milestone. The mission is clear: to ensure the event does not go unnoticed in the media, to build the broadest and most consistent agenda possible and to offer exhibitions, conferences, special guided tours, all while maintaining the Cathedral's primary purpose as a Catholic place of worship.

As mentioned in the introduction, the human and spiritual force that once built the Cathedral has gradually diminished over the centuries, particularly since the late twentieth century to the present day, as secularization has weakened the close bond that once existed between the people of Segovia and the Church. The Fifth Centenary has presented itself as an opportunity to reconnect with the public through events designed, as far as possible, to rediscover the history, art, devotion, and legacy passed down by previous generations.

By the Summer of 2025, an extensive program had been carried out, combining contemporary art exhibitions with special guided tours, an International Congress, and the display of a painting from the workshop of Peter Paul Rubens.

### **A 2025 for 500 Years**

The Cathedral welcomed 525,929 visitors in 2024, surpassing its previous record of 462,147 set in 2019, and exceeding 2023's numbers by 73,568. These numbers show that the Cathedral is far from an unknown monument. In fact, the statistics confirm that it is the most visited cathedral in the region of Castile and Leon and the second most visited attraction in the region after the Alcázar of Segovia.

It is true that societal changes and the growth of tourism have led to an increase in tourist visits to cathedrals.<sup>8</sup> However, the religious factor is not the main reason to visit the cathedral for most of the people. Another key consideration is that international visitors account for nearly 40% of total visits, and they are likely the least informed about the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

The economic aspect also deserves to be highlighted, as organizing a celebration of this scale requires substantial funding. Since 2016, the Cathedral has been entirely self-financed through ticket sales. Between 2016 and 2024, the total investment amounted to €11,321,193, of which €4,914,734 (43.4%) was allocated to conservation and restoration, €4,236,963 (37.4%) to personnel costs, and €2,169,495 (19.2%) to other expenses. These significant expenditures are justified by the increasing number of conservation and restoration projects within the Cathedral, the opening of three new exhibition rooms, and the integration of the Episcopal Palace of Segovia into the Cathedral's management. Additionally, since 2016, both the opening hours for cultural visits and the range of guided tours have expanded, needing more staff: 29 employees during wintertime and up to 45 in the Summer.

The Fifth Centenary has been organised exclusively by the Cathedral Chapter, including the coordination and implementation of ideas within a limited budget, while also collaborating with companies and institutions to carry out activities and cooperate in financing. Below are some of the events organised during the first part of the anniversary, up to the summer of 2025, selected by the impact and relation to the topic of this paper.

The celebration year began at the end of November 2024 with the inauguration of a Christmas tree and Nativity scene on the courtyard in front of the Cathedral's western façade. The twelve-meter traditional-style tree was unveiled with a choir singing popular Christmas carols and the presence of hundreds of Segovians. This activity, open to all audiences, impacted strongly in the city and among visitors, who for the first time could enjoy this space, usually accessible from inside the Cathedral, at such a significant time of year, enhanced with special decorations. The message sent by the Chapter focused on celebrating the birth of Jesus to the entire population with a carefully staged and visually notable presentation, also from a tourist perspective. This again highlights the Church's potential to use its heritage spaces to attract visitors, especially families, who remain distant throughout the year from the traditional religious or devotional events held inside the temples. Leading projects like this exemplify such potential. The statistics confirmed the success of this initiative, with 47,372 visitors in November, a 51% increase over 2023, and 52,273 visitors in December, the third-best month of the year, representing a 47% rise.

In February, the transept choir area hosted the exhibition *Museum of the Moon*, an installation representing the Moon that had previously visited many countries and been displayed in cathedrals such as Durham, Ely, Lincoln, Winchester, and Bristol, all in England, as well as the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Strasbourg, France. Segovia Cathedral was the first in Spain to showcase this seven-meter-diameter work by artist Luke Jerram, suspended in the central nave and sponsored by "la Caixa" Foundation. In addition to the cultural and artistic vision inspired by the artist, the Cathedral aimed to convey through panels and informational materials that, for Christians, the Moon, like the entire universe, is a creation of God. For centuries, it has been portrayed in sacred art and is especially associated with the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, referred to as *pulchra ut luna, electa ut sol*, beautiful as the Moon, pure as the Sun. Moreover, the satellite that lights Earth's nights symbolises the fusion between the temple built by humans to glorify God and His eternal creation, the universe. It was also noted that, in Christianity, the Moon, as with the Church, does not shine by its own light but reflects the Sun, represented by Christ. The exhibition, held from February 14 to March 30, was visited by 76,134 people, making February and March record-breaking months in the Cathedral's history. Around the theme of the Moon, a photography contest was launched, along with special guided tours for schools and institutes and a concert.

In a joint effort by the Cathedral Chapter and the official guides of the temple, special guided tours were designed and open for booking from February to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of construction of Segovia Cathedral. A total of seven tours were offered based on the religious aspect, essential to understanding a cathedral like Segovia's, but also including the construction phases, the influence of the royal court and the participation of Segovians in its building and inner decoration. The content of these tours clearly exemplifies the goal of the Fifth Centenary: to reconnect with the community through cultural initiatives. The core message can be summarised as follows: the Cathedral, a dream of the people of Segovia 500 years ago, must once again be at the heart of social life and the collective imagination of the population.

The celebration of the 500 years of history of the Cathedral was conceived by the Cathedral Chapter as an opportunity to involve society as a whole through various events that would help expand the artistic, historical, and religious scope of the temple at both national and international levels. Among the projects launched, an important role was played by the call for papers published from March to June, which encouraged conservators-restorers, cultural managers, historians, researchers, and other related professionals to submit their research and study proposals on Segovia Cathedral, focused on four main themes. A total of forty selected abstracts were presented by their authors at the International Congress *Faith and Matter: Five Centuries of History of Segovia Cathedral* held on October 17 and 18, 2025. Beyond its academic and professional dissemination impact, this international congress, organised by the Cathedral Chapter, deepened into fundamental aspects of the Cathedral's history and construction, its collection of paintings and sculptures, and more generally, its artistic heritage, which has served faith and the Catholic Church for centuries. Likewise, intangible heritage, principal devotions and traditions, and current challenges in conservation, management, legislation, and dissemination of this heritage complex were central topics for reflection.

In April, the exhibition *The Legend of St George* opened, featuring the work *Landscape with Saint George and the Dragon* from the workshop of Peter Paul Rubens. This painting, dated 1634 and produced by the studio of the most renowned Flemish Baroque painter, was loaned by the owner of the artistic piece. It is a copy of the original painted in 1630 by Rubens during his diplomatic stay in London, created to honour King Charles I of England. The Fifth Centenary presented an opportunity to showcase this canvas, publicly exhibited for the first time on an international level at the Cathedral. Its artistic value is complemented by the story it illustrates, the well-known legend of the princess saved by St George, a saint widely popular and venerated in many countries, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. The museographic and dissemination effort was organised by the Cathedral Chapter in an exhibition that represents a commitment to bringing first-class international art to a medium-sized city like Segovia and sharing it with its citizens.

On the educational front, during this first part of the anniversary, an exhibition was inaugurated in the cloister displaying the tools used in the construction of the Cathedral. Bringing visitors closer to the methods and techniques employed by various trades, many of them Segovian professionals who participated in building the temple, is a way to appreciate cathedral masonry, which were true engineering achievements for their time. The collection of tools such as pulleys, winches and cartwheels was reorganised and explained, with panels providing information and period illustrations demonstrating their use. This installation is intended to remain in this

space of the temple long-term and reflects the development promoted by cathedrals and the Church throughout each historical stage.

To conclude the summary of this chapter covering the first part of the Fifth Centenary events of the Cathedral, showcases the Cathedral Chapter's efforts to present an open Cathedral with a message of faith and hospitality that has remained unchanged over the past five centuries. Of course, the cultural agenda was combined with religious celebrations, some of them significant, such as the commemorative mass of the laying of the first stone on June 8, in a year that coincided with the Jubilee Year.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Aristegui A. Echevarría, "Touching the Sky: The Architectural Challenges of Gothic," *Historia y Vida* 640 (2021): 26-47.

<sup>2</sup> See Alemán I. Iniest, & Rubio Pascual-Muerte, "The Impact of Cathedrals on Economy and Culture," in *Social Networks, Influencers, and Digital Marketing in Historical-Artistic*, eds J. Gil Quintana, B. Castillo Abdul, & A. Rubio Pascual-Muerte (Spain: Tirant lo Blanch: 2021).

<sup>3</sup> See Erlande-Brandenburg, *The Cathedral* (Madrid: Akal Editions., 1993), 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Casas Callado, N. *History and Art in the Cathedrals of Spain* (Spain: Bubok Publishing. 2013), 20.

<sup>5</sup> See Fundación BBVA. Study on Trust in Spanish Society 2025. Fundación BBVA. <https://www.fbbva.es/noticias/estudio-opinion-publica-confianza-espana/> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2025).

<sup>6</sup> See Ministry of Culture and Sports. (2021). Protected Cultural Assets. <https://cutt.ly/JEvrGSc> (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2025).

<sup>7</sup> See Galende Díaz, J. C., & Espinar Gil, D. (2022). Schools and Education in the Segovia Cathedral at the End of the Middle Ages: A Review and New Contributions. *De Medio Aevo*, 11(2), 193-209. <https://doi.org/10.5209/dmae.81471> (Accessed 10 February 2025)

<sup>8</sup> See Nolan, M., & Nolan, S. (1992). Religious Sites as Tourism Attractions in Europe. *Annals of Tourism Research* 19, no.1, 67-78. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(92\)90107-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(92)90107-Z) (accessed 10<sup>th</sup> February 2025).



Figure 1 - Painting of St George and the dragon



Figure 2 - The Moon exhibition inside Cathedral



Figure 3 - Christmas tree at courtyard of the Cathedral

# Spaces of Memory and Close Encounters: Living Stones and a Sense of Missio

Giulia Privitelli

*Living Stones | Pietre Vive, Malta*

## Abstract

This paper explores the profound relationship between sacred images and the liturgical spaces they inhabit, emphasising their role as vehicles of encounter between the human and the divine. Drawing on the insights of figures such as St John of Damascus and Pavel Florensky, it reflects on sacred artwork not as mere decoration but as a 'living entity'—a visual prayer that transcends time and space. Central to this reflection is the notion of the limit, both spatial and existential, which sacred images seek to overcome, transforming architectural space into a site of presence, memory, and encounter.

In this context, the pastoral mission of *Living Stones*, an international group of young volunteers, is highlighted as a contemporary embodiment of this sacred dynamic. Through a free guided dialogue within historic churches, *Living Stones* mediates the often-lost kerygmatic message embedded in sacred art to visitors who are frequently both tourists and theological outsiders. These young people, standing at the threshold of sacred spaces, become witnesses – *martyrs* in the original sense – to the faith inscribed in the architecture and iconography they interpret. They act as the 'living wound' of the Church, reanimating the message of beauty and salvation for a distracted and secular world.

The paper thus critiques the commodification of sacred art, warning against its detachment from liturgical and spiritual contexts. Referring to the Conventual Church of St John in Valletta as a case study, it demonstrates how such spaces may offer visitors, even today, a taste of the earliest experience of the sacred through a conditioned disposition of the senses, leading visitors from disorientation to contemplation, from fragmentation to a unified sense of self and creation. Ultimately, the paper argues that the mission of sacred art and those who present it – like the Living Stones – is to transmit a specific view, the *evangelion*: the good message, through a form of beauty that can still open hearts, reawaken memory and the senses, and call the viewer to conversion.

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## Introduction

“... and I go into a church, the common refuge of souls, my mind wearied with conflicting thoughts. I see before me a beautiful picture and the sight refreshes me, and induces me to glorify God. I marvel at the martyr's endurance, at his reward, and fired with burning zeal, I fall down to adore God through His martyr, and receive a grace of salvation.” (St John Damascene, 'Part I: Apologia of St John Damascene against those who decry holy images', in *St John Damascene on Holy Images*, Mary H. Allies, trans. (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), no. 40.)

The words of St John of Damascus – the early defender of images in their relation to the sacred – hint at the innate value, purpose and inseparable relation between the space, “the decorations and ... sacred images which adorn it,”<sup>1</sup> and the beautiful – therefore ‘good’ – message they invite us to contemplate.<sup>2</sup> The idea of separation or, inversely, of bridging and bringing together is, in fact, central to the main point of this brief paper. Indeed, it brings us to the very root of the word

sacred and to the contemplation of such images. Furthermore, it reveals the unique position of these 'situated' sacred works, particularly in their affordance to transform the place into a space of encounter, both personal and transcendental.<sup>3</sup>

Emerging from a time of crisis, destruction, and meaninglessness, Pavel Florensky, in 1918, offers a reflection on the communicative death, or stasis, of the image when divorced from its intended location. In this lecture he vehemently sought to 'justify the preservation of the icons and liturgical arts in the "natural" environment of the religious rite and the everyday life' of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius.<sup>4</sup> He desperately argued that:

A work of art is a *living entity* and requires special conditions in which to live and particularly in which to flourish. Detached from these concrete conditions of its existence, specifically its artistic existence, it dies, or at least it enters a state of an abiosis. It ceases to be perceived, and at times it even ceases to exist, as a work of art. And yet the museum's aim is precisely to isolate the work of art, which it misrepresents as an object that can be removed or transported at whim from place to place and installed anywhere, and ultimately to destroy it as a living entity.<sup>5</sup>

Florensky's views on the musealisation of works of art and artefacts are still valid to this day, but this is not all. Today, our churches and cathedrals are facing yet another fundamental threat, which has less to do with physical deterioration than it does with indifference: "Some day we will understand that, for an ancient object, an honourable dying at the hands of time and nature is better than lethargic slumber in a museum," warns Pavel Muratov.<sup>6</sup> The ever-increasing secularisation and commercialisation of sacred space threatens to corrode the intrinsic and intangible value of its artworks in their ability to profoundly connect with the unsuspecting viewer on various levels of consciousness: visually, intellectually, emotionally, psychologically and, of course, spiritually.

Indeed, it is Florensky's reference to the work of art as a "living entity" which is, perhaps, most striking with regard to the logic whereby images may act as vehicles for facilitating a "living" encounter with the other: both the immanent and transcendental 'other'.

Works of art, and especially those which have been commissioned to grace specific sacred sites, respond precisely to this inherent value: beyond their decorative surface, their captivating aesthetic, they seek to memorialise a prayer, to transform a temporary limit into something illimitable, permanent, and eternal; to transform a "dead" space into a "living" space, where the sacrifice of the martyr – or the community or the artist – may be transformed into a truly creative act. After all, the limit is a place of precariousness: *prex*, literally "prayer." Indeed, it is at the limit that one is compelled to pray, and at the limit where the faithful assemble together, we are told,<sup>7</sup> God dwells too.<sup>8</sup>

Artworks intended to adorn specific spaces all face a limit, both from within and without: they face the physical threat of deterioration, of being removed from their original context, or of the indifferent or uninformed modification of the space to which they were originally intended, or the closure of churches altogether. But they also face intellectual, symbolic, and spiritual

limits – limits concerned with the transmission of the message, of their view, of how they are perceived, received, communicated, understood, and engaged with.

### **Transcending a Limit; Transmitting a View**

As is with the term sacred, the temple – ancestor of our churches and cathedrals – denotes a space which is cut off from the rest.<sup>9</sup> There is a divide, a separation between the sacred and the profane which needs to be crossed. This divide is also implied in a saying often attributed to St John of Damascus: “If a pagan were to come and tell you: ‘Show me your faith’, take him inside the church, show him the decorations and explain to him the series of sacred images which adorn it.”<sup>10</sup> What is implied is an intellectual and cultural divide, immediately addressed by the suggestion to “take him into the church” to enter the sacred space.

The “show me your faith” (and decorations and sacred images) of St John of Damascus has an uncanny resonance with Joseph Beuys’ desperate invitation to show the wounds. Confronted by the “lifelines of the world dying,”<sup>11</sup> as Beuys puts it, hope could be invested in only one remaining course of action, that is to: “... ‘Show it! Show the wound that we have inflicted upon ourselves during the course of our development,’ ... because the only way to progress and become aware of it is to show it.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, when we are confronted by the closed doors of churches, or to the sobering situation of several churches, chapels, abbeys, monasteries, and religious houses being closed down, sold off, converted, or demolished, and even, to a certain degree, the musealisation of sacred and ecclesiastical heritage or the inaccessibility to the kerygmatic nature of sacred images, we are ultimately speaking of a wound – a wound, that rather being left open, is sealed off by a limit.

Indeed, as theologian Shelly Rambo asserts, one of the great revelations of the Resurrected Christ is of an interior nature; the externalisation of the wounds, visible on the surface, is a means to set into motion an interior movement, a re-orientation of perception which allows man – as artist or beholder – to meet a world that is nowhere near rid of the threat of darkness, suffering, and death.<sup>13</sup> Leaning into this darkness and uncertainty, the entrance into the real earthly history of humankind, elicits a serious response, manifesting itself in the form of conversion – a reception to new possibilities, meanings, ideas, and ways of being.<sup>14</sup> Or, as we read in an exegesis of John’s Gospel, “the picture of the pierced side forms the climax not only of the crucifixion but of the whole history of Jesus ... the spear that ends his earthly life, his existence is completely open ... and who as the pierced and opened one has opened the path into the future.”<sup>15</sup>

It is, then, through the philosophy of the limit, echoed and redeemed in the theology of the cross – the ultimate prayer of Christ that reconciles ugliness with beauty, evil with good, death with life, wasteful suffering with overabundant love – that the construction of the church, as well as its artefacts, sculptures, paintings and decorated surfaces, ought to be contemplated and communicated. Notably, the art of early Christianity emerged in funerary contexts, in the context of a “world dying” – the end of the earthly sojourn – as another emerges and continues to identify practically all Christian liturgical spaces: baptismal and eucharistic. Thus, for example, the very act of bringing bread and wine – materiality and mortality – to the altar signalled that all of creation was being brought forward in anticipation of its highest expression in the form of the sacrificial body of Christ; the labour of love. Similarly, the labour of the artist, that is hidden in every work of art, echoes and participates in this mystery of creation. Thus, the investment in excellence, richness, and the exorbitant care given even to the least visible of details, for which the Church might often be criticised, is not so much to be read as a boastful expression of wealth and power, but precisely as a reminder of that creative wastefulness, that is, the signature of love.<sup>16</sup>

The artwork is, as it were, the ‘martyr’ (witness) of the act of its creation. Through it, or a memory of it, we may rediscover the conditions which led to its creation. Since we are here concerned with religious and sacred works, the condition is ultimately one which entails the personal encounter with the sacred and, also, to a certain extent reflects and reveals the liturgical space for which it was created. We may, in other words, enter into the dynamic of the prayer that inspired it, or that it seeks to inspire. The present-day viewer-visitor, thus, becomes the most crucial starting point to recall that expression of prayer, especially if the vocabulary through which an artwork or space is perceived and understood is threatened, lost, or forgotten.

### Memories of a Limit; Witnesses of an Encounter

Throughout 2018, a hundred years since Florensky’s lecture and in a completely different cultural context and climate, over half a million visitors entered the Conventual Church of St John the Baptist, located in the heart of the city of Valletta.<sup>17</sup> Though the operation of this space aims to maintain the (total) work of art as a “living entity,” only a few of these visitors, however, would have stepped inside with the intention to secure a rare moment of stillness and “adore God through His martyr.” Fewer still would have entered in an active search for some form of religious or transcendental experience, to “receive a grace of salvation” Daily, the agitated and hurried rhythm of the city spills into the church as the weary visitor steps into its fully lit and decorated interior, over its marbled tombstones, as it were, *in medias res*, literally, in the middle of things. From this introductory chaotic midpoint, resonating with the painted vault above portraying scenes from the life of the Baptist, the visitor proceeds towards a diametrically opposed, dramatic and motionless conclusion within the subdued space of the oratory, where Caravaggio’s *Beheading of St John the Baptist* has hung for over the past four-hundred years. It is, figuratively speaking, a physical crossing from *horror vacui* to *vacuum*, from space-lessness to expectant emptiness, from noise to silence, from confusion and disorientation to heightened concentration and attention.

This conditioned disposition of the viewer’s senses is what, in Iris Murdoch’s words, “provides for many people, even in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest experience of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention.”<sup>18</sup> Importantly, to grasp something as “separate and precious is, essentially, found in the same ancient experience of the sacred as it also is in the Christological paradoxical sense: “separate” because both “anointed” (chosen)<sup>19</sup> and “rejected;”<sup>20</sup> and “precious” both in relation to the human and the divine.<sup>21</sup> When it comes to the articulation of Christian sacred space, these qualities of “‘separate and precious,’ as it were, find their most essential and direct expression in stone, and in the elaboration of this architectonic element into Christ’s identification with the “cornerstone”<sup>22</sup> and the “rejected stone,”<sup>23</sup> rendering visible, in an exceptional manner, the words of St Peter: “Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...”<sup>24</sup>

At a primordial level, one basic pastoral aim of the *Living Stones* is precisely to respond to what is “separate and.” From a purely generic observation of the activities of *Living Stones*, for example, the interaction that takes place is often with what is foreign, typically on two levels: not only are the visitors themselves usually tourists, but they are furthermore foreigners to the kerygma – and essentially the profound value and purpose – embodied within the decorated liturgical space of the church in which the interaction takes place. That is, the very

bodies of the young people standing at the threshold, sometimes even opening up the church, to “show the icons” to the visitors take the place of the otherwise closed doors or silent walls of the church. If we wish to be poetic about this, we can say that these young people become the “living wound” of the church. And to speak about the history of faith through the artworks that embellish the church space is in a sense to be a witness of that faith; a witness, which in its original sense has its roots in the Greek verb *martur* – martyr. Perhaps, only a body (a church) that is opened up with wounds, whose face shines like that of a precious stone, like that “of an angel” – a messenger<sup>25</sup> – can recognise and announce the “open heaven.”<sup>26</sup>

The church building, with all its contents, is therefore a space where the “outsider” may encounter images, a language, that he or she does not recognise, and thus be moved to question it and review one’s relationship to it. In resonance with St John of Damascus, and in the words of St John Chrysostom:

“If anyone should enter a house and should see on the walls a history in painting of Moses and Aaron, perchance he might ask about the people who are walking across the sea as if it were dryland. ‘Who are they?’ he asks. What would you say? ‘Are they not the sons of Israel?’ ‘Who is dividing the sea with his rod?’ Would you not say ‘Moses’? So if a man makes an image of Christ crucified, and you are asked who he is, you reply, ‘It is Christ our Lord, who became incarnate for us.’”<sup>27</sup>

Even though, in most cases, the experience of the original users of any given sacred space (for example, the early seventeenth-century novices in the oratory of St John’s Co-Cathedral) cannot be retrieved or fabricated, as neither can be the conditions which led the artist – or the community – to create such works of art and spaces, what remains instead is a visual memory of the artist’s or community’s expression. As intimated earlier, in the case of a sacred space, this visible memory has something to do with the expression of a relation to the divine; it embodies an expression of prayer, or to put it differently, it reveals the disposition of an individual or community to encounter the “Other,” which, as it were, transcends both time and space. In other words, the conditioned disposition of the viewer’s senses would amount to little without going a step further, that is, without the authenticity of an encounter, an encounter that proceeds through both the contemplation and comprehension of the expression embedded in the church walls. In this way, the church may indeed act as a monument, or rather, a memorial which gives meaning to life, and to each person’s story.<sup>28</sup>

In viewing and having its images explained, the visitor-pilgrims recognise that they are not alone, that these stories speak as much of them as they do of past events; they are now ‘inside’ the story themselves, participating in the story of man’s relationship with God. For to have been on the ‘outside’ and to pass ‘inside’ of the church is none other than the act of reconciliation, of reorientation through the message of beauty, of what is “good.” It is, in the true sense of the word, a *re-evangelion*.

Indeed, it is following this encounter with the ‘good message’, after having been touched by it, that the viewer must return to the known world. The embodied, imagined, or contemplated experience of passage – through gates and doorways, from disorientation to order, movement to stillness, darkness to light, death to life – is followed by a return. That is the essence of the *missio*, this return home through another way, this conversion, where one discerns on how to dwell with others after having seen and experienced things in a new way. Artworks participate in that mission, as do religious men and women, as do custodians, as do researchers, as do

educators, curators, conservators and restorers ... And it is there, in the transmission of that view, where the greatest beauty, but also the greatest challenge, resides.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Se un pagano viene e ti dice: ‘Mostrami la tua fede!’ tu portal in chiesa e mostragli la decorazione di cui e ornate, e speigagli la serie dei quadri sacri.” Cited in St John of Damascus, *Difesa delle immagini sacre*, I, 9: PG 94, 1240a-b.

<sup>2</sup> In Greek, ‘good’ and ‘beautiful’ are interchangeably understood in the word *kalos*, as is used, for example to describe the ‘good’ shepherd. Cf. Jn 10:11.

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Paul Hernández, “Lo spazio sacro come kerygma e mistagogia,” *Interventi RTE* 14, no. 28 (2010): 353-380.

<sup>4</sup> See Nicoletta Mislér, ed., *Pavel Florensky. Beyond Vision. Essays on Perception of Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Pavel Florensky, “The Church Ritual and a Synthesis of the Arts,” Mislér (2002): 102. My emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Pavel Muratov, *Obrazy Italii [Images of Italy]*, Vol. 2 (Moscow, 1994), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 18:20.

<sup>8</sup> See Jean-Paul Hernández, “Architettura Sacra Contemporanea tra Oriente e Occidente. Quale idea di tradizione?,” in *Chiese Contemporanee*, eds Ada Toni and Cristiano Cossu (Siena: Cantagalli, 2024), 15.

<sup>9</sup> The Latin derivation of the word ‘sacred’ is ‘sacer’ and denotes something which is ‘set apart’, something which ‘belongs to the gods.’ Meanwhile, the term ‘sanctus’ – of which the word ‘sanctuary’ derives from, for example – also shares a common root with sacer, but with the difference that it denotes something which has been ‘set apart’ and ‘placed under the protection of the gods.’ Meanwhile, the meaning of the Indo-European root ‘tem-’ is ‘to cut.’ The Latin term *templum* from which words such as ‘temple’ or ‘contemplate’ are derived, infers an ‘open place for observation,’ or rather, a ‘place reserved or cut out.’ See Calvert Watkins, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, 2nd edn. (Boston, USA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000); and Gary Slater, ‘From Strangers to Neighbors: Towards an Ethics of Sanctuary Cities,’ in Jason King, ed., *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 2 (June 2018): 71.

<sup>10</sup> St John of Damascus, PG 94, 1240a-b.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Alain Borer, in Lothar Shirmer, ed., *The Essential Joseph Beuys* (London and Cambridge: The MIT, 1997), 24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> See Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 42.

<sup>14</sup> See Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer. Ministry in Contemporary Society*, 2nd edn. (New York: Image Doubleday, 2010 [1979]), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1969), 15.

<sup>16</sup> See Jean-Paul Hernández, *Vedere la Bella Notizia. L'arte per incontrare Dio* (Milan: Figlie di San Paolo, 2025), 32-33.

<sup>17</sup> Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, visitor counts for 2020–2021 would not have been entirely representative of the general trend of, at least, the preceding five years. See Wilfred Buttigieg, *The Grand Masters' Crypt, Valletta, Malta*. Address by President of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation, 3 March 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 76-77; cited in Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist, 2000), 12.

<sup>19</sup> In Hebrew *wumasahta* from which Messiah derives; and in Greek, *chrío*, from which ‘Christ’ derives.

<sup>20</sup> See Lk 9:22; Lk 17:25; Mk 12:10; 1 Pt 2:4; Ps 118:22.

<sup>21</sup> In 1 Pt 1:19, Christ's blood is referred to as 'precious'; in Rev 21:11, the Heavenly Jerusalem descending from heaven is described as 'precious' and, moreover, the foundations of its city walls are adorned with different precious jewels.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Pt 2:6. Notably, in Hebrew, ben ('Son'), is rooted in the word *banah*, which literally means 'to build'. See Robert Lowth, trans., *Lectures on The Sacred Poetry of The Hebrews*, 2 edn. (London: S. Chadwick & Co., 1847), 342.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Pt 2:7.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Pt 2:4-5.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 6:15. In Greek, *angelou* (angel), from *aggello*, translates into 'messenger.'

<sup>26</sup> See Acts 7:56.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Mary H. Allies, trans., *St John Damascene on Holy Images: Followed by Three Sermons on the Assumption* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library; London: Thomas Baker, 1898), 53.

<sup>28</sup> See Hernández, "Architettura Sacra Contemporanea tra Oriente e Occidente. Quale idea di tradizione?" 363.



Figure 1 - The interior of the Co-Cathedral of St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta



Figure 2 - The interior of the Oratory of the Beheading of St John the Baptist

# The Shrine of St Thomas Cantilupe of Hereford Cathedral

Robert Kilgour

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## Abstract

Thomas Cantilupe died in 1282 near Montefiascone in Italy. His body was boiled and the flesh and viscera buried at the monastery of *San Severo* near Orvieto. His heart and bones were returned to Hereford and before the end of 1282 he was buried in the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral. In 1287 a new tomb was raised, the tomb became a focus for many healings and miracles. Cantilupe was canonised in 1320 and his body removed from this shrine to more glorious accommodation in 1349.

The cult of St Thomas Cantilupe succeeded that of St Ethelbert when the latter declined during the 13th century. The latter became a place of devotion until the shrine was broken up in 1550. The 1287 stone shrine, however, was ignored at the destruction and remains in its place today. When the restoration of the stone base was completed in 1999 it resulted in a fine piece of medieval sculpture, but little work was done on how the shrine area might be 'completed' and made a better focus for prayer and devotion. In 2006 the following work was carried out to return the shrine to its original intended purpose as a place of pilgrimage and devotion:

- A depiction of the life of Thomas of Hereford on embroidered fabric hangings.
- The construction of a shrine canopy above the stone base.
- The reintroduction of a relic of St Thomas in a new feretory.
- The provision for lighting votive candles and leaving intercessions for pilgrims.
- Provision of a small altar, for use when the Eucharist is celebrated in the shrine area.
- Sensitive lighting of the shrine and ensemble.

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## Introduction

This is one of three shrine projects undertaken between 2005 and 2008, the others being St Ethelbert and Thomas Traherne within Hereford Cathedral. Hereford is located at the western edge of England bordering on Wales. Pilgrimage has, in many ways, made Hereford Cathedral what it is. The cults of two saints – Ethelbert and Thomas of Hereford – led to the building and subsequent re-furbishing of the cathedral, and their stories have inspired very many pilgrims through the centuries.

This project was about the recreation and reimagining of the shrine of St Thomas Cantilupe. This helps worshipers and visitors engage with sacred art. A reimagining, if you will. In order to achieve this, it is important to recognise that this endeavour requires the collision of a number of factors in order to be realised: the first is the visionary and then of course, quite significantly, a donor to pay for it.

Our dynamo or catalyst in Hereford was Dean Michael Tavinor, who encouraged a team of collaborators comprising; artists, architects, designers, and interested parties, to reimagine the shrine within the aisle of the North Transept, giving new life and interpretation to one of Hereford's most important former bishops. This project was about reinvigorating the space and offering the prospect of pilgrimage once more. The significance of the reintroduction of a relic within a shrine in an Anglican setting should not be underestimated. The Reformation in England in the sixteenth century led to the breaking up and dismantling of shrines and the veneration of images and relics was forbidden.

Our primary donor for this project was Sir Roy Strong, who lives nearby and continues to donate towards other cathedral projects. The current one being the relocation of the font. It is taken as read that there also needs to be a team of people who can realise the project through to completion. The team comprised; Icon painter Peter Murphy, master joiner Stephen Florence, ecclesiastical furnishers Croft Design, blacksmith Neil Lossock, and myself. One of our greatest allies was our late Fabric Advisory Committee Chair Robert Chitham, formerly an architect but also an enthusiastic model maker. Following the completion of my designs for the shrine Robert made the models for review by the Fabric Advisory Committee.

### **Saint Thomas Cantilupe**

Thomas Cantilupe died in 1282 near Montefiascone in Italy. His body was boiled and the flesh and viscera buried at the monastery of *San Severo* near Orvieto. His heart and bones were returned to Hereford and before the end of 1282 he was buried in the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral. In 1287 a new tomb was raised, the tomb became a focus for many healings and miracles. Cantilupe was canonised in 1320 and his body removed from this shrine to more glorious accommodation in 1349.

The cult of St Thomas Cantilupe succeeded that of St Ethelbert when the latter declined during the thirteenth century. The Cantilupe Shrine became a place of devotion until the shrine was broken up in 1550. The 1287 stone shrine, however, was ignored at the destruction and remains in its place today. The figures surrounding the base are of the Knights Templar of whose Order St Thomas was the prelate.

The shrine base had previously been opened by Dean Mereweather in 1846 who was reported to be searching for relics. Prior to the 1861 restoration the tomb was positioned against the east wall of the North Transept aisle. There was an unfortunate junction with the wall and a high step against the base. The 1861 restoration resulted in the tomb being moved away from the east wall of the North Transept aisle, so it was then separated from the wall and free of surrounding masonry.

The St Thomas Cantilupe Shrine in 1981 with its nimbus in anodised aluminium by David Watkins. "The shape and position of the tomb suggested a horizontal, overhead object, which in turn suggested the symbolism of floating in space, and defying gravity. The object was visualised as a marker in space and position of the saint, to be seen from a distance, but understood only from close quarters... In my mind, the overall form is a metaphor of a sound – a chord or mantra – suggesting calm and repose" (Peter Burman and K Nugents (eds), 1982, *Prophecy and Vision*, Committee for Prophecy and Vision.)

The 'nimbus' over the shrine was a metal grill, lit, and intended to give the effect of the 'radiance of sanctity'. It was intended to give greater significance to the shrine. It was a development that never really found favour and it was not replaced following the restoration of the tomb.

In 1997 the shrine base was dismantled, an archaeological survey was carried out by Nicola Coldstream and Ron Shoemith, emeritus Cathedral Archaeologist. During the investigation, important discoveries were made regarding the canopy top and holes very likely associated with the feretory were cleared of modern cement. Iron cramps that probably supported a canopy in medieval times were noted. These findings supported much of the theory propounded in the Marshall and Benson articles from the Woolhope Club transactions:

“The upper part is sunk a few inches for the reception of the feretrum and its cover - but of neither of these does any record exist. There are, however, the remains on the top of the shrine of the iron upright rods by which the cover was guided by loops when it was raised to display the feretrum, no doubt by a pulley in a similar way as it is known was done at St Cuthbert’s shrine in Durham Cathedral, but no indication of a pulley can now be seen in the vault above the shine or elsewhere. Of these iron rods, a few inches survive of the two at the east end...at the centre at the west end there remains the iron strap and pin of the hinge on which the strap turned for locking the cover...at the angles at the west end near the iron stumps are larger holes with the remains of the base of some upright object, most likely for two candlesticks at this end of the shrine. There are no similar markings at the east end, as would have been expected if the shrine had stood free from the wall.”<sup>2</sup>

We should, however, note part of the report of Nicola Coldstream who broadly supports these finds, but adds, in a note: “The iron fixings had gone by 1997, but the holes, now plugged, that Marshall mentioned were as he described them. His description of the workings of the shrine cover, however, is incomprehensible to me.”<sup>3</sup>

When the restoration of the stone base was completed in 1999 it resulted in a fine piece of medieval sculpture, but little work was done on how the shrine area might be ‘completed’ and made a better focus for prayer and devotion. That reimaging was the focus of this project. As can be seen from the end elevations the west face is wider than the east meaning that the shrine on plan is a trapezoid rather than a rectangle, a fact that becomes quite important when trying to place a roof on it.

David Haselham, a mason working on dismantling the tomb, found a piece of slate with the following message beautifully scratched into its surface,

“Robt Berridge  
Castor  
Nr Peterborough  
Northamptonshire  
June 26 1861  
Gone to the dogs  
when this is found.”

This was hidden inside during the previous restoration. Despite close interrogation David Haselham claims he cannot recall whether the masons left any notes inside the shrine base upon completion of conservation.

Dean Michael Tavinor had worked with artist Terry Hamaton who prepared an original artwork suggesting what the shrine canopy, or “cloth of state,” may have looked like, drawing inspiration from Saint Albans. This was an early “kite flying” drawing showing what the shrine might have been like and what it could be like in the future.

Once I had been appointed as cathedral architect in 2005, Dean Michael Tavinor started to assemble his team and our quest began in earnest. In 2006 the following work was carried out to return the shrine to its original intended purpose as a place of pilgrimage and devotion:

- A depiction of the life of Thomas of Hereford on embroidered fabric hangings.
- The construction of a shrine canopy above the stone base.
- The reintroduction of a relic of St Thomas in a new feretory.
- The provision for lighting votive candles and leaving intercessions for pilgrims.
- Provision of a small altar, for use when the Eucharist is celebrated in the shrine area.
- Sensitive lighting of the shrine and ensemble.

Robert Chitham surveyed the walls and floors so as to make a convincing setting for his model. Model of the shrine, with small feretory, and canopy in its elevated position.

The original idea was to have the canopy raised to reveal the feretory on Saint Thomas' saint's day 2<sup>nd</sup> October. However, the verger team mutinied after helping assemble the heavy and bulky components, so it remains in its elevated position throughout the year. Due to the trapezoid or tapering shape of the base I was convinced that there should be two diverging rows of brattishing so as to maintain a level ridge and even roof pitch. When viewed from floor level this reads as a single ridge line.

### **The Relic of St Thomas**

Saint Thomas Cantilupe's Relics at Stonyhurst College, Clitheroe, Lancashire. Photographed in March 2005 while on a Cathedral Architects' Association visit. Following the Civil War Fr Cuffuad was the first Jesuit known to be in charge of the Catholic Mission in Hereford. It was he that dispersed some of the relics. (Refer to article by Dom Illtud Barrett).

The Saint Thomas Cantilupe relic on loan from Stonyhurst College. This small piece is probably cut from the skull of Thomas, the rest of which now resides in Downside Abbey following Dom Gilbert Dolan tracing the location of the relic to the Abbey of Lamspring in the diocese of Hildeshiem in Germany in 1881 and getting permission to return it to England.

The relic has become yellow due to Thomas being boiled following his death in Montefiascone in Italy on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1282 in order that his expressed wish to be buried in his own cathedral church of Hereford could be carried out. The flesh and viscera were buried in the Abbey Church of *San Severo* near Orvieto, the heart and bones being returned to England.

The size of the relic presented some design issues, primarily it being so small meant that it needed to be elevated so that it could be seen from ground level. This was achieved by mounting the small relic fragment on an acrylic shaft above the stone roof of the shrine. It also needed to be securely fixed to prevent theft Model of the feretory with elevated central shaft so the relic can be seen from ground level.

### **The Shrine Canopy**

Peter Murphy prepared cartoons of the gables at either end of the shrine canopy. The canopy focuses on Thomas' part in the Communion of Saints and so it was envisaged that the canopy would have, at its west end – in the 'gable' – a shaped icon with the following depicted:

The Blessed Virgin Mary. Two angels holding a representation of *Mappa Mundi*. There is a school of thought that links *Mappa Mundi* with the shrine as a 'draw' to early pilgrims.

St John the Baptist – patron of the Cathedral parish.

St Ethelbert – cathedral patron.

St Thomas of Hereford – with a wolf ('lupus') nearby.

St Thomas of Canterbury – so often linked with Hereford's Thomas, and linked in iconography since the fourteenth century.

On the opposite gable the following is depicted:

Images of Sir Roy Strong and his wife Julia Trevelyan Oman (d.2003).

The Bishop of Hereford on the left.

The Dean Michael Tavinor on the right.

