Decommissioning and ecclesial reuse of churches
Guidelines

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The International Conference "Doesn't God dwell here anymore?" took place 29-30 November 2018 at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. It was organized by the Department for Cultural Heritage of the Church of this Pontifical Council for Culture, with the Italian Episcopal Conference – *Ufficio Nazionale per i beni culturali ecclesiastici e l'edilizia di culto* – and the Pontifical Gregorian University – *Facoltà di Storia e Beni Culturali della Chiesa – Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali della Chiesa.*

The themes of the two days were respectively "the decommissioning of places of worship" and the "integral management of ecclesiastical cultural heritage."

An important and qualified presence at the conference was that of the 23 official delegations of episcopal conferences from North America, Europe and Oceania who shared their respective experiences in the afternoon sessions.

A document entitled *Guidelines*: *Decommissioning and Ecclesial Reuse of Churches* is the fruit of collaboration between the scientific committee of the conference and those delegations. It was discussed and approved during the afternoon session on 30 November.

The document has five short chapters that analyse the question under various profiles before closing with a series of practical recommendations. The document recognises the final authority of the Ordinary for cultural heritage, but invites the ecclesiastical authorities to share all decisions with the ecclesial community; to dialogue with civil society, keeping in mind the peculiarities of the territories and different cultural contexts; and to prefer new usage rather than selling or destroying heritage – that usage may include cultural, social or charitable purposes, but not merely commercial activity.

The *Guidelines* have now been published and are intended mainly for internal ecclesial use. They are offered not as norms but as practical orientations for dioceses, religious communities and other communities facing this particular issue.

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Introduction

1. The Pontifical Council for Culture and the delegates of the episcopal conferences of Europe, Canada, the United States and Australia present on the occasion of the conference *Doesn't God Dwell Here Anymore? Decommissioning Places of Worship and Integrated Management of Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage*, held in Rome at the Pontifical Gregorian University 29-30 November 2018, approved these *Guidelines* for ecclesial communities. They were enhanced by the reflections offered during the conference.

2. The question of decommissioning places of worship is not new in history. Today, it requires attention not only because of the modern condition that we can briefly define as advanced secularization, but also because of our greater awareness of the symbolic, artistic and historical value of sacred buildings and the items conserved in them.

3. Over 30 years ago a *Charter on the Use of Former Sacred Edifices* was published by the Central Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy,[1] showing the foresight of the Holy See in dealing with these issues. However, that document focused on Italy and did not take into consideration the situation of other countries faced with problems such as diminishing numbers of the faithful and clergy with repercussions on the maintenance of heritage. These issues are widespread today.

4. Since then the phenomenon has been addressed in a timely fashion by some episcopal conferences.[2] Moreover, over the last decade several European and North American universities and academic centers have produced a number of studies that can help understand the technical and juridical issues involved.

5. Aware of the wide variety of concrete situations and the diverse quality of buildings, this current document intends to reflect on the phenomenon as it presents itself today and to propose to Catholic communities (episcopal conferences, dioceses, parishes, religious institutes) instruments with which to face the challenge. The phenomenon of decommissioning, which is more apparent in some Western regions, will probably spread to other countries.

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[1] Central Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy, "Carta sulla destinazione d'uso degli antichi edifici ecclesiastici / Charte sur l'utilisation des anciens bâtiments ecclésiastiques," October 26, 1987, Rome, in *Arte cristiana*, 75, 1987, 410-412.

[2] Germany in 200, Switzerland in 2006 and Belgium in 2012 dedicated documents to this, while other episcopates have included sections on this theme in guidelines on the administration of heritage or management of cultural goods. Cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Directory on the Ecclesiastical Exemption from Listed Building Consent, 2018.

1. The socio-pastoral context of the decommissioning of churches

6. During the second half of the 20th century, the Church set about erecting worship buildings in the suburbs of the expanding industrial cities and major towns undergoing internal migration. In recent years this trend has slowed down due to the demographic contraction of many communities, the changing distribution of populations, the increased mobility of people, and a related change in the way the faithful belong to a territory and to traditional territorial ecclesiastical institutions. Historical city centers that were once full of churches belonging to different ecclesiastical institutions have become places without residents or with an elderly group of faithful. Meanwhile, small rural towns have seen