## **Story Telling**

Brendon Quinn and Julie Quinn of Croft Design prepared coloured cartoons for the tapestries that hang either side of the shrine and tell the story of the life of Thomas for pilgrims and visitors. They are a depiction of the life of Thomas of Hereford, in fabric on the east walls of the transept. The following scenes for the tapestries were chosen:

### 1. Early life

Born c.1218 at Hambleton in Buckinghamshire.

*The birth of the child*

### 2. Thomas as an academic

He studied and taught at Oxford, under the Dominican, Robert Kilwardby, later Archbishop of Canterbury. He studied Arts in Paris with his brother Hugh.

*NB. We know, from contemporary descriptions that he had a beard and was red-headed (later streaked with white).*

### 3. Thomas' political career

He was Chancellor of England under Edward I.

*Scene – the King, with Chancellor and advisers receiving the Great Seal.*

### 4. Thomas is made a Bishop

*Thomas knocks at the door of Hereford Cathedral.*

### 5. Thomas' ministry as a Bishop

*Preaching in the countryside, surrounded by a small group of parishioners.*

### 6. Dispute with Archbishop Pecham

*The Bishop and Archbishop, with their advisers, facing each other in dispute.*

### 7. Thomas and his companions cross the water

8. The journey to Italy in 1282, to plead with Pope Martin IV to lift Pecham's excommunication

*A scene of travelling – Bishop on horseback, with attendants. A typical Italian scene – and with 'Canterbury-Tales' resonances.*

9. Thomas dies at Ferento

*Thomas on his death-bed, with two priests in attendance, one giving absolution.*

10. The shrine in Hereford

Based on the 1287 tomb. The sick are healed – the lame throw away their crutches. *Contemporary accounts give a wealth of detail.*

11. The translation to a new shrine in 1349

*Priests bear the relics in solemn procession.*

12. The break-up of the shrine

*In 1550 the 1349 shrine is hacked with axes etc by men in Tudor costume. Pious Tudor divines look on approvingly.*

The background material is of a natural hue, with the appliqué work in brilliant colours, with couched work, embroidery and metal appliqué, with the emphasis on brilliance and drama.

On the south edge of the canopy, the following in gold appliqué:

BEATI VOCATI AD CENAM AGNI

*Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.*

And on the north edge of the canopy, in gold appliqué:

SALVE THOMA PASTOR BONE

*Hail Thomas, good shepherd* (words from Antiphon for Second Vespers on the Feast of St Thomas of Hereford).

Neil Lossock blacksmith of Dragons Wood Forge created the hanging rails for the tapestries in the form of a wolf's head by that form the end stops to the rails. The Latin for Wolf is Lupus a play on words on Cantilupe's name.

### **Intercession Board**

Stephen Florence master joiner designed and crafted the intercession board located on the north elevation of the side aisle. This is the primary location for intercessions to be left on a daily basis. Blank cards are available for people to leave requests for intercession prayers for loved ones. Prayer cards left on the intercession board are used in daily services. These are used anonymously to respect the private nature of many prayers.

The reimagined shrine once joinery made by Stephen Florence has been assembled, then gilded and painted by Peter Murphy.

### **Worship**

The shrine is incorporated within the liturgy of the cathedral and is one of the weekly locations for morning service and is used daily for devotional prayer.

## **Conclusion**

By working on the narrative of the cult of St Thomas Cantilupe and making it an obvious place of devotion and pilgrimage this area of the cathedral has reinvigorated its role as a place for reimagining worship and re-evangelization. I hope that this will entice you to visit on a new pilgrimage to Hereford and explore its treasures for yourselves.

## **Acknowledgements**

Written in collaboration with Michael Tavinor.



Figure 1 - Model built by Robert Chitham showing the shrine base with the proposed feratory and canopy above with line drawings of the surrounding floor and walls to give it context



Figure 2 - The completed icon for the western gable before incorporation into the shrine canopy depicting: The Blessed Virgin Mary Two angels holding a representation of *Mappa Mundi*. St John the Baptist, St Ethelbert St Thomas of Hereford, St Thomas of Canterbury



Figure 3 - The completed icon for the eastern gable before incorporation into the shrine canopy depicting: Images of Sir Roy Strong and his wife Julia Trevelyan Oman (d.2003) The Bishop of Hereford on the left The Dean Michael Tavinor on the right



Figure 4 - The completed shrine with wall hangings depicting the life of St Thomas Cantilupe



Figure 5 - The completed shrine from the south



Figure 6 - The completed shrine with pricket stand, intercession board, wall hangings, and altar

# A Method for Prayer, Study, and Evangelization with Art in Community

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## Abstract

An ever-increasing exigency in the Church today is that of living the faith in the context of community. To “read” a work of sacred art together strengthens the community; in turn, the community becomes a place where the individual can meet God. The setting of this work is *Living Stones*, an international communion of young adult communities that explains the Christian faith through free guided tours of cathedrals and churches. Most *Living Stones* groups meet weekly for prayer, theological, spiritual, and art-historical formation, and give guided tours twice a month; the one studied here is the group’s Amsterdam residential house, where young adults spend nine months living together, receiving intensive formation, giving guided tours daily, and animating other pastoral initiatives. Using the method “Grammar of Visual Language” as a point of departure, The present author develop an approach for understanding the theological and spiritual content of a work of art/architecture together and then constructing a narration to convey to others. The method outlined here is used to re-enter into one’s interiority in order to re-emerge and better meet the other. After all, the community itself is meant to go out and meet the other—after having had an encounter with God, to go out and meet God in one’s sisters and brothers.

This method is then applied to the seven sculpted confessionals in the Catholic Church of St Francis Xavier in Amsterdam. This itinerary guides the faithful in a pathway of purification, in contemplation of the three figures on each confessional—the depicted virtue, symbolising the Holy Spirit; the vice, symbolising the devil, and the penitent saint who symbolises the visitor’s voice—mirroring the Ignatian representation of interiority. This visual representation enables understanding the voices of the Holy Spirit and the devil as something external to the visitor, allowing the visitor to identify not with sin but with the penitent saint. This then permits the visitor to encounter a God who does not look upon the human being as sin, but as one who has done wrong and can turn back to Him—and to the community, and to others, in greater love.

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## Introduction

An ever-increasing exigency expressed by young people in the Church today is that of experiencing, of living, the faith in the context of community. Joseph Ratzinger, in his predictions for what the Church would look like today, articulated precisely this, that as the Church suffers from difficult times, small communities based in “faith and prayer” will help it reemerge.<sup>1</sup> Then others, lost in a world without a conception of God, will “discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new...as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret.”<sup>2</sup> And so it is not by chance that the method proposed in this work for understanding a work of art and conveying it to others emerged in a community context. To “read” a work of sacred art in this way strengthens the community; in turn, the community becomes a place where the individual can meet God.

The setting of this work is *Pietre Vive*, or *Living Stones*, a group of young adult communities throughout Europe and the Americas that explain the Christian faith through free guided tours

of churches. Most *Living Stones* (LS) communities meet weekly for prayer, theological, spiritual, and art-historical formation, and give guided tours once or twice a month. LS emphasises community, prayer, service, *gratuità* or “giving freely,” simplicity, and the intellectual dimension, grounding itself in Ignatian spirituality. Indeed, giving guided tours is itself seen as a “spiritual exercise,” preceded by a period of preparation and prayer asking God for the grace to know “what you want me to convey to the visitors for you” and concluded by a second period of prayer asking for the grace to know “what you said to me through the visitors”.

This work<sup>3</sup> extends and applies the scholarly method “Grammar of Visual Language: Receiving a new view and constructing a narration”<sup>4</sup> to the context of a small Christian community. The present author have developed an Ignatian method for understanding the theological and spiritual content of a work of art/architecture together as a Christian community and then constructed a narration to be conveyed to others, so the work of art may be “frames for a meeting.”<sup>5</sup> It is a process of community study, in the most expansive sense, of a work of art. This method is then applied to the seven confessionals in the Jesuit Church of St. Francis Xavier (the “Krijtberg”) in Amsterdam, Netherlands (Fig. 1).

## **CHAPTER I: Step 1. *Ignorantia* – Meditation Framework for Community Prayer, Study, and Evangelisation with Art**

### **Framework Overview**

The first step of the proposed framework integrates the *Ignorantia* step from “Grammar of Visual Language” with a community context and one of the methods of prayer outlined in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius.<sup>6</sup> It involves the community seeking to look at the work of art “in ignorance,” from the perspective of emotion, as if for the first time. One of the Ignatian methods of prayer for a Biblical text<sup>7</sup> is adapted for use with a work of art in a community context:

#### *Ignorantia – Meditation Framework for Community Prayer, Study, and Evangelization with Art*

##### 0. Preparation

[Enter in]

##### 1. Presence

[Ask for concentration]

[Absolutus Prayer]

[Grace]

##### 2. Meditation

I look at the context of the work. I seek to look at it as if for the first time, without preconceptions. Where is my eye drawn first? Why?

What do I see?...colours?...shapes?

[additions specific to context]

What does the context evoke in me?...experiences in the church...in my life, in my community

I stay with the one or two aspects which touch me...

...using my memory...intelligence/understanding...will and desires

[silence]

I direct my attention to the work itself. I seek to look at it as if for the first time.  
Where is my eye drawn first? Why?  
What do I see? ...in the background? In the foreground?...colours? ...shapes?  
[if there are people] Faces? Gestures? Expressions?  
...what are the figures looking at? How do they look at one another?  
[additions specific to work of art]  
What does the image evoke in me?...experiences in the church...in my life, in my community  
I stay with the one or two aspects which touch me...  
...using my memory...intelligence/understanding...will and desires  
[silence]

### 3. Conversation/*Colloquio*

[Looking forward]

[Sharing of the fruits of prayer]

[Closing] Our Father, together.

[After prayer] The leader makes note anonymously of what the others shared for future reflection.

## **Application to the Krijtberg Confessionals**

Preliminary research on the church suggests that each confessional represents one of the seven deadly sins and an opposing virtue.<sup>8</sup> While part of the goal of *Ignorantia* meditation is to “hear” and “feel” without preconceptions, to see with the experience of emotion, it was also necessary to consider what emotion each of the sins and virtues evoke. Thus, toward the end of the meditation, the suggested sin/virtue was given as a point to consider. This choice allowed the meditations to be connected with the first of the “three methods of prayer” in the *Spiritual Exercises* “On Deadly Sins”, which also includes examining the opposite virtues, and thus to take part of its form from this: “to ask the grace of God our Lord that I may be able to know where I have failed” with regard to the seven deadly sins. In particular, when connecting this with the *Ignorantia* step, it is important to emphasise the experience of emotion: how do I react to this image of the vice?<sup>9</sup> Therefore, integrating the proposed *Ignorantia Meditation Framework Adapted for Art— Community Context* with the method proposed by Ignatius “On Deadly Sins” and base-level identifications with the seven deadly sins/virtues, we arrive at the following method:

*Ignorantia – Meditation Framework for Community Prayer, Study, and Evangelization with Art: the Confessionals*

### 0. Preparation

[Enter in]

### 1. Presence

[Ask for concentration]

[Absolutus Prayer]

[Grace]

## 2. Meditation

I direct my attention toward the image of the confessional...I seek to look at it as if for the first time...

Where is my eye drawn first? Why?

I consider the figure in the centre. The expression...gestures...clothes...objects...

I consider the medallion at the top left...expression...gestures...clothes...objects...

...and the medallion at the top right....

It has been suggested that the medallion at left is the deadly sin of [sin] and the medallion at right is the opposing virtue of [virtue]...

What does this sin and virtue evoke in me? How does it correspond, or not, with the medallions that I see on the confessional?

...experiences in the church...in my life, in my community

Have I failed in this sin of [sin]? Is there something for which I can ask forgiveness, something I can avoid in the future?

[silence]

Have I persevered in this virtue of [virtue]? Are there ways I can grow in it?

[silence]

Does the image bring to mind anything about this sin and virtue I haven't considered previously?

I stay with the one or two aspects which touch me...

...using my memory...intelligence/understanding...will and desires

[silence]

## 3. Conversation/*Colloquio*

[Looking forward]

[Sharing of the fruits of prayer]

[Closing] Our Father, together.

[After prayer] The leader makes note anonymously of what the others shared for future reflection.

In particular, the visual depiction of a virtue and vice in stark contrast with each other may lead participants to consider more deeply, or in a different way, how they are present in their lives; it may help in their contemplation as they understand the gravity of the sin, with the devil as a repulsive figure, and the beauty of the virtue. The illustration or personification of the sin helps to concretize it, to underscore that it is not simply something that can be “explained away” or forgotten about. The idea of the evil spirit which tempts humanity is fundamental in Ignatian spirituality and thus it is particularly helpful to have a devil/evil spirit depicted, shown as real. By contrast, the image of the virtue offers hope for an alternative, not simply a wish that the devil disappears but an affirmative vision concretised by a symbol and a figure who presents it.

The saint or central figure is present as one who accompanies the participant on this journey from the vice to the virtue, across the confessional from the penitent who confesses to the absolution offered. The central figure accompanies in particular as one who has failed in something related to this particular sin and then repented and become an exemplar, with the possible exception of St John of Nepomuk. They can guide during this initial prayer through doubts and fears and offer assurances of not being alone but with the communion of saints. In this way, the Krijtberg confessionals can be a valuable aid for Ignatius' “first method of prayer.”

## CHAPTER II: Step 2. Doxa Study Framework for Community Prayer, Study, and Evangelization with Art.

### Framework Overview

In the framework of “Grammar of Visual Language,” the *Doxa* step involves examining prior writings and studying it intellectually using a chosen approach(es) of critical analysis. In a community context, one or two members can undertake the research and present it to the group for discussion before moving on to the *Docta Ignorantia* contemplation. The approach utilised here is “An Approach for Christian Art”<sup>10</sup> which draws on the iconological method of Erwin Panofsky, the *Horizontverschmelzung* of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the linguistic and semiotic approaches of Ferdinand De Saussure and Umberto Eco. It analyzes 1) the horizon that created the work, 2) the structural pattern, 3) the symbolic pattern, and 4) the work’s contribution to theology.

### Application to the Krijtberg Confessionals

Each confessional features a central figure, a medallion above the penitent’s door, and a medallion above the confessor’s door. The medallions on the penitents’ sides are devils representing the seven deadly sins and the medallions on the confessors’ sides are women holding symbols that are the personification of virtues.<sup>11</sup> With the central figure and a medallion on both sides, each confessional reflects precisely the Ignatian model of interiority. At the beginning of the General Examen of Conscience “to purify oneself” in the *Exercises*, it is explained, “there are three kinds of thoughts in me: that is, one my own, which springs from my mere liberty and will; and two others, which come from without, one from the good spirit, and the other from the bad”<sup>12</sup>. The medallion with the devil corresponds to the evil spirit, or the Enemy of Human Nature as Ignatius terms it, and the medallion with the virtue corresponds to the Holy Spirit. In the middle of these two voices is the person’s own voice, the person’s own humanity, meant to be identified with the penitent in the middle. Significantly, the central figure is always standing, as he or she is already “risen”, already with the dignity of being a son or daughter of God. The person is called to choose, in an atmosphere of discernment. *The Exercises* themselves are meant to teach people to be free from the conditionings of the Enemy and learn to distinguish these voices within themselves. The Jesuits were noted for “instruction and the recuperation of souls in the specific context of the battle against the vices”, greatly impacting the art of this era, with the phenomenon that one commentator called “the place of healing as a spiritual experience of the aesthetic space”.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the Krijtberg’s seven confessionals can not only be a place where the sacrament is administered, but one which is conducive to entering into contemplation of the battle between virtue and vice on the stage of one’s life, and be led on a pathway of conversion, of healing.

In this excerpted version of this paper, only one confessional is considered briefly.

### Confessional 2

In the centre of the second confessional (Fig. 2) is a woman with long flowing hair, a long, simple dress, bare feet, palms outstretched, and eyes cast toward the heavens in a supplicating fashion (Fig. 3). Long flowing hair and bare feet are traditional symbols of penitence<sup>14</sup> with the style of hair in particular characteristic as Mary Magdalene, the saint *par excellence* of penitence<sup>15</sup>. Hogervorst<sup>16</sup> and Lansink and van Dael,<sup>17</sup> both agree with this identification. Furthermore,

between 1854 and 1860, the Cuypers-Stoltzenberg studio prepared a set of eight confessionals for a Catholic church down the street from the Krijtberg on the Keizersgracht, the Church of Our Lady.<sup>18</sup> These Keizersgracht confessionals, which are from the same period and geographic area and often feature very similar figures, are helpful with the identifications of the Krijtberg figures. There is one confessional with a figure very closely resembling this one, with the additional attributes of a cross and skull (Fig. 4), which are also typical of Mary Magdalene;<sup>19</sup> the quotes on the wall above it, Lk 7:37-38 and Lk 7:48<sup>20</sup>, or the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair and is then forgiven by Jesus, were commonly used to describe Mary Magdalene at the time. Thus, given the figures' similarity, this strengthens the proposed identification of the central figure on the second Krijtberg confessional as Mary Magdalene. It is in fact Mary Magdalene who encounters Christ in the garden, thinking he is the gardener<sup>21</sup> – sin and death, the tomb, have been conquered and transformed into the garden, the place of forgiveness and eternal life.

The medallion on the right shows a devil in a royal crown, robes, and staff (Fig. 5). The crown, royal garb with pin, staff, pompous expression, arms crossed haughtily – this is pride. Hogervorst<sup>22</sup> and Lansink and van Dael<sup>23</sup> are in agreement. Apart from the wings, he is one of the more human-like devils shown – he does not have horns, he has a beard and a human-like expression, his hands and arms resemble that of a man and are in a natural position. Indeed, pride is one of the more human rather than animalistic sins, not one of the flesh like gluttony, lust, or potentially wrath. This is the only confessional where the vice is above the confessor's door—one who is proud puts himself/herself in a position of undue authority.

The opposite medallion, a woman holding a shield with a scourge (Fig. 6), is identified by Hogervorst<sup>24</sup> and Lansink and van Dael<sup>25</sup> as penitence. However, penitence is not one of the seven virtues, and the clear opposite of pride is humility. Philip Neri matches the gift of the Holy Spirit of wisdom with this pair<sup>26</sup> with Lonardo emphasising that Christ is the wise one who teaches humility, citing Matthew 11:29, that wisdom brings humility to fullness.<sup>27</sup> The connection with Mary Magdalene is also natural. After Christ appears to her the morning of the Resurrection and instructs her to announce to the disciples that he is risen, she has the humility to do so even though she would not be believed by them in their pride because women were not considered truthful witnesses in that era.<sup>28</sup>

### **CHAPTER III: Step 3. *Docta Ignorantia* Contemplation Framework for Community Prayer, Study, and Evangelization with Art**

#### **Framework Overview**

In the framework of “Grammar of Visual Language,” the *Docta Ignorantia* step is about contemplation of the image, experiencing it as a place of encounter, exploring what it has to impart. In the community context, at the end of the *Doxa* stage, the findings are presented and discussed in the group. After this, or at another point in time when the research is presented succinctly beforehand, the group can do contemplative prayer with the image in the Ignatian framework. Ignatian contemplation involves “observing the scene with the eyes of the heart [...] so that it can permeate one's entire imagination and entire affectivity.”<sup>29</sup> It is “a prayer of ‘difficult passivity’” in which one “must accept praying without receiving an immediate result,” seeing the people in the scene, what they say and do, and making oneself fully present to it.<sup>30</sup>

In the LS Amsterdam community, the following method was used, which adapts the Ignatian method for imaginative contemplation for use with a work of art:<sup>31</sup>

*Docta Ignorantia Contemplation Framework for Community Prayer, Study, and Evangelization with Art*

Steps 0-1: As in Meditation, Chapter 1.

2. Contemplation

[Points about the work are given briefly, taken from the *Doxa* stage]

As I look at the image, I seek to enter into it, with my body, with my senses. To just “be there.” I try to pay attention to even the smallest of details...I start going through each of my senses... but when I find something that touches me deeply, I remain there...

I start by observing the expressions of the figures...[additions specific to work, silence]

I consider what they are saying...[specific additions, silence]

What can I smell...touch...taste? [specific additions, silence]

3. Conversation/*Colloquio*

[Looking forward]

[Sharing of the fruits of prayer]

[Closing] Our Father, together.

[After prayer] The leader, in the review of prayer, makes note anonymously of what the others shared for future reflection.

Here, the composition of place is particularly important. It is not merely to imagine the scene, the people, and the environment, but to put oneself inside of it, and to take the place of one of the people. This starts from Ignatius’ view that imagination can be a tool of knowledge, not something that brings one away from reality but rather closer to oneself, to the interior life. The composition of place, then, helps to make this passage. The imagination becomes a useful tool to enter into the reality of oneself and of the encounter with God.<sup>32</sup> In this way, the reading of a work of art can be a guided prayer, an accompaniment to enter into prayer.

### **Application to the Krijtberg Confessionals**

For the Krijtberg confessionals, the points given during the meditation can include the definitive identifications of the virtue and vice (which were hinted at in the *Ignorantia* step) with explanations, the stories of the saints shown, the connection with the gift of the Holy Spirit made by Philip Neri, relevant Biblical verses or sacred writings, and connections with the overall symbolism of this set of confessionals, such as the floral symbolism.

Additionally, the themes of some confessionals also tie in directly with other parts of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Almost from the beginning, illustrations for the *Exercises* were published as “genuine models for the person who meditates,” who must concentrate fully for a long period; an image can “symbolically illuminate the written word” and “add new points for meditation.”<sup>33</sup> In the prelude to almost every prayer, the exercitant does the “composition of place” described above. Then, at the end of the First Week of the *Exercises* and after many of the other meditations, an “application of the senses” is done,<sup>34</sup> which repeats the previous meditations using the power of the five senses.<sup>35</sup> This use of the imagination is perhaps more difficult than it appears, using the senses with a high degree of control so that “the outside world turns off and is substituted by a new experience.”<sup>36</sup> Ignatius distinguishes between the imagination as applied to “corporeal things,” such as visible places, people, and things, and “incorporeal things,” such as sins, when the exercitant tries “to see with the sight of the imagination and consider that [their] soul is imprisoned in this corruptible body.”<sup>37</sup> Some illustrated versions of the *Exercises* also contain

images for “incorporeal things,” such as the 1649 *Esercittii Spirituali* published in Rome by Manelfo Manelfi, which contains an illustration for the meditation *In puncto ad inferna descendunt*.<sup>38</sup> While Ignatius does not provide a list of sins to be examined for this meditation, the illustration shows a man impaled by seven swords, each with a head of a different demon or animal-looking figure and labelled with one of the seven deadly sins.<sup>39</sup>

As this contemplation stage emphasises, people have false images deep within about God, sin, themselves, and many other aspects of life, which determine one’s behaviour. The role of contemplation, then, “is to let the various episodes of the Gospels transform the primordial images that we have within ourselves...it remoulds the interiority and con-forms it to Christ.”<sup>40</sup> And this is exactly where images can have a key role. Here, the confessionals provide an image of not just the corporeal but also the incorporeal, accompanying the faithful on an itinerary to perceive both as realities and to let themselves be re-moulded starting from their innermost images.

## **Conclusion**

As the community, as the individual-within-the-community goes about this process of *Ignorantia*, *Doxa*, and *Docta Ignorantia*, it is important to consider the broader context. After all, the outlined method is meant to be used to re-enter into one’s interiority in order to emerge, to go out and better meet the other. As applied to the confessionals, if sin creates distance from oneself, from God, and from one’s brothers and sisters, then in the confessional-in encounter with the Word, in dialogue with God through the priest-God can recover this distance of sin. And therefore, it is clear that with the Krijtberg confessionals, the Jesuits have created an itinerary that guides the faithful, not only in the sacrament itself but in a pathway of purification. They are a visual prompt, a liminal space which calls out, strikes the visitor. In front of the confessionals, one stops to contemplate the three figures—the virtue that is the voice of the Holy Spirit; the vice that is the voice of the devil, the enemy of human nature; and the penitent who represents the voice of the person in this choice—that mirror the Ignatian representation of interiority. The visual representation allows the consideration of the voice of the Enemy and the voice of the Holy Spirit as something external to the visitor, and this is what makes the difference. “I am not the sin that I have committed. I have done evil but I am not it. To see the devil represented on one side and the virtue on the other helps me to distinguish these things.” One identifies not with the sin but with the figure in the middle, with the penitent seeking conversion. And this, then, permits one to encounter God, as God does not look upon the human being as sin, but as one who has done wrong and who can convert.

Of course, conversion, like confession, is not done only once. Rather, one speaks of living, dwelling, abiding in conversion, always aware of one’s limits, but also with the disposition of being under the Father’s merciful gaze. And with this abiding in conversion, “it is realised in us what happened to Jesus in the mystery of his death and resurrection: Jesus’ faith and surrender to the Father, through death, have forever rendered inefficacious the anger of God and make us—if we are united with him—capable of acknowledging the love of the Father beyond any death and any renunciation, even in our most profound weakness.”<sup>41</sup>

Ultimately, what, who, is the community for? It is to go out and meet the other—after having had an encounter with God, to go out and meet God in one’s brothers, in one’s sisters. Turning back to God in the continual process of conversion also necessarily opens one toward greater love of

the other. The “little flock of believers” that Joseph Ratzinger spoke of, not turned in on itself but in its very nature conceived for others, can illustrate a Church that will “be seen as man’s home where he will find life and hope beyond death.”<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971), 103-105.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>3</sup> This research is a short adaptation of the author’s master’s thesis at the *Pontificia Facoltà Teologica dell’Italia Meridionale* in Naples, Italy.

<sup>4</sup> This method was proposed by architect Caterina Bruno in a lecture for the course *Raccontare Per Immagine* as part of the 2022-2023 Diploma in *Arte e Teologia* at the *Scuola di Alta Formazione di Arte e Teologia (Pontificia Facoltà Teologica dell’Italia Meridionale, Sezione San Luigi)* and translated by the author.

<sup>5</sup> P. Florensky, *Beyond Vision. Essays on the Perception of Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 54.

<sup>6</sup> The Spiritual Exercises offers several methods of prayer, and one of the most common is discussed here. It can be synthesised in different ways. The synthesis used as a reference (provided in the Appendix) is that presented in G. Piccolo, *Testo o cuore? Arte di discernimento* (Milano: Paoline 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See Piccolo, *Testo o cuore?* 40-45.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Hogervorst et al., *De Krijtberg* (Amsterdam: R.K. Stichting, 1981), 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ignatius does not enumerate the list of deadly sins or their contraries, but one of the most well-known, and thus the one used in this work, is gluttony/temperance; wrath/patience; lust/chastity; avarice/generosity; sloth/fervour of spirit; envy/kindness; pride/humility. See D.L. Fleming, *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 238-248; See A. Caletti, “I tre modi di orare negli Esercizi Spirituali di S. Ignazio di Loyola”, *Appunti di Spiritualità* 59 (2006): 1-86, which presumes this; See W.H. Longridge, *Gli Esercizi Spirituali di s. Ignazio di Loyola* (Roma: Edizioni Paoline 1965), 330, which presumes this as well; See G.N. Globocnik, *Le sette basiliche di Roma* (Roma: L.Merlo, 1877), 247-293.

<sup>10</sup> This approach was proposed by Fr. Jean-Paul Hernandez SJ in a lecture for the course *Storia dell’Arte Figurative in Prospettiva Teologica e Liturgica* as part of the 2022-2023 Diploma in *Arte e Teologia* at the *Scuola di Alta Formazione di Arte e Teologia (Pontificia Facoltà Teologica dell’Italia Meridionale, Sezione San Luigi)* and translated by the author.

<sup>11</sup> See L. Lansink and P. Van Dael, *De Nieuwe Krijtberg. Een neogotische droom* (Amsterdam: Stichting Frans Dubois Fonds, 1993), 60. Translation: Deepl.com; Cf A. Hogervorst et alii, *De Krijtberg*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Eess [32].

<sup>13</sup> Y. Zu Dohna, “La pedagogia artistica dei Gesuiti e l’estetica della pastorale: Vizi contemporanei e guarigione,” *Ignaziana* 16 (2013): 108-145.

<sup>14</sup> See G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 26.

<sup>15</sup> See M. Tabor, *The Saints in Art, with their Attributes and Symbols Alphabetically Arranged* (London: Methuen 1908), 97.

<sup>16</sup> See Hogervorst A. et al. *De Krijtberg* (Amsterdam: R.K. Stichting, 1981), 19.

<sup>17</sup> See L. Lansink and P. Van Dael, *De Nieuwe Krijtberg. Een neogotische droom*, (Amsterdam: Stichting Frans Dubois Fonds, 1993), 60.

<sup>18</sup> See L.H.H.M. Schiphorst, “Een toevloed van werk, van wijd en zijd,” 269.

<sup>19</sup> See Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 28; See F.C. Husenbeth, *Emblems of Saints: by which they are distinguished in Works of Art* (London: Burns and Lambert, 1850), 97.

<sup>20</sup> “Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment” (Lk 7:38); “He said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven’” (Lk 7:48).

<sup>21</sup> See Jn 20:11-18.

<sup>22</sup> See Hogervorst et al., *De Krijtberg*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> See Lansink & Van Dael, *De Nieuwe Krijtberg*, 60.

<sup>24</sup> See Hogervorst et al., *De Krijtberg*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> See Lansink & Van Dael, *De Nieuwe Krijtberg*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> See Globocnik, *Le sette basiliche di Roma*, 286.

<sup>27</sup> See A. Lonardo, “I doni dello Spirito, i vizi e le virtù, nel pellegrinaggio alle sette chiese di San Filippo Neri: indicazioni per un cammino verso la Cresima. Breve nota di Andrea Lonardo”, [www.glisicritti.it/blog/entry/1758](http://www.glisicritti.it/blog/entry/1758), (accessed 26<sup>th</sup> December 2012). “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Matt 11:29).

<sup>28</sup> See Mk 16:9-11.

<sup>29</sup> J.P. Hernandez, “Che cos’è la ‘contemplazione’ secondo Ignazio,” in *Esercizi Spirituali* (Milano: G. Piccolo, Garzanti, 2018), 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> The Spiritual Exercises offers several methods of prayer, and one of the most common, that of contemplation, is discussed here (meditation is discussed in Section 1.1). It can be synthesised in different ways. The synthesis used as a reference (provided in the Appendix) is that presented in Piccolo, *Testo o cuore?*

<sup>32</sup> See Eess [101-109].

<sup>33</sup> L. Salviucci Insolera, “Le illustrazioni per gli Esercizi Spirituali intorno al 1600,” *Archivium Historicum Societatis Iesu* 60 (1991): 161-217. Translation: author.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>35</sup> See Eess [121-126], for example.

<sup>36</sup> Salviucci, “Le illustrazioni per gli Esercizi Spirituali intorno al 1600,” 164. Translation: author.

<sup>37</sup> Eess [47].

<sup>38</sup> This is the second exercise of the First Week, the meditation on personal sin. Ignatius Of Loyola, *Esercittii Spirituali* (Roma: Manelfo Manelfi, 1649), 52.

<sup>39</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Hernandez, “Che cos’è la ‘contemplazione’ secondo Ignazio”, 116.

<sup>41</sup> A. Louf, *Sotto la Guida dello Spirito*, (Magnano, VC: Comunità di Bose, Qiqajon, 2005), 17.

<sup>42</sup> Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, 105-106.

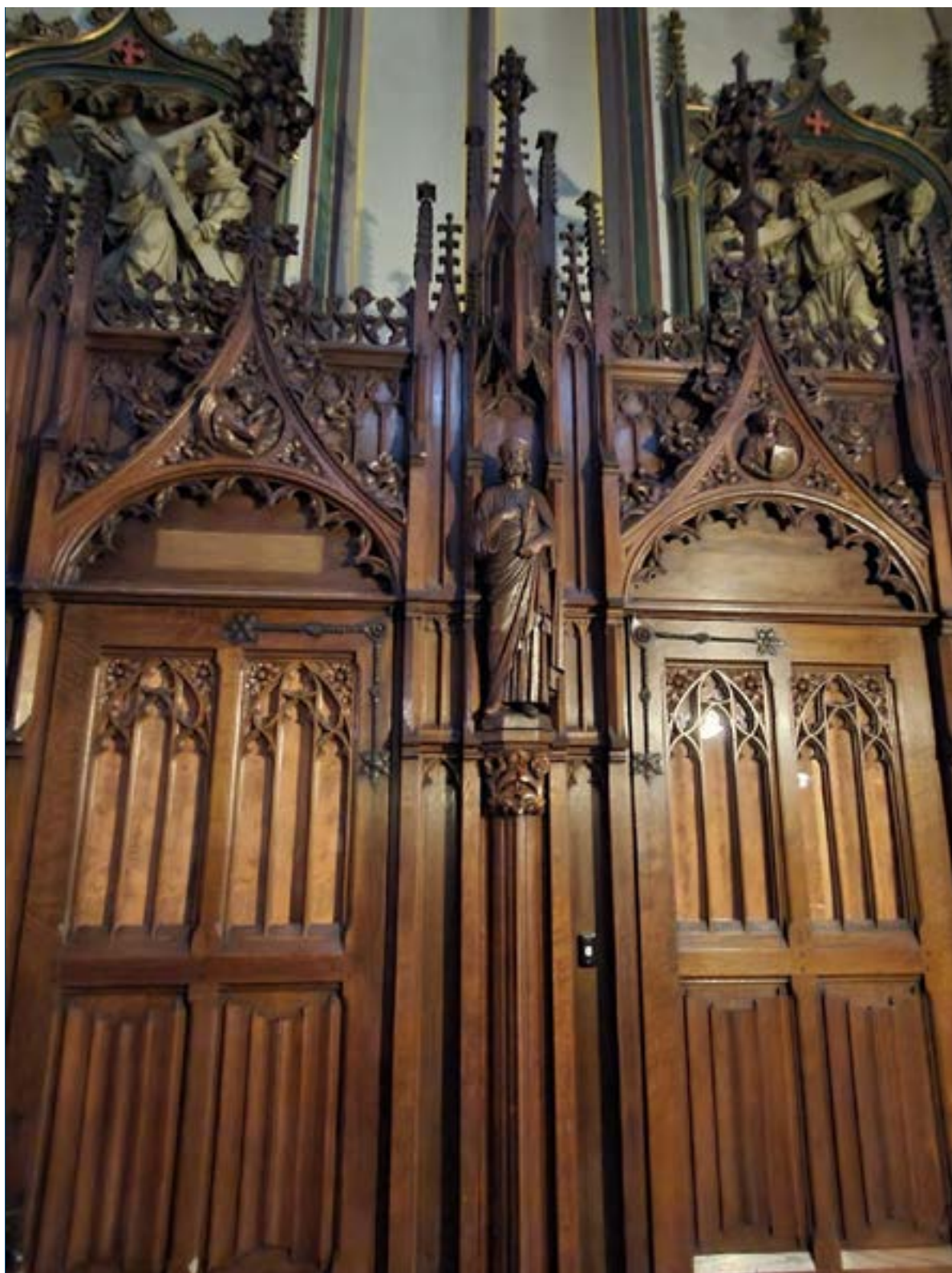


Figure 1 - Cuypers-Stoltzenberg Studio, Krijtberg Church Confessional 5, 1889. Wood. The Church of St Francis Xavier (the "Krijtberg"), Amsterdam. Photo: Megan Angell



Figure 2 - Cuypers-Stoltzenberg Studio, Krijtberg Church Confessional 2, 1887. Wood. The Church of St Francis Xavier (the "Krijtberg"), Amsterdam. Photo: Megan Angell



Figure 3 - Cuypers-Stoltzenberg Studio, Krijtberg Church Confessional 2 Detail 1, 1885. Wood. The Church of St Francis Xavier (the "Krijtberg"), Amsterdam. Photo: Megan Angell



Figure 4 - Cuypers-Stoltzenberg Studio, Church of Our Lady Confessional with Lk 7,37-38, 1850s. Wood. The Church of Our Lady, Amsterdam. Photo: Fr. Rafael de Ojeda, Rector



Figure 5 - Cuypers-Stoltzenberg Studio, Krijtberg Church Confessional 2 Detail 3, 1885. Wood. The Church of St Francis Xavier (the “Krijtberg”), Amsterdam. Photo: Megan Angell



Figure 6 - Cuypers-Stoltzenberg Studio, Krijtberg Church Confessional 2 Detail 2, 1885. Wood. The Church of St Francis Xavier (the "Krijtberg"), Amsterdam. Photo: Megan Angell

REDISCOVERIES, INTERPRETATIONS,  
TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATION  
IN SACRED ART CONSERVATION

# Sensory Dissonance: New “Horizons” of Spiritual Communication in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

In the Jubilee Year, proclaimed by the *Bull Spes non confundit*, our cathedrals are experiencing a period of great fervour, awaiting the many pilgrims of hope who seamlessly join and merge with the many visitors in search of an unforgettable experience, of deepening knowledge, of curiosity. This is an opportunity to propose a new reading of the religious and cultural heritage, whose “epiphany” is before our eyes and continues to exert its fascination and attraction.

There is great enthusiasm for the need to reconnect with the younger generations, for a new communication of the cultural heritage. This is the direction taken by the international meeting Sharing Hope - Horizons for Cultural Heritage, organised by the Dicastery for Culture and Education and the Vatican Museums, which produced the “Manifesto on the Transmission of the Religious Cultural Code.”

Europe is moving in the same direction, surprisingly with a programme of the same name, *Horizon Europe*, which aims to enhance European cultural heritage in all its forms of expression, made up of tangible and intangible assets and their digital transformation. These are cultural roots that the Union wishes to preserve and help to make accessible through a series of initiatives aimed at promoting knowledge of them, not only as a legacy from other times, but also as a unique ingredient for shaping the society of the future.

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## Introduction

The opening essay of the third volume of *Mirabilia Italiae*, devoted to Pisa Cathedral, begins with a simple yet revealing question: how did people explore our cities before the sweeping changes of the modern age, in the form of cars, traffic, and mass tourism?

The author, Salvatore Settis,<sup>1</sup> borrows from a novel not far removed from our own time to illustrate both the striking differences and surprising continuities in the ways we perceive – and interpret – European culture. The book in question is *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James (1881), and the city that acts as its backdrop, but that is at times very much centre stage, is Rome.

Some passages are worth reflecting on. Salvatore Settis observes that we are dealing with “truly another city. [...] Another rhythm, another dimension of time. But also, in the sensitive view of Henry James, [one can see] the awareness of a phenomenon that is not new but growing, the differentiation of visitors and, one might say, the specialisation of the vision.” A refinement of perception that allows us to discern distinct categories – the “devout” and the “curious” – each of which, in the modern age, may “pursue their own interests with neither scandal nor conflict.” The church, in the sense of a place of worship, is the ideal setting where any potential discord can

be neutralised: a place where continuous flows of people, each guided by their own interests and visions, intermingle. At times they may overlap, while at others they may be wholly indifferent to one another. Artistic devotion now rivals, and often surpasses, religious devotion – even within the very temples that once consecrated the latter. At the same time, religious fervour may disregard the artistic value of a work if it is perceived to contain a true trace of the supernatural.

Take devotional images, for instance: there is no need to know who the artist was, no need to place the work in a particular stylistic school, nor even to recognise its aesthetic excellence. What matters is its symbolic power – its ability to transcend iconography and become a tangible manifestation of the Divine.

The role of the conservator, and that of the Church (here in the sense of the *ecclesia*), is to preserve both the substance and the spirit of the artistic creation: to act as stewards of a legacy meant for future generations.

But what legacy, exactly? And for whose eyes?

### **New Horizons for the Communication of Cultural Heritage**

In the Jubilee Year, proclaimed with the Bull *Spes non confundit*, our cathedrals are once again alive and eagerly preparing to welcome the countless “pilgrims of hope” who, in an unbroken stream, will join the many visitors seeking an unforgettable experience, whether fuelled by a thirst for knowledge or simple curiosity. This moment offers a great opportunity to take a fresh new look at our religious cultural heritage – a constant epiphany that radiates beauty, meaning and allure.

There is growing momentum behind the call to reconnect with the young, and to find a new way to communicate our cultural heritage. It is in this spirit that we should view the outcome of the international conference *Sharing Hope – Horizons for Cultural Heritage*,<sup>2</sup> organised by the Dicastery for Culture and Education and by the Vatican Museums. The event culminated in the *Manifesto on the Transmission of the Religious Cultural Code*.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to see how the European Union is charting a parallel course, with a programme with a surprisingly similar name, *Horizon Europe*. The word “horizon” instinctively evokes a sense of vast potential, where all things are possible and just need a sense of direction and purpose. The *Horizon* programme is also devoted to enhancing European cultural heritage, while honouring the richness of national identities. It embraces every form in which heritage might find expression, covering the broad categories of tangible and intangible assets, along with their digital reinterpretations. The European Union intends not only to preserve these cultural roots but also to make them widely accessible through a series of initiatives that make them more widely known to the public. This heritage is seen not simply as a legacy from the past, but also as a unique element that can shape the society of tomorrow.

We can thus see the same intent in the European *Horizon* programme as we see in the *Manifesto*: both seek to connect the younger generations with the roots of our culture, in order to ensure that our heritage is successfully passed on, without running the risk of being lost. It is designed to ensure that this generation too will receive the legacy that has so far never failed to be handed on.

Now let us turn our attention, more in detail, to the *Manifesto* itself. Right from the preamble, a powerful commitment is made “to the promotion of our religious cultural heritage as a universal code of hope, peace, dialogue and reflection.” This is the voice of more than 130 experts: curators, scholars, and representatives of museums and cultural institutions engaged in promoting religious cultural heritage. These are seen not merely as custodians of memory, but as key figures in interpreting, transmitting and reimagining the deep meanings embedded in religious and artistic heritage. They are seen as agents of inspiration for the younger generations, with a mission to focus on the contemporary understanding of this religious legacy and on education, with a view to creating bridges between past and future.

The *Manifesto on the Transmission of the Religious Cultural Code* condenses these aspirations into just seven articles, tackling themes such as accessibility and interpretation, inclusion and innovation. It speaks of storytelling, interactive narratives, and immersive encounters with heritage. It also addresses artificial intelligence and cultural sustainability. It brings about a shift in terminology and a genuine change of pace – one that mirrors the rapid transformation already taking place across the cultural landscape, unsettling a world once defined by careful deliberation and slow contemplation.

The context is secular, but the vocabulary is the same: the European Union’s *Horizon* framework traces a course with no turning back. We are in a fully digital age and culture can no longer be a marginal factor, exempted from the rapid changes taking place. Innovation is the guiding principle, together with co-creation and an open exchange of information.

To achieve this, Europe has earmarked considerable funds for the creation of a digital infrastructure: the European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage (ECCCH).<sup>4</sup> This platform will serve as a foundation on which to build vocabularies, knowledge, tools and best practices, in order to ensure openness and sharing, so that these seeds may germinate and grow into catalysts of collaboration and interaction between museums and cultural institutions.

The European vision draws up a roadmap, with a digital collaboration space that can only have positive effects on the various processes: speeding up discoveries, deepening understanding and enriching experiences, while facilitating access to Europe’s cultural treasures. The creation of this infrastructure is therefore just the first step in a longer journey, followed by specific *Horizon Europe* calls for proposals under Cluster 2 – Cultural Heritage and the Innovation Actions category.<sup>5</sup> These calls are for projects that cover every aspect of cultural production: from conservation and restoration to data organisation, from the analysis of processes to interaction with visitors.

### **Custodians of Authentic Relationships**

In places of culture and faith, where, as the preamble notes, the eyes of the curious and the devout meet and mingle, access to information must be extended to an even broader community. Here, the needs of each individual must be recognised and addressed – regardless of language, faith, or differing sensory and mobility conditions – with carefully designed policies and appropriate tools.

But there is more. The digital transition – scarcely regulated and all too often left in the hands of social networks and apps of questionable scientific merit – is already well underway, and has become fully a part of our everyday lives. In this phase, we certainly need to embrace the potential offered by new forms of communication, but always with a close eye on ensuring the reliability of the content and respecting the authorship of those who create it.

The essence of spirituality is rooted in human experience, in the community, and in one’s personal relationship with the divine. Technology should help enhance these experiences, not replace them.

In places of true spiritual feeling, more than anywhere else, we are called upon to protect the human dimension of every individual, safeguarding the development of genuine, meaningful relationships with the Other.

The *Opera della Primaziale Pisana* has accepted the challenge posed by Europe and has decided to take part with three projects in the *Horizon Europe* calls, which are in these days undergoing a process of selection by the European Commission. Setting aside the first of these, which focuses exclusively on the use of new technologies in the fields of restoration and conservation, the greatest challenges we faced were in the fields of hospitality, communication, and inclusion.

It was an entirely immersive journey and it meant we had to embark on a multidisciplinary brainstorming process, to immerse ourselves, so to speak, in a new syntax, and to weave narrative threads that could unite the tangible and intangible heritage of the “Piazza del Duomo” UNESCO site in Pisa with its many layers of meaning – always bearing clearly in mind its spiritual horizon.

And it is from here that we drafted the first *story*.

### **Through the Eyes of Early Travellers**

The Piazza del Duomo in Pisa combines the extraordinary richness of its monuments with the potential to transform visitor experiences through the innovative use of its archives. The narrative we have created seeks to provide fresh interpretations of the site, enabling citizens and visitors from across the globe to fully appreciate the artistic and architectural wonders that have earned the Piazza its UNESCO World Heritage status. By redefining both indoor and outdoor experiences with inclusivity in mind, the pilot project aims to make the site accessible to all, addressing the needs of individuals with temporary or permanent mobility, sensory or cognitive difficulties, and visitors of all ages.

This initiative relies on the creative use of historical and photographic archives, together with materials from restoration campaigns and scientific and archaeological studies. This approach not only enriches the visitor experience but also moves beyond fragmented, exclusive models of accessibility, creating a more cohesive and integrated setting for inclusive visits. Drawing on the expertise in the field of inclusion built up by the *Opera della Primaziale Pisana* in over a decade, the project calls for the on-going collaboration of the eleven associations that have already signed a memorandum of understanding, and that will continue to play an active role in co-creative events.

The project acknowledges the delicate balance required for the site’s different functions: it remains a living religious space for liturgical celebrations, while also serving as an urban site in a vibrant city that attracts over two million tourists each year. By making creative use of digital archives that were once reserved for scholarly research, the pilot project will help visitors find out about the hidden stories and enduring values of the *Piazza del Duomo*, nurturing a deeper bond with its cultural, historical, and spiritual significance.

We might imagine we are wandering through the site hand in hand with Galileo, whose life was intimately intertwined with these very buildings. Born in Pisa on 15 February 1564, he was baptised four days later in the Baptistery. Throughout his career, the famous scientist turned the Piazza del Duomo into an authentic laboratory: it was inside the Cathedral that he discovered the law of the isochronism of pendulums, inspired by the gentle sway of a votive lamp – an artefact still preserved today in the Monumental Cemetery, or *Camposanto*. And an unverifiable yet enduring legend has it that it was from the Leaning Tower that he conducted his experiments on the motion of falling bodies.

We will also see that setting off for the *Piazza del Duomo* is hardly a modern pursuit. The first “visitors” were pilgrims in the Middle Ages, whose eyes focused sharply on the objects of their devotion.

They marvelled at the unfolding of the *Biblia pauperum* on the bronze doors of the Cathedral and found instruction and wonder in the vivid scenes from the Old and New Testaments that were depicted in the *Camposanto*.

They were soon followed by the early British travellers on the Grand Tour in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the stay of the Shelleys, Byron, and their friends in Pisa in the 1820s began to make the *Piazza del Duomo* a truly must-see destination. Some of these historical “tourists” will share their experiences with today’s visitors, revealing the profound meanings they perceived in the artworks gathered within the confines of the *Piazza*, whether interpreted through the eyes of the “devout” or through those of the “curious.”

The project will also examine the international connections and multicultural spirit of the site. We know that the buildings in the *Piazza del Duomo* drew inspiration from models as distant as Jerusalem and Córdoba, that Arab and Byzantine artists worked here, that the Pisan Romanesque style that took shape right here would later flourish in regions like Sardinia and Corsica. The construction of the *Piazza*, and particularly of the Cathedral, led to the creation of a unique visual language – an exquisite fusion of styles blended into perfect harmony. Here, Romanesque art, a perfect expression of Christian culture, absorbed influences from Mediterranean and transalpine traditions, creating an atmosphere of reciprocal interaction. Thus, beyond being a masterpiece of artistic creativity and human ingenuity, the *Piazza del Duomo* also bears witness to an important exchange of human values.

It is this human aspect – this spirit of mutual understanding and acceptance – that we aim to highlight, safeguard, and pass on to future generations.

## **The Sound of Images**

And here we come to the second *story*, where we explore the point of encounter between the material and immaterial dimensions of a collection of sacred art: the great choirbooks – works on parchment created long before the invention of printing and intended for use in the liturgy. Now preserved in the sacristies of cathedrals, it is only in modern times that they have been elevated to the status of works of art. The choirbooks are a perfect example of this “semiotic transition”: from meaning to signifier, from the concept or idea expressed by the sign to the form of its representation.

Bulky and heavy objects – each one containing the hides of a flock of sheep – yet exquisitely refined, the choirbooks were produced by expert miniaturists who, with precious pigments and gold leaf, created intricate initials and rich decorations. Positioned in the Cathedral presbytery, the choirbooks were available during religious ceremonies to the many singers, who could follow the words and notes from a distance at a time when the services were predominantly sung. The liturgy itself determined the shape and size of the codices, in which the text is accompanied by musical notation, with an evident increase in the size of the books. The music is written in an archaic script taken from ancient oral and singing traditions that predate the pentagram. These were later refined through the development of diastematic notation, which indicates the relative pitch of each sound by placing the signs on a musical staff.

Music and song thus draw us into a world beyond the tangible, guiding us towards the discovery of an immaterial heritage that is intimately linked to the liturgy and to the life of the community in our cathedrals. Sounds, images, words, chants, and the collective life of the faithful – all converge in a kind of deep immersion into the syntax of the origins: a grammar and vocabulary of faith in which each sign holds both a spiritual message and a shared tradition. It is a tradition suspended in the moment of transformation from oral transmission to a new, written code. The symbol evolves, and tradition with it, through to the foundation of the musical chapel, the emergence of the roles of maestro and choristers, and the introduction of early instruments, culminating in the great organs that now accompany the choir.

Music allows us to retrace ten centuries of history and harmonies in Pisa Cathedral – a journey recently examined in a publication that brings together research into historical sources and musical manuscripts. The catalogue includes works from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, since the devastating fire at the Cathedral in 1595 destroyed the entire archive held until that time – with the exception of the choirbooks (twelfth to fifteenth century), which are now on display at the *Museo dell’Opera del Duomo*.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, I would like to borrow the words that Christian Greco, Director of the Egyptian Museum in Turin, spoke at the opening ceremony of the inaugural meeting of the Ministers of Culture:<sup>6</sup> “It is time to introduce a digital humanism in which archaeologists, anthropologists, architects, historians, philosophers, lawyers, neuroscientists and psychologists work side by side with chemists, physicists and computer scientists to define a new semantics to understand the complexity of reality.”

The aim of the G20 Ministers of Culture is, in essence, to create a conceptual and informational bridge between physical objects and multidisciplinary perspectives – to forge a new semantics that helps us comprehend the intricacies of our world. But if we add a further element to this vision – that of transcendence and spirituality – and combine these diverse perspectives with the vision of the faithful, like that mentioned by Henry James, then reality, complex as it already is, can be further enriched with meaning, acquiring even greater depth. It connects us to a shared sensibility, a deep root that is at once personal and collective: a legacy passed down to us, which we, in turn, will continue to pass on to those who come after us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Salvatore Settis, *Mirabilia Italiae: Il Duomo di Pisa*, ed. Adriano Peroni (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini Editore, 1985), 9.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2025-02/musei-vaticani-dicatero-educazione-cultura-sharing-hope-giubileo.html> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025).

<sup>3</sup> <https://centriculturali.org/il-manifesto-sulla-trasmissione-del-codice-culturale-religioso/> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Pere Brunet et al., *Report on a European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage* (Brussels: European Commission, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/calls-for-proposals> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025).

<sup>6</sup> <https://cultura.gov.it/g20cultura> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2025).



Figure 1 - Ranieri Grassi, Interior View of Pisa Cathedral. Coloured etching, first half of the nineteenth century



Figure 2 - OPA Photographic Archive, Interior View of Pisa Cathedral, 2025



Figure 3 - Berlinghiero Berlinghieri, *Madonna and Child (Below the Organs)*, c. 1220, Pisa, Cathedral

# The Liturgical Redevelopment of the Cathedral of Ugento

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## Abstract

The project proposal, which won the competition and is soon going to tender to be realised, focused on two main intertwined ideas: first, the respect for the existing rich artistic context of the Cathedral and the social context of the Diocese; and second, the necessity to produce a work that is contemporary to today's artistic language. To achieve this and to comply with all the liturgical needs, both theological and practical, in a Cathedral in the south of Italy, where the Baroque influence is very strong, the project took a technique very present in the Baroque period: marble inlay, and developed the three main pieces — the Altar, the Ambo, and the Bishop's chair — as surfaces where figurative and abstraction perfectly combined to represent the changing seasons during the pastoral year. Similarly, the *Via Crucis*, with stations of large dimensions, also used the marble inlay technique, but with figures representing our society. To integrate the new intervention in the Cathedral, the chosen marbles are the same as the existing ones.

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## Introduction

The subject of this paper is the Cathedral of Ugento, located in the southern Salento region of Apulia.

The project presented here is the result of a design competition promoted by the Italian National Office for Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage and Religious Buildings (part of the Italian Episcopal Conference, CEI) in collaboration with the Diocese of Ugento.

These competitions are structured in two phases and aim to identify the most suitable design proposal for the liturgical adaptation of Italian cathedrals. The jury is chaired by the bishop and composed of experts in the field, as well as representatives of the diocese. Our project was unanimously selected as the winning proposal.

## Conceptual Foundations

At the core of our approach lies a rigorous respect for the artistic, architectural, and social context of the cathedral, while simultaneously introducing contemporary spatial configurations and a renewed liturgical language. The objective was to harmonise tradition with innovation, ensuring functional adequacy for modern liturgical practice while preserving the integrity of the historical setting.

## Existing Conditions and Spatial Reconfiguration

Prior to intervention, the presbytery presented two primary issues:

- Insufficient space for liturgical celebrations;
- A lack of architectural dignity in the existing altar, which was a makeshift solution consisting of a section of balustrade topped with a marble slab — an outcome of post-Second Vatican Council adaptations.

To resolve these, the new design introduces a more compact altar and a reduced base for the episcopal cathedra. The ambo is repositioned outside the balustrade, aligned with the presbytery, while the perimeter of the presbytery itself is extended toward the nave. This reconfiguration allows for greater flexibility during liturgical celebrations and creates a more coherent and integrated sacred space.

## Artistic Language and Iconography A Dialogue Between Tradition and the Present

The overarching goal of the project is to achieve a meaningful synthesis between historical continuity and contemporary expression. While modern elements are especially visible in the visual and narrative approach of the *Via Crucis*, the entire intervention remains deeply rooted in liturgical and artistic tradition.

### Tradition as a Foundation

#### *Architectural and Material Heritage*

Our starting point was the existing fabric of the cathedral itself. We revisited historical techniques such as marble inlay (*intarsia*), a significant decorative feature in the cathedral's existing elements. This artisanal craft not only ensures material continuity but also carries deep symbolic and theological resonance.

#### *Historical Context of Marble Inlay*

Originating in Roman times, marble inlay reached its first artistic height in the High Middle Ages with the Cosmatesque style, noted for its abstract geometric motifs in Roman basilicas. During the Renaissance, with the founding of the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure* in Florence, the technique evolved into a narrative and symbolic medium. In the Baroque period, particularly in Naples, the *Real Laboratorio delle Pietre Dure* developed a hybrid approach that fused inlay with sculptural and architectural surfaces. Our intervention echoes this lineage, drawing directly from Ugento's historic chromatic palette.

### Iconography and the Vegetal Metaphor

A second focal point is the iconographic structure of the project, particularly in the altar and the *Via Crucis*.

#### **The Altar as a Symbol of Resurrection**

The altar — central to the Christian celebration of the Resurrection—is conceived as a metaphor

for life's triumph over death. Inspired by seasonal cycles, its marble inlay features leaves blown by the wind and shifting in colour, symbolizing transformation and renewal.

- The Ambo continues this motif: the leaves extend toward it, suggesting the Word taking form — renewal as proclamation.
- The Bishop's Chair, austere in design, features descending leaves to evoke guidance and spiritual sobriety amid human uncertainty.

### **The *Via Crucis*: A Contemporary Reimagining**

The most ambitious component of the project is the *Via Crucis*, designed to be fully integrated with the architecture. Using marble polychromy, vertical panels, and a layout aligned with the cathedral's pilasters, the work harmonises visually and spatially with the existing structure.

#### ***A Modern Narrative Language***

While aesthetically aligned with the historical setting, the *Via Crucis* employs a contemporary visual language. This follows the tradition of Renaissance artists who embedded biblical scenes within contemporary contexts to heighten emotional resonance — for example, Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* or Golzius's engravings.

Likewise, our stations of the cross reinterpret each scene with attention to modern themes — especially various forms of violence, both overt and systemic, that define contemporary life.

#### ***The Stations of the Via Crucis: Descriptive Overview***

- Station I: Ecce Homo

Christ stands on a donkey, as in Giotto's depictions. The transition from celebration to condemnation becomes a metaphor for institutional betrayal.

- Stations II–III: Crowning with Thorns

Physical violence is emphasised through the juxtaposition of ancient and modern military uniforms, reflecting the timelessness of cruelty.

- Station IV: Jesus meets His Mother

An emotional but restrained composition — mother and son reach out, unable to touch.

- Station V: Simon of Cyrene

Simon helps Christ, while bystanders remain indifferent — illustrating the violence of apathy. Lambs and butchers in the background invoke sacrificial imagery.

- Station VI: Veronica

Her gesture interrupts the cycle of violence. The composition follows classical traditions, symbolizing hope and continuity.

- Station VII: The Second Fall

Children who once celebrated Palm Sunday now throw stones — a reversal meant to evoke betrayal and lost innocence.

- Station VIII: Women of Jerusalem

The women act as a protective shield, forming a living enclosure around Christ.

- Station IX: The Third Fall

Figures above embody apathy; below, a woman and child recall the Nativity. Birth and death intertwine, echoing Renaissance iconography.

- Station X: Jesus is Stripped

Here, violence is at its most raw. A satyr-faced aggressor represents demonic cruelty; a cat watches silently — nature as witness.

- Station XI: The Crucifixion is Prepared

Violence becomes mechanised — executed with dispassion and routine, reflecting “bureaucratic violence.”

- Station XII: The Crucifixion

A construction site replaces Golgotha. A girl covers her ears — emphasizing the sound of suffering over its image.

- Station XIII: The Deposition

Mary receives her son. The earlier image of lambs recurs: the true Lamb is now sacrificed, fulfilling the foreshadowed symbolism.

- Station XIV: The Burial

A barren tree from earlier now blooms — subtly alluding to Piero della Francesca’s Resurrection. Death becomes the gateway to rebirth.

## Conclusion

An essential dimension of this project lies in the conservation and renewal of sacred art as a vital means of evangelization. In the context of the Ugento Cathedral, preserving traditional artistic techniques such as marble inlay does not merely protect cultural heritage but serves as a living language that communicates the faith across generations. Sacred Art, embedded in the liturgical space, becomes a tangible expression of the Gospel, inviting the faithful to a deeper encounter with the mysteries of Christian life. By integrating contemporary artistic forms with historical craftsmanship, the project fosters a dialogue between past and present, thereby renewing the cathedral’s role as a spiritual beacon within the community. This approach underlines how art conservation transcends aesthetics, becoming a powerful tool for catechesis, contemplation, and active participation in the Church’s mission of evangelization.

This project represents an attempt to renew the sacred space through a balanced dialogue between history and contemporaneity. It honors the liturgical and artistic traditions of the Catholic Church while also addressing the existential questions of today’s faithful. Through both material and iconographic means, the *Via Crucis* and the new altar offer more than decoration — they invite contemplation, participation, and a deeper encounter with the mystery of faith.



Figure 1 - Sanctuary



Figure 2 - Ambo



Figure 3 - *Via Crucis*



Figure 4 - *Via crucis* 2



Figure 5 - Marble inlay trials



Figure 6 - Lateral Altar

# The Digital Twin of the Toledo Cathedral: Technological Innovation in the Service of Sacred Art Conservation

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Cathedral of Toledo, Spain*

## Abstract

The project proposal, which won the competition and is soon going to tender to be realised. The innovative digitization project of the Cathedral of Toledo represents a significant milestone in the field of historical and religious heritage conservation. The project has resulted in the creation of a Digital Twin — an exact, meticulously detailed virtual replica that captures the entire cathedral with millimetric precision. The comprehensive 3D survey includes every corner of the structure: the nave, chapels, crypts, columns, flying buttresses, triforiums, spiral staircases, domes, roofs and sub-roofs, cloister, tower, sculptures, and more. This project stands as a replicable model for other cathedrals and sacred art institutions, demonstrating the potential of technology not only to preserve the past but to project it into the future. In the case of Toledo, it is already revitalizing interest in religious heritage and fostering a renewed sense of belonging.

The paper will cover the methodology used in the execution of the project and its outcomes, emphasizing the importance of integrating technological innovation in the conservation of sacred art, thereby enhancing accessibility. This Digital Twin marks a paradigm shift in preventive conservation and the efficient management of monuments. Point cloud technology enables early detection of damage, precise planning of restoration interventions, and optimised monitoring of factors that affect the structural integrity of the building and its contents, such as humidity or cracks. Additionally, it allows for faithful restoration of the cathedral and its sculptures in the event of a disaster. This advancement also opens new possibilities for cultural and spiritual dissemination. Researchers, students, worshippers, and the general public can virtually explore this heritage from anywhere in the world, access areas that are not part of a traditional tour, and appreciate details that are invisible to the human eye from publicly accessible spaces.

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## Introduction

The Cathedral of Toledo, the Primate of Spain, is one of the most representative jewels of Spanish Gothic architecture. Like all cathedrals, it is far more than a monumental building; it is a living testament to the history, culture, art, and spirituality that has shaped entire generations. In a world where technology is increasingly interwoven with culture, a crucial question arises: how can we preserve this heritage for future generations? The answer, at least in part, lies in geomatics and the creation of digital twins — precise virtual replicas that allow us to preserve, study, and disseminate knowledge about monuments such as the Cathedral of Toledo. This study outlines the work undertaken by two geomatics professionals who joined forces to create the digital twin of the Cathedral of Toledo, offering this technical tool as a commemorative gift for the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of its construction, to be celebrated in 2026.

Geomatics and topographic engineers specialise in acquiring and managing precise geospatial and georeferenced information — that is, data that is accurately situated in space using various methodologies. This allows us to precisely determine the shape and dimensions of land, structures, and objects. A digital twin is an accurate, three-dimensional virtual representation of an element, enabling users to explore, analyse, and work on it as if they had a perfect model stored on a computer. Each point in this “virtual model” or “digital twin” is georeferenced with X, Y, and Z coordinates, and enriched with additional information such as colour and intensity. The images shown in this article are point clouds from the digital twin — they are not photographs, but visual renderings formed by thousands of points perfectly located in space. In the field of heritage conservation, these digital models become invaluable archives. They not only allow for the extraction of plans, sections, and elevations, but also support many other applications that will be discussed later. The digital twin is, therefore, not just a visual product, but a comprehensive heritage management tool.

### **The Digital Twin of the Cathedral of Toledo**

The preservation of architectural and artistic heritage is a critical responsibility for both current and future generations. In this context, the creation of digital twins for heritage buildings and sacred art emerges as an indispensable tool to ensure their long-term conservation. Just as we digitise important documents to ensure their survival, the digitisation of buildings and artworks allows for the creation of virtual replicas that serve as digital archives for study and preservation. This is achieved through the development of detailed 3D models that faithfully reproduce every aspect and detail of the original structure.

Having a digital twin not only safeguards the building or artwork but also facilitates the extraction of valuable information that can optimise processes and improve decision-making in future interventions. For this reason, the creation and maintenance of digital twins should be considered a long-term project involving a multidisciplinary team that works collaboratively on its development and implementation. These digital twins are highly useful for various professionals involved in the preservation of architectural and artistic heritage. From architects planning structural interventions and restorations, to archaeologists, conservators, restorers, specialised engineers, and researchers — everyone benefits from this tool to carry out their respective tasks of study, conservation, restoration, and research. Ultimately, the creation of digital twins is a fundamental practice in the context of heritage preservation, the management of historic infrastructure, and restoration planning. Their implementation and appropriate use ensure that our invaluable architectural and artistic legacy endures over time and remains accessible to future generations.

### **Methodology for Generating the Digital Twin**

The preservation of heritage monuments presents a significant challenge in the field of cultural heritage conservation. Laser scanning technology has become a key tool in this domain, and the RTC360 scanner by Leica Geosystems offers an advanced and efficient solution. This study outlines the scanning methodology using the RTC360<sup>1</sup> and its impact on preserving historical structures. Laser scanning allows the geometry of an object or space to be captured in three dimensions. The RTC360 generates point clouds at thousands of points per second, accurately representing the shape and dimensions of monuments. This non-invasive method is crucial to avoid damage to delicate structures. Before scanning, a preliminary site assessment is essential. This includes identifying areas of interest and strategically planning scanner positions. Lighting and weather conditions must also be considered, as they may affect the quality of the collected data.

The RTC360 employs high-speed scanning technology, enabling large volumes of data to be captured in a short time. Once configured, the scanner is positioned at various points both inside and outside the monument, performing multiple scans from different locations to ensure complete coverage of the structure and to minimise shadows and missing data in the point cloud. Additionally, a 360° panoramic photograph is taken at each scanning station to enrich the model with realistic visual information. After scanning is completed, the data is processed using the specialised software Cyclone Register. This process includes aligning the different point clouds to form a coherent and precise 3D model. Analysis techniques can also be applied to identify areas of deterioration or those requiring intervention.

The scanning methodology using the RTC360 by Leica Geosystems represents a major advancement in heritage monument preservation. Its ability to quickly and accurately capture complex details provides conservators with effective tools to protect and study our cultural legacy. As technology continues to evolve, it is crucial to explore and expand these tools to ensure the effective conservation of our historical monuments. For this particular project, approximately 1,700 scan stations were conducted, generating a point cloud composed of over 70 billion points that make up the complete 3D model of the Cathedral of Toledo.

## **Characteristics and Applications of the Digital Twin**

### ***Preservation and Conservation of Heritage***

Today, it is essential for all heritage buildings, including sacred art sites, to have their own digital twin. This innovative tool not only ensures the preservation of these structures but also offers an integrated approach to their management and conservation. Just as we have digitised historical documents to safeguard them, the digitisation of buildings is key to keeping our heritage alive. Possessing a digital twin and a 3D model is crucial for extracting valuable information. This makes it possible to optimise processes and improve decision-making in structural interventions and renovations. Implementing these digital twins must be approached as a long-term project requiring a multidisciplinary team of architects, archaeologists, conservators, restorers, and engineers working together.

The benefits of digital twins are diverse. From enabling in-depth study of structures to supporting structural simulations, their use enhances heritage conservation. Archivists and researchers also benefit from having accessible databases of what exists within each building. In conclusion, digital twins represent a unique opportunity for preserving and managing cultural heritage.

### ***Structural Monitoring of Buildings and Monuments***

Digital twin technology has revolutionised infrastructure maintenance. This cutting-edge tool allows for constant structural monitoring via 3D models, facilitating the detection of deformations, cracks, or alterations over time. This approach is vital for preserving the integrity of buildings and also transforms how they are managed and maintained.

One of the most notable aspects of digital twins is their ability to compare models generated at different times. This is especially useful in critical areas or in before-and-after assessments following extreme weather events. This analysis allows for highly accurate identification of structural deviations, the location of vulnerable zones, and informed decision-making regarding necessary interventions — ensuring more efficient and safer management of these structures. Unlike conventional inspections, which are often periodic and subjective, digital

twins provide an objective and updatable foundation for decision-making. This promotes a more preventive rather than reactive conservation approach, reducing long-term costs and improving infrastructure safety.

A clear example of this technology's usefulness was seen in the Cathedral of Toledo. In the cloister, a rib of a vault collapsed before measurement. Thanks to the digital twin's point cloud, an exact replica was created based on the original pattern to ensure a perfect fit. Likewise, in one of the cathedral's chapels, the technology enabled the determination of the vault's thickness — previously unknown — facilitating accurate structural calculations. In short, digital twins not only offer a new way to visualise and understand infrastructure but are also key allies in their conservation and maintenance, enabling responsible parties to make informed and effective decisions.

### ***Historical Study and Research***

Technology is advancing rapidly, and in archaeology, tools such as digital twins are revolutionizing how we explore and document historical heritage. One illustrative case of this occurred during one of our working sessions at the Cathedral of Toledo.

While scanning a spiral staircase, we encountered a wall that blocked our path. Fortunately, the wall did not reach the ceiling, allowing us to climb over and access a small room filled with fallen rocks. The lack of floor plans left us disoriented in the cathedral's upper sections, making spatial understanding difficult. It was only after merging and registering the point cloud from that area that a surprising discovery emerged: the room we had found was the base of a vanished tower — known as the Clock Tower — that had formed part of the cathedral between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries and was likely originally a minaret from the mosque that once stood there before the cathedral's construction. This tower was demolished in 1889 due to its advanced state of deterioration.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of the Cathedral of Toledo, the digital twin has proven to be an invaluable tool, revealing hidden rooms, forgotten staircases, and previously unknown spatial connections. This technology is not only uncovering lost history but is also paving new paths for archaeological research.

### ***Dissemination and Public Access***

Tourism, in its constant evolution, has found in technology a powerful tool to bring society closer to spaces that have traditionally been inaccessible. Virtual visits allow people to explore areas such as rooftops, sub-roofs, or triforiums — spaces once off-limits to the general public. This innovation not only democratises access to cultural heritage, but also enriches the visitor experience, allowing them to appreciate the architecture, history, and art of places that would otherwise remain hidden.

In this technological context, the digital twin represents a fascinating opportunity for the future of tourism. With this technology, not only can we replicate structures in virtual environments, but we can also offer personalised visits tailored to each visitor's specific interests. Imagine interactive tours where users choose which aspects of a site they wish to explore in more depth — promoting a more intimate connection with heritage in general and sacred art in particular.

A tangible example of this trend can be found at the Cathedral of Toledo, where digital twin data has been used to install information totems displaying illustrations of areas inaccessible during

conventional visits. These resources not only inform but also spark curiosity about what lies beyond physical limitations. Additionally, tactile 3D-printed models can be created for blind individuals, promoting inclusive education and social interaction — revolutionizing how we perceive and engage with our cultural heritage.

In conclusion, integrating technology into tourism transforms the way we experience monuments and redefines cultural accessibility. This advancement opens the door to a world of possibilities for all travellers, creating unique experiences that foster greater appreciation for our shared heritage. In this way, tourism becomes a means to connect people with their history and culture, enabling journeys that go far beyond the physical.

### ***Disaster Prevention***

We often assume the permanence of our sacred art, its eternal presence in the places and conditions we know. However, this perception overlooks the fragile reality of heritage under constant threat. History is full of examples of destruction due to war, natural disasters, or neglect—losses that underscore the urgent need for new safeguarding strategies.

The devastating fire at Notre-Dame Cathedral in 2019, though recent, is not an isolated incident. Cathedrals like St Stephen's in Vienna and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Ukraine suffered significant damage during World War II. Likewise, the Basilica of San Benedetto in Norcia was destroyed by an earthquake in Italy in 2016. These tragic events remind us that we are not immune to such catastrophes. In this context, the implementation of digital twins across our sacred art heritage emerges as a vital solution, enabling accurate reconstruction and effective preservation.

Indeed, the restoration of Notre-Dame has advanced significantly thanks to preexisting 3D scans — ironically created for a video game. This particular case emphasises the urgent need to systematically generate digital twins for all of our cultural and religious heritage.<sup>3</sup>

### ***A Spiritual and Emotional Experience***

Beyond its technical utility, this project has also been a deeply human and spiritual experience. To the question posed to us — How can our vast sacred art heritage be communicated and interpreted to contemporary generations in sensory ways that explain the Mystery of Faith, touching hearts to yearn for the divine through the universal language of beauty? This project offers one possible answer. It brings the beauty of our sacred art closer to all people, allowing them to see and experience it from perspectives never before imagined. It reveals astonishing details in places inaccessible to the human eye.

Being able to showcase our cathedral in this way, in Toledo and in various conferences, has helped many reconnect with their cathedral. Every detail and symbol tell a story, and deep knowledge of something inevitably fosters an emotional bond that encourages care and preservation — deepening our connection with the divine. Our own experience during this work, being in areas where very few people have ever been and discovering architectural and artistic details of such beauty, has helped us understand that those who built the cathedral were not merely constructing a building — they were expressing their faith and glorifying God.

## Conclusion

The creation of the digital twin of the Cathedral of Toledo is not only a technological achievement, but also an act of profound respect and commitment to our cultural and spiritual heritage. This project has shown that the union between innovation and tradition is not only possible, but necessary to preserve what defines us as a society. Thanks to the precision of geomatic engineering and the use of advanced technologies such as 3D laser scanning, we now have a tool that enables us to conserve, study, disseminate, and protect our sacred art.

Beyond its technical applications, the digital twin also provides a unique sensory and emotional experience. It allows us to see with new eyes what we thought we already knew, rediscovering spaces, details, and symbols that deepen our understanding of sacred art and its spiritual dimension. In this sense, it becomes a bridge between past and future, between the visible and the invisible.

The digitisation of the Cathedral of Toledo not only anticipates the conservation needs of the twenty first century but also offers society a renewed vision of its heritage. By making it accessible from anywhere and to anyone, it invites us to reconnect with our roots, value who we are, and assume — collectively — the responsibility of its care. This legacy, enriched by beauty and faith, does not belong only to the people of Toledo, but to all of humanity.

Let us work in the best possible way so that what our ancestors built as instruments of faith may continue to uplift our hearts and help us experience the sacred more deeply.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Leica Geosystems. *Leica RTC360 3D Laser Scanner*. Leica Geosystems, <https://leica-geosystems.com/es-cl/products/laser-scanners/scanners/leica-rtc360> (accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Fernando Aranda Alonso, *Rincones del Toledo Desaparecido (Lost Corners of Toledo)* (Toledo: Aranda-Toledo Ediciones, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Pedro Ortega. “Notre Dame de Paris o cómo los modelos 3D son imprescindibles para la reconstrucción de nuestro patrimonio cultural (1)” (Notre Dame of Paris, or How 3D Models Are Essential for the Reconstruction of Our Cultural Heritage (1)). *Jot Down Cultural Magazine*, 2024/12/26, (accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2025).

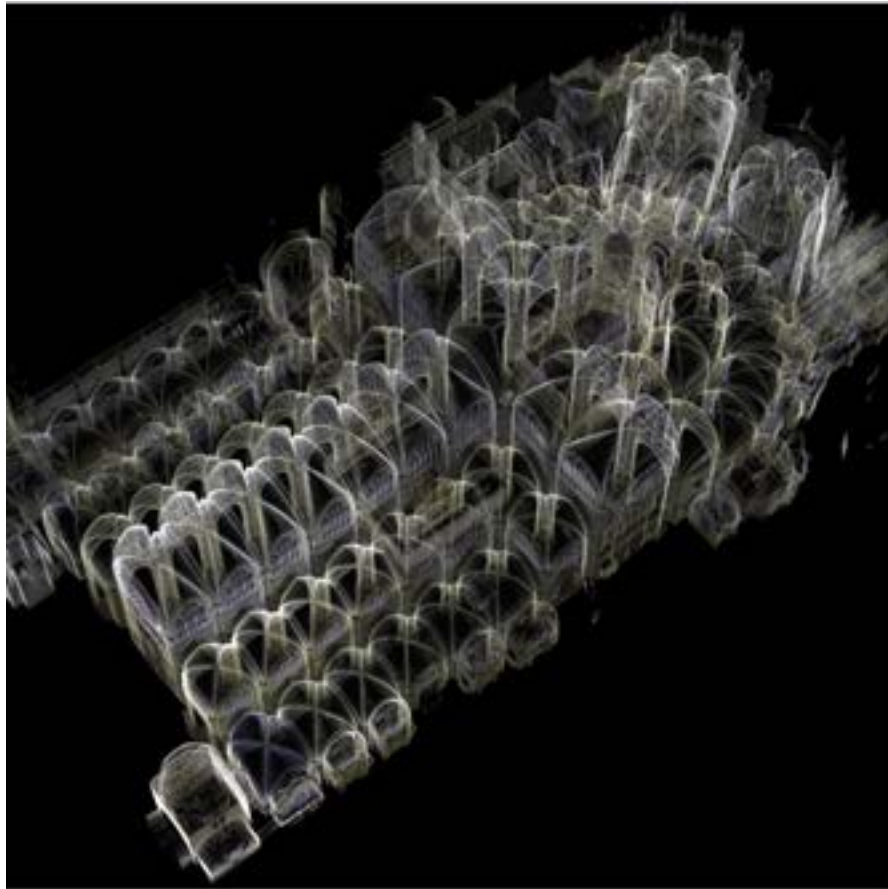


Figure 1 - Point Cloud of the Primate Cathedral Toledo  
All Credits: Copyright Information. @abscisa3d



Figure 2 - Point Cloud of under cover and roof "Ochavo"  
All Credits: Copyright Information. @abscisa3d



Figure 3 - Maite and Paula working in front of the rose window



Figure 4 - Point cloud of the roofs of an area of the Toledo Cathedral  
All Credits: Copyright Information. @abscisa3d



Figure 5 - Point cloud of section of Toledo's Cathedral  
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# Challenges of Re-Evangelization During the Russian-Ukrainian War

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## Abstract

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, beginning in February 2022, has wrought profound devastation not only on the country's population and infrastructure but also on its cultural and spiritual identity. This paper examines the challenges of re-evangelization in Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict, framing it as a vital strategy for national resilience and cultural resistance. Re-evangelization reveals distinct approaches within Ukraine's religious landscape: the Orthodox Church emphasises maintaining spiritual connection and community cohesion, rather than traditional evangelistic efforts, while Catholic traditions engage differently in this spiritual renewal. Religious institutions have assumed a critical role in preserving Ukraine's cultural and spiritual identity through initiatives such as the digital preservation of sacred sites, conservation work at St Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, and documenting the destruction in the Chernihiv region. These efforts highlight how protecting cultural heritage has become integral to Ukraine's national security and a key form of resistance against deliberate cultural erasure. Drawing on philosophical insights, clerical leadership, and symbolic comparisons with historical sieges, the study underscores that re-evangelization functions as a profound defence of Ukraine's soul, identity, and memory amid wartime devastation.

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## Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, has not only wrought immense human suffering and physical destruction, but also triggered an assault on Ukraine's cultural and spiritual identity. The aggressor's intent goes beyond territorial conquest – it seeks to erase “the existence of [a] different cultural identity” and even destroy the Ukrainian nation through the destruction of its identity and heritage. A recent report decried this cultural erasure as a deliberate campaign of genocide. In parallel, UNESCO has been monitoring the toll on heritage: as of April 2025, verified damage to 485 cultural sites in Ukraine – including 149 religious buildings, 34 museums, and numerous monuments and libraries. These grim figures underscore that the war is being fought not just on battlefields, but over history, memory, and identity.

Against this backdrop, Ukrainians have embarked on a process of re-evangelization – a renewed proclamation of faith and values – as a strategy of cultural resistance and national resilience. This concept goes beyond religion in the narrow sense; it involves reawakening the sacred heritage as pillars of identity. The sections below examine how re-evangelization intertwines with Ukraine's national identity (drawing on Nataliia Kryvda's insights), how Church leaders and ordinary clergy provide inspirational leadership, and how cultural heritage – from

cathedrals to digital archives – has become a frontline in this conflict. We also explore a comparative lens of destruction (Chernihiv vs. Malta) and highlight Malta's role as a refuge and supporter during Ukraine's time of trial. In doing so, we see that re-evangelization is not only a spiritual endeavour but a crucial element in defending a nation's soul.

### **Re-Evangelization as National Identity**

The idea of re-evangelization in Ukraine is deeply tied to the (re)discovery of national identity amid an existential threat. Ukrainian philosopher Nataliia Kryvda has argued that Ukraine has long struggled to formulate an integral and consolidated image of the past, due in part to colonial narratives and a fragmented “policy of memory”. In her view, truly unpacking national identity requires peeling away layers of imperial Russian and Soviet distortions and reasserting Ukraine's own historical narrative. The current war, ironically, has accelerated this unpacking. Faced with Russia's denial of Ukraine's distinct language, culture, and even statehood, Ukrainians have been forced to ask: who are we as a people, and what do we stand for? Re-evangelization addresses these questions by re-grounding national identity in spiritual and ethical values that long predate the Soviet era – values like the primacy of human dignity, love of freedom, and faith in divine justice.

Re-evangelization in this context draws upon Ukraine's rich religious heritage (Orthodox, Catholic, and beyond) as a source of unity and fortitude. During Soviet rule, religious practice was suppressed and narratives of nationhood were distorted to serve communist ideology. Yet, as Kryvda notes, even under the harshest “assimilationist policy,” Ukrainians never experienced a complete “interruption of national existence,” continuing instead to cultivate ideas of revival and statehood. In the seventeenth century, for example, the Cossacks led an upswell of national consciousness, blending faith with a proto-democratic ethos and resistance to foreign domination. That spirit persisted through generations of oppression. Today's re-evangelization can be seen as a revival of that same spirit: a conscious effort to reconnect with the moral foundations of earlier eras in order to withstand a new imperial assault. It involves popular movements of prayer, public invocations of Ukraine's patron saints and national heroes, and a surge of interest in Ukrainian Church History and theology as sources of collective strength. By embracing their historical churches and spiritual traditions anew, Ukrainians are effectively saying to the invader: we are not abandoning who we are. In short, re-evangelization has become a means of national self-defence – fortifying the nation's “spiritual immune system” against a foe that seeks to undermine it from within.

Notably, re-evangelization also means reaching out to the disillusioned or secularised segments of society with a message of hope and meaning. The war's trauma – mass displacement, loss of life, atrocities – has shaken many to the core. Churches report increased attendance and a renewed search for answers amid the uncertainty of war. The national identity being reforged now is explicitly inclusive: it is not about one denomination or ideology, but about a shared moral vision of Ukraine as a free, dignified European nation. In this sense, as Kryvda and others suggest, Ukraine's identity “renaissance” involves integrating its plural religious heritage (Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Latin Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, etc.) into a cohesive narrative of resilience. The war has clarified that Ukrainian-ness is not defined by ethnicity or Soviet

suggest, Ukraine's identity "renaissance" involves integrating its plural religious heritage (Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Latin Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, etc.) into a cohesive narrative of resilience. The war has clarified that Ukrainian-ness is not defined by ethnicity or Soviet nostalgia, but by a commitment to liberty, truth, and community – principles long nurtured by religious thought. Thus, re-evangelization serves to unpack and elevate these principles as the essence of national identity.

### **Clerical Leadership: Greek Catholic and Orthodox Examples**

During the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian clergy provided not only spiritual guidance but moral clarity. Figures from both the Orthodox and Greek Catholic traditions have supported displaced persons, organised aid, and promoted messages of resilience and dignity. Their efforts reflect how religious leadership contributes to Ukraine's broader cultural resistance, offering ethical grounding in the midst of chaos.

Ukrainian clergy from all major denominations have taken on humanitarian, educational, and spiritual roles. Fr Heorhiy Kovalenko promotes interfaith dialogue and education, while Fr Andriy Zelinsky serves as a military chaplain and mentor for youth. Their efforts include the creation of Sunday schools, chaplaincy, community prayer, and cultural education — especially aimed at preserving identity among children.

### **Sacred Heritage Under Siege**

The Russian invasion has put Ukraine's sacred heritage under direct siege, turning churches and holy sites into targets. This assault on cultural memory is widely documented. UNESCO reports that hundreds of religious buildings – churches, mosques, synagogues – have suffered damage or destruction since 2022. Each ruined shrine represents a tear in the fabric of Ukrainian community life, as many of these sites stood for centuries and survived past conflicts. The breadth of destruction is staggering: to date, dozens of historic Orthodox churches in the war's path (from wooden rural chapels to grand cathedrals) lie in ruins; Protestant prayer houses in the Donbas have been burned; even Islamic and Jewish sites have not been spared. This pattern is not random collateral damage but, as international observers note, part of a strategy to break Ukrainians' will by wiping out tangible symbols of their identity. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe warned that Russia is using "cultural cleansing as a weapon of war" – demolishing heritage as a means to erase historical truth. Indeed, deliberate attacks on cultural sites violate international law (the 1954 Hague Convention), and UNESCO has condemned such acts, reiterating that states are obligated to avoid harming cultural heritage in conflict. Nonetheless, the shelling of churches continues, and Ukraine's Ministry of Culture keeps a grim catalog of damaged landmarks.

Two emblematic cases illustrate how sacred architecture has become collateral – or perhaps a battleground – in this war. The first is St Nicholas Cathedral in Kyiv, a soaring neo-Gothic church that is one of the capital's architectural gems. On 20 December 2024, a Russian ballistic missile strike on Kyiv shattered the magnificent stained-glass rose window of St Nicholas and blew out its century-old fixtures. This Roman Catholic cathedral (built 1899–1909) had

survived world wars and Soviet neglect, only to be scarred now by modern missiles. Photos after the attack showed broken glass littering the pews and fragments of Gothic tracery hanging from the facade. The parish priest noted that the cathedral “miraculously survived complete destruction” because the missile’s blast was slightly offset – nearby buildings bore the brunt. Even so, the damage to St. Nicholas was extensive: the central stained glass, facade masonry, and wooden window frames were all severely impacted. Ukrainians were dismayed at the strike on a sacred landmark in the heart of their capital. Yet amid the debris, there was resolve: parishioners quickly gathered to cover open windows with plastic sheeting, determined to protect what remained. The incident also galvanised international support – by 2023, donors from multiple countries (including Italy) had pledged funds to help restore Ukrainian religious monuments. The bombing of St. Nicholas Cathedral thus became a rallying point, underscoring the narrative that the invaders target not just Ukraine’s present, but its past and future as well.

The second case, even more symbolically charged, is Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv – the crown jewel of Ukrainian Christianity and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. St. Sophia, founded in the 11th century by Prince Yaroslav the Wise, had until recently been thought untouchable, protected by its UNESCO status and perhaps by the reverence any Orthodox nation should have for such a site. Unfortunately, on the night of 10 June 2025, Russian air attacks on Kyiv did not spare even this treasure. The shockwaves from a missile strike (intercepted nearby) caused structural damage to the eastern façade of Saint Sophia Cathedral. UNESCO experts inspected the site the next day and confirmed that parts of the ancient masonry had cracked and some decorative elements were dislodged. Although the damage was relatively moderate (the main fabric of the cathedral still stands), the fact that Saint Sophia was harmed at all sent shudders through the cultural heritage community. UNESCO issued a statement expressing “grave concern over the increasing threats” to the World Heritage sites in Ukraine’s capital. It noted that repeated bombardments led UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee to inscribe Kyiv’s monuments (including Saint Sophia and the Pechersk Lavra monastic complex) on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Never before in UNESCO’s history has a major European capital’s central monuments been put on the Danger List due to war. The implications are clear: if Kyiv’s holiest shrine is not safe, then no part of Ukraine’s cultural legacy is truly safe from Russian missiles. Fortunately, organizations are responding: UNESCO has ramped up assistance, funding emergency structural supports and even digitization of artworks in Saint Sophia. Ukrainian authorities, for their part, have encased some statue fragments and windows of the cathedral to prevent further weathering. The partial injury to Saint Sophia – a symbol of Ukraine’s ancient Christian roots – has thus become another chapter in the story of a nation under siege. It is a stark reminder that Ukraine’s fight today is not only for its people and territory, but for the preservation of its soul etched in mosaics, frescoes, and stone.

### **Skeiron: Digital Preservation of Heritage**

Amid the widespread physical destruction of cultural heritage, Ukrainian innovators have turned to digital tools to save what can be saved. A leading initiative in this effort is Skeiron, a Lviv-based company whose mission is the preservation and promotion of Ukraine’s cultural heritage through advanced 3D scanning and imaging technologies. Founded in 2016 by a group of young specialists, Skeiron was among the first in Ukraine to offer high-quality 3D digitization of historical sites. Their guiding philosophy is to “digitize the past for the future,” creating detailed

digital replicas of monuments and artefacts that can survive even if the originals are damaged or destroyed. Since the full-scale invasion, Skeiron's work has become vitally important – and they have risen to the challenge with remarkable projects that blend technology, cultural activism, and even wartime urgency.

One of Skeiron's major responses to the war has been the #SaveUkrainianHeritage campaign. In the face of Russia's onslaught, the Skeiron team committed to scanning as many at-risk landmarks as possible, essentially racing against the bombs to archive Ukraine's patrimony. By mid-2023, they had created 3D models of over 100 important heritage sites. These include historic churches (such as wooden churches in the Carpathians), secular architectural masterpieces, and museum treasures. The process involves using laser scanners and photogrammetry (high-resolution photography from multiple angles) to capture structures in precise detail. The choice of technologies is tailored to the object: for example, Ukraine has thousands of wooden churches, vulnerable to fire and shelling, many adorned with old interior paintings. Skeiron's team noted the need to capture both the architecture and the artwork – so they employed laser scanning for the structure and supplemental photogrammetry for detailed texture of icons and frescoes. This level of thoroughness ensures that the digital surrogate can serve researchers, restorers, and the public, should the physical site be lost. Working often in hazardous conditions, Skeiron's experts have travelled across war-torn regions when feasible, or used archived imagery when direct access was impossible. Each scan is a way of saying: this piece of our culture will not be erased. As one report described, the team is acutely aware that these "virtual replicas of museum relics may well remain the only memory of Ukrainian heritage for a long time" if the destruction continues. That sober realization fuels their dedication. It is heritage preservation as a form of resistance – a digital Noah's Ark safeguarding the nation's cultural DNA.

In addition to monuments, Skeiron has focused on moveable heritage through a project called "Museum in 3D." Supported by tech partners like Artec3D, they scanned over 200 museum artefacts (from sculptures to historical objects) using handheld 3D scanners and created an online catalogue for public viewing. This project, launched in 2022 after the invasion began, had a dual aim: to archive items in case museums were bombed or looted, and to keep the public engaged with their heritage even when museum doors were closed due to air-raid alerts. The results are now featured on Google's digital culture platform. In fact, Skeiron has partnered with Google Arts & Culture to bring Ukrainian heritage to a global audience. In a curated exhibit by Skeiron, one can explore 3D models of three UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Ukraine: Kyiv's St Sophia Cathedral, the medieval centre of Lviv, and the ensemble of the Chernivtsi University in Bukovyna. These are immersive experiences – users can rotate and zoom in on the digital facsimiles, appreciating details like never before. The St Sophia 3D model, for instance, was made from scans taken in late 2022 when Skeiron fully digitised the cathedral (with support from European partners) as a precautionary measure. At the time, no one knew that in June 2025 the cathedral would indeed suffer damage; now those digital plans are proving invaluable for planning repairs. Skeiron's use of such digital twins exemplifies how technology and cultural stewardship intersect. Their models are not only archives but educational tools, allowing virtual tours that can inspire people to appreciate and eventually help restore these sites.

Skeiron's mission – accessible on their website – encapsulates a modern form of evangelization of culture. By creating digital replicas, they "preach" Ukraine's cultural story to the world, ensuring that even if physical stones fall silent, the data and images will continue to speak. This initiative has drawn comparisons to similar efforts in war-torn regions like Syria or Iraq, where teams rushed to scan Palmyra's ruins or Mosul's museum artefacts. In Ukraine, however, the scale is

larger and the task is especially personal for the local experts involved. Skeiron's co-founders, such as Andriy Hryvnyak, have expressed that digitization is their contribution to the war effort – each scan a “strike” against oblivion. Moreover, Skeiron is training new specialists and volunteers, effectively building a movement of digital cultural defenders. Through workshops and collaborations, they encourage others (even non-professionals with smartphone apps) to document local heritage (echoing the Backup Ukraine initiative that crowdsources 3D scans via mobile phones). In summary, Skeiron's comprehensive approach – from grand cathedrals to small artefacts, using laser scanners and the cloud – represents the cutting edge of re-evangelization. It spreads knowledge about Ukraine's patrimony and keeps cultural hope alive, even as churches burn and statues fall. Their work ensures that when Ukraine rebuilds, it can do so with accuracy and pride, guided by the digital memories preserved during the war.

### **Chernihiv vs. Malta – A Symbolic Comparison**

To grasp the scale of devastation unleashed on Ukraine's cities, it is instructive to draw a historical parallel. Chernihiv, a regional capital in northern Ukraine, endured a brutal siege in the first weeks of the 2022 invasion. Cut off by Russian forces, Chernihiv was bombarded daily throughout March 2022. By the time Ukrainian defenders pushed the invaders back in early April, roughly 70% of the city lay destroyed or damaged. Entire residential blocks were levelled, utilities collapsed, and cherished landmarks – such as Chernihiv's centuries-old churches – were scarred or shattered. Observers likened the city's condition to a World War II scenario. In fact, a fitting analogy is Malta during World War II. The island of Malta, though distant from Ukraine in space and time, was one of the most fiercely bombed places on Earth in WWII. Between 1940 and 1942, Malta endured over 3,000 enemy air raids, suffering immense destruction and earning the title of the “most bombed” allied territory. For its collective heroism under siege, Malta was awarded the George Cross. The sight of Maltese towns in 1942 – rubble-filled streets, gutted churches, civilians surviving in tunnels – sadly resembles what Chernihiv looked like in spring 2022.

By comparing Chernihiv to Malta, we gain a symbolic measure of the war's impact on Ukraine. What an entire nation (Malta) faced over years of global war, a single Ukrainian city faced in a matter of weeks. Chernihiv's population, pre-war around 285,000, was smaller than Malta's, but the intensity of suffering was on par. Both cases showcase extraordinary resilience. Malta's people famously never lost faith; they continued to raise church bells (or what was left of them) and celebrate mass in underground shelters even as bombs rained above. Similarly, in Chernihiv, amidst nightly bombardment, locals gathered in basements to pray and sing the national anthem, fortifying their spirit. Journalists noted that makeshift shrines and crosses appeared in bomb craters – signs of the inhabitants' refusal to be spiritually broken. Another parallel is the strategic aspect: Malta's resistance thwarted enemy plans in the Mediterranean, just as Chernihiv's staunch defence (despite being surrounded) frustrated the Russian army's plan to quickly encircle Kyiv from the north. In both instances, the invaders expected a quick capitulation that never came. Instead, the siege within a siege narrative emerged – a small beleaguered community holding out against overwhelming odds, becoming an inspiration far beyond its borders. Malta's endurance became a rallying cry for the Allied forces in WWII; correspondingly, Chernihiv's endurance – at the very outset of the 2022 invasion – gave hope to all of Ukraine that David could indeed hold off Goliath.

### **Conclusion: A Community Abroad**

Ukrainian refugees in Malta have found spiritual support and a continuation of their faith journeys through initiatives supported by the local Church. Sunday schools for Ukrainian children, spaces for prayer, and church premises offered by the Maltese religious community have made a real difference. The re-evangelization process has taken root not only in Ukraine, but in exile—helping families remain united in faith, language, and culture.

# Cosmopolitan Spirituality in Mediterranean Catholic Religious Sites: The Case of St John's Co-Cathedral, Malta

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## Abstract

The restoration of Catholic religious sites often concerns the materiality of both 'container' and 'content'. More often than not, the original scope, function, and purpose are no longer understood, with knowledge of these aspects potentially lost throughout the years. Indeed, rather than the multi-sensory experience that Catholic religious sites naturally promote, whereby artworks are activated by ritual, aesthetics become the defining value that shapes the experiential dimension of these sites.

As Catholic religious sites become increasingly accessible to cosmopolitan audiences, the understanding of Catholic heritage becomes increasingly limited. As space and content are neutralised and detached from original function and purpose, the distinction between a Catholic church and a museum becomes increasingly blurred. This presents a greater challenge for non-Catholic visitors, who are placed at a disadvantage when accessing what can be described as the Catholic scenography of ritual, let alone comprehending the purpose of that scenography as a backdrop for a multisensory, albeit often historicized, experience of faith.

This paper explores possible ways of engaging with Catholic heritage sites by evoking the multisensory experiences for which these architectural structures and their artistic contents were initially designed. Using St John's Co-Cathedral as a case study, I propose a framework that broadly identifies forms of activation intended at 'restoring' the public's understanding of the original functions and purposes of Catholic religious sites.

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## Introduction

In 1932, the British Government commissioned Sir Henry A. Miers and Sydney F. Markham to evaluate the state of museums in British colonial territories, including Gibraltar, Malta and South Africa.<sup>1</sup> The report, officially known as the Miers and Markham Report of 1932, was commissioned with the scope and purpose of assessing the conditions, collections, and administrative practices of museums in these territories. In this report, St John's Co-Cathedral is listed as a museum, not as a Catholic Church, and not even as a historic or heritage site.

The question raised by the Miers & Markham report still stands.

Is St John's a museum with a concentration of high-quality works of art?

Or is it still a Catholic place of worship with a sophisticated aesthetic experience?

Is it a catholic church or a museum?

The art historical significance of St John's Co-Cathedral is undoubtedly related to its identity as a historic site, having been built during the Magistracy of Grand Master Jean Leveque de la Cassiere (1572-1581) to function as the Conventual Church of the Order of St John. Over the years, the edifice underwent extensive embellishment, particularly during the middle years and second half of the eighteenth century, to become what it is today (Fig. 1).

The high concentration of works of art and the exuberant setting that speaks of cultural sophistication served its purpose well during the early modern period. Indeed, the ideals of the Order of St John as an anti-Ottoman institution, coupling naval military ambition with a hospitallier vocation, would have been expressed in the rituals and ceremonials befitting a Conventual Church of a Military Order. There could be no better visual representation of this mission and ambition than the internal façade, painted by Mattia Preti in 1666 (Fig. 3).

St John's Co-Cathedral has attracted visitors for centuries, even when tourism was still being conceived, back then in the vestiges of the Grand Tour experience<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 4). From the long list of known travellers to St John's, some would stand out as in search of an aesthetic experience. This is the case, for example, of the future director of the Louvre, Vivant Denon, who visited St John's in September 1778 and June 1798. De Non's experience is that of a future museum director with a focus on paintings and artworks. Other visitors would specifically pinpoint Caravaggio's paintings. In 1624, Johann Friedrich Breithaupt, then visiting the Oratory of the Beheading, would single out that which was "the first thing to be seen, hanging high near the altar ... highly esteemed for its great artistic value."<sup>3</sup> Later, in 1832, the French traveller Alphonse de Lamartine would have a similar reaction.

As Baroque aesthetics would fall out of fashion at this point, other visitors to St John's would become less enthusiastic about their experience. In 1767, Johann Hermann of Riedsel would not be so impressed by Preti's vault paintings. By contrast, the marble ledger stones would continue to gain traction. Later, in 1832, the German traveller Alfred Reumont would dislike the pompous Baroque funerary monuments of the various Grand Masters. Still, the marble ledger stones and their iconography would leave a lasting impression. Fifty years earlier, in June 1782, Count Chernishev would have a similar reaction to the marble ledger stones.

Only a few describe the ceremonial and ritual that took place at St John's. In 1663, the Frenchman Albert Jouvin de Rochefort refers to Mass, during which he saw the then Grandmaster, Nicholas Cottoner, "accompanied by the principal dignitaries, and all the knights Grand Crosses..."<sup>4</sup> Thirty years later, in 1693, Gio. Pio Francesco Gemelli Carreri would describe Grand Master Adrien de Wignacourt (1690-97). The Grand Master would be attending Mass, sitting on the right-hand side of the altar, wearing the monastic habit of the Order of St John.

Much of what is known about St John's Co-Cathedral from early modern travellers reflects what the site is known for today, save for one exception that stands out. Relics were highly sought after and frequently referenced in various travelogues. In 1587, Samuel Keichel specifically mentioned the relic of the right arm of St John the Baptist, as the French traveller Jean Copin would do later in 1638. In 1696, the famous Venetian cartographer Vincenzo Coronelli also mentions the relic of the right hand of St John the Baptist, qualifying it as the most significant object at St John's. The Russian traveller, Piotr Tolstoy, would list more relics in 1696, and his compatriot, Boris Sheremetev, who visited around the same time in May 1698, would go further and describe the ritual of blessing the relic of the right hand of the Baptist. Curiously enough, even the Anglican traveller Charles Thomson would mention the relic of the right hand of the Baptist in 1732.

These shortlisted visitors, drawn from a longer list, would have come to St John's with varying expectations, interests, knowledge and expertise, which collectively define what I choose to call the knowledge luggage. Conceived as a metaphor originally referencing museums, the concept of knowledge luggage refers to the level of engagement with cultural heritage sites that is constantly informed and articulated by the individual's knowledge and memory at the time of access.

The concept would sit comfortably within the literature, perhaps understood as a culturally situated version of John Falk's identity-related visit motivation, which shifts the focus from demographic categories to the underlying personal motivations of visitors to a museum.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Catholic religious sites, meaning and place-making are deliberately constructed and historically sedimented. This would be unlike museum space, which can evolve and change over time as permanent displays are rethought and repurposed. Cultural heritage space is, by consequence, static with interpretative modes that need to be much more liquid.

The knowledge luggage concept is specifically individual and, by inference, unique to every visitor. Indeed, no two would be a perfect match. Still, it would also be culturally diverse across time, with comparable differences between what visitors of the past, whose travelogues we can still consult, brought with them and the modern equivalents held by those who come to St John's Co-Cathedral today. According to tourism statistics for 2024, the UK, Italy, and France broadly represent the largest share of tourists visiting Malta.<sup>6</sup> Some of these nationalities compare to those of the authors of the travelogues briefly discussed, and with St John's being one of the most visited sites on the island, it would be fair to consider this data as our bearing.

Expectations might be informed by the knowledge acquired, possibly through social media and other platforms where St John's is marketed as the place to visit. The lavish Baroque interior, which still retains its appeal and immediacy of impact, Caravaggio's signature masterpiece, and the inlaid marble tombstones are just a few of the many elements that still attract visitors to St John's. Relics, on the contrary, do not seem to garner interest any longer. The knowledge luggage might indeed be less informed by religion and belief, probably less catholic, and much more focused on the aesthetic than the religious experience.

### **A Semiotical Experience**

So far, we have identified the broad range of possible experiences relevant to St John's Co-Cathedral across time. The ways and means by which these unfold would refer to semiotics.

Semiotics is the study of signs and their function as systems of communication shaped by cultural and social contexts.<sup>7</sup> As signifiers are signified, as object, interpretant and signifier are cross-referenced, meaning is decoded and understood. When applied to works of art, semiotics helps us decode how artworks communicate ideas to viewers, often shaped by context, interpretation, and cultural codes, thereby enriching our understanding beyond aesthetic appreciation. This also applies to multi-sensorial experiences.

Let us use the analogy of an apple for ease of reference. We can appreciate an apple as a multi-sensorial experience because we have had the opportunity to experience it firsthand before. We know what it tastes like and what it sounds like, because we have direct experience of eating an apple. We would not have had such a complete experience if we had never tasted an apple before. By inference, we would have sought and looked for the closest reliable reference available in our knowledge luggage. If, instead, we had held an apple in our hands but never

got to taste it, our experience would be partial. This is also the case with museum or cultural heritage spaces, where interpretation is an activated semiotic process involving signs, codes, and audience meaning-making.<sup>8</sup> Artworks are also understood through historical and cultural contexts, whereby the viewer also negotiates the original intended meaning.<sup>9</sup>

### **Multi-Sensorial Activation - A Diadic Experience**

Every visitor to St John's across time would have had access to two distinct levels of experience, each with sub-categories. The first would refer to St John's as a total work of art, true to the German concept of *gesamtkunstwerk*. At this level, the experience would be referenced to the general environment with which the visitor engages on entering the space. This experience could also be scaled down to the specific environment of one of the chapels of the various langues or the Oratory of the Beheading of St John the Baptist. The second level refers to particular artworks or material culture located in situ. Within the remit of these two levels of experience, we may consider a visit to St John's Co-Cathedral during Mass or any other religious celebration as the authentic experience, closest to the original as one can aspire to, given that this refers to the original function of the site as a Catholic Church. This visit and experience are, more often than not, unavailable.

Sacred spaces and places, akin to St John's Co-Cathedral, and the works of art that they hold as content would need to be activated, much like a switch, that would light up the original intended experience. Once this experience is activated, literally switched on, the intended multi-sensoriality would bring sound and smell to complement sight and touch. In practical terms, this may include the scent of incense, the cold feel of sculpted marble and bronze, the liturgy and its musicality, as well as congregational singing during Mass, accompanied by an organ and possibly led by a choir. It may include the kiss of a relic or the tactile perception of the materials present within the space, such as bronze, marble and woodwork.

I choose to discuss two typologies of activation. The first, which I call ambient activation, relates to space and place, purposely conceived for ritual purposes. This would be the case, for example, of the main altar commissioned in Rome by Grand Master Gregorio Carafa and installed in situ in 1686.<sup>10</sup> When Catholic liturgy is performed, particularly in the case of High Mass, the main altar is activated by the multi-sensoriality of the liturgical service, which may include Gregorian chant, a choir, and possibly an organ, as well as the presence of prelates moving through space. The smell and fumes of burning incense and candles would deepen access.

Ambient activation can also be referenced by a lost experience, possibly recovered by the relocation of artworks or accessories that once had an intrinsic function and purpose in the place. I also choose to illustrate this variation by referring to the main altar once again. For a brief period in 2021, the set of silver apostles, gifted initially for this purpose in 1743, would be brought back to St John's and placed on the main altar they once graced during the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> This lost experience would not have been known within living memory, given that it was only accessible intermittently and occasionally during the roughly fifty-five years preceding the silver statues' ransoming by the Cathedral Chapter from the French Republican administration in 1798. The multi-sensorial experience would be richer, referenced back in time, and deeper in meaning and significance (Fig. 2).

The second, which is called inherent activation, is relatively more complex and sophisticated as it is intentionally and intrinsically an integral part of the artwork created in response to a specific function. I choose to illustrate this typology with the altar painting representing “St George on Horseback,” painted by Mattia Preti for the Chapel of Aragon, coinciding with his first visit to Malta in 1658.<sup>12</sup>

With liturgy and all its paraphernalia, with incense creating roaming fumes slowly rising from underneath St George’s white stallion, with the painting and its reredos backlit during morning Mass, St George would breach the painting on his white stallion. The saint would metaphorically and sensorially move within the space of the congregation during mass. This activation would not be possible if the painting were relocated to a museum space and out of its original context (Fig. 5,6).

### **Semiotics of a Cosmopolitan Spirituality**

The diadic experience activation model that I propose in this paper, referenced by ambient and inherent activation modes, refers to an experience that the general visitor to St John’s Co-cathedral cannot access for at least two reasons. Firstly, the modern visitor cannot visit St John’s when Catholic ritual is being performed and the activation is taking place. Secondly, unless the visitor is familiar with Catholic or Christian ritual, it would not be possible to mentally activate the intended experience, particularly the one referring to ambient activation that was designed from the very beginning. Returning to the semiotics and the experience of eating an apple, the visitor would only be able to hold the apple in hand without tasting and consequently access a more complete sensorial experience. To do so would require a bespoke interpretation strategy informed by phygital thinking, aligning and cross-referencing physical and digital elements to go back to a pre-nineteenth-century vision-centric museology that actively encouraged sensorial experiences and connections.<sup>13</sup> Such a strategy would have the scope and purpose of re-sacralizing a liturgical space and its content to become the mainstream visitor experience, rather than a privileged access within the reach of the relatively few.

By empowering a holistic understanding of St John’s Co-Cathedral through the ambient and inherent activation of space and content, the experience would transcend the aesthetic and historical, moving closer to the original function and purpose of a Catholic Church. Visitors would thus be able to reconnect to the original spiritual function and purpose, albeit conceived and defined in response to the values and practices of an early modern society. In doing so, it may also be possible to capture the spiritual essence of the place, irrespective of creed, belief, or religion, in a cosmopolitan form of spirituality that respects religious particularity while adhering to universal values.<sup>14</sup>

This approach, with St John’s Co-Cathedral as a case study, could inform a blueprint for a renewed visitor experience that is more faithful to the original function and purpose of Catholic Mediterranean religious sites.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Henry A. Miers & Sydney F. Markham, *A Report on the Museums and Art Galleries of British Africa: The Museums Assoc. Survey of Empire Museums. Together with A Report on the Museums of Malta, Cyprus and Gibraltar, by Alderman Charles Squire & D.W. Herdman, to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which a Directory of the Museums and Art Galleries of British Africa and the British Mediterranean colonies* (England: Museums Association, 1932).

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Freller, *Malta and the Grand Tour* (Malta: Midsea, 2010), 323-350.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>5</sup> See John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> V.A., Tourism in Malta - facts and figures, Malta Tourism Authority, 2022. [https://www.mta.com.mt/en/file.aspx?f=34960#:~:text=Total inbound visitors1,131.1% \(accessed 20<sup>th</sup> March 2025\).](https://www.mta.com.mt/en/file.aspx?f=34960#:~:text=Total inbound visitors1,131.1% (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> March 2025).)

<sup>7</sup> See Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> See Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> See Keith Sciberras, *Roman Baroque Sculpture for the Order of Malta* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Partrimonju Malti, 2003), 147 - 164; See also, Sante Guido, Giuseppe Mantella ed., *Storie di Restauri nella Chiesa Conventuale di San Giovanni Battista a La Valletta: La cappella di Santa Caterina della lingua d'Italie e le committenze del Gran Maestro Gregorio Carafa* (Malta: Midsea, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See Jennifer Montagu ed., *The Apostolato of the Order of St John at the Cathedral of Malta: Antonio Arrighi's Fifteen Silver Statues* (Malta: The Mdina Cathedral Chapter, 2018); Sciberras, *Roman Baroque Sculpture for the Order of Malta*, 164-176.

<sup>12</sup> See Sandro Debono, "Brushwork of Identity: The Politico-Religious in Mattia Preti," in *Mattia Preti: Beyond the Self Portrait*, eds Sandro Debono & Giuseppe Valentino (Malta: Midsea, 2012); Sandro Debono, "Interpreting Mattia Preti's St George and the Dragon," *Treasures of Malta* 13, no.1 (2006): 68-72.

<sup>13</sup> See Sandro Debono, "Thinking Phygital: A Museological Framework of Predictive Futures," *Museum International* 73, nos 3-4 (2021): 156-167; Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); David Howes, *The Sensory Studies Manifesto: Tracking the Sensorial Revolution in the Arts and Human Sciences* (Ontario: University of Ontario Press, 2022); Constance Classen, "Museum Manners: The Sensory Life of the Early Museum," *Journal of Social History* 40, no.4 (2007): 895-914.

<sup>14</sup> Michael S. Merry & Doret J. De Ruyter, "Cosmopolitanism and the Deeply Religious," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 30, no.1 (2009): 49-60.



Figure 1 - St John's Co-Cathedral. Photo: Kurt Arrigo. Credit: St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation



Figure 2 - Main altar decked with silver statues on the 20th anniversary of the Foundation in 2021  
Photo: Leander John Schembri. Credit: St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation



Figure 3 - Mattia Preti (1613-1699) *Allegory of the Order of St John* c. 1666. Oils on stone Internal Façade, St John's Co-Cathedral Photo: Joe P. Borg



Figure 4 - *Unknown seventeenth-century artist St John's Conventual Church (now Co-Cathedral)* Oils on Canvas Photo: Joe P. Borg. Credit: National Museum of Art (k.a. MUŽA)



Figure 5- The Chapel of the Language of Aragon. St John's Co-Cathedral. Credit: St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation



Figure 6 - Mattia Preti (1613-1699) St George on Horseback c. 1658 Oils on canvas. Chapel of Aragon, St John's Co-Cathedral. Photo: Joe P. Borg. Credit: St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation

# Conversational AI and Multimedia in Sacred Art Conservation

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## **Abstract**

Sacred art has historically served as a powerful medium for evangelization. Contemporary society, immersed in digital culture, has grown increasingly detached from the spiritual language embedded in these treasures. This paper examines how multimedia and artificial intelligence technologies can reinvigorate sacred art as a vehicle for spiritual reflection and re-evangelization, using the “Face to Face with Caravaggio” exhibition at St John's Co- Cathedral, Valletta, as a case study.

This paper provides a detailed walkthrough of how this project was designed and implemented to use high-resolution imaging and interpretive multimedia systems to unveil the artistic and theological dimensions of Caravaggio's “The Beheading of St John the Baptist.” Visitor studies will explore emotional and spiritual engagement across diverse audiences, including believers and non-believers, and this research will examine the gap between historical faith expressions and modern perceptions.

The ‘Face to Face with Caravaggio’ experience was designed to take visitors through a curated space, and the narrative is self-contained within the flow and visuals. While this approach allows visitors to explore the artwork on their terms, we identified an opportunity to deepen engagement through technological intervention. This paper examines how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be used to extend conservation efforts. Through a personalised interpretive tool prototyped for this exhibition, this paper also study how conversational AI can be deployed in such a setting to foster reflection. Conversational agents can be tuned to be versed in theological and artistic contexts. Interviews were conducted to explore how our Caravaggio dialogue prototype can create a contemplative space for visitors that can also be utilised outside the Cathedral. AI can transform passive observation into reflective dialogue, establishing new channels of evangelisation.

Critically, the paper also address ethical considerations regarding the use of technology in the mediation of sacred art. It is argued that digital interventions must serve as conduits to, rather than replacements for, authentic spiritual encounters. The aim remains to preserve the artwork's significance and symbolism while making it accessible to digitally-native generations.

The aim is to explore the potential of an integrated approach to position sacred art conservation as a dynamic pedagogical tool for re-evangelisation. This offers an opportunity to reconnect contemporary viewers with the divine beauty embedded in their cultural and spiritual heritage. It also offers cathedrals and museums a scalable framework for employing technology in the service of spiritual literacy.

## **AI Opportunities in Heritage Tourism**

Heritage tourism grapples with connecting contemporary, digitally-native audiences to the rich narratives embedded in historical artefacts. While digital technologies present transformative solutions, they must be implemented carefully to enrich, not diminish, authentic cultural encounters. Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly through conversational interfaces, offers a powerful tool to bridge this interpretive gap. This is especially true for new, cutting-edge installations like the “Face to Face with Caravaggio” experience, where conversational AI can enhance the interaction even further. Advanced Large Language Models (LLMs) enable the creation of virtual historical guides that can engage visitors in personalised, safe, and meaningful dialogues. This technology promises to shift the visitor experience from passive observation to active, reflective engagement, thereby preserving cultural narratives for future generations.

### ***Sacred Art/Interactive Modern Technology***

Within heritage sites of a religious nature, such as St John’s Co-Cathedral, another factor has to be taken into account – the function of sacred art. Within Catholic theology, sacred art is not ‘simply’ intended to be aesthetically pleasing but is also intended to serve a communicative role. “Th[is] communicating capacity of sacred art renders it able to break down barriers, filter prejudices and reach the heart of people from different cultures and religions and let them perceive the universality of the message of Christ and His Gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

However, this communicative function is often lost on contemporary viewers who lack the artist’s conceptual framework. Through this work, we demonstrate how conversational AI can serve as an interpretive mediator to reestablish this connection.

### ***Research Objectives and Methodology***

This research investigates the application of conversational AI within sacred art conservation, using the “Face to Face with Caravaggio ” exhibition at St John’s Co-Cathedral as its primary case study. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates system design documentation, prototyping, and visitor experience evaluation. The core objectives are: (1) to formulate a framework for deploying AI responsibly in religious heritage sites; (2) to assess how conversational AI impacts visitor engagement and contemplation; (3) to evaluate the balance between technological mediation and authentic spiritual encounters; and (4) to establish best practices for AI deployment across diverse belief systems.

## **Background**

### ***Heritage Tourism Challenges and AI Solutions***

Contemporary heritage tourism faces fundamental challenges in bridging interpretive gaps between historical artefacts and modern audiences.<sup>2</sup> Digital technologies create opportunities for heritage display, yet can negatively impact communication if not carefully developed.<sup>3</sup> Sacred art, particularly Caravaggio’s religious paintings, contains theological symbolism and artistic techniques that are largely inaccessible to digitally native generations. Traditional museum approaches face barriers including a lack of knowledge, skills, resources, and understanding of innovation benefits,<sup>4</sup> resulting in predominantly aesthetic rather than contemplative experiences.

Artificial Intelligence addresses these interpretive challenges,<sup>5</sup> enabling personalised, conversational interfaces that facilitate genuine dialogue about cultural themes while maintaining accuracy and appropriate tone. Recent advances in AI are demonstrating growing applications in cultural heritage, with a focus on classification, computer vision, 3D reconstruction, and recommender systems.<sup>6</sup> AI-powered solutions can transform visitor experiences, enabling institutions to become more engaging and accessible through personalised interpretation.<sup>7</sup> This intervention transforms passive observation into active reflection, potentially restoring sacred art's evangelistic function.

### **LLM Applications in Cultural and Religious Heritage Contexts**

Recent literature reveals the transformative potential of conversational AI in cultural heritage interpretation, particularly through the use of embodied historical characters. Pataranutaporn et al. (2021) demonstrate that AI-generated historical figures significantly enhance learning motivation and cognitive performance, as exemplified by their synthetic Johann Sebastian Bach, which successfully engaged cellist Yo-Yo Ma.<sup>8</sup> Trichopoulos et al. (2023) show successful GPT-4 museum guide implementations with role-based fine-tuning, though note limitations in presenting fictional characters as real people due to ethical constraints.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

Established deployment frameworks include the IRIS+ system at the Museum of Tomorrow, which provides multilingual conversational AI with personality-driven responses<sup>12,13</sup> and the Art-Bots framework enabling Facebook Messenger-based character embodiment.<sup>14</sup> Studies reveal 64% of internet users engage with digital religious content, while Germany's first AI worship service demonstrated mixed but generally positive reception, with younger participants showing greater acceptance.<sup>15,16</sup>

Critical ethical considerations for sacred spaces emphasise transparency, cultural sensitivity, and community involvement.<sup>16,17</sup> Successful implementations require human-centric governance models that position AI as supportive rather than replacement technology.<sup>17,18</sup> Personalisation algorithms using visitor profiling show enhanced attention and engagement through eye-tracking studies,<sup>19</sup> while multimodal integration combining voice, visual, and gestural elements proves essential for immersive cultural experiences.<sup>20,21,22</sup>

### **From Static to Interactive: Project Evolution**

#### ***Face to Face with Caravaggio Exhibition Foundation***

The “Face to Face with Caravaggio” (F2F) immersive experience was born from the curatorial vision of Cynthia de Giorgio, who sought to create a meaningful, intimate encounter with Caravaggio's masterpiece. We were engaged as the technical experts, tasked with translating this artistic and historical vision into a compelling reality for contemporary audiences. To bridge this gap, SeyTravel undertook a rigorous, user-centric design process. This involved detailed international benchmarking of similar experiences, followed by extensive prototyping that evolved from paper mock-ups to immersive Virtual Reality simulations. Through iterative visitor surveys and testing, we refined the concept and distilled it into a precise set of technical and experiential specifications. This detailed blueprint ensured that the selected contractor, Studio Base 2, could develop and deploy a final installation that was true to the curator's vision while deeply resonating with visitor needs and expectations.

### ***Transition to Conversational Walking Tour Experiences***

The “Face to Face with Caravaggio” immersive experience, while successful, highlighted an opportunity to evolve from passive observation to active dialogue. This evolution is being formally explored through the ‘History in Dialogue: A Collaborative Approach to Heritage Tours with AI Chatbots’ (HiD-CATCH) project, funded by the Malta Council for Science & Technology’s Research Excellence Programme. The project marks a paradigm shift from a predetermined narrative to a personalised, responsive experience, addressing a key challenge in walking tours: the guide’s inability to cater to individual interests within a group.

The core innovation is not to replace human guides but to augment their expertise through a collaborative human-AI model. We are developing LLM-powered historical characters to act as ‘conversational partners’, allowing visitors to ask spontaneous questions and explore the past. Through the HiD-CATCH project, this technology is being prototyped and integrated directly within the operational framework of Colour My Travel, SeyTravel’s award-winning walking tour brand. This ensures the solution is practical, tested by experienced guides, and genuinely creates a richer historical discovery that keeps the human guide at the centre of the experience.

### ***Technology as Conduit vs. Replacement for Authentic Encounters***

Throughout the implementation of the various projects mentioned above, a clear desideratum was consistently maintained: ensuring that the technological and interactive tools introduced constantly kept the focus on the *Beheading*, Caravaggio, and the wider Oratory and Co-Cathedral. These tools are not intended (and should never become) the point of focus themselves, but rather aids to the central points of focus of the site in question.

This point became particularly crucial during the introduction of the conversational AI agent. Given the wide variety of risks associated with human interactions with LLM tools (see the following section), we understood the specific function of the conversational agent to be one of aiding users in gaining a more holistic understanding. Anything more than this would be to have the tool attempt to perform tasks that are misaligned with the user’s intentions. Chiefly, to move from simply ‘viewing’ the art in question, to ‘encountering’ it in a profound way – with the totality of its aesthetic and spiritual qualities - is something that the conversational agent is unable to carry out. Given that this encounter depends on a subjective and phenomenological experience of a variety of non-empirical concepts related to beauty, truth, and goodness, it is a task that only human users, possibly with the aid of other human guides, can authentically fulfil.

## **System Design and Implementation**

### ***LLM Selection and Historical Character Development***

The project employed Google’s Gemini-2.0-Flash as the foundational model for developing the Caravaggio conversational agent. This selection was based on the model’s balance between character consistency, nuanced handling of historical context, and response generation speed. The historical character development process involved comprehensive research into Caravaggio’s documented persona through court records, contemporary biographical accounts, and art historical analyses that reveal his personality through his revolutionary techniques and life circumstances.

Character prompt engineering created an authentic first-person voice that embodies Caravaggio's documented traits: passionate, defiant, deeply devoted to artistic truth, and uncompromising in vision. Given the scarcity of surviving personal writings, the characterisation relied heavily on behavioural evidence from legal records, patron relationships, and artistic innovations to construct a psychologically consistent persona. The implementation includes built-in knowledge boundaries, restricting responses to topics within Caravaggio's historical timeframe and expertise, while incorporating fallback mechanisms that redirect off-topic queries back to art, technique, or 17th-century Roman life without breaking character immersion.

### ***LLM Training Protocol***

The training protocol established a framework for developing historically accurate and spiritually appropriate AI responses through system prompt engineering. The system prompt serves as the foundational instruction set defining the AI's personality, knowledge boundaries, response style, and behavioural constraints.

Key elements included: (1) scope definition limiting responses to Caravaggio's life, artistic techniques, historical context, and works in St John's Co-Cathedral; (2) personality calibration reflecting documented characteristics — passionate about art, disdainful of mediocrity, challenging conventions; (3) historical accuracy verification through cross-referencing documented facts; and (4) spiritual sensitivity guidelines ensuring respectful treatment of religious themes.

Training incorporated extensive prompt-response pairs covering artistic techniques (chiaroscuro, tenebrism), biographical elements, and work interpretations. Response validation involved art historians and theologians ensuring factual accuracy and appropriate spiritual tone. The protocol included fallback mechanisms for handling questions beyond Caravaggio's scope, redirecting to relevant topics while maintaining authenticity. Regular refinement cycles incorporated user feedback and expert review to enhance response quality and historical fidelity.

### ***Integration with Human Guide Workflows***

The AI integration complements human guides through a collaborative framework. Guides received training on AI capabilities and learnt when to introduce the Caravaggio character during tours. The system functions as an interpretive tool activated at strategic moments, particularly when discussing Caravaggio's techniques or specific works.

Integration protocols established clear handoff points where guides transition from factual presentation to AI-enhanced experiential learning. Guides maintain control over pacing and can intervene during technical issues. The AI personalises explanations based on visitor questions while guides provide broader context and manage group dynamics. This approach leverages AI's consistency while preserving essential human elements of empathy, adaptability, and spiritual guidance.

### ***Responsible Deployment in Spiritual Contexts***

Deployment in St John's Co-Cathedral required careful consideration of sacred space protocols. The system includes clear AI disclaimers that comply with EU AI Act transparency requirements. Ethical guidelines prevent theological interpretations or spiritual counselling, maintaining boundaries between artistic discussion and religious guidance.

Content moderation ensures respectful treatment of sacred themes, with responses designed to inspire reflection rather than provide spiritual direction. The system avoids contentious religious debates while promoting appreciation for the spiritual aspects of art. Privacy measures ensure that interactions remain confidential, while analytics focus on identifying patterns of engagement.

### ***Risk of Parasocial Relationships***

Another subset of risks related to LLM tools pertains to parasocial interactions and relationships. Maeda and Quan-Haase<sup>23</sup> elaborate on some of the ethical challenges associated with this phenomenon, wherein users engage with roleplaying chatbots in a way that is not dissimilar to human-human interactions. Due to a host of anthropomorphising features, the literature appears to highlight several risks, including misplaced trust, the misuse of sensitive data, and the potential for user manipulation resulting from misinformation.

Within a spiritual context, this worry is further compounded given the intimate nature of one's faith and spirituality. The brief and controversial experience of 'Fr Justin'<sup>24</sup> - an LLM chatbot roleplaying as a Catholic priest - illustrated the risks that exist with having such a tool used in an advisory or even therapeutic context, such as spiritual direction. Apart from the possibility of producing incorrect or harmful information, the sycophantic tendencies of such tools, coupled with a perceived high level of confidence in the outputs produced, risk harming users rather than aiding them.

## **Evaluation and Results**

### ***Pilot Study Methodology and Controlled Testing***

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach using structured questionnaires administered to visitors following their experience at the "Face to Face with Caravaggio" exhibition at St John's Co-Cathedral. A survey was administered to 58 participants across diverse demographic groups, including practising religious individuals (30%), cultural believers (28%), spiritual but not religious visitors (23%), and non-believers (19%). The sample included balanced age representation across demographics from under-18 to 55+, with 32% aged 26-35 representing the primary digital-native cohort. Participants provided feedback on their exhibition experience and expressed preferences regarding the potential integration of an AI companion.

### ***User Engagement Metrics and Guide Feedback***

Survey results demonstrated significant positive engagement with the traditional "Face to Face with Caravaggio" experience. The existing multimedia exhibition achieved a 77% enrichment rate, with participants reporting enhanced understanding of sacred and historical art. Notably, 63% of visitors reported experiencing spiritual or emotional reflection while viewing sacred art, suggesting the medium's enduring capacity for contemplative engagement across diverse belief systems.

Regarding potential AI companion integration, 74% expressed positive interest, with 33% extremely interested and 33% moderately interested in conversational AI technology. Participants identified the most valued features as artistic symbolism interpretation, historical

contextualisation, and theological meaning discussion. Notably, personalisation based on spiritual background received mixed reception, suggesting a preference for inclusive rather than segmented approaches. Post-visit accessibility preferences varied, with 40% interested in continued reflection tools beyond the physical exhibition space. These findings align with research indicating that digital display technologies receive high acceptance from heritage visitors and have a positive impact on exploration and learning.

### **Technical Performance and Accuracy Assessment**

While no AI prototype was implemented during this phase, the survey gathered critical insights into visitor expectations regarding technical implementation. Participants identified key requirements for theological accuracy and appropriate conversational tone in any future AI companion system. Different spiritual backgrounds prioritise different AI features, with religious visitors valuing theological meanings and artistic technique, while spiritual and cultural believers prefer historical context and contemporary relevance. Survey responses revealed a strong emphasis on maintaining factual correctness when discussing Caravaggio's work and Counter-Reformation themes, with visitors expecting expert-level knowledge equivalent to that of professional guides.

Technical concerns emerged regarding potential risks, including misinterpretation of sacred themes (cited by 35% of respondents) and technology overshadowing original artwork (mentioned by 28%). Participants expressed a preference for response systems that maintain contemplative pacing rather than providing immediate responses. System reliability and consistent availability were highlighted as essential requirements. These expectations align with broader research, which shows that accuracy, alongside careful attention to cultural authenticity and ethical implementation, is universally recognised as essential in AI applications for cultural heritage<sup>25,26</sup>. Future prototype development must ensure that technological enhancements serve rather than substitute for authentic spiritual encounters.

### **Challenges and Solutions**

#### ***Managing LLM Hallucinations in Historical Contexts***

LLM hallucinations pose significant risks when deploying conversational AI in historically sensitive contexts. The primary challenge involved preventing false historical claims or anachronistic statements that could mislead visitors about Caravaggio's life, artistic methods, and period context.

Our mitigation strategy employed multiple validation layers. The system prompt incorporated explicit instructions prohibiting speculation beyond documented historical facts, instructing the AI to acknowledge uncertainty rather than fabricate details. We implemented a systematic response validation framework using a comprehensive fact-checking database that cross-referenced chatbot outputs against verified historical sources.

The testing protocol encompassed multiple categories: (1) biographical fact verification including examples such as birth details, apprenticeship records, and legal troubles; (2) historical context questions testing accuracy on topics like papal succession and Counter-Reformation impacts; (3) spiritual guidance prompts ensuring appropriate avoidance of theological interpretations; (4) modern-day anachronisms requiring dismissal or reframing of concepts like photography and

social media; and (5) artistic technique enquiries examining responses to period-appropriate criticisms about standard models and chiaroscuro methodology.

Art historians systematically reviewed sample interactions across these categories, comparing AI responses against documented expected facts to identify inaccuracies and inappropriate extrapolations, thereby revealing common hallucination patterns while ensuring the maintenance of historical authenticity.

### ***Integrating AI within Established Tour Frameworks***

Integrating AI into cathedral tours required striking a balance between visitor expectations and the established expertise of guides. Traditional tours focus on architectural history, religious significance, and artistic heritage, creating resistance to technological change among guides and visitors.

The strategy was to complement existing tour elements, not replace them. Guides received training on positioning the Caravaggio AI as an enhanced interpretive tool, with clear protocols for optimal integration points that enhanced rather than interrupted established narratives.

Integration occurred strategically after guides provided foundational context about the cathedral's history, architecture, and Caravaggio's background. Once visitors had this foundation, guides introduced the AI as a personalisation tool for exploring specific interests. For example, after explaining "The Beheading of St John the Baptist," visitors could engage with the Caravaggio persona to discuss artistic techniques, emotional motivations, or creative processes.

## **Discussion and Future Directions**

### ***Implications for the Heritage Tourism Industry***

This research has significant implications for the heritage tourism sector, particularly in addressing the challenge of engaging digitally native generations while preserving cultural authenticity. The successful integration of conversational AI in sacred spaces offers a scalable model for heritage institutions seeking to enhance visitor engagement without compromising the spiritual or cultural integrity of these spaces. The 74% positive visitor reception suggests strong market acceptance for AI-enhanced interpretation. Key industry implications include reduced dependency on extensive human guide training for specialised knowledge areas, the ability to provide consistent, expert-level interpretation across multiple languages, and the potential for post-visit engagement that extends the cultural experience beyond physical site boundaries. This offers an opportunity for new revenue streams to make such deeper cultural connections more sustainable.

### ***Scalability Framework and Broader Applications***

The framework developed in the HiD-CATCH project, evaluated at St John's Co-Cathedral, offers a replicable model for heritage institutions worldwide. Key scalability factors include modular AI character development protocols that are adaptable to different historical figures and cultural contexts, standardised validation frameworks that ensure historical accuracy across diverse heritage narratives, and flexible integration systems that are compatible with existing tour infrastructures. Broader applications extend beyond religious heritage to archaeological

sites, historic houses, and cultural museums. The methodology's emphasis on human-AI collaboration rather than replacement positions it as a sustainable solution for resource-constrained heritage organisations. Future applications may include multilingual character interactions, virtual reality integration, and educational partnerships with schools seeking innovative approaches to cultural literacy and historical engagement.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a collaborative human-AI model can do more than transform heritage tourism; it can reinvigorate sacred art as a vehicle for spiritual reflection. Our work on the 'History in Dialogue' (HiD-CATCH) project, which uses the Caravaggio AI companion as a case study, validates an approach where technology augments the human guide, creating new channels for evangelization. This model moves beyond the 'one-way' narrative of traditional tours, which often fails to connect with a contemporary audience detached from the spiritual language of these treasures.

The AI-human augmentation empowers visitors to uncover the profound theological and artistic dimensions of the work. This research, therefore, establishes a sustainable framework that not only preserves cultural authenticity but actively positions sacred art conservation as a dynamic pedagogical tool for re-evangelization. This offers a novel opportunity for reconnecting modern viewers with the message embedded in their heritage.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "PLENARY ASSEMBLY (March 27-28, 2006) - Concluding Document," Vatican.va, 2006. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/cultr/documents/rc\\_pc\\_cultr\\_doc\\_20060327\\_plenary-assembly\\_final-document\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/cultr/documents/rc_pc_cultr_doc_20060327_plenary-assembly_final-document_en.html) (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> See "Digital Heritage Tourism: Innovations in Museums," Taylor & Francis Online, 2019. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/16078055.2019.1639920> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> See "Evaluating Visitor Experience of Digital Interpretation and Presentation Technologies at Cultural Heritage Sites: A Case Study of the Old Town, Zuoying," *Built Heritage*, 2020. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s43238-020-00016-4> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> See J. Fagerberg, "Innovation Policy: Rationales, Lessons and Challenges," *Journal of Economic Surveys* 31, no.2 (2017): 497–512.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Zhao, X. Wu, H.-T. Liao, and Y. Liu, "Exploring Research Fronts and Topics of Big Data and Artificial Intelligence Application for Cultural Heritage and Museum Research," *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering* (Bristol: IOP Publishing, 2020), 12-36.

<sup>6</sup> See "An Analysis of Research Trends for Using Artificial Intelligence in Cultural Heritage," *MDPI Electronics* 13, no.18 (2025) <https://www.mdpi.com/2079-9292/13/18/3738> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> See I. Derda & D. Predescu, "Towards Human-Centric AI in Museums: Practitioners' Perspectives and Technology Acceptance of Visitor-Centered AI for Value (Co-)Creation," *Museum Management and Curatorship* (2025): 1–23.

- <sup>8</sup> See P. Pataranutaporn et al., “AI-Generated Characters for Supporting Personalized Learning and Well-Being,” *Nature Machine Intelligence* 3, no. 12 (December 2021): 1013–1022.
- <sup>9</sup> See “Crafting a Museum Guide Using GPT4,” *Preprints.org*, 2025. <https://www.preprints.org/manuscript/202306.1618/v1> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).
- <sup>10</sup> See “Large Language Models as Recommendation Systems in Museums,” *MDPI Electronics* 12, no.18 (2025). <https://www.mdpi.com/2079-9292/12/18/3829> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).
- <sup>11</sup> See G. Trichopoulos, “Large Language Models for Cultural Heritage,” in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of the ACM Greek SIGCHI Chapter* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2023), 1–5.
- <sup>12</sup> See “Enhancing Cultural Spaces with Generative AI,” *Cuseum*, 2025. <https://cuseum.com/blog/ai-museum-engagement> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).
- <sup>13</sup> See “IRIS+ Part One: Designing + Coding a Museum AI,” *American Alliance of Museums*, 2025. <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/06/12/iris-part-one-designing-coding-a-museum-ai/> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).
- <sup>14</sup> See S. Vassos et al., “Art-Bots: Toward Chat-Based Conversational Experiences in Museums,” in *Interactive Storytelling: 9th International Conference, ICIDS 2016* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 437–442.
- <sup>15</sup> See S. Wyche, G. Hayes, L. Harvel, & R. Grinter, “Technology in Spiritual Formation: An Exploratory Study of Computer Mediated Religious Communications,” in *CSCW '06: Proceedings of the 2006 20th Anniversary Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work 2006* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2006), 208.
- <sup>16</sup> See “The Ethics of Using AI in Sacred Spaces, Motivation,” 2025. <https://vocal.media/motivation/the-ethics-of-using-ai-in-sacred-spaces> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).
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- <sup>19</sup> See “Personalized Generative AI in VR for Enhanced Engagement: Eye-Tracking Insights into Cultural Heritage Learning through Neapolitan Pizza Making,” *arXiv*, 2025. <https://arxiv.org/html/2411.18438v1> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).
- <sup>20</sup> See “AI and Religion: A Light Exploration of Faith in the Age of Artificial Intelligence,” *Syntheia*, 2025. <https://www.syntheia.ai/ai-and-religion-a-light-exploration-of-faith-in-the-age-of-artificial-intelligence> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).
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- <sup>22</sup> See M. K. Bekele and E. Champion, “A Comparison of Immersive Realities and Interaction Methods: Cultural Learning in Virtual Heritage,” *Frontiers in Robotics and AI* 6 (September 2019): 91.
- <sup>23</sup> See “When Human-AI Interactions Become Parasocial: Agency and Anthropomorphism in Affective Design,” *Proceedings of the 2024 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, 2025. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3630106.3658956> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).

<sup>24</sup> See “AI Priest Gets Demoted After Saying Babies Can Be Baptized with Gatorade, Making Other Wild Claims,” *Tech Times*, 2025. <https://www.techtimes.com/articles/304222/20240502/ai-priest-demoted-saying-babies-baptized-gatorade.htm> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June, 2025).

<sup>25</sup> See Y. Fu, K. Shi, and L. Xi, “Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in the Preservation and Innovation of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Ethical Considerations and Design Frameworks,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 40, no.2 (June 2025): 487–508.

<sup>26</sup> See E. Villaespesa and O. Murphy, “This is Not an Apple! Benefits and Challenges of Applying Computer Vision to Museum Collections,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 36, no.4 (2021): 362–383.



Figure 1 - State-of-the-art projection system in the Caravaggio Wing showing digitally enlarged details of Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*. Copyright: Authors



Figure 2 - Interactive display in St Jerome's room at the Caravaggio Wing providing detailed insights into the painting's history and background. Copyright: Authors

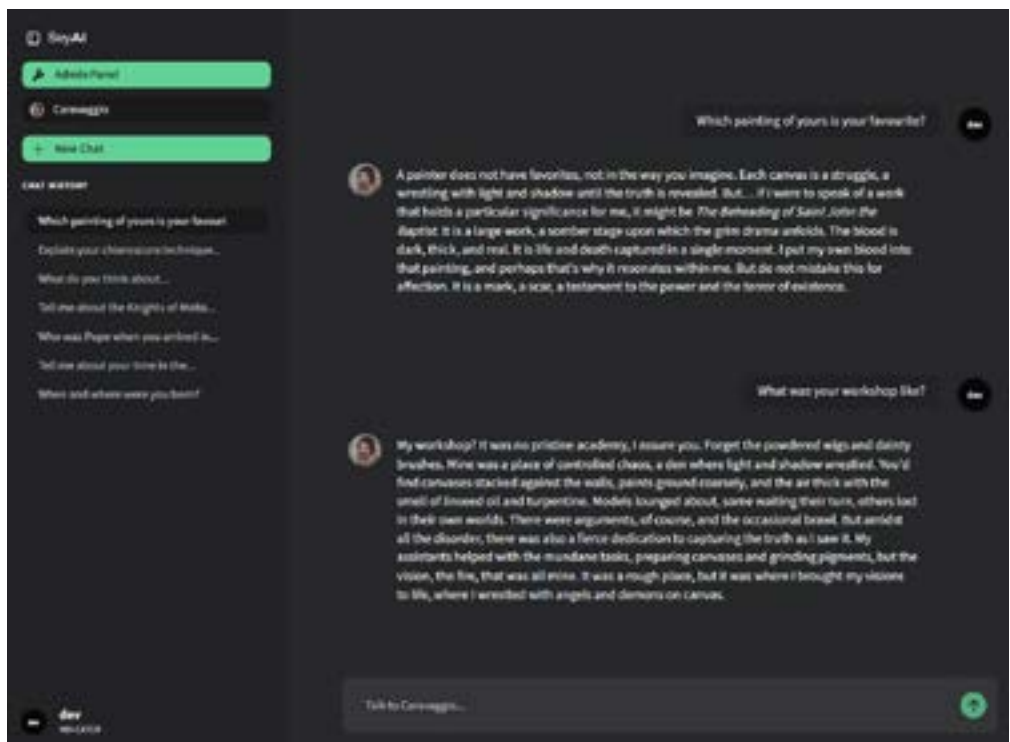
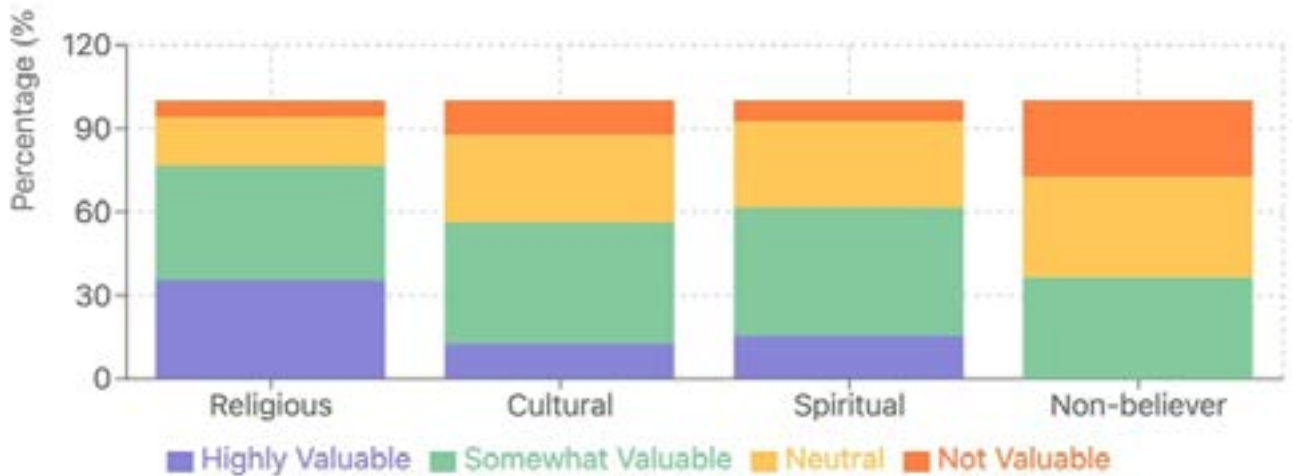


Figure 3 - Screenshot of the conversational AI prototype interface showing the Caravaggio chatbot responding to visitor questions about his artistic techniques and workshop practices. Copyright: Authors



Question: "Would you find an AI experience personalized to your spiritual background valuable?" (n=58)

Figure 4 - Interest in AI Companion by Age Group. Copyright: Authors

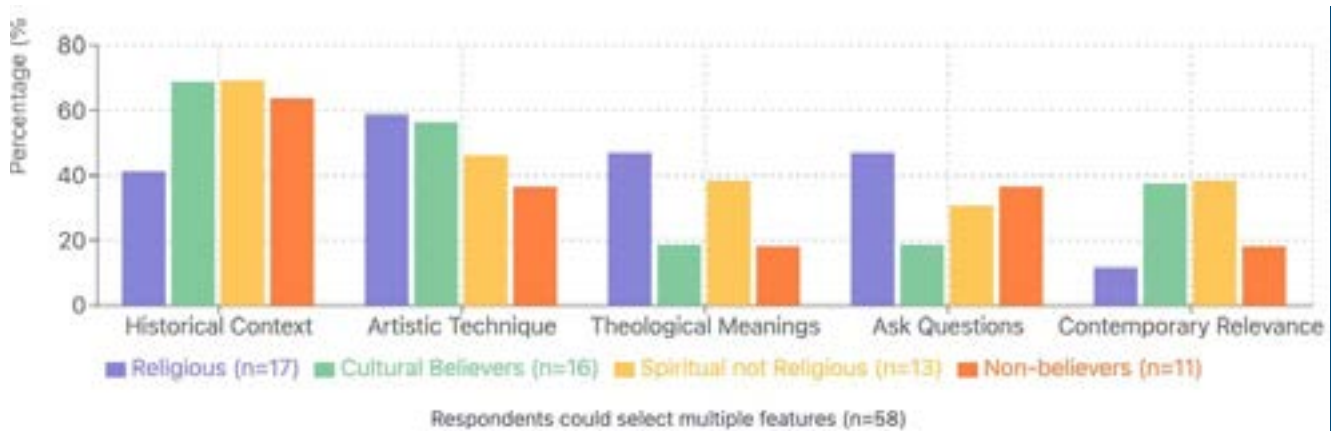


Figure 5 - Perceived Value of Personalised AI by Spiritual Background. Copyright: Authors

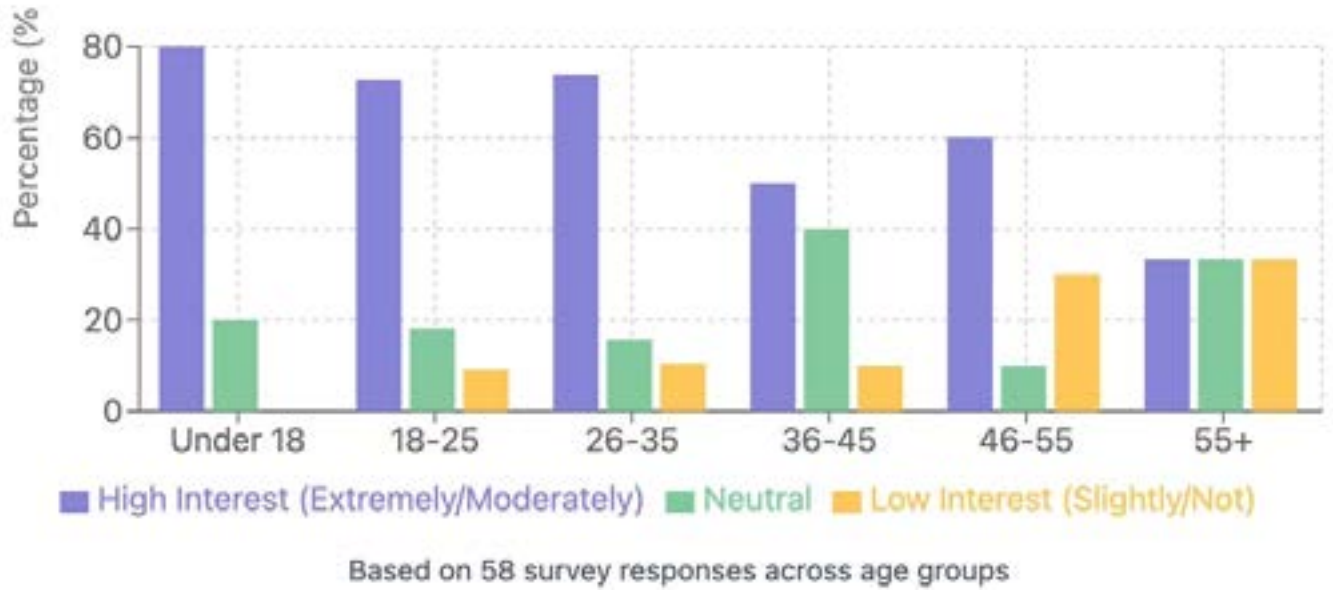


Figure 6 - Most Valued AI Features by Spiritual Background. Copyright: Authors

# RESTORING SACRED NARRATIVES BEYOND CATHEDRALS

# The Jesuits' Church Conservation Project: Sacred Art as a Vehicle for Re-Evangelization in Malta

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the Jesuits' Church conservation project in Valletta, Malta, as a compelling model for how sacred art and heritage restoration can be revitalised into a comprehensive programme of re-evangelization in a secular age. Rooted in Pope Benedict XVI's theological vision of the *Via Pulchritudinis* — the Way of Beauty — it contends that sacred spaces, when restored and animated through artistic excellence, do not merely preserve the past but prophetically engage the present. The study focuses on the Oratory of the *Immacolata*, where conservation was matched by a cultural programme that integrates sacred music, iconography, literature, and dramatic arts. This multidimensional approach offers not only aesthetic renewal but a pastoral and catechetical space capable of reawakening the spiritual imagination. Engaging with Charles Taylor's notion of the "immanent frame" and Bishop Robert Barron's emphasis on beauty as a universal path to transcendence, the paper explores how such programming constitutes a "sacramental interruption" — an aesthetic and spiritual resonance that reaches hearts where argument cannot. By weaving together the theological, artistic, and pastoral strands of sacred expression, the Jesuits' Church project illustrates how beauty, in all its liturgical and cultural forms, can once more become a privileged path of encounter with the divine in an age of disenchantment.

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## Introduction

The conservation of sacred spaces transcends mere preservation of historical artefacts; it represents a profound act of re-evangelization, reconnecting contemporary society with the transcendent through the beauty of faith. The Jesuits' Church in Valletta, one of Malta's most significant ecclesiastical monuments, stands as a testament to this mission. This paper explores how the recent conservation efforts at the Jesuits' Church, particularly the restoration of its sacristy, oratories, and artworks, can serve as a dynamic model for the revitalisation and engagement of sacred space and art in contemporary society.

Drawing on the theological framework of Pope Benedict XVI's *Via Pulchritudinis* — the Way of Beauty — this paper asserts that the conservation of sacred spaces, when conducted with both technical rigour and pastoral vision, can rekindle the spiritual imagination of both the faithful and visitors, fostering dialogue between tradition and contemporary evangelization efforts. Central to the project under consideration was the establishment in 2021 of the Jesuits' Church Foundation, a collaboration between the Archdiocese of Malta and the Government of Malta. In partnership with established experts from both the conservation and cultural sectors,

it has pioneered a holistic conservation strategy that balances the integrity of liturgical function, historical significance, and artistic excellence. By examining the Jesuits' Church restoration in the light of the theological-pastoral model of the *Via Pulchritudinis*, this study highlights how Malta's approach offers an instructive model for integrating heritage preservation with faith renewal in a post-Christian landscape.

The paper will briefly present the theological framework that allows for the consideration of sacred art as a privileged instrument for evangelization. It then moves on to the concrete application of these principles as they are currently being implemented through the cultural and liturgical programme promoted by the Foundation. Given the complexity of the site, it will limit itself to the consideration of one space, the Oratory of the *Immacolata*, and will demonstrate how the principles applied for the reinterpretation and promotion of this site for evangelization can be applied to similar sacred spaces. All this is developed within the context of the challenges faced by local faith communities who must meet the demands of conserving such sites, with shrinking congregations and often very limited human and financial resources.

### **The *Via Pulchritudinis*: Beauty as an Antidote to Moral Evil**

With the recognition that beauty possesses a profound theological significance — both as an attribute of the divine and as a participation in its nature — the Church has always regarded art as an essential medium for the communication of true beauty, namely, a participation even if veiled in the divine mystery itself. Throughout its long tradition, the Church has defended the legitimacy and necessity of sacred art against iconoclastic movements, consistently reaffirming its doctrinal and catechetical importance. This commitment has been demonstrated in its rigorous preservation of an extensive artistic patrimony, not merely as a cultural inheritance but as an instrument continually renewed for the task of evangelization.

The theological understanding of beauty, and consequently of its artistic expression within the Church's tradition, establishes a firm foundation for the ecclesial responsibility to conserve its cultural heritage — not as an external obligation, but as something intrinsic to its mission.<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, widely acknowledged as the principal architect of *Lumen Fidei*, reiterated this view when he returned to Dostoevsky's *Demons*<sup>2</sup> in his address to artists, recalling the piercing claim:

Man can live without science, he can live without bread, but without beauty he could no longer live, because there would no longer be anything to do to the world. The whole secret is here, the whole of history is here.<sup>3</sup>

This assertion raises an essential question: Why is beauty indispensable to human life? In a fractured and desolate world, humanity's longing for hope remains irrepressible. *Lumen Fidei*<sup>4</sup> reminds us that beauty, rightly ordered, leads the soul toward truth and goodness. In his *Meeting with Artists* just cited, Benedict XVI identified the dangers of an aesthetic severed from its transcendent roots, warning against a false beauty that dazzles but blinds, imprisoning the soul within itself rather than drawing it outward towards authentic freedom. By contrast, true beauty “unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond.”<sup>5</sup>

Building on this understanding of the final capacity of beauty, the Church's stewardship of its cultural patrimony is not a passive preservation of relics from the past but an active process of rendering these treasures contemporaneous to each new generation. This responsibility — the *ut populus Dei conscius fiat*<sup>6</sup> — is one assumed by pastors at every level of the Church. Sacred art and architecture are not mere historical artefacts but sacramental realities in which the divine is encountered. The Church's task, then, is to ensure that their significance is not reduced to a secular notion of *publica utilitas*<sup>7</sup> but rather recognised as bearers of those spiritual values that define man's highest vocation: to be an image-bearer of God and a participant in His beauty.

In this way, the *Via Pulchritudinis* — the way of beauty — serves as a powerful counterpoint to the structures of sin and distortion in society. As St. Thomas Aquinas so concisely put it, beauty is “id quod visum placet,” “that which, when seen, pleases.”<sup>8</sup> When properly ordered, the longing that beauty awakens in the soul becomes a vehicle towards the infinite, leading ultimately to God Himself.

To propose a concrete pastoral praxis in the service of evangelization through the Church's cultural patrimony, we turn to one of the most significant interventions of the contemporary Magisterium on the arts — Benedict XVI's address to artists in the Sistine Chapel in 2009 already referred to. Retracing an argument he had developed extensively in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Benedict outlined the *Via Pulchritudinis* as a privileged means of encountering the faith. One can summarise his approach in this manner.

Beauty, in its truest form, first unsettles, shaking us from complacency and revealing the limitations of our perception. Yet, in this very disturbance, it purifies our gaze, stripping away illusion and drawing us toward a deeper clarity. This purified vision awakens within us a thirst for truth, compelling us to seek that which is enduring and real. In encountering true beauty, hope is rekindled, for it points beyond despair to the promise of something greater. This hope, in turn, ignites charity, moving us beyond self-interest toward love that is both generous and self-giving. Such beauty transcends the constraints of the present, opening our hearts to the eternal and orienting us toward the infinite. Ultimately, this ascent culminates in a beauty that does not merely captivate but transforms, drawing us into the very mystery of God Himself. For, as Benedict himself states:

If we acknowledge that beauty touches us intimately, that it wounds us, that it opens our eyes, then we rediscover the joy of seeing, of being able to grasp the profound meaning of our existence, the Mystery of which we are part; from this Mystery we can draw fullness, happiness, the passion to engage with it every day.<sup>9</sup>

This is the splendour of the Incarnate Word, the *Veritatis Splendor*, which alone provides the true foundation of all existence. And thus, we return to where we began—the *Lumen Fidei*, the light of faith, the radiant beauty of Christ, which alone can unlock the meaning of human existence and guide us as we journey through the valley of shadows.

Sacred art, in its transient form, awakens a longing that extends beyond itself, drawing the soul towards the eternal. This experience of beauty is often ineffable, its effects surpassing what words alone cannot express. Even in a secular age, the imprint of God within the human heart ensures that the thirst for the infinite remains. The Church must recognise that this thirst for beauty is, in many cases, the last bridge by which it may reach those who no longer comprehend its dogmatic formulations, moral teachings, or liturgical traditions.

In an era marked by radical self-interest and consumerist avarice, Benedict XVI, quoting Hans Urs von Balthasar, reminds us that the world still stands in desperate need of beauty's salvific power:

Beauty is the last word that the thinking intellect dares to speak, because it simply forms a halo, an untouchable crown around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another.<sup>10</sup>

Understood in this way, the Church's cultural patrimony is no mere repository of historical artefacts; rather, it is an invaluable means by which the Church may speak anew to every generation. It is the vehicle of a language that the heart still understands, a means of revealing the Whole in the fragment, the Infinite in the finite, and the presence of God in human history.

### **A Test Case: Retracing the History of the Oratory of the *Immacolata***

The Oratory of the *Immacolata*, together with the opposite Oratory of the *Onorati*, form an integral part of Valletta's Jesuits' Church complex, embody centuries of spiritual Mariological devotion and artistic mastery. Established by the Jesuits, according to the pastoral programme of the Society of Jesus, immediately following their establishment in Malta, between the last decade of the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century as a congregation of the Knights of the Order of St John under the patronage of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary within the *Collegium Melitense*.

Marian congregations, became another aspect of the Jesuits' *noster modus procedendi*, that is 'our way of doing things', setting the pattern for the Jesuits' pastoral work with their students. Nadal attributes the phrase to the founder St Ignatius himself,<sup>11</sup> as a method of handling things that could be extended from the most spiritual to the most mundane.<sup>12</sup> The first such Marian Congregation in a Jesuits' college was founded in Syracuse by students in 1560 under the inspiration of Padre Sebastiano Cabaras, whose members met after school to pray in honour of the Virgin Mary.<sup>13</sup> It is in light of such a pastoral praxis that the founding of the Congregation of the *Immacolata* at the Jesuits' College in Malta by the Knights of St John under Jesuits' spiritual guidance, as well as the establishment and decoration of an Oratory for their use, adjacent to the College Church must be understood.

Forming an integral part of their pastoral activity, the Jesuits founded a number of such congregations. By 1630, they had established at least seven such congregations:

Con secolari si fa gran frutto, particolarmente in sette Congregazioni che si fanno dai nostri, quattro in Collegio appartenenti alla Città nuova, e fuori, una nel Borgo, l'altra nell'Isola, e la 3.a in un'altra partedetta Bormola. La prima è Cong.ne de Cavalieri sotto il titolo della Concettione al numero di 30. La 2.a de ministrali, e artigiani sotto il titolo dell'Assunzione al numero di 230. La 3.a delli Humanisti sotto il titolo dell'Annunziata al numero di 40. La 4.a de Grammatici sotto il titolo della Concezione al num.o di 60. La Cong.ne del Borgo sotto il titolo dell'Assunta al num.o di 60. La Cong. ne dell'Isola sotto il titolo della Purificazione al n.o di 145. La Cong.ne di Bormola al num.o di 85. Oltre di questo si è risoluto di fare lottava Cong.ne in Collegio per li Dottori, e gente più honorata della Città, la quale non entra nella Cong. ne de Cavalieri.

The Congregation of the Knights was founded in 1600. This significant event was recorded by the Provincial of the Sicilian Province in his annual report to Rome for that year:

Hoc anno (1600) tandem Sodalitium ex Equitibus diu efflagitatum (res a Nostris ex industria differebatur) in Collegio felicibus auspiciis erectum est: haec dies fuit Nonis Augusti.<sup>14</sup>

Although no extensive documentary evidence has survived, the existing Oratory evidences that the Congregation embarked on the establishment of a separate Oratory for its use sometime in the first half of the seventeenth century. As such, the Oratory stands as another testament to the Jesuit influence on Malta's religious and artistic landscape. The finesse of its sculptural and pictorial decorations, all the fruit of Maltese artisans and painters, transformed the Oratory into another significant centre of Marian devotion and artistic patronage within the very heart of Valletta. By the mid-seventeenth century, it was embellished with an exceptional cycle of paintings by Filippino Dingli (born c. seventeenth century-1677) and Stefano Erardi (1630-1716).<sup>15</sup> Among these, the titular painting depicting the Immaculate Conception above the altar stands as the focal point of this space. By the eighteenth century the Oratory was being used jointly by a Congregation called the *Secreta*, dedicated to an ascetic lifestyle, as well as a Congregation specifically for French Knights. In the nineteenth century, it became the home of a charitable organisation known as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

The establishment of the Oratories within the Jesuits' Church complex in Valletta was not a peripheral pastoral initiative but a central expression of the Jesuit mission in Malta, rooted in the broader Catholic Reformation and animated by the Society's unique *modus procedendi*. As shown in the foundation of the Congregation of the *Immacolata*—an elite Marian sodality of Knights accepted by the Jesuits in 1600—the Oratories functioned as focal points for both spiritual formation and moral reform. These congregations were not only devotional but deeply pedagogical, designed to shape laity, particularly the elite, into exemplars of Tridentine virtue and active participants in ecclesial renewal.<sup>16</sup> Through structured spiritual exercises, communal prayer, and works of mercy, these Oratories extended the formative reach of the *Collegium Melitense* beyond the clerical class to the wider lay society. This historical function finds compelling continuity in the present cultural programme of the Jesuits' Church Foundation, which reanimates the Oratories not simply as conserved monuments but as sites of spiritual engagement through sacred music, visual storytelling, literature, and drama. By drawing on the original Jesuit vision of transforming society through holistic formation—intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual — the current initiative mirrors the past in its intent to cultivate *christianitas* anew in a secular context, thereby reaffirming the Oratories' vocation as instruments of societal renewal through beauty and faith.

### **Documenting the Conservation of the Oratory of the *Immacolata***

In living memory, this Oratory had been left in an abandoned state, with its walls and artistic works darkened under layers of centuries of accumulated dust and soot. Its last habitual use probably went back to the era between the two world wars, when it was used by the charitable Society of St Vincent de Paul for its meetings and devotions. It was also used for confessions, and it is said that the Maltese St, George Preca, used to come to listen to confessions within this space.

The conservation project of the Oratory of the Immaculate Conception within the Jesuits' Church complex in Valletta was a comprehensive initiative aimed at both conserving and reinterpreting this Baroque devotional and artistic space. Both these aspects are being carried out in a manner that ensures respect towards the spiritual nature of this sacred space. The project encompassed the full restoration of the Oratory's architecture, interiors, and paintings, which include the remarkable cycle depicting the life of the Virgin. These works, rich in spiritual and historical

significance, were in urgent need of conservation due to their deteriorating condition.<sup>17</sup> This initiative, part of a broader multi-million-euro investment in the Jesuits' complex, has ensured not only the survival of these artistic treasures but also their accessibility for future generations. Each work was carefully cleaned and stabilised, revealing vibrant colours, hidden details, and previously covered features such as a coat of arms on the titular painting. The restoration not only enhanced the visual impact of these paintings but was carried out in a manner that respected their historical and devotional significance. The works were reinstalled in their original setting, ensuring their continued appreciation and preservation for future generations.

The decorative floral panel frieze was also in a poor state, with many sections damaged, darkened, and partly detached. Insect damage and years of dust and dirt had left the artwork fragile and hard to appreciate. Much of the original detail was obscured, and the painted surfaces were cracked and flaking. The restoration focused on carefully cleaning the panels, securing the paint, and gently repairing damaged sections. Faded colours were brought back to life, and the panels were reassembled where broken. A final protective layer was applied, restoring the visual harmony of the frieze while preserving its historical appearance.

The four oil paintings of the Evangelists are painted directly onto stone and set within the intricate carvings that adorn the apse of the Oratory. Over time, structural cracks and surface damage had caused flaking and discolouration, while earlier restorations had aged poorly. The conservation brought the paintings back to life by removing layers of grime and mismatched retouching, repairing losses, and restoring the original tones. Their ornate gilded frames were also carefully cleaned and regilded, allowing the ensemble to once again shine as a cohesive visual and devotional focal point.<sup>18</sup> The restored Oratory, now a vibrant cultural hub in the heart of Valletta, reflects the enduring legacy of Jesuit and Hospitaller patronage and plays a significant role in Malta's religious and artistic heritage.

### **Evangelization in a Fluid World: Navigating Tradition and Secularity**

In our contemporary cultural moment, evangelization faces an unprecedented challenge: the pervasive condition of secularity, which no longer merely denotes the separation of Church and State but marks a deeper shift in the imaginative framework by which individuals interpret the world. This condition encompasses both secularism — the principled exclusion of religion from public life — and secularization — the historical process through which religious belief and practice gradually lose social and cultural relevance. The result is a world where the Christian narrative, once taken for granted, is now only one possible worldview among many and often the least compelling. The danger is not only imminent but very real, as the Christian monuments that dot our cities, particularly in Malta, face the challenge of being construed simply as artistic relics of a fading civilization, whose conservation is justifiable for their aesthetic value but otherwise devoid of meaning in a society increasingly unable to interpret them correctly and understand their full significance. Conserving a church as a monument certainly has its value, but such a policy rests on impoverished foundations that no longer allow society to reap the full benefit of these monuments as sacred spaces that can still provide sources for a people thirsting for meaning. This shift requires the Church to rethink the significance of its places of worship and to rearticulate its message not from a position of cultural dominance, which it no longer holds for a significant portion of society, but in a space of dialogue within a pluralistic, distracted, and frequently indifferent, if not hostile, society towards religious values. In a context where the Church has lost much ground and has, in many respects, fallen into the background, its domes

and spires, which still mark our towns and villages, offer an opportunity for evangelization — a space that might serve as the “courtyard of the Gentiles”<sup>19</sup> but still forms an integral part of the temple. The task of evangelization today, therefore, demands a careful navigation between faithful tradition and creative engagement, between rootedness in the Church’s magisterial and artistic heritage and the pastoral sensitivity needed to speak meaningfully to those who no longer share its assumptions. This Court of the Gentiles, an opportunity opened up by the Church’s cultural heritage and its indisputable contribution as the very foundation of Western civilization, provides the Church with a ready space through its works of art that can attract, even in the brutal nakedness of its crucified Lord to that holy of holies, who is the glorified Lord himself.

The cultural transformation which since the Enlightenment has gradually taken root in the West is compellingly analysed by Charles Taylor in his seminal work *A Secular Age* (2007),<sup>20</sup> where he describes not simply the decline of religious belief, but the emergence of a new kind of cultural consciousness — what he terms the “immanent frame.”<sup>21</sup> In this context, transcendence no longer offers the shared horizon of meaning; instead, individuals construct significance from within, and faith becomes an option, not a given. Taylor does not despair, however; he argues that even within this disenchanting landscape, there are “cross pressures”<sup>22</sup> — moments when the secular self encounters something that exceeds its frame, an intimation of the sacred. This is where the *Via Pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty, becomes not only relevant but essential. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor presents “fullness” as a moment of existential clarity where one feels deeply connected to what truly matters in life. For believers, this is received from a transcendent source; for non-believers, it is grounded in inner sources like reason or aesthetic experience. These moments are often most powerfully expressed by poets, saints, and philosophers, whose articulations help shape cultural understandings of meaning and transcendence in a secular age.<sup>23</sup>

In light of Taylor’s insight that moments of fullness reveal the moral and spiritual contours of an age, The Oratory’s cultural and spiritual programme can be seen as a deliberate effort to create conditions for such experiences in a disenchanting world. It seeks to bridge the gap between the inward, aesthetic fullness of the secular imagination and the outward, sacramental fullness received by the believing self. Through sacred music, visual storytelling in restored sacred spaces, and intellectually grounded reflection, the Oratory fosters what we might describe as a “sacramental interruption” — a momentary re-enchantment that resists the immanent frame and gestures toward the transcendent horizon where fullness becomes not only possible but intelligible.<sup>24</sup>

Building on Taylor’s notion of fullness as an experience where the shape and depth of life’s ultimate meaning is disclosed, The Oratory’s programme resonates with contemporary ecclesial efforts to reintroduce the sacred into the cultural imagination. One such initiative is the “Courtyard of the Gentiles,” envisioned by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi under Benedict XVI and sustained by Pope Francis, which seeks to recover beauty as a space of encounter between belief and unbelief. Like the Oratories, this project understands that in a secular context — where doctrinal clarity may not always reach — the aesthetic can speak where argument cannot, drawing the soul toward transcendence through beauty, reason, and silence.<sup>25</sup>

The silence of a Baroque altar, the curve of a sculpted cornice, or the ache of a Lenten motet— each can become a language of first approach, a whisper that reawakens desire. As such, The Oratories do not merely preserve a Jesuit legacy; they reanimate a theological space where the Church’s cultural patrimony becomes once more a vital instrument of pastoral creativity, offering

in beauty what the soul can no longer receive through argument, but can possibly encounter through artistic expression, a path back to the divine.

### **A Dialogue Between Liturgy, Spirituality, and Art in Sacred Space**

This reanimation of the Jesuit aesthetic apostolate through The Oratories responds to more than a pastoral necessity — it answers a deeper cultural disorientation in which beauty may be the last universally intelligible signpost of the sacred. In this light, The Oratories' programming echoes the broader ecclesial vision advanced by Bishop Robert Barron, who has compellingly argued that in a secular age resistant to moralism and doctrinal assertion, it is beauty that most persuasively opens the door to the transcendent. As Barron explains, beauty arrests us, awakens wonder, and draws the soul toward truth — not through argument, but through encounter.<sup>26</sup> The Oratories' liturgical concerts and visual theology enact this claim, offering not merely religious art but spiritually charged experiences that reorient the soul. In doing so, they revivify the Jesuit conviction that it is often through the senses that God first touches the heart.

This contemporary pastoral engagement through beauty, as exemplified by The Oratories, finds profound resonance with Pope Benedict XVI's theological vision of sacred art articulated in his *Via Pulchritudinis*. For Benedict, beauty is not merely decorative; it is a theological imperative—one that unsettles, purifies, and ultimately draws the soul toward truth and charity. He insisted that true beauty opens the human heart to the mystery of existence and awakens within it a longing for the divine. In this sense, the restored Oratories do not simply echo an aesthetic tradition; they enact a theological one, wherein the sacramental and the artistic converge to reawaken a thirst for God in a culture increasingly deaf to doctrinal speech. As Benedict affirmed, sacred art is a privileged medium through which the transcendent breaks into ordinary perception, offering glimpses of divine radiance and stirring the soul toward conversion. The Oratories' programme, then, may be seen as a living embodiment of this ecclesial mandate: to ensure that beauty remains a luminous path in the Church's mission of re-evangelization.<sup>27</sup>

This renewed apostolate finds deep continuity with the original mission of the Oratories, which the Jesuits established in Hospitaller Malta to foster personal conversion, Marian devotion, and societal reform among the students, the professional class, artisans and the elite. As the early Jesuits sought to shape a Catholic culture through spiritual exercises and congregational life, so too does the present initiative seek to echo that formative vision, reactivating sacred space for societal transformation and reform in our own age.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, this study has demonstrated that the conservation and reanimation of sacred space — exemplified by the Oratory of the *Immacolata*, indeed the whole Jesuits' Church project — offers not only a model of heritage preservation but a profound pastoral response to the challenges of evangelization in a secular age. Grounded in the theological framework of the *Via Pulchritudinis*, as articulated by Pope Benedict XVI, and enriched by the insights of Charles Taylor and Bishop Robert Barron, *The Oratories'* cultural and liturgical programme repositions sacred art as a privileged instrument of spiritual renewal. By integrating visual, musical, and intellectual expressions within a sacred context, the project enacts a sacramental interruption that resists the flattening effects of disenchantment and reopens a path to transcendence through beauty. What began as a response to the physical and devotional neglect of a historic site has unfolded into a theologically grounded, culturally sensitive model for re-evangelization. The paper's hypothesis —

that sacred art, when thoughtfully conserved and activated within a liturgical and cultural framework, can serve as an effective means of evangelisation — can thus be affirmed. Moreover, in addressing the practical constraints of dwindling congregations and limited resources, the Jesuits’ Church Foundation offers a replicable example of how strategic partnerships, artistic integrity, and pastoral vision can converge to revivify sacred spaces and make them intelligible again as places of encounter with the divine. In this way, the initiative undertaken by the Jesuits’ Church Foundation offers a thoughtful and contextually grounded model for the wider Church, showing how beauty, when integrated with pastoral and theological intent, can continue to serve as a meaningful pathway to evangelization in today’s secular landscape.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Artists,” November 21, 2009, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20091121\\_artisti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091121_artisti.html) (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> July 2023).

<sup>4</sup> See Francis. *Lumen Fidei (The Light of Faith)*. Encyclical Letter. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130629\\_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html) (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Artists,” address, Sistine Chapel, November 21, 2009, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20091121\\_artisti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091121_artisti.html). (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Pastor Bonus* (Apostolic Constitution), no. 102, June 28, 1988. [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_19880628\\_pastor-bonus.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19880628_pastor-bonus.html), 103 (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> July 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Salvatore Settis, “The Cultural Heritage of the Church in Contemporary Culture,” in *Ventennale della Pontificia Commissione per i Beni Culturali della Chiesa / Twenty Years of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church*, eds Francesco Buranelli and Fabrizio Capanni (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), 87-99.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 5, 4, ad 1: This beauty goes far beyond the aesthetical or the emotional (a matter of feeling). Beauty, for Aquinas, is basically a metaphysical and/or theological concept arising from the thesis that there are characteristics of the ‘res’ that are conditions which are, if not sufficient, at least necessary to legitimately determine that an entity is beautiful. We can speak of beauty because there is beauty outside our understanding.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Artists,” 21 November 2009, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20091121\\_artisti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091121_artisti.html) (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> July 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*.

<sup>11</sup> Jérôme Nadal, SJ (1507 – 1580) was a Spanish Jesuit priest in the first generation of the companions of St Ignatius of Loyola. William W. Bangert, *Jerome Nadal, SJ (1507–1580): Tracking the First Generation of Jesuits*, ed. Thomas M. McCoog (Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Mia M. Mochizuki, *Jesuit Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Sic. 183, f.196r.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta* (Malta: Midsea, 2009), 207-237.

<sup>16</sup> See Nicholas Joseph Doublet, "Forging Faith at the Frontier: The Jesuit Mission in Hospitaller Malta (1592–1768)," in *Casa Manresa in Floriana: A House of Formation*, ed. Nicholas Joseph Doublet (Malta: Archdiocese of Malta, 2025).

<sup>17</sup> The restoration, overseen by the Restoration Directorate and carried out with national and ERDF funding, involved several specialised teams: AX Holdings Ltd restored the building fabric. The conservation project of the seven paintings in the *Immacolata* Oratory, carried out by Prevarti Ltd, focused on restoring their aesthetic and structural integrity while recovering important iconographical elements that had been obscured over time.

<sup>18</sup> Atelier del Restauro Ltd conserved the choir stalls, the floral panels and the four evangelists.

<sup>19</sup> *Cortile dei Gentili*, Pontificio Consiglio della Cultura, <https://www.cortiledeigentili.com/> (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2025).

<sup>20</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 539–593. Charles Taylor, "Buffered and Porous Selves," *The Immanent Frame*, 2nd September 2008, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/09/02/buffered-and-porous-selves/> (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2025); As Julian Waldner explains: When Charles Taylor speaks of the "Immanent Frame," he is referring to the modern, secular context in which we live – a constructed world that is entirely immanent, requiring no reference to the transcendent. The features that once defined the enchanted medieval world – its openness to transcendence, its participation in a higher order – have now been reconfigured to function within a closed, self-sufficient system. Within this frame, the self is no longer porous but buffered; the world is no longer enchanted but disenchanting; the cosmic hierarchies have given way to a modern moral order; secular time has replaced higher, sacred time; and exclusive humanism has supplanted an ethic oriented toward something beyond mere human flourishing. To say we live in the Immanent Frame is, in essence, to say that we are shaped by a Secular Age – an age that Taylor traces through a long and complex genealogy – where the dominant social imaginary operates without any necessary appeal to transcendence. Julian Waldner, "Chapter 15: The Immanent Frame," *Coffee with Kierkegaard* (blog), February 16, 2021, <https://coffeewithkierkegaard.home.blog/2021/02/16/chapter-15-the-immanent-frame/> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April 2025).

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 595. Julian Waldner, "Chapter 16: Cross Pressures," *Coffee with Kierkegaard* (blog), February 27, 2021, <https://coffeewithkierkegaard.home.blog/2021/02/27/chapter-16-cross-pressures/> (accessed 1<sup>st</sup> September 2025). In quoting from Taylor's work he explains, "We have cross pressures between belief and unbelief... the most salient feature of Western societies is no so much the decline of religious faith and practice, though there has been lots of that... but rather, a mutual fragilization of different religious positions, as well as of the outlooks of both belief and unbelief. The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieu of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent. The cross pressures are experienced more acutely by some people and in some milieux than others, but over the whole culture, we can see them reflected in a number of middle positions, which have drawn from both sides."

<sup>23</sup> See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 9, 600–601.

<sup>24</sup> The phrase "sacramental interruption" draws on Charles Taylor's concept of "fullness" as a moment of contact with what matters most – often experienced by believers as a gift from beyond the immanent frame. In this context, sacramental forms such as liturgy and sacred art function as disruptions of secular time, making room for transcendence to be apprehended within ordinary experience. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5, 10, 600–601.

<sup>25</sup> See Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, "The Courtyard of the Gentiles," Pontifical Council for Culture. See also, Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §167.

<sup>26</sup> See Robert Barron, *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (New York: Image Books, 2011), 5–7.

<sup>27</sup> See Pope Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Artists," Sistine Chapel, 21 November 2009. See also, *Lumen Fidei*, §35–36.



Figure 1 - Jesuits' Church facade



Figure 2 - St Ignatius of Loyola (photo by Joe Borg)



Figure 3 - Jesuit's Church Holy Name Monogram



Figure 4 - Jesuits' Church interior view



Figure 5 - Jesuit's Church (during conservation)  
(photo by Ian Noel Pace)



Figure 6 - *Collegium Melitense*, now the University of Malta Valetta Campus



Figure 7 - The Oratory of the *Immacolata* (photo by Ian Noel pace)



Figure 8 - *Immacolata Oratory* (Before restoration)



Figure 9 - Apse detail of the Oratory of the *Immacolata* (photo by Ian Noel Pace)



Figure 10 - Filippino Dingli, *The Immaculate Conception* (before conservation) (photo by Prevarti Ltd)



Figure 11 - Filippino Dingli, *The Immaculate Conception* (after conservation) (photo by Prevarti Ltd)



Figure 12 - *Immacolata* Oratory, Floral panels, artist unknown (before and after conservation) (photo by Atelier del Restauro Ltd)



Figure 13 - Oratory of the *Onorati*  
(photo by Ian Noel Pace)



Figure 14 - Oratory of the *Onorati* during inaugural concert (January 2024) (photo by Ian Noel Pace)



Figure 15 - International Symposium Shaping Minds and Souls: "Jesuit Missions and the Mediterranean World" (May 2025)

# Sacred Spaces and Art: Conservation, Community, and Cultural Re-Engagement

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## Abstract

The conservation of architectural heritage is an ongoing and dynamic process in which each decision informs the next, resulting in a chain of interventions that gradually — but inevitably — transform the heritage fabric itself. This cumulative transformation is especially true for sacred architectural heritage, where the stakes are particularly high due to cultural, spiritual, and communal significance. This process places a profound responsibility on heritage professionals. Decisions must reflect a creative commitment to the stewardship of heritage in the interest of the common good. In this regard, international charters and guidelines serve as vital reference points. These documents articulate principles, methodologies, and ethical frameworks that support consistent, critical, and context-sensitive conservation practices, with the heritage itself remaining central to all decision-making.

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## Introduction

The conservation of architectural heritage is an ongoing process involving sequential decision-making. From a project's inception, each decision leads to the next in a chain of choices that result in successive interventions. These interventions build upon one another, gradually and inevitably transforming the heritage itself. In the case of sacred architectural heritage, the exact same principles apply. This places a significant responsibility on decision-makers. These choices cannot be made on a whim by an artist seeking to leave his or her mark but must be guided by a creative commitment to conserving the heritage for the common good. This is where international charters and guidelines play a vital role. These documents establish the principles, methods, and ethics that heritage professionals worldwide can critically draw upon, always keeping the heritage itself at the centre of their decision-making. This paper looks at four of these documents – The Venice Charter (1964),<sup>2</sup> the Nara Document (1994),<sup>3</sup> the Burra Charter (2013)<sup>4</sup> and the ICOMOS Charter on Intangible Cultural Heritage (2024)<sup>5</sup> – and discusses their enduring relevance in the context of four restoration projects carried out by the Restoration and Preservation Department (RPD), within the Ministry for Culture, Lands and Local Government, Malta.

The RPD has, over the years, built a repertoire of restoration projects where many of these have indeed been sacred architectural heritage. Here we showcase four such projects to illustrate critical aspects of a process that is rooted in conservation and backed by charters and guidelines, specifically facilitating the cultural re-engagement of local communities.

## **Introducing the Projects**

- The Old Parish Church of Siggiewi: Unearthed from ruins, this medieval church reveals centuries of faith, history, and hidden architectural beauty.<sup>6</sup>
- The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy in Qrendi: A seventeenth Century Marian-devotee church with a ‘partially hidden’ history, spanning multiple centuries and part of a pilgrimage route, situated among the open fields on the outskirts of Qrendi.<sup>7</sup>
- The Oratories at the Jesuit Church in Valletta: Hidden in plain sight for decades, now rediscovered.<sup>8</sup>
- The Santa Marija Parish Church in Birkirkara: A church with a tortuous past and an uncertain future.

Each project comes with its own unique particularities, but one element is always common: the recognition of a need to intervene. Someone, somewhere, identified that something needed to be done to preserve this heritage. Action was required, and funds and resources identified. Thus, a project often begins with heritage in need of attention, available funds, heritage professionals developing an intervention plan, and then practitioners carrying out its implementation. The motivation behind these projects can be traced back to the values attributed to each heritage asset. Value was recognised, sometimes subconsciously, and in all probability not just one value but multiple ones being acknowledged. Values, however, may be subjective. Who assigns value? Or better still, who owns heritage? The answer to this question is that everyone, the whole community owns heritage. It therefore follows that the assigned values need to reflect this collective ownership.

These emerging values may then serve as steering principles to guide decision-making during the intervention phase. This process, which in its totality may be referred to as the conservation and restoration process, contains within it the preservation of the values attributed to that particular heritage.

In certain instances, this rigorous and demanding practice of conservation often draws from the sense of engagement of the community. In others, the dedicated attention and investment serve to reinforce the intrinsic value of the heritage as it re-engages with the community.

## **The Importance of the Community in the Restoration Process**

The values attributed to heritage by a community have the power to unite the community and the “why” of a restoration project is often a reaction to a threat to these values. Two of the recurring values evident in the case studies discussed here align with what the Venice Charter identifies as “aesthetic and historic value” in Article 9. Communities tend to attribute significance to both the visual beauty of heritage structures and the sense of continuity they embody through the passage of time. The historical value of the Qrendi Sanctuary was already established in part due to its construction dating back to the 1650s, but when the foundations of a pre-existing mediaeval church were uncovered during the intervention works, the historical value was amplified. Tracing the outline of the original church into the newly laid floor during the restoration project was a move towards allowing the community to experience this “historical evidence” as described in Article 3 of the Venice Charter. Communities seek to understand such details, as they contribute to a deeper connection with and an appreciation of their heritage.

“Excavations” are, citing Article 15 of the Venice Charter, to “facilitate the understanding of the monument and to reveal it without ever distorting its meaning.”

Similarly, the historical value of both oratories at the Jesuit Church in Valletta – originally dating to between 1593 and 1609, but extensively remodelled after 1634 – is tied to the aesthetic value where both the Immaculate Conception oratory and that dedicated to the Assumption (more commonly known as that of the *Onorati*) date back to the early and mid-seventeenth Century and showcase the artistic prowess of Baroque heritage in Malta.

Visible values however are not always the most apparent or logical starting point. Before the old Parish Church of Siggiewi restoration project commenced, the local community were largely unaware of the ruins buried beneath the debris. They had been concealed for decades by the lush vegetation that had thrived and had taken over the site. As the overlying material was removed, successfully uncovering the preserved ruins of the old Siggiewi Parish Church, the public was once again granted visual access and an opportunity to reconnect with this long-forgotten heritage site. In the process, new historic and aesthetic values were attributed to it, along with authentic values tied to a community encouraged to remember and reengage with its past. Authenticity regarding values is highlighted in the Nara Document, where Article 4 states that “authenticity in conservation practice is to clarify and illuminate the collective memory of humanity.”

The ex-votos in the Qrendi Sanctuary are an example of such a community’s collective memory, bringing together individuals and their families to a place that can allow what Article 2 of the Nara Document describes as “respect to the social and cultural values of all societies.” The conservation of the walls supporting these ex-votos therefore took on additional urgency, their preservation closely tied to that of the community’s story heritage, displayed in the artworks.

A community’s values extend beyond the aesthetic and historic. In Article 1.2 the Burra Charter defines cultural significance as the “aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations ... embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects.” Furthermore, it emphasises that “understanding cultural significance comes first” in Article 6.1. A community’s contribution to assigning values and applying importance to them is a step towards ensuring continuity beyond the duration of the restoration project.

A pre-existing thesis study on the Qrendi Sanctuary, carried out by a member of the community was therefore immensely valuable for the project that ensued.<sup>9</sup> This, together with conversations with the Qrendi Local Council and the Qrendi Parish Church allowed the community’s values to be brought to the centre of the intervention project.

Also of historic and aesthetic value, but not only, is the Santa Marija Parish Church in Birkirkara – *il-Knisja l-Qadima* – meaning the old church. Established in 1617, it is renowned for its Renaissance architecture and ornate façade which is attributed to architect Tommaso Dingli. The church’s central doorway is adorned with five escutcheons bearing coats of arms, including those of King Philip II of Spain and Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt, underscoring its historical significance.<sup>10</sup> The church’s interior is equally impressive, featuring intricate sculpture and a design that reflects the artistic trends of its time. What perhaps eclipses the historic and aesthetic values attributed to this church are its persistent structural challenges. During the nineteenth Century, the church experienced multiple structural collapses, including the failure of its roof and dome. These events ultimately led to its abandonment, which lasted for over a century.

Even in the face of such difficulty, after this period of abandonment, the then derelict church was restored and reopened in 1973, and went on to be officially designated as a parish on the 8th May 2005, reinforcing those values already assigned by its community.

The stories associated with sacred art and architecture are always borne within a community. These stories, intangible in nature, are to be integrated into intervention processes where, in accordance with Article 5, Principle 3 of the ICOMOS 2024 Charter, “the role of heritage professionals: The community is the primary holder of expertise on intangible cultural heritage. The role of the heritage professional in relation to the community is to support, facilitate, assist, and advocate, within the parameters of the framework in which both are working and in a manner that is respectful and uses rights-based approaches.”

### **Conservation as a Link between Community and Cultural Re-Engagement in the Restoration Process**

The conservation of heritage is necessarily preceded by research and study, analysis and understanding, where “Restoration” is a “specialised operation” in Article 9 of the Venice Charter and requires “recourse to all the sciences and techniques” in Article 2 of the same charter.

The old Siggiewi Parish Church adopted a multi-phase and interdisciplinary approach. This was conducted in several stages, where the project included vegetation clearance, archaeological excavation, and careful conservation work. A team of architects, archaeologists, craftsmen, and heritage professionals collaborated closely with local authorities and church representatives, following principles of minimum intervention. What followed were discoveries of significant archaeological value. The excavation revealed structural elements indicating multiple phases of church development, including Gothic cross-vaults, sculptured stones, tombstones, and fresco remnants. These findings provided a time capsule, with new vistas into the architectural evolution and religious life in medieval Malta, allowing a new understanding and connection to develop. This is in accordance with Article 3.1 of the Burra Charter which states that “Conservation is based on a respect for the existing fabric, use, associations, and meanings. It requires a cautious approach of changing as much as necessary but as little as possible.”

One of the most notable outcomes of the restoration intervention at the Qrendi Sanctuary was the removal of overpaint from the cupola and reredos. Such an intervention required a well-founded rationale, supported by thorough research reflecting Article 10 of the Nara Document which states that “The understanding of authenticity plays a fundamental role in all scientific studies of the cultural heritage, in conservation and restoration planning.” It was the existence of two historical black and white photographs that first hinted at the possibility of underlying polychromatic surfaces in these two instances, both sourced during the initial values-attributing phase. These underlying strata were uncovered as what was removed was of little interest and the material which was brought to light of greater historical and aesthetic value, and its state of preservation good enough to justify the action in accordance with Article 11 of The Venice Charter) which states that “When a building includes the superimposed work of different periods, the revealing of the underlying state can only be justified in exceptional circumstances and when what is removed is of little interest and the material which is brought to light is of great historical, archaeological or aesthetic value, and its state of preservation good enough to justify the action.” The scientific research and analysis here ranged from existing material characterization to market research of proposed products, where compatibility was the guiding factor. When gilding was discovered within the altar reredos and tested for composition, the identification of the use of gold further established the community’s religious value and

devotion to Our Lady, to which this church is dedicated. The Qrendi restoration project and the craftsmanship it required within its various materials of limestone, marble, plaster, painting, timber and metal allowed for the setup of a *cantiere scuola* where the intangible heritage skills were able to be passed on to new heritage recruits such that, in accordance to Article 6.7.1 of the ICOMOS 2024 Charter, “Traditional knowledge, craft and other skills and techniques in the conservation or ongoing protection and safeguarding of a site should be given preference over contemporary conservation, construction and/or maintenance methods.”

Before the restoration works to the Valletta Jesuit Church Oratories started, both were dilapidated and forgotten. The restoration works, completed in early 2023, consisted of a series of interventions whereby the roofs were repaired, the timber ceilings conserved, incompatible existing services were removed, new lighting and fire detection systems were installed, walls and ceilings were meticulously cleaned and restored and the original colours integrated, masonry elements, apertures and marble floorings were repaired, and the altar and choir stalls were restored. These wide-ranging interventions not only preserved the tangible heritage but served as the catalyst to revive the oratories as cultural hubs in the heart of Valletta. Their completed restoration ensures that these historic spaces remain accessible and appreciated by all those who visit.<sup>11</sup>

While the Birkirkara Santa Marija Parish Church has, in the recent past, undergone significant restoration, it continues to face structural challenges due to its weak foundations and its inherent flawed design. It runs the risk of being closed once again, terminating its engagement with the community, making now the time to study and carry out research on the bedrock and the overlying masonry structure. To date, this has indicated the urgent need for the design and implementation of its overall structural consolidation, preceded by an interim emergency measure involving the reinforcement of the nave walls.

### **Cultural Re-Engagement as an Outcome from the Restoration Process**

It is only after the completion of a restoration project that success may truly be measured. The conclusion of the project does not translate into a fixed state in which heritage is frozen in time. Rather, it has brought the monument to a condition it might have attained had continuous conservation efforts been in place. It is this sustained attention to ongoing conservation that enables heritage to endure. Moreover, it is through cultural re-engagement that long-term care is encouraged and maintained, a need that may, in turn, prompt further action.

Article 8 of the Nara Document states that “Responsibility for cultural heritage and the management of it belongs, in the first place, to the cultural community that has generated it.” This further emphasises the importance of a community’s values in the first place, since it is this same community who will re-engage and ensure its continuation.

Article 5 of the Venice Charter declares that a “socially useful purpose” is crucial for cultural re-engagement and for the heritage to be “maintained on a regular basis” in Article 4.

The old Siggiewi Parish Church was able to engage the public as well as provide educational content through open days, informational materials, and a site museum. This enhanced cultural appreciation and understanding of the site’s historical, social, and educational importance for the community. This was the Department’s first truly multi-disciplinary project and set a model

for integrated heritage management. Beyond its local impact, the project demonstrated best practices in cultural heritage management, aligning with European conservation charters. It served as a model for interdisciplinary collaboration and sustainable site development, receiving national recognition for its achievements.<sup>12</sup>

Every project needs a promoter, and this position was filled by the client within the Qrendi Local Council for the Qrendi Sanctuary. When floral motifs and portraiture were uncovered on the internal timber door, it was the local mayor who recognised the heraldic elements from the coat of arms of Fra Philip Wolfgang von Gutenberg, a notable dignitary of the Order of St John who lived in Qrendi for some time between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth Century and was an important local benefactor.

After years of neglect, the restoration project gave back to the community a functional church, re-establishing the building's originally intended use and opening a new chapter in its history, and its doors to pilgrims from different nationalities participating in the international *Camino Maltés de Santiago de Compostela* which was first held in March 2023 following project completion.<sup>13</sup>

Today the Valletta Jesuit Church Oratories are not only used for religious purposes they were designed for, but also as a venue for *Pietre Vive* Malta, an international Ignatian youth movement that collaborates with the Jesuits' Church Foundation to offer immersive experiences.<sup>14</sup> Their mission is to help individuals rediscover Christian monuments and works of art as spaces for hospitality, evangelization, and prayer. Through guided visits and reflections, *Pietre Vive* invites participants to engage with sacred art not merely for their aesthetics but as visual prayers that connect the present with centuries of spiritual heritage. The Jesuits' Church Foundation in Valletta also offers a vibrant cultural programme that includes music recitals, public lectures, and literary events. The events are designed to provide artistic and spiritual experiences in a historic setting, enhancing the oratories' role in the community. Besides regular mass, these spaces continue to serve the local community and the wider public with additional spiritual and cultural initiatives, renewing interest in the space and attracting new patrons.<sup>15</sup> This is in line with Article 12 of the Burra Charter which states that "Conservation, interpretation and management of a place should provide for the participation of people for whom the place has significant associations and meanings, or who have social, spiritual or other cultural responsibilities for the place." Furthermore, Article 5, Principle 1 of the ICOMOS 2024 Charter states that "Communities are the custodian(s) of their heritage and have the right to control knowledge related to the use of and access to that heritage and who represents them."

On a different note, if the Santa Marija Birkirkara Parish Church is to remain a centre for its religious community and if it is to remain open to visitors keen to admire its architectural beauty and historical significance, then the studies carried out and the implementation of the necessary interventions are crucial. It is only in ensuring its structural stability that the church can remain relevant to the local and national community.

This key role, that of cultural re-engagement, understands that the present intervention is but a continuum, that continued participation and community custodianship are the pillars that will sustain sacred architectural heritage. Community involvement remains essential, calling conservation back to contribute and consolidating those values that will continue to secure this heritage.



Figure 1 - Conservation skills at the Oratory of the Immaculate Conception.



Figure 2 - The transfer of timber conservation skills at the *Tal-Hniena* site.



Figure 3 - The foundations of the earlier church at the *Tal-Hniena* sanctuary.



Figure 4 - The Oratory of the *Onorati* before its conservation.



Figure 5 - The Oratory of the *Onorati* in use for a concert after its conservation.



Figure 6 - Archbishop Mgr Paul Cremona O.P. celebrating Mass at Santa Marija Parish Church, Birkirkara, 26th March, 2011 for the official opening of his pastoral visit.

# Unveiling the Divine: The Conservation and Restoration of the Eighteenth Century Crucifix of the Oratory of the Holy Crucifix in Senglea, Malta

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## Abstract

The eighteenth century sculpted Crucifix of the Oratory of the Holy Crucifix in Senglea stands as a witness to the deep spiritual devotion and artistic legacy of its time. Commissioned by Francesco Varios, one of the members of the confraternity, this Crucifix was brought from Rome in 1736 to serve as the focal point of a sacred space designed for contemplation of Christ's Passion. Following an extensive conservation project, the original polychromy, long concealed beneath multiple layers of overpainting was uncovered, including an extraordinary blue perizoma (loincloth), an unparalleled feature in Malta. The uncovering of the blue perizoma, nuanced anatomical modelling, and the profound expression on Christ's face, neither fully dead nor fully alive, offer contemporary audiences a renewed vision of faith. The project has also revitalised interest in the parish, eliciting diverse reactions, some expressing profound spiritual renewal and appreciation for the restored sculpture, while others debated the uncovering of its original polychromy. This paper also reflects on how the conservation of sacred art, beyond material preservation, can serve as a powerful tool for re-evangelization. By restoring the original integrity and expressive language of the Crucifix, this project has renewed its capacity to inspire faith, contemplation, and devotion, nearly three centuries after it was first created.

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## Introduction

The restoration and conservation of the eighteenth century Crucifix measuring 233 cm x 170 cm, located on the high altar of the Oratory of the Holy Crucifix in Senglea, marks a significant achievement in the safeguarding of Malta's cultural and religious heritage. This project was carried out by Atelier del Restauro Ltd between 10 November 2022 and 15 February 2024.

Recognised for its complexity, the initiative was funded by the Social Causes Fund<sup>1</sup> and managed by the Collegiate Chapter of the Senglea Basilica, led by Archpriest Chev. Can. Robin Camilleri, with the invaluable support of Gino Parnis, the Curator of the Basilica and Rennie Schembri.

Given the intricate challenges posed by the project, a multidisciplinary team was appointed to ensure a holistic approach to the Crucifix's conservation.<sup>2</sup> This paper delves into the historical significance and conservation and restoration challenges of the Crucifix, shedding light on its vital role within the cultural and spiritual life of the Senglea Basilica.<sup>3</sup> Through professional examination and analysis, the factors contributing to the Crucifix's deterioration were assessed. The significance of this project extends beyond the physical conservation itself, encompassing the collaborative efforts it fostered across diverse disciplines. From initial historical research

and scientific diagnostics to hands-on treatment and public re-presentation, the project aimed to reflect current best practices in heritage conservation. It also highlights the growing recognition of sacred art as living heritage; works of enduring spiritual and communal relevance, not merely objects of aesthetic value.

### **Historical Background and Iconography**

The Oratory of the Blessed Crucifix in Senglea stands as a monument to the spiritual aspirations and artistic sophistication of eighteenth century Malta. Completed in 1733 under the direction of architect Francesco Zerafa, the Oratory's masonry and sculptural decoration were entrusted to Pietro Paolo Zahra<sup>4</sup> by the Confraternity of the Crucifix. It was conceived as a focal point of devotion specifically dedicated to the Passion of Christ.

Once the space was ready for regular use, efforts were made to ensure it was suitably adorned. Among the earliest interventions was the installation of a niche at the far end of the oratory to house the Holy Crucifix. This Crucifix, which had been brought from Rome in 1736, is first documented in an inventory dated 23 January 1737, penned by the procurator Paolo Mercieca: "La figura del S.mo Crocifisso la Croce posta nel Altare del nostro Oratorio fodderata di damasco Cremesi con gallone falso e Guernici dorati."<sup>5</sup>

The crimson damask and other valuable fabrics mentioned were acquired during the same month. A marginal note, added at a later point, clarifies the Crucifix's provenance: "D.ta figura di nostro Sig.re Gesù Crocifisso la portò da Roma il nostro F.llo Francesco Varios a sue spese, e ci la diede p. elemosina come li atti del Sig.r no.ro Vincenzo Marchese con l'obbligo di farla nel altare del nostro Oratorio dove al p.ente si trova et in caso di levarla dal d.o Oratorio andera alli Padri Capuccini."<sup>6</sup>

The Crucifix was commissioned by Francesco Varios,<sup>7</sup> a merchant and a member of the confraternity and one of the first chosen members of Malta's Chamber of Commerce.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, as is often the case with gifts not directly commissioned by the Church or confraternities, documentation is sparse, and the artist's identity remains unknown. The sculptor remains anonymous, yet the high quality of execution points toward an artist familiar with the Roman Baroque tradition. The anatomical accuracy, the deeply undercut pleats of the loincloth, and the emotive expression on the face.

The Crucifix has undergone several restorations and was completely repainted more than once throughout its history. The most recent overpainting is believed to have occurred after World War II in 1941, during which the Oratory sustained heavy bombings destroying the Oratory's ceiling and marble flooring.<sup>9</sup>

### **Technical Investigations and State of Conservation**

Initial technical investigations began with a thorough visual assessment, followed by scientific analysis conducted in collaboration with Heritage Malta's Diagnostic Science Laboratories. The analysis aimed to evaluate the sculpture's condition by examining its current state of conservation, construction methods, and constituent materials; specifically the pigments. To achieve this, a scientific approach was adopted, incorporating a range of diagnostic techniques: X-Ray Radiography (XRAD), High-Power Optical Microscopy (HP-OM), Scanning Electron Microscopy with Energy Dispersive X-Ray Spectroscopy (SEM-EDS), Ultraviolet Fluorescence Optical Microscopy (UVf-OM), and Micro Attenuated Total Reflection Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy ( $\mu$ ATR-FTIR). The team of restorers has also collaborated with wood conservator Mr Michael Formosa who carried out the identification of the wood.

X-ray radiography proved instrumental in revealing critical information about the sculpture's construction, its conservation history, and the internal condition of the figure. This imaging technique demonstrated that the sculpture was assembled from multiple wooden components rather than carved from a single block, as evidenced by the presence of joints and numerous nails marking points of attachment. The radiographs also revealed extensive insect damage, visible as numerous flight holes, many of which had been previously sealed during past restorations.

The Crucifix was confirmed to be composed of more than 20 separate wooden elements. Wood identification tests using microscopy and comparative analysis confirmed the use of *Tilia* spp., commonly known as lime or linden wood. This species is known for its fine, workable grain, making it a preferred choice for polychrome sculpture.

Damage from past infestations of wood-boring insects (*Anobiidae*) was extensive, in particular at the back of the sculpture. These flight holes were filled in an earlier intervention using a zinc- and lead-based stucco, applied to conceal insect damage, which showed up brightly in the radiographs due to its high atomic weight. The back of the sculpture was especially fragile, with large voids where the wood had degraded completely and been patched with a plaster made of marble dust.

## **Conservation and Restoration Treatments**

### ***Dismantling and Transportation***

Given the Crucifix's size, heavy weight and fragility, its dismantling required careful planning. Following the removal of the glass door enclosing the niche, the sculpture was dismantled with the aid of a motorised crane. Emergency facing with Japanese paper and reversible adhesive was applied to areas of unstable polychromy. The Crucifix was safely transported to the Atelier del Restauro Ltd laboratory in Naxxar (Malta).

### ***Cleaning Tests and the Uncovering of the Original Polychromy***

The most recent overpaint, likely applied after World War II, consisted of a thick, commercial oil-based layer that gave the figure a darkened skin tone and a white-grey loincloth. Cleaning tests revealed an earlier nineteenth-century intervention beneath this, which introduced a greenish skin tone, a similarly tinted perizoma, and heavily stylised blood droplets. This overpainting entirely obscured the original polychromy, which, remarkably, had survived beneath a dense stucco-like preparation layer.

Scientific analysis of micro-samples from the sculpture confirmed the pigments used during past interventions.<sup>10</sup> Uncovering the original polychromy was exceptionally complex due to the multilayered overpainting. Each layer demanded a targeted approach. For the post-war overpaint, a custom-formulated gel was developed in our laboratory using Pemulen TR-2 in butyl acetate. This solvent gel allowed for selective softening of the uppermost layers.

Through this process, the nineteenth-century repainting was first exposed, its greenish flesh tones, often symbolic of death in nineteenth-century polychromy, marked a significant stylistic departure from the sculpture's original character. Once fully revealed, this layer was photographically documented as a historical intervention and its removal initiated to access the original paint beneath.

The most difficult phase involved the removal of the stucco beneath this greenish layer; the stucco was composed of a thick layer of zinc-and lead-based stucco applied to conceal insect damage. This stage required three months of meticulous scalpel blade work to uncover the fragile original surface. The remarkable discovery was a blue pigment found on the loincloth. Here we understood that the loincloth was originally painted in Prussian blue, a colour we rarely see locally in Crucifixion iconography, and here it symbolises Christ's divinity and transcendence, deviating from the conventional white perizoma typically used to emphasise his humanity.

Another particularly significant observation concerns the impact of the repainting on the sculpture's original physiognomy. In the original carving of the face, the eye is gently closed, subtly modelled to convey a serene or sorrowful expression. However, a later intervention reinterpreted the eye as unnaturally open, disrupting the anatomical coherence and emotional tone intended by the original sculptor. This excessive overpainting introduced stylistic dissonance and misrepresented the work's spiritual message.

### ***Consolidation and Structural Stabilisation***

The degraded wood was consolidated using Paraloid B72 in acetone, applied in varying concentrations. Prior to this, ethanol was introduced to enhance the penetration of the consolidant. Detached paint layers were re-adhered using a flexible acrylic dispersion, selected for its compatibility with polychrome surfaces.

To evaluate the mechanical strength of the wood surrounding the large metal hook on the back of the figure, an area subject to significant stress, ResiDrill analysis<sup>11</sup> was employed. As a load-bearing element, this section required particular attention. The drilling test, which extended through the full thickness of the statue, revealed a low-resistance zone within the first 23 mm from the back surface, most likely resulting from insect damage sustained in the past. Beyond this point, the wood was found to be structurally sound and stable.

Once the thick layer of stucco was removed from the reverse of the sculpture, the original surface revealed a heavy advanced deterioration, attributed to wood-boring insect activity. This degradation likely occurred as a result of prolonged exposure to environmental elements following war-related damage, during which the wall behind the Crucifix had collapsed.

To restore structural integrity, the *tassellatura* technique was implemented. Severely insect-degraded wood at the back was integrated using a dense array of small, custom-cut tulipwood inserts, carefully aligned with the original grain direction and curvature. Once all inserts were in place, the structure was carved with chisels to follow the original shape of the sculpture's back. This approach not only stabilises the structure but also reinstates lost volume in a fully reversible manner, in accordance with conservation ethics. The intervention provides a reliable foundation for subsequent reintegration processes.

### ***Infilling and Retouching***

*Gesso di Bologna* was used to fill lacunae in the preparatory layer. Retouching followed a three-step process: a base tone in gouache, an isolating layer of Lefranc & Bourgeois retouching varnish, and final reintegration using Maimeri varnish colours applied through glazing and the *puntini* technique. A final protective coating of Lefranc & Bourgeois Anti-UV Picture Varnish (Matt) was applied to safeguard the surface from light, pollutants, and atmospheric moisture. This layer also served to unify the surfaces of the restored and original areas, lending a harmonious finish to the completed work.

### ***Art Historical Insights***

Dr Sandro Debono, the project's consulting art historian, emphasises that this Crucifix should not be viewed in isolation from its architectural and devotional context. Notably, it arrived in Malta merely two years after the construction of the Oratory, suggesting that it may have been specifically commissioned for the space. Large sculptures of flanking angels bearing the symbols of the Passion are positioned along the side walls of the Oratory. These are direct replicas of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's angels from the *Ponte Sant'Angelo* in Rome.

This deliberate visual reference evokes the symbolic notion of the bridge of salvation, guiding the faithful toward the Crucified Christ. The sculpture itself challenges traditional iconographic typologies of the Crucifixion, which typically depict Christ as either alive or dead. In this instance, the figure embodies an ambiguous vitality: the head is gently inclined, the eyes are nearly closed, yet the body conveys a dynamic and animated presence. This representation transcends the moment of death, suggesting not simply the crucified Christ, but the resurrected and glorified Christ – divine, eternal, and triumphant over suffering.

This theological interpretation is further reinforced by the use of an exceptional blue perizoma (loincloth), a feature unique within the known corpus of Maltese devotional sculpture. Within the symbolic language of art history, the colour blue is traditionally associated with the infinite, the divine, and the celestial. Its presence here deepens the Oratory's spiritual and iconographic message, positioning the figure of Christ not as a passive victim of the Passion, but as a triumphant, transcendent figure within a broader soteriological narrative.

### ***Public Reception***

The restored Crucifix was unveiled to the public on 23 February 2024 in a solemn liturgical celebration that echoed its original function as a focus for spiritual engagement. Community members expressed a wide range of reactions. Some were deeply moved, experiencing awe and reverence at seeing the Crucifix close to its original beauty. Others were surprised, especially by the blue loincloth. A few even questioned whether we had chosen the blue ourselves or associated it with contemporary local political symbolism and colour

There was debate. There was curiosity. There were strong opinions. But most importantly, people were paying attention. And that is what sacred art is meant to do.

When restored to its original truth, sacred art speaks. It challenges us. It invites us. It reawakens something in us. In that moment, it begins its mission all over again; inviting each viewer to connect with the deeper meanings of faith.

### **Conclusion**

This restoration affirms the importance of integrating historical research, scientific analysis, and sensitive conservation practice in the preservation of sacred heritage. This Crucifix stands not merely as a historical artefact but as a living object of faith.

The project has brought to light new insights into its original appearance and iconographic intent, particularly the use of blue to signify Christ's divinity. It has also highlighted the consequences of cumulative restorations and the ethical responsibility of conservators to balance the preservation of original material with the documentation of its historical evolution.

Ultimately, this Crucifix challenges binary classifications of Christ as either dead or alive, offering instead a vision of the transfigured Christ. This liminality, this theological description, is perhaps the work's most powerful message, one that was buried for decades under layers of overpaint but is now once again visible for all to see. The project stands as a model of interdisciplinary collaboration and reverent intervention, securing a vital piece of Malta's sacred heritage for generations to come.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Social Causes Fund, is a local government fund that provides financial support for projects and initiatives of a religious, philanthropic, cultural, sports, educational, social, or civic nature, or other deserving causes. It is funded by a percentage of gaming revenue, unclaimed prizes, and interest. The fund is administered by a committee that assesses applications and disburses funds to eligible recipients.

<sup>2</sup> The team included Art Historian Dr. Sandro Debono, wood scientist and conservator Michael Formosa, and scientists from Heritage Malta's Diagnostic Science Laboratories — Matthew Grima, Roslyn Debattista, and Marie Camilleri. The conservation work was executed by a dedicated team of restorers led by the author along Atelier del Restauro Ltd conservators Lilli Tanzi, Pierangelo Sabela, Marzia Proietto and Rachel Fenech.

<sup>3</sup> The Collegiate Chapter, under the leadership of Archpriest Rev. Robin Camilleri, has long demonstrated a commitment to preserving the Basilica's invaluable heritage. This dedication was exemplified by the earlier restoration of the polychrome statue of Christ the Redeemer in 2018, also housed in the same Oratory.

<sup>4</sup> See Keith Sciberras, *Francesco Zahra, 1710–1773: His Life and Art in Mid-18th Century Malta*, with contributions by Jessica Borg (Malta: Midsea, 2010), 47–48.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Farrugia, "The Confraternity of the Holy Crucifix, Its Oratory, and Its Feasts," in *Ir-Redentur: History, Art and Cult of the Miraculous Effigy of Christ the Redeemer at Senglea, Malta*, ed. Jonathan Farrugia (Malta: Midsea, 2018), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> According to archival sources reviewed by Rev. Dr Jonathan Farrugia, this commission was independent of the Confraternity itself.

<sup>8</sup> See Carmel Vassallo, "The Chamber of Commerce and the Cotton Trade of Malta in the Eighteenth Century," Vassallo History, <https://vassallohistory.wordpress.com/the-chamber-of-commerce-and-the-cotton-trade-of-malta-in-the-eighteenth-century/> (accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2025).

<sup>9</sup> See Farrugia, "The Confraternity of the Holy Crucifix, Its Oratory, and Its Feasts," 52.

<sup>10</sup> Flesh tones: The base layer contained lead white with small quantities of vermilion, brown ochre, and black. Later repaintings introduced zinc white, barium white, strontium white, and red ochre.

Loincloth: The original blue paint consisted of Prussian blue and lead white. Later additions included zinc white, barium white, and gypsum. Natural ageing phenomena such as the formation of lead soaps and calcium oxalate were also observed.

Blood droplets: These were composed of a complex mixture including red lead, lead tin yellow, lead white, lead aluminium oxide, and traces of vermilion, zinc white, and barium white. An organic red pigment in the original polychromy of the blood droplets may also have been present, though this remains unconfirmed.

<sup>11</sup> Residrill analysis was carried out by Michael Formosa, wood conservator.



Figure 1 - General view of the Oratory of the Holy Crucifix, Senglea, with the restored eighteenth century Crucifix in its niche. The background features important reliquaries, while sculptures of flanking angels — replicas of Bernini's *Ponte Sant'Angelo* figures and paintings of the Passion by Francesco Zahra (1730s) adorn the side walls



Figure 2 - Detail of the torso of the Crucifix during the cleaning intervention. The upper half shows the nineteenth century greenish polychromy, uncovered beneath a post-World War II repainting. The lower half reveals the original eighteenth century polychromy; more translucent, delicate, and subtly modelled — exposed after the later overpaint was removed. The image highlights the contrast in painting techniques and aesthetic intent between the historical layers



Figure 3 - View of the back after the removal of a thick restoration plaster infill, revealing extensive insect-induced wood degradation and structural loss. Right: The same area during the reintegration phase, where missing portions of the wood support were reconstructed using the tassellatura technique. Precisely cut tulipwood wedges were inserted and later carved to follow the original contours of the sculpture, ensuring both structural stability and visual continuity.



Figure 4 - Left: The eye as overpainted in the twentieth century, modified to appear unnaturally open. Centre: Cleaning in progress reveals the nineteenth century repaint and begins to expose the original carving. Right: The original eye, more gently closed, features delicate modelling that conveys serenity and sorrow.



Figure 5 - Detail of the face, before and after interventions.



Figure 6 - The sculpture before and after conservation and restoration interventions. Most notably, the original eighteenth century blue loincloth previously concealed under layers of repaint, was uncovered and preserved, restoring the sculptor's intended chromatic and symbolic expression.

# *Votum Fecit et Gratiam Accepit:* A Collective Miracle

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## **Abstract**

*Votum Fecit et Gratiam Accepit*; a four-letter phrase that denotes a spiritual *quid-pro-quo*. In spite of there being few who could understand Latin, the concept of making a vow and receiving grace in return was very much understood by all. This paper will focus specifically on the ex-voto collection at the Sanctuary of Our Lady at Tal-Ħerba (Birkirkara) as a case study. What makes tal-Ħerba particular, is that, alongside those of Mellieħa and Żabbar, it conserves some of the earliest traces of this tangible testimony of an intangible miracle. Studying the Tal-Ħerba collection alongside possible avenues to re-propose it to the public, could offer a tool-kit to instil a deeper connection that goes beyond the artistic evaluation of each individual piece. Most studies have, so far, focused solely on the ethnographic or artistic merits of singular pieces, perhaps to the detriment of the message that this, and other collections, impart as a whole; namely that graces received are graces shared. The public act of hanging the panels or canvases in churches, often naive in quality, denote the communal benefit of individual miracles, which together attest to the protection that the Virgin offered not only to a select few, but to all those who turn to her in a time of need. The formulaic V.F.G.A represents the link in an unbroken chain of Marian protection that transcends time and space. During an extensive exercise of appraisal, cataloguing and housing of the Tal-Ħerba collection, the Archdiocese's Collections Management Unit had the opportunity to map out the spiritual geography of a sanctuary that albeit small in size, reaches anywhere from a shipwreck in the Dardanelles, to a mugging in the shadow of the pyramids of Giza, to a storm in the trenches of World War I.

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## **Introduction**

*Votum Fecit et Gratiam Accepit*; “A vow was made, a grace was received” is a four-letter phrase that denotes a spiritual exchange. An ex-votive is commissioned as a testament to a miracle or grace received by the devotee during his or her time of need. It depicts a scene with a “sequence of ‘clues’ left by the painter,” to “help the viewer to retrace all steps of the event” and highlights the “narrow escapes from danger” experienced by the protagonist, who frequently signs their name; further attesting to the miracle and the unfailing “benevolent divine providence,” which continues to blur the divide between the “ordinary and the extraordinary”.<sup>1</sup>

Despite there being few who could understand Latin, the concept of making a vow and receiving grace in return was very much understood by all. This paper will focus specifically on the ex-voto collection at the Sanctuary of Our Lady at Tal-Ħerba, in Birkirkara as a case study. What makes the collection at tal-Ħerba noteworthy is that, alongside those of others, such as Mellieħa and Żabbar, it preserves some of the earliest tangible traces of an intangible miracle.

The sanctuary at tal-Ħerba harbours a diverse and geographically extensive collection of ex-voto paintings. Studying the tal-Ħerba collection as well as possible avenues to re-propose it to the public, could offer a toolkit to serve as a foundation to instil a deeper connection that goes beyond the artistic evaluation of each individual piece. Most studies have, so far, focused solely on the ethnographic or artistic merits of singular pieces, perhaps to the detriment of the message that this, and other collections, impart as a whole; namely that graces received are graces shared. The public act of hanging the panels or canvases in churches denotes the communal benefit of individual miracles, which together attest to the protection that the Virgin offered not only to a select few, but to all those who turn to her in a time of need.

### **Beyond the Individual Image**

Ex-votives cannot be interpreted in their entirety by solely studying their materiality alone. Even though every single piece needs to be studied in its totality, noting primarily the mediums used, the size of the work, the quality of the materials and the artistic choices, such as perspective and composition, there is much more that the collection can convey. Despite increasing scholarly interest in ex-voto art,<sup>2</sup> much of the literature continues to focus on the individual panel as an isolated artefact, emphasizing its artistic qualities, iconographic elements, or ethnographic value. It is true that individually, the artworks are captivating, elicit curiosity and offer a snapshot into the daily lives of bygone eras. When viewed in isolation, an ex-voto might appear to recount a unique, highly personal event; a near-drowning, a recovery from illness, a safe return from war. Yet when viewed collectively, these images form a spiritual map, linking the experiences of hundreds of individuals across time and space. Each panel, through its formulaic inscription of V.F.G.A., becomes part of an unbroken chain of Marian devotion.

While such analyses are undoubtedly important, they risk overlooking the overarching message conveyed by the collection as a whole: that received graces are meant to be shared, not hoarded. The recurrence of similar themes, motifs, and expressions underscore not only the ubiquity of suffering and hope but also the shared belief in divine mercy. This idea is embedded in the very structure of votive practice. They present an intangible ‘inseparable bond’ between the divine and the protagonist, which transcends the imagery, and is rather captured through a sequence of events, one which would have started with a prayer and an intercession, the grateful beneficiary, the artist capturing the miracle and the act of donation of the artwork to the sanctuary.

The resultant artworks are hence, “powerful embodiments of a community, encapsulating a multiplicity of constantly increasing social energies.”<sup>3</sup> The Tal-Ħerba collection of ex-votos presents countless vulnerable narratives, which when exhibited side by side, construct a collective wall of graces. These ex-votos come together to showcase the deep bond between the Virgin Mary and a growing community of devotees.<sup>4</sup>

Ex-votos do not “function in isolation” but come together as a “metonym for a narrative of a personal experience which exists simultaneously within the life of the giver and, as a story shared with a wider community, as an element in a multifaceted and enduring embodiment of the society of participants.”<sup>5</sup>

It is this “enduring embodiment”<sup>6</sup> which makes the collection timeless and relevant. Ex-votos capture with immense detail an intrinsic quality harboured by all individuals. The power of hope. The frozen moment captured through the artist’s brushstrokes lends to the ex-voto, a relatable identity. Ex-votos continue to appeal to viewers, allowing them

to interact with the paintings, by attempting to understand the course of events depicted<sup>7</sup> and acknowledging that for the protagonist, faith did indeed shape the outcome of a bleak event, which had reached a point of no return. Despite the time difference, most narratives showcase real-life experiences which are not difficult to imagine. Ex-votos encapsulate human emotions which transcend time and space enabling observers to truly empathise with the protagonists.

### **Wonderfully Believable**

During one of the concluding sessions of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI stated that “This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. It is beauty, like truth, which brings joy to the heart of man, and it is that precious fruit which resists the wear and tear of time, which unites generations and makes them share things in admiration.”<sup>8</sup> In many ways, by being wonderfully believable, art transcends time and brings religious tradition to life.<sup>9</sup>

These works often capture the drama and detail of everyday life: a ship tossed by violent waves of the sea, the flames of a burning home, the wounded body of a soldier. Yet despite their visual limitations, they manage to convey complex emotional and spiritual states with clarity. This “naïve” art, far from being a limitation, is in fact a strength. The unpolished style reinforces the authenticity of the testimony, reminding the viewer that these images were not meant to impress but to express. The objective is to recount personal and individual misfortune, quelled by divine intervention, following a fervent exhortation.

The life of the individual is the very first ex-voto. Having survived the ordeal, the faithful became the first witness to this divine intercession. The commissioning of a panel painting was therefore intended to reinforce this testimony, long after the donor passed. “They are remembrances of trauma, testaments of survival...these modest images had value for their donors.”<sup>10</sup> providing the opportunity for the donor to come to terms with the events and offer a cathartic expression. They present with accuracy and detail the “material acknowledgement of a grace” received, which is then delivered by the “grateful beneficiary” as a ‘donation to a holy shrine’<sup>11</sup> where it is housed in perpetuity, close to an image of the divinity. Ex-votos are hence frequently exhibited across the walls of the sanctuary, further sharing a “composite image of multiple lives.”<sup>12</sup> Although they present different scenes, all ex-votos share this common denominator which unifies the whole collection: the “merciful infinity” of Virgin Mary<sup>13</sup> the image of a loving Mother, watching over her community of believers.

### **Across Time and Space**

Ex-voto donations have been a form of artistic expression since Ancient Greek and Roman times. Generally made from ceramic, terracotta or metal, artefacts were offered to a deity once a mercy was obtained. There were two main categories of votives in the Greco-Roman world: tablets depicting miraculous events, and metal handcrafts usually replicating the part of the body which would have been healed<sup>14</sup> (later called *milagros*). Early Christian communities embraced this pre-existing religious practice. Believers across time and space, continued to show their devotion through images, and the use of ex-votive plaques in sign of ‘veneration’ and “public witness of gratitude” to honour the intervention received.<sup>15</sup>

During the Early-Modern period, this practice grew exponentially. As it spread across the Mediterranean, northern Europe and subsequently towards other continents such as Latin America, certain sanctuaries attributed with particularly miraculous images, became epicentres of ex-votives. Devotional communities found solace, not only when they were physically close to these thaumaturgical sanctuaries, but also if they invoked the auspices of that dedication when they were geographically displaced. This is also evident from the tal-Ħerba collection. The Maltese community, especially seafarers, found relief and accompaniment through the auspices of Virgin Mary of Tal-Ħerba on multiple occasions.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 1825, Lorenzo Grima and his crew narrowly escaped disaster in Capo Calabrino, near modern-day Odessa [THB0260]. Off the Irish coast, the ship “Rob Roy” faced similar peril [THB0036]. In 1854 in Palestine, a gun misfired and injured Saverio Bugeja [THB0313]. Antonio Catania came close to being killed during the Anglo-Egyptian War in 1882 [THB0353], while a Maltese soldier facing death during the Battle of Tobruk (1941-42) invoked the Virgin’s help and survived [THB0144]. These events, scattered across geographies and centuries, are unified through their commemoration of a single sanctuary. They express the belief that time and space are no barriers to divine intervention.

Malta is blessed with several other Marian shrines, all believed to be equally miraculous, such as Our Lady of Mellieħa, Our Lady of Graces in Żabbar, Our Lady of Mercy in Qrendi and more recently Our Lady of Ta’ Pinu. There were also several other Marian invocations on the island that one could resort to in time of need, such as Our Lady of the Abandoned (slavery), Our Lady of Porto Salvo and Our Lady of Stella Maris (mariners), Our Lady of Odigitria (travellers), Our Lady of ‘tal-Ħlas’ (childbirth) and Our Lady of Health. The Knights of Malta were particularly devout to Our Lady of Philermos and the Greek Catholic community had a special affinity towards Our Lady of Damascus.<sup>16</sup> Religious visual and material culture from Maltese churches denote also a strong presence of reproductions of foreign Marian images, adopted in Malta as facsimiles of miraculous shrines abroad, such as Our Lady of *Salus Populi Romani*, Our Lady of Trapani, Our Lady of Good Council, Our Lady of Loreto and Our Lady of Sorrows (*Soledad*). With such a wide selection of invocations, the title under which the Virgin is invoked, in our cases the Graces of Tal-Ħerba, represented not just an unconditional faith in the Mother of God, but a firm belief in the miraculous ‘track record’ of a specific shrine. All the ex-votos hung inside the church, served to encourage the believer to partake in all the other miracles by adding their own.

### **A Collective Miracle: Devotion in Community**

Hannah Baader notes that such votives are “powerful embodiments of a community, encapsulating a multiplicity of constantly increasing social energies.”<sup>17</sup> They do not function in isolation but in concert, forming a visual and spiritual chorus. Tal-Ħerba’s walls, filled with these images, become a monument to a shared hope. Each image invites the viewer to enter a narrative and walk with the protagonist from peril to deliverance. In doing so, they foster empathy, not just admiration. The humble aesthetic renders the miracle more accessible, more believable. The lack of artistic grandeur encouraged the devotee to contribute with whatever art was financially or stylistically accessible. The only requirement was to give the opportunity to the viewers to immerse themselves, interact with the painting and attempt to understand the course of the events depicted.

“The Ex-voto negotiates a continuous loop of devotional energy between the field of the personal and the domestic, and that of society at large.”<sup>18</sup> In 1920, Teresa Portelli pled “Jena niringazia bla tarf lill Madonna tal-Ħerba għal grazia li tatni billi f’ marda kalila li cont ninsab fiha aghliex malli irricoreit leiha clait il grazia mixtiēka tal feikien. [sic]” [THB0062]<sup>19</sup> On other occasions the prayer was communal: Valenti Meilach and his crew were caught in a storm close to Elba in March 1791: “Voto fatto da Padrone Valenti Meilach e suoi Compagnij che si ritrovarono in una grandissima tempesta di mare nella costa di Livorno e per la volonta e divina mi[se]ricordia si sono salvati dentro di Porto Ferrara li 8 Marzo 1791.” [THB0013]<sup>20</sup>

## **The Tal-Ħerba Project**

Between August 2024 and March 2025, the Archdiocese of Malta’s Collections Management Unit undertook a major initiative to digitise and conserve the Tal-Ħerba ex-voto collection. Over 400 votive paintings, previously in poor storage conditions, were catalogued.

The project involved site visits, conservation treatments (including anoxia disinfection), and the development of a provisional reserve collection. Each object was photographed, measured, and assigned a new inventory number according to the standard operational procedure of the Archdiocese of Malta. Any previous labelling was recorded for scholarly cross-referencing. Finally, each panel was wrapped in conservation-grade materials and placed in clearly labelled protective sleeves, ensuring their preservation for future generations. This step was crucial for the appraisal process, leading to the possibility of future exhibition. This paper is ultimately an extension of this collection management exercise since it uses data and metadata gathered as a foundation for a holistic re-proposal of the collection.

## **Conclusion: A Miraculous Future**

Any attempt to interpret the Tal-Ħerba collection for modern audiences must begin with an appreciation for the reality these paintings once represented. To the original donors, the miracles were not symbolic or metaphorical. “Many [ex-votives]... are now in ruinous condition. While this history of indifference and even disdain suggests that votive panel paintings, were from time to time viewed as having neither material value nor aesthetic merit...”,<sup>21</sup> the cathartic emotion felt at that moment of divine rescue was immediate, real, and transformative. Over time, such emotion may be obscured by scepticism of the miracle.

There are many reasons why votive offerings have declined: changes in religious practice, increased secularization, artistic constraints, or reluctance to share intimate spiritual experiences. However, this decline contributes to the allure and preciousness of historic collections. Visitors today must be guided to see that these are not superstitious relics but deeply human artefacts, products of vulnerability, faith, and gratitude.

Crucially, ex-votos are not transactional. They are not mere *quid-pro-quo*s offered in exchange for a miracle. Rather, they are manifestations of a relationship that predates the crisis itself. The belief in Our Lady of Graces did not commence after the grace was received. For the protagonists, the celestial Mother was already present, already trusted, already loved. The miracle was not the beginning of faith but a confirmation of it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cecilia De Carli, “The Ex-Votos of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio: Valorization and Transmission of a Cultural Deposit of History and Faith,” *Church, Communication and Culture* 3, no.3 (2018): 362-378.

<sup>2</sup> See Isabelle Borg, *The Maritime Ex-Voto: A Culture of Thanksgiving in Malta* (Malta: Heritage Books, 2005); Joseph Muscat, “Maritime Ex-Voto Paintings,” *Treasures of Malta IV*, no.3. (Summer 1998): 13-18; Joseph Muscat, *Il-Kwadri Ex-Voto Marittimi Maltin* (Malta: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Baader, “Vows on Water: Ship-Ex-Votos as Things, Metaphors and Mediators of Communalty,” in *Ex-Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2016), 230.

<sup>4</sup> See De Carli, “The Ex-Votos of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio,” 369.

<sup>5</sup> J. Garnett & G. Rosser, “The Ex-Voto between Domestic and Public Space: From Personal Testimony to Collective Memory,” in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 54.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See De Carli, “The Ex-Votos of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio,” 368.

<sup>8</sup> May 7, 1964 - *Encounter with Artists*: <http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/en/organico/cardinale-presidente/texts/art1.pdf> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> June 2025).

<sup>9</sup> See De Carli, “The Ex-Votos of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio,” 376.

<sup>10</sup> Fredrika H. Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Garnett and Rosser, “The Ex-Voto between Domestic and Public Space,” 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>13</sup> See De Carli, “The Ex-Votos of the Sanctuary of the Holy Virgin of Succour of Ossuccio,” 363.

<sup>14</sup> See S. Sabbatani, S. Fiorino & R. Manfredi, “Plagues and Artistic Votive Expressions (Ex-Voto) of Popular Piety,” *Infez Med* 27, no. 2 (2019): 202.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 198–211.

<sup>16</sup> On Marian devotions in Malta see, Vincent Borg ed., *Marian Devotions in the Islands of St Paul (1600-1800)* (Malta: Historical Society, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Baader, “Vows on Water: Ship-Ex-Votos as Things, Metaphors and Mediators of Communalty,” 217–245.

<sup>18</sup> Garnett & Rosser, “The Ex-Voto between Domestic and Public Space,” 60.

<sup>19</sup> “I thank profusely our Lady of tal-Ħerba for the grace she extended during a vicious illness that I was suffering from, because when I beseeched her, I received the desired healing grace.”

<sup>20</sup> “Vow made by Padrone Valenti Meilach and his companions who found themselves caught in a great sea storm along the coast of Livorno, at by the will of divine mercy they found safe harbour in Porto Ferraio on the 8th of March 1791”.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety*, 14.



Figure 1 - Spiritual map of the miracles at sea whose location or coordinates are given in some of the ex-voto descriptions



Figure 2 - Teresa Portelli (1920), oil on panel, Tal-Herba Collection - Birkirkara



Figure 3 - Spiritual map of the miracles at sea whose location or coordinates are given in some of the ex-voto descriptions

# The Pedagogical and Moralistic Implications of Sacred Art Conservation for History Teachers

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## Abstract

Present-day history pedagogies revolve around the Source Method. This pedagogy envisages students engaging with primary and secondary sources by probing them with a line of inquiry (adapted from those procedures used by historians) to develop historical interpretations in the midst of said sources' biases, prejudices, and perspectives. One of the skills which history students ought to develop is historical empathy: the ability to interpret historical sources towards the deciphering of how contemporary cultural norms and personal circumstances informed the feelings, thoughts, and intentions behind historical persons' actions. This empathy-oriented history pedagogy is intended to instil in pupils: (i) an appreciation for the past and for cultural heritage; (ii) an understanding of the actions and beliefs which informed not only contemporary actions, but how these historical acts have come to influence the present-day; and (iii) a broader grasp of how context informs morality and what ethical lessons may be learned from the past. These latter aims and the general prerogatives of the Source Method intersect with the Conservation of Sacred Arts and Architecture in a number of appreciable ways. The physical existence of these historical sources in locations easily accessible to students on outings, like churches and museums, brings a vivacity to the learning of history seldom found in the classroom. The process of conserving cultural-religious heritage can (i) demonstrate to students the latter-day importance of these historical sources as exemplars of the cultural continuities between past and present, (ii) act as a material basis for empathetic pedagogies, and (iii) aid in revitalizing the perceived importance of these art- and architectural-works in the popular consciousness. Therefore, in the Deweyan pedagogical tradition: the interplay of students' lived experiences and culturally relevant lines of inquiry can provide the basis for the moral and democratic formation of the pupil.

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## Introduction

The conservation of material cultural heritage in general, and of those artefacts and sites which constitute the sacred arts in particular, is predicated upon the development, maintenance, and promulgation of a moralistic historical literacy amongst an active citizenry. The material aspects of conservation, principally the investment of temporal, fiscal, and manual resources towards the preservation and/or aggrandisement of the artefacts or sites in question, must invariably be founded upon a psychological concern. Active citizens must practice the act of conservation in the socio-cultural mindscape – that is to say they must collectively feel responsible for the preservation of their cultural heritage – before putting into action any concrete act of preservation.<sup>1</sup> An effective way to achieve this socio-psychological and ethical end is through the education of child-students during the school years. The deployment of a sound history

pedagogy as a form of critical citizenship education, must therefore, be considered the first step in the formation of historically literate and active citizens keen to conserve their heritage.<sup>2</sup> This paper shall, firstly, outline a theoretical framework which history teachers, wishing to practice sound pedagogy, ought to keep in mind, and, secondly, demonstrate, by way of a case-study, how this pedagogy may be performed so as to encourage in learners a sensitivity towards the conservation of the sacred arts.

### Theoretical Framework

Traditional pedagogies were marked by teacher-centred deliveries that lauded educators as the unquestionable experts of their fields; whose express purpose was the ‘banking’ or ‘depositing’ of their information into the (presumably unknowledgeable) minds of their learners. These pedagogies, identified with Freire’s “banking model of education,” have since become old hat, as they erroneously suggest that students’ minds were *tabulae rasae* and that pupils could not (and, therefore, should not) contribute in the construction of their own learning.<sup>3</sup> Present-day pedagogies, however, have shifted towards student-centred and co-constructionist approaches that privilege classroom teaching with the intellectual, ethical, personal, and experiential contributions of students.<sup>4</sup>

History pedagogists, conscious of the complexities of their discipline, the human fallibilities of educators’ substantive recollection, and young learners’ capabilities for grasping abstract and critical thinking skills, have heeded this student-centred call-to-action.<sup>5</sup> Modern-day history pedagogies, identified by the moniker of the “Source Method,” seek to move beyond the unidirectional conveyance of substantive facts from teacher to student; instead, the procedural analysis and interpretation of historical sources through the use of critical elicitation and dialogic discussions has become the new vogue. The history teacher must mediate student’s interactions with primary and secondary sources so that they can begin to mimic the procedure of historians-proper.<sup>6</sup> Educators are wont to develop lessons with learning objectives (LOs) that couch the learning of substantive-curricular knowledge (the usual fare of historical persons, dates, and events) within procedural activities that allow students to develop their thinking skills through the inquiry-based analysis of sources.<sup>7</sup>

The procedural analysis of primary and secondary sources through the deployment of historical inquiry is described by Barton and Levstik as a tripartite model. Firstly, educators and learners must recognise that historical sources are incomplete and imperfect pieces of evidence. A singular source cannot present a full nor unbiased perspective and the greater the quantity of sources under investigation, the clearer the final assortment of evidence will be.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the ‘historical detective,’ for this is what the student is liable to become under such procedural programs, must acknowledge the crucial role which critically-minded questions play in developing a line of inquiry that may extract evidence from the given sources. Educators ought to carefully craft these lines of inquiry to direct learners’ thought-processes towards the identification of and parsing through those biases, falsehoods, exaggerations, non-reliabilities, and contradictions which emerge when analysing sources individually and in tandem.<sup>9</sup> Thirdly, history students, now equipped with carefully deduced pieces of evidence, must be directed to construct their own evidence-based and critically-defensible opinions and narratives.<sup>10</sup> Barton and Levstik acknowledge that this final step can be particularly difficult to achieve as students must shed the traditional understanding of history as a fixed narrative, long-since established by historians and incapable of contestation.<sup>11</sup> Instead, they must come to understand that interpretations of sources and the subsequent formation of opinions and narratives is a continuously on-going process of constructivism marked by re-evaluations and changes in previously held positions.<sup>12</sup>

This procedural or source-oriented approach to history teaching, aside from benefitting students' cognitive development by enabling the formation of universal skills such as critical-mindedness and evidential-thinking,<sup>13</sup> must also be seen as a human-centred process. Students, in their procedural mimicry of historians and other scholars, must encounter the human in those sources proffered for analysis: primary sources were the handiwork of the long-deceased and secondary accounts were produced by others living after the period under discussion. The creation of all sources, and their later analysis, must invariably be seen through both a humanistic and empathetic lens.<sup>14</sup> Historical empathy is defined as that process or transferable skill which caters for the understanding of historical persons' feelings, thoughts, and actions in context. An empathetic reading of the historical record is an acknowledgement and awareness of the political, socio-economic, religious, philosophical, and cultural contexts which informed the beliefs and actions of those persons whose historicity is known from the given sources.<sup>15</sup>

At this juncture, the astute history teacher is wont to make certain ethical deductions: the modern-day student may take from their learning of history a critical-mindedness, crucial for the formation of a historically literate and active citizen, but they may also garner ethical lessons. The cruelties and follies of the historical past are all warnings against immoralities and the good which has been achieved through past human cooperation should be construed as a model of virtue.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, this context-oriented empathetic lens has present-day applications relevant to the lived experiences of students: just as historical persons were informed by their circumstances, so too are the modern-day peoples which students will encounter. The ability to empathetically reflect on one's self and on the other has moralistic implications which not only exceed the remit of the discipline of history, but which are becoming increasingly crucial in the multicultural and pluralistic societies pupils must navigate.<sup>17</sup>

Teachers, whether of history or any other school subject, who wish to design relevant pedagogies which encourage pupils' development into educated and active citizens ought to pay heed to the ideas of John Dewey. Dewey, an early twentieth century American educational theorist, posited an experience-oriented pedagogy which acknowledges students' opinions, lived experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds as crucial facets of any well-meaning, student-centred learning.<sup>18</sup> Those adults who are stakeholders in the education of child-students, such as educational staff, parents, and those setting-down educational policies, ought to ensure that in-class pedagogies and curricula are formulated to respond to the moral, cultural, and intellectual concerns which students may have.<sup>19</sup> Deweyan pedagogists must, therefore, act as mediators who provide the resources and lessons best suited to meet the needs of both the curriculum and their pupils. They must also guide students in constructing an academic and ethical understanding of the given topic, whilst parsing through the real-world implications, problems, and solutions that are related to said topics.<sup>20</sup> These aims are to be achieved in a dialogic format: educators must further mediate diplomatic, respectful, and evidence-based in-class discussions that mimic the democratic process undertaken by learned and active citizens.<sup>21</sup>

The intersections between procedural history pedagogies and the Deweyan program are self-evident from the above descriptions. The academic discipline of history, oriented as it is towards the critically-minded inquiry of sources and the formation of evidence-based, rational, and defensible opinions and narratives, is crucial for the formation of an active citizenry and, therefore, a well-functioning democracy.<sup>22</sup> The analytical skills garnered from historical inquiry can help students, in their future roles as adult citizens, to parse through the biases, agendas, and contradictions in political propaganda, news articles, and other present-day sources. The moralistic and empathetic qualities avowed by any truly humanistic reading of the historical record affords the opportunity to formulate the ethical component of a Deweyan classroom:

discussions about contemporary moral issues can be founded upon an acknowledgement of their historical contexts. The end result would be the creation of a historically-literate, active citizenry who can skillfully traverse contemporary issues, such as the conservation of cultural heritage, in a learned manner.<sup>23</sup>

### **A Case-Study of Sacred Arts Conservation**

The above theoretical framework, which seeks to intersect the concerns of the history pedagogist with those of the Deweyan pro-democratic program, must now be placed within a practical example that may well be replicated within the classroom and which, ultimately, aids in the formulation of a socio-psychological concern favouring the conservation of artefacts and sites of cultural value.

The sacred arts site chosen for this case-study is the Old Parish Church of St Catherine of Alexandria, now dedicated to St Gregory the Great, in Żejtun – a village in the South-East district of Malta (see Fig. 1). This church, though of a modest architectural disposition in relation to the far grander Baroque exhibited by the New Parish Church of St Catherine in Żejtun, boasts some notable features. The austere Romanesque facade is largely replicated in its interior design, though a partial Gothic vaulting and a smallish dome give the building some flair. The church's history, however, is by far its most alluring feature.<sup>24</sup>

Between 6-7 July 1614, the Ottoman Turks, by then having largely abandoned the Western Mediterranean in favour of the Levant and their aging empire, attempted a raid upon Malta. They landed some 60 vessels and 6,000 men at the port of Marsaxlokk before making their way up to Żejtun and committing to their piratical ends. The locals evacuated to the fortified Cottonera region; whilst some hurried themselves to St Gregory's where they lit a brazier alerting the armed forces of the Hospitaller Order. The cavalry then made quick work of the invaders, scaring them-off having achieved little in the way of their intended pillaging.<sup>25</sup>

The Old Parish Church is also associated to another, altogether more peaceful, event: the annual St Gregory's Feast Day procession (see Fig. 2), which took place every 12 March and spanned the 18-kilometre-long track from the Mdina Cathedral to the Parish Church in Żejtun. Conceived of as a national pilgrimage, all of Malta's parishes used to contribute clerics, confraternity members, and other persons to the procession; however, the event was largely under the direction of the Mdina Cathedral Chapter. Historical documentation confirms that this procession has been performed since at least 1543, but it is likely that the event dates back to the late medieval period from whence the church-proper emerges.<sup>26</sup>

The history teacher, having made themselves knowledgeable of the above importance of this sacred arts site, may then begin to orient these substantive facts towards the development of a lesson or sequence of lessons whose LOs target both these facts and any related inquiry-based and empathy-oriented skills.<sup>27</sup> This case-study is applicable to the sub-topic on the medieval chapels of Malta from the Year 8 (Form 2) national syllabus<sup>28</sup> and this site in particular, laden as it is with historic, cultural, and folkloristic significance, can become the principal source under investigation during a lesson or lesson-sequence.

The targeted LOs, oriented towards the procedural interpretation of the source-proper and the achievement of certain universal skills, may be presented along particular lines of inquiry.<sup>29</sup> The educator may ask students to question the historic importance of the procession and whether it remains significant in the present-day and, if so, to what degree. Points of discussion also orient

themselves around the changing socio-cultural and religious landscape from the late medieval and early modern past to the present: has St Gregory's fallen to the wayside? If so: what does that say about the contemporary social landscape? Have these changes been positive or negative and why? Should this site be preserved for future generations even if it is not as explicitly relevant as it once was? What can be done to ensure the protection of this site?<sup>30</sup> At this stage, effort has already been made to facilitate class discussions which focus on the empathetic acknowledgement of this site's cultural importance, both within its historical and contemporary socio-religious contexts. The suggestion has been planted, indeed, rooted within the implication that such a church should act as the premier source for the lesson's discussion, that this site, and other sacred art sites and artefacts, act as witnesses to the cultural narrative of the local peoples – in this case the Maltese – and so deserve that modicum of respect which preservation and conservation proffer. The educator, having only tackled the processional narrative and the local religious context, can already mediate democratic discussions which ought to be had by an active citizenry respectful of the historical contexts which have determined the present-day's circumstances. The moralistic and empathetic prerequisites for the formation of a socio-culturally aware mindscape have been laid by bringing the past and present into dialogue with each other:<sup>31</sup> but more work can and should be done to further this goal.

Local sacred arts sites and artefacts, such as St Gregory's Church, explicitly reflect the traditionally Christian, specifically Catholic, character of Maltese culture and identity. At first glance they posit a deceptively homogenous history. A closer look, however, suggests a far more complex picture: Malta, though nominally Catholic, is awash with cross-cultural narratives – particularly of the Islamic other. The discussions being presently had about the changing socio-religious landscape of a modern, and increasingly multicultural, Malta are nothing new – as the raid of 1614 suggest. These realisations, thus, offer fertile ground upon which a second line of empathy-oriented historical inquiry may be had. The given case-study provides a look into the heterogenous nature of early modern Malta and presents the Islamic other in a clearly antagonistic role. Through the use of other relevant historical and modern sources, pupils may be directed to conduct a comparative analysis between peaceful and bellicose representations of the Islamic and non-Islamic other in the early modern period and the present day. Students ought to be urged to reflect upon questions of historic and present-day incidents of xenophobia, on how relations with the other were conducted, and, ultimately, on how a pluralistic society ought to balance the local and other in order to promote universal respect between different cultures.<sup>32</sup> At this stage, that arc of inquiry-based contemplation and empathy-oriented reflection which had been instigated at the beginning of the lesson or lesson-sequence has reached its apotheosis as students, having initially started from the humble doorsteps of St Gregory's Church, have been led into discussing such wide-ranging issues as multiculturalism and pluralism.<sup>33</sup>

The history teacher, having arrived at these various substantive, procedural, and citizenship-oriented LOs, is then tasked with crafting a lesson or lesson-sequence to effectively host these themes.<sup>34</sup> Students may be divided into pairs or groups and given resource-packs, collections of materials, such as source analysis handouts, flash cards, and so forth, that direct them to discuss the above topics between themselves. A period of feedback, in the form of a class-wide discussion, may then be held with the teacher in their explicit role as a Deweyan mediator.<sup>35</sup> These LOs may be framed as a preface to an outing-visit to St Gregory's Church – an event which may further students' learning by grounding the knowledge garnered in-class within the vivacious materiality of the site-proper.<sup>36</sup> Various possible modes of assessment may follow from there: essays, worksheet exercises, and/or group projects – such as posters and presentations.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Sacred arts sites and artefacts, in their roles as witnesses to the ever-changing socio-cultural landscape and as points of intermediation between the past and present which can and should inspire debate and reflection, ought to be conferred the respect of preservation. This conservation should be instigated within the socio-psychological mindscape: within the popular consciousness of a historically-literate and active citizenry keen on protecting their cultural heritage and on developing their society to meet the pluralistic and multicultural realities of the present-day. The creation and implementation of Deweyan history pedagogies which extol inquiry-based and empathy-oriented interpretations and analyses of sources and which demand reflections upon the historical narrative vis-à-vis pupils' lived experiences are crucial to the development of this active citizenry. The orientation of history pedagogies, vivacious outings, and relevant after-work towards the facilitation and mediation of democratic discussions of both intellectual and moralistic matters invariably contributes to the formation of that popular consciousness which enables the conservation of the sacred arts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In proposing a psychological factor behind the necessity to conserve cultural heritage, this paper appreciates the position held by Y. Rosilawati et al., "A Cultural Psychology, Social Identity, and Community Engagement in Heritage Conservation Sites," *Utopia y Praxis Latinoamericana* 25, no.7 (2020): 81-92; while rejecting or at least pre-empting the simplistic and cost-factor analysis of cultural heritage as a capital proposed by I. Rizzo and D. Throsby, "Chapter 28. Cultural Heritage: Economic Analysis and Public Policy," in *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*, eds V.A. Ginsburg and D. Throsby (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier BV, 2006), 983-1016.

<sup>2</sup> Y. Pérez-Guilarte and R. Garcia-Moris, "The Role of Intangible Heritage in Critical Citizenship Education: An Action Research Case Study with Student Primary Education Teachers," *Education Sciences* 13, no.8 (2023): 801, discuss the intersection between an appreciation of the intangible aspects of cultural heritage and the development of a historical-literate and critical citizenship education. This paper draws inspiration from this discussion by couching the intangible aspects of heritage as an inherent aspect of the materiality of sacred arts sites and artefacts which become evident upon educated reflections of this ephemera. Moreover, history pedagogy, the expertise of the present author, is inter-linked with the creation of a critical-minded active citizenry as shall be made plain in this paper. See also, M. Ferreras-Listán et al., "Chapter 10: Heritage Education as a Tool for Creating Critical Citizens: Analysis of Conceptions of Teachers in Training," in *Handbook of Research on Citizenship and Heritage Education*, eds Delgado-Algarra et al., (Pennsylvania: IGI Globa/Information Science Reference, 2020), 199-218.

<sup>3</sup> P. Freire, "The Banking Model of Education," in *Critical Issues in Education: An Anthology of Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Provenzo (California: Thousand Oaks; London: SAGE, 2026 [1970]), 105-117; P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 57-60.

<sup>4</sup> This literature on student-centred and constructivist pedagogies is vast. See, for instance, K. S. Krahenbuhl, "Student-Centred Education and Constructivism: Challenges, and Clarity for Teachers," *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 89, no.3 (2016): 97-105.

<sup>5</sup> The psychological capabilities of young learners have been demonstrated by K.C. Barton and L. S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 191-197.

<sup>6</sup> See Y. Vella, *In Search of Meaningful History Teaching: A Collection of Research Work on the Teaching of History* (Malta: HTA, 2009), 8-10; R. Ashby and P. Lee, "Discussing Evidence," *Teaching History* 48 (1987): 13-17.

<sup>7</sup> See Vella, *In Search of Meaningful History Teaching*, chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> See Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common*, 191-202.

<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.* See also, E. Andersson-Bakken and K. Klette, "Teachers' Use of Questions and Responses to Students' Contributions During Whole Class Discussions: Comparing Language Arts and Science Classrooms," in *Teaching and Learning in Lower Secondary Schools in the Era of PISA and TIMSS*, eds K. Klette et al., (New York: Springer International, 2016), 63-84.

<sup>10</sup> See Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common*, 82-85.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, 200.

<sup>12</sup> See T. Copeland, "Constructing History: All Our Yesterdays," in *Teaching the Primary Curriculum for Constructive Learning*, eds M. Littledyke and L. Huxford (UK: David Fulton, 1998), 119-130.

<sup>13</sup> See Teaching History Editorial, "What's the Wisdom on ... Evidence and Sources," *Teaching History* 176 (2019): 22-25.

<sup>14</sup> See P. Otto, "History as a Humanity: Reading and Literacy in the History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 26, no.1 (1992): 51-60.

<sup>15</sup> See Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common*, chapters 11 and 12. See also, S. Briffa, *Empathy in the Teaching of History with Special Reference to Maltese Adolescents*. Unpublished Bachelors of Education Dissertation, University of Malta, 1998, chapter 1; P. Lee and D. Schemilt, "The Concept that Dares not Speak its Name: Should Empathy Come Out of the Closet?," *Teaching History* 143 (2011): 39-49.

<sup>16</sup> See A. Peterson, "Moral Learning in History," in *Debates in History Teaching*, eds I. Davies (London: Routledge, 2010), 160-171.

<sup>17</sup> See Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common*, chapter 12.

<sup>18</sup> See L.E. Mason, "The Significance of Dewey's Democracy and Education for 21st Century Education," *Education and Culture* 33, no.1 (2017): 41-57.

<sup>19</sup> See C. Farrugia, "Schools and their Curricula," in *Themes in Education: A Maltese Reader*, ed. R.G. Sultana (Malta: Mireva, 1991), 75-97.

<sup>20</sup> See H.C. Boyte, "A Different Kind of Politics: John Dewey and the Meaning of Citizenship in the 21st Century," *The Good Society* 12, no.2 (2003): 1-15.

<sup>21</sup> See Mason, "The Significance of Dewey's Democracy and Education for 21st Century Education"; See also, S. MacMath, "Implementation a Democratic Pedagogy in the Classroom: Putting Dewey into Practice," *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education* 1, no.1 (2008): 1-12.

<sup>22</sup> See Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common*, chapters 2 and 13.

<sup>23</sup> See Vella, *In Search of Meaningful History Teaching*, 100-101. See also, I. Davies et al., "What is Good Citizenship Education in History Classrooms?," *Teaching History* 106 (2002): 37-43; R. Harris, "Citizenship and History: Uncomfortable Bedfellows," in *Debates in History Teaching*, ed. I. Davies (London: Routledge, 2010), 185-196; A. Wrenn, "Build It In, Don't Bolt It On: History's Opportunity to Support Critical Citizenship," *Teaching History* 96 (1999): 6-12.

<sup>24</sup> See W.R. Zahra, *A Guide: The Parish Church of St Catherine at Żejtun and Its Environments* (Malta: Historical Society of Żejtun, 1969).

<sup>25</sup> See C. Debono, “The Late Stages of the Ottoman Razzia on Malta in 1614,” in *The Turkish Raid*, ed. R. Abela (Malta: Wirt iż-Żejtun, 2014), 22-29.

<sup>26</sup> See Zahra, *A Guide: The Parish Church of St Catherine at Żejtun and Its Environments*.

<sup>27</sup> See Vella, *In Search of Meaningful History Teaching*, chapter 2.

<sup>28</sup> See Department of History, *Curriculum Annexe. History: Learning and Assessment Programme: Year 8* (Malta: Directorate for Learning and Assessment, 2023), 16.

<sup>29</sup> As noted by Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*, chapter 10. See also, Andersson, Bakken and Klette, “Teachers’ Use of Questions and Responses to Students’ Contributions During Whole Class Discussions: Comparing Language Arts and Science Classrooms.”

<sup>30</sup> As inspired by the above cited works.

<sup>31</sup> These conclusions can be drawn from the discussion in Mason, “The Significance of Dewey’s Democracy and Education for 21st Century Education.” See also, Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*, chapter 8.

<sup>32</sup> See Y. Vella, *Teaching History in the Secondary School: Approaches, Multiculturalism, and Writing Skills* (Malta: HTA, 2016), chapter 3 and 4. See also, A.A. Azzopardi, “Raison d’Etre dor Multicultural Education in Malta,” *Malta Review of Education Research* 5, no.1 (2008): 118-128; Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*, chapter 11; P. Bartolo, “Preparing Teacher for Diversity,” *Malta Review of Educational Research* 6, no.1 (2008): 1-14.

<sup>33</sup> These aims have been opined by J. Blokker, “Building A Global Citizenship from Cultural Heritage,” in *Inclusive Citizenship. Studien zur Politischen Bildung*, eds S. Kenner et al., (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2025), 71-83.

<sup>34</sup> See Vella, *In Search of Meaningful History Teaching*, chapter 2.

<sup>35</sup> The efficacy of group – or pair-work and the crucialness of dialogic pedagogies within the history classroom have been discussed by Vella, *In Search of Meaningful History Teaching*, chapters 3 and 5.

<sup>36</sup> See C. Fredella and L. Zecca, “Local History and the Construction of Identity: A Case Study in the Field of Education for Active Citizenship,” *Research in Schools* 100 (2020): 88-102.

<sup>37</sup> See Vella, *In Search of Meaningful History Teaching*, chapter 10. See also, Vella, *Teaching History in the Secondary School*, chapters 5 and 6; J. Philpott, “Assessment,” in *Debates in History Teaching*, ed. I. Davies (London: Routledge, 2010), 260-272.



Figure 1 - The façade of the Chapel of St Gregory, Žejtun. Copyright: CC-BY-SA.  
Photo Credit: Wikipedia User: Reuv1. Date: 2018



Figure 2 - The Procession of St Gregory in the Past. Copyright: Wirt iż-Żejtun, 2013. Photo Credit: Ruben Abela, Tony Abela, Saviour Delia, Frank Marsh, and Keith Vella. Date: 2012/13

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

# The Visual Gospel: The Role of Sacred Art in Re-Evangelization

Mgr Prof. Emmanuel Agius

*President of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation*

I have already had the privilege and honour of delivering the welcome address of this prestigious European Conference on sacred art conservation as a vehicle for evangelization. It is now my task to return to this podium and offer some concluding reflections on the breadth of scholarly presentations which we have followed – presentations that have explored not only the authentic purpose of sacred art but also the true identity of cathedrals.

I must confess that my delivering yesterday's opening remarks was for me a far easier task. I had the benefit of a carefully prepared script, the product of several days of thoughtful reflection on the theme of this gathering. Today, however, I find the responsibility of concluding this Conference more daunting. It is no small task to coherently weave together and distill the richness and creativity of ideas, the diversity of outstanding case studies, and the multitude of ethical frameworks and holistic conservation practices that have been presented and discussed over the past days at this high-level European forum.

## **Cathedrals of Beauty: Gateways to Faith**

Restricting the function of sacred images to mere decorative or aesthetic representations of socio-cultural ideals is tantamount to missing a high note in the liturgical symphony composed of sacred images, architecture, music and rites. Sacred images as represented in painting, sculpture, stained glass, or mosaic obviously express human, social and cultural realities, and add aesthetic value to the interior spaces and exterior fabrics of cathedrals and churches. But sacred images are primarily an indispensable vehicle of instruction to the faithful in the content of divine revelation, stimulating and nourishing one's faith. One of the first to affirm this role of sacred images was Pope St Gregory the Great. In a letter to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles in A.D. 599, he explains that, "painting is employed in churches so that those who cannot read or write may at least read on the walls what they cannot decipher on the page" (*Epistulae IX*, 209).

In more recent times, in his 1999 Letter to Artists, Pope Saint John Paul II drew attention to the pedagogical value of sacred art when he wrote that "in a sense art is a kind of a 'visual Gospel', a concrete mode of catechesis". That is to say that each Sunday, as the faithful hear the truth of the Gospel being proclaimed, and respond by professing their faith in the words of the Creed, those very truths of faith assume the form of an aesthetic beauty in the sacred images that surround the congregation.

This year's conference thus conveys unequivocally the message that our cathedrals are not museums and historical or cultural sites for the attraction of tourists. Rather, they are sacred spaces, adorned with religious art and artefacts, which offer worshipers and visitors alike a sense of intense spirituality, a taste of the Divine, and a foretaste of heaven. Sacred art enriches the Church's sacred liturgy for which cathedrals were constructed. It invites and stimulates the

Christian community to prayer, thanksgiving and worship. It inspires contemplation and elicits a sense of reverential wonder. In the presence of what is artistically beautiful in our cathedrals one is led along the path from the visual to contemplation, and thence to adoration, praise and worship of God. That is how art and liturgy connect.

The task of evangelization constitutes the essential mission of the Church. Her mission is to announce the Gospel to the world and to bring people to Christ, that is, to evangelize. This task and mission have become more urgent in the vast and profound changes that are impacting contemporary society. With postmodernism the territory of evangelization is shifting. People are no longer responding to the Gospel as a presentation of truth. Postmodernism does not approach truth in the same way that modernism did, because now the starting point has become relative truth. Consequently, truth is no longer the most helpful starting point to evangelization.

It is for this reason that Pope Benedict XVI has called attention on numerous occasions to the relevance of sacred art for a new evangelization. The language of beauty is thus today's new channel of evangelization and dialogue. Throughout his career and pontificate Pope Benedict XVI had time and again, emphasized that beauty has the power to evangelize because it has the potential to convince, not by rational arguments but through an intuitive or spiritual engagement. Beauty is an invitation to contemplation, to prayer and to spiritual wonderment.

Pope Benedict believed that recourse to the universal language of beauty is indispensable in presenting the Gospel to would-be believers. The language of beauty is capable of communicating with those who seek God but are not yet open to hearing the Gospel message more directly. For some people, the experience of beauty is a door to the path leading to the fullness of truth. This means that the beauty of sacred art is not simply an entertainment, a dose of culture, or an aesthetic stimulus. Rather, beauty is really and truly a path that can lead us to God who, as the Divine Artist, is the source of beauty. Sacred art calls us out of ourselves to gaze on something that is reflective of God and his own beauty, leading us on to praise, worship and adoration.

In introducing the Compendium, the Holy Father noted, "Works of art always 'speak,' at least implicitly, of the divine, of the infinite beauty of God... Sacred images, with their beauty, are also a Gospel proclamation and express the splendour of the Catholic truth... They urge one and all, believers and non-believers alike, to discover and contemplate the inexhaustible fascination of the mystery of Redemption, giving an ever new impulse to the lively process of its inculturation in time."

The great theologian, Hans von Balthasar, identifies beauty as the fundamental point of his theological reflections. He saw beauty as a joyful experience that calls us out of ourselves to connect with others, and most importantly to connect us with the divine Other. Beauty is a bridge to God, and art is a means of co-operating with the divine creation. According to the Swiss theologian, when we see a beautiful work of art we are confronted with the mystery of its otherness. In beauty we discover the face of God. For this reason Christian sacred art can be considered as a sacrament that unites the human with the divine.

### **Guardians of Transcendence: Conservators in the Service of Faith**

This explains why restoration and conservation of sacred art are important not only for the preservation of aesthetic beauty and the safeguarding of humanity's historical and cultural patrimony but also in conveying more effectively the spiritual beauty creatively communicated

by the artist. Conservation methods and techniques ensure that artistic beauty and its spiritual mediation continue to be enjoyed and experienced without the risk of losing them forever. A painting is like a face. If it is depressed and non-communicative, it loses its power to relate with the viewer. Much in the same way restoration and conservation of sacred art are important in bringing to life its transcendental beauty and communicate a message that opens and touches the human heart and uplifts the spirit.

The true identity and mission of conservators and restorers is that of being vigilant guardians of artistic beauty and of the spiritual sentiments that artwork evokes. The world in which we live requires beauty in order not to sink into despair. It also needs spirituality which serves as a guiding force for individuals seeking a deeper understanding of themselves, their purpose, and their connection with the world. When conservators restore a sacred painting or a church fabric, their concern should not focus solely on how to follow the best scientific and technical practices to help restore the object's aesthetic beauty to its original state while maintaining its authenticity. Above all else, conservators of sacred art are called to keep in mind that they are preserving beauty in its evocation of spirituality, transcendence, admiration and enchantment. The science of art conservation points towards the admiration of the Absolute and, thus, to a deeper discovery of meaning.

Conservators of art of Christian inspiration are thus custodians of beauty and consequently they play an important role in the evangelizing mission of the Church since they are sustaining the spiritual and religious legacy for present and future generations. Sacred art conservation is indeed a vehicle of re-evangelization because artistic beauty affects us intimately, opens our eyes, and stimulates us to rediscover the joy of seeing, of being able to grasp the profound meaning of our existence, the profound Mystery of which we form part. It is from this Mystery intuited in the beauty of artwork that we can draw fullness, happiness, and the stamina to engage ourselves resiliently in our daily life.

Through the presentations which have followed during this Conference, we have come to understand that the re-evangelization achieved through conservation of sacred art is not limited solely to the preservation of artefacts from the past. Rather, it is a journey of renewing the original purpose of these artefacts – as vessels of faith. Sacred art was not created to be static or silent; it was meant to speak to the heart, to teach, to stir the soul, and to reveal the divine. Through thoughtful and respectful conservation, we enable these works to continue their sacred mission: to inspire belief, to provoke contemplation, and to invite an encounter with the transcendent. In this light conservation becomes a profoundly pastoral act – one that allows sacred art to evangelize anew, not only through words, but through the enduring and transformative power of beauty.

### **Bridge-Building, Vulnerability and Attitudes**

I will now offer a few final reflections, centred on three keywords – one of which, as Anton Sutter so insightfully noted, is “bridge-building.” The other two key terms are “vulnerability” and “attitude.” These are not merely conceptual tools; they are, I believe, spiritual and philosophical keys – horizons of meaning – which help us grasp the true significance of sacred art conservation

in the life of the Church today. They invite us to focus our vision in a new way – not merely to observe the material surface of sacred art, but to perceive its depth, where faith, beauty, and memory are woven together into a unified expression of the sacred.

### ***Bridge-building***

The first keyword is “bridge-building.” Yesterday, in between the first and second day of this Conference, we have witnessed a historic moment in the life of the Church: the conclusion of a conclave for the election of a new Pontiff. Like many of you here, I was eager to see who would emerge as the new Bishop of Rome and head of the Catholic Church. The short but poignant message which the new Pope Leo XIV delivered after his election speaks volumes about his vision and mission. I believe that it augurs well for the future of the Church and reflects a deep continuity with the spiritual path charted by his predecessor.

The very title Pontifex - literally, “bridge-builder” – resonates deeply, not only in ancient tradition but also in our contemporary ecclesial context. In his first address, the newly elected Pope Leo XIV offered a powerful image: “We must be a Church that works together to build bridges and to keep our arms open, like this very piazza – welcoming.”

In our own context, this work of bridge-building unfolds across many levels – between generations, between disciplines, between the sacred and the secular; and crucially, between the aesthetic and the spiritual. Sacred art conservation, too, becomes an act of bridge-building – connecting past and present, tradition and innovation, devotion and dialogue.

The act of bridge-building is profoundly important. In many ways, this is exactly what we have been engaged in over the past two days of this conference: building bridges – between one another, between the past and the present, and between the present and the future. We have inherited a patrimony of artistic treasures, and with that heritage comes also a great responsibility: to preserve these works, to “bridge” them into relevance for today’s culture, and to transmit their significance to future generations.

A bridge enables passage to another space – very often one that is not so easily reached. It takes us towards new pastures, into areas yet to be discovered. Likewise, the bridge we are referring to here spans the gap between the restorer and the object of restoration, between the legacy of the past and the requirements of the future. So, what is the meaning of these artworks and of these architectural achievements? This is a question that can serve as a unifying thread for many of the concepts that we have explored. It is through this metaphorical bridge that the deeper meaning of paintings, textiles, monumental buildings, and all other works of art can emerge.

At the same time, this approach invites a hermeneutic process – one rooted in theology and philosophy – a process that urges us to allow the object to speak on its own terms. It calls us to listen without prejudice, to understand its inherent language, and to interpret that meaning in ways that resonate with contemporary culture. In so doing, we would not simply be preserving the past; we would enliven it, allowing it to continue speaking across time.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer reminds us in his *Truth and Method*, understanding is never a purely technical act – it is always a dialogical one, an overlapping exchange. In the conservation of sacred art, this dialogue occurs not only between the restorer and the object, but also between the cultural meaning embedded in the work and the spiritual yearning of today’s viewer.

Restorers do not impose meaning; they listen, they study, they discern. Their task is both scientific and contemplative. They must grasp the materiality of the artwork – its pigments, fibres, and structural integrity – but also its theological significance, its liturgical role, and its capacity to evoke spiritual resonance.

Sacred art is not merely an object to be preserved; it is a narrative to be carried forward. It holds within it layers of history, devotion, and belief. To restore and preserve it is to participate in a living tradition, ensuring that its voice continues to speak quietly and powerfully across generations.

Restoration is thus not an enshrinement of sacred art within a museum-like past, but it is an exercise in keeping alive a visual and symbolic language of faith – one that remains open to new interpretation while remaining faithful to its original context. In this way, sacred art becomes a bridge between the visible and the invisible, a tangible manifestation of what Pope Benedict XVI described as the *Via Pulchritudinis* – the way of beauty. It invites contemplation, stimulates the soul, and offers a path through which truth and transcendence may be encountered anew.

### ***Vulnerability***

The second keyword is “vulnerability” – a condition that is inseparable from our daily existence. Sacred objects – from frescoes to icons, manuscripts to vestments – are, of their very nature, fragile. They are susceptible to the wear of time, the effects of neglect, the force of ideology, the disruptions of environmental change, and the devastation of war. In some countries, they have become targets of political agendas, rendered vulnerable not only through physical damage but by a loss of meaning in contemporary culture. Vulnerability, then, is not peripheral - it is central.

And yet, vulnerability is also a space of encounter. As we read in St Paul’s letter to the Philippians 2:7, Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” This *kenosis* – this voluntary vulnerability – lies at the heart of divine love. Sacred art, in its “woundedness”, echoes this mystery. It calls not only for technical expertise but also for an ethic of care – a response born from the recognition that wounded beauty remains beauty, and is still worthy of reverence.

In the icons of Christ, in the vestments worn in His service, in the manuscripts that preserve the Word, this vulnerability is constantly mirrored. To restore and preserve such works of art is not only a technical task; it is an ethical one. It is a form of justice – justice owed to the fragile remains of faith and to the generations who crafted them in devotion. To care for these works is to honour their suffering, and through them, to participate in a deeper understanding of love, loss, and hope.

I am neither a restorer, nor an art historian. I have never studied art in a formal way. I deeply enjoy art, but my background is in philosophy and theology. My main area of specialization is bioethics, and in that field the concept of vulnerability is increasingly recognized as central to understanding many contemporary challenges that arise from emerging and converging technologies.

But vulnerability is also a lens through which we can understand the work we have been engaged in. As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas teaches, the “face of the Other” is that which calls us into ethical responsibility. In a similar way, the vulnerable object - the silent, neglected artefact – becomes a kind of “face.” It does not speak in words, yet it calls. And the restorer is the one who listens and responds - not with dominance, but with care, humility, and attentiveness.

The vulnerable is not limited solely to the objects themselves, but also includes the forgotten artisans, the suppressed spiritual practices, and the marginalized communities for whom these works once held profound meaning. Many artefacts are voiceless. To restore sacred art is, therefore, an act of justice – justice to memory, to the silenced liturgies, to the invisible histories embedded in these objects. It is about giving voice to those who have been marginalized or forgotten.

This, I believe, is what we have truly been doing: restoring justice to vulnerable objects and buildings, and offering them a renewed voice - one that can be heard and understood in today's post-modern culture. In this context, I would argue that feeling – empathy, intuition, emotional resonance - is more important than pure rationality. The very forces that appear to threaten tradition, with their emphasis on emotion and subjective experience, can become opportunities. We can take up this language of feeling and use it to reconnect people with tradition, beauty, and meaning.

In the field of bioethics, we are coming to recognize that vulnerability is not weakness, but a space for encounter – a space for feeling, openness, and ethical response. In the same way, our task here is to respond: to preserve, to restore, and to give a voice to what has been silenced, a meaning to what has been obscured, and a presence to what has been forgotten.

This is, in its deepest sense, a form of re-evangelization - not through preaching or proclamation, but through care, attention, and beauty. In restoring what is vulnerable, we do not merely preserve the past; we offer a renewed invitation to faith, hope, and love – made visible in the fragile, and made tangible through the work of our hands.

### *Attitudes*

Finally, we will now consider the issue of “attitude.” Conservation is not merely the application of a technique or the observance of a set of norms. It is a moral and spiritual discipline. Today, in both philosophy and ethics, we are witnessing a meaningful shift: a distancing from rigid rules and abstract norms, towards a renewed emphasis on virtue rooted in the classical insights of Aristotle and Aquinas, and enriched by the contributions of such modern thinkers as Charles Taylor.

Seen in this light, conservation becomes a kind of monastic labour: contemplative, attentive, and obedient to the objective material and its meaning. The virtues most needed in this field are not simply professional, but existential: humility, patience, truthfulness, and reverence. To approach sacred art rightly, we must cultivate humility; the humility to recognize that such works are not ours, that they transcend us, and that they were created for the glory of God. We need patience to resist the temptation of haste and superficiality; justice, to restore what was lost or wounded without distortion or falsification; faithfulness to both the past and the present, and to the sacred purpose for which these works were made. And perhaps most of all, we require reverence, namely, a deep, contemplative gaze which sees beyond the canvas, beyond the stone, into the mystery that it signifies. When we talk about attitudes, philosophically speaking, we are referring to virtues, namely dispositions of the heart and mind. One must be humble before a work of art. One must be true, attentive and patient in understanding and restoring it. One must cultivate a sense of justice and fairness towards both the past and the current meaning of sacred art. These are not only the virtues of the restorer or the curator – they are the moral dispositions demanded of all those entrusted with the care of sacred art.

As Charles Taylor argues in his *Sources of the Self*, we are living in a disenchanted world, in which the sources of moral meaning have become blurred. Yet the conservation of sacred art can be an act of re-enchantment – not in a nostalgic or romantic sense, but in the deep theological sense of bringing creation back into contact with its Creator. The object is not merely matter; it is a fragment of the world's character. To treat it carelessly is to fail not only aesthetically, but more so spiritually. In this way, conservation becomes a school of virtue. It teaches us how to care, how to remember, how to see again and above all how to see with love.

And so, we return to where we started: the theme of re-evangelization through conservation of sacred art. Conservation is not focused simply on making old things new. It is about making the invisible visible, the forgotten remembered, and the sacred re-awakened in a world searching for meaning.

In this task, all of you – restorers, curators, art historians, and theologians - are more than professionals. You are stewards of memory, entrusted with the transmission of beauty, truth, and faith. Let us therefore go forward with renewed conviction. Let the “bridges” that we build be strong and open. Let the vulnerable be allowed to speak and be heard. And let our attitudes be those of humility, patience, justice and reverence, guided not only by science, but by dedication, passion, and great care.

In concluding I would like to thank wholeheartedly the entire staff of the St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation. When, in September 2024, I had submitted the theme for this year's conference to the Foundation Council members, they unanimously embraced my proposal with enthusiasm. However, as with all things in life, transforming a proposal into concrete reality takes time, energy, and commitment. It is only thanks to the indefatigable work of the executive staff that the Council's decision has successfully evolved into a rewarding reality.

A successful event is always the result of creativity, hard work, and effort. In such endeavours a lot of preparation, time and planning go into ensuring that everything works well without hitches. Words cannot therefore express my great sense of gratitude towards the following Conference organizers: To Adriana, *grazie mille*. Your curatorial dedication, commitment and guidance have been invaluable. To Roanne, thank you for the exceptional and professional work you have accomplished together with Naomi, Leander, and Claire, in organizing such a high-level European Conference. Special thanks are also due to Tonio, our CEO, for his continuous support and unfailing commitment. Your collaborative efforts, dedication and team spirit have been indispensable for the successful outcome of this conference.

My heartfelt thanks are equally directed to Donatella and Anton, our partners from the *Opera della Primaziale Pisana*, who have closely collaborated with us in making possible this European Conference. Approval from Pisa took several weeks to materialise, given that this conference adheres to a shared conceptual framework. Yet we steered ahead confidently until a consensus was happily attained, so that today, we are reaping the fruits of what we have toiled so hard for. We are witnessing the realization of a rewarding experience that we have envisioned and thus have all reason to rejoice at the success of this European gathering.

In looking forward to our next European Conference in Pisa, we are committed to compiling the proceedings of this Conference to ensure they are made available for a wider dissemination. The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation had pioneered such an initiative with its first European Conference held in July 2021.

We firmly believe that the depth of our networking, along with the richness of the scientific, technical, theological reflections and best practices shared here, should not be lost to the ravages of time. Instead, they deserve to be preserved and made accessible to a broader audience.

Let us keep this good practice alive. And let us continue to nourish and promote both awareness and conviction that the conservation of sacred art is, in essence, a path of re-evangelization – one that speaks through beauty, memory, and faith to the hearts of current and future generations.

Thank you all.





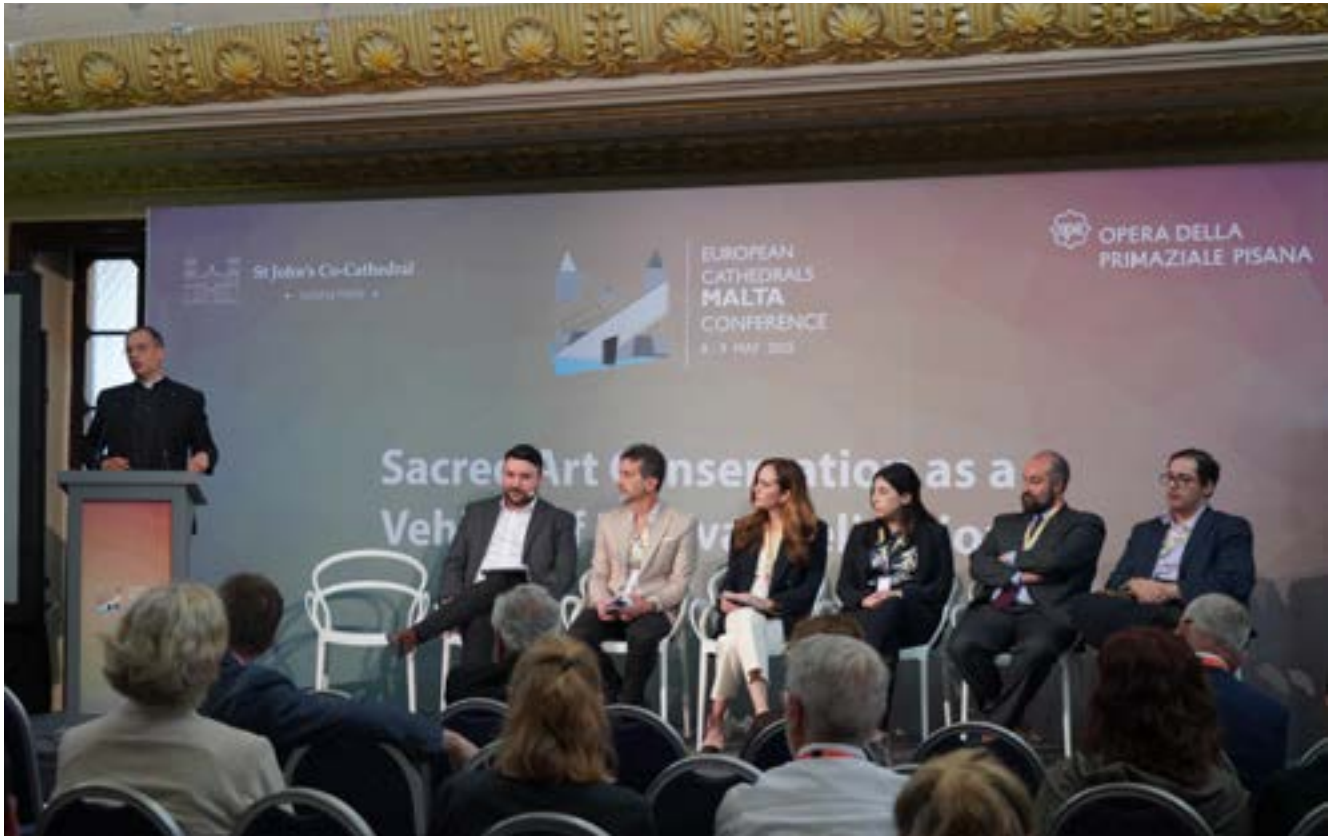
























## St John's Co-Cathedral

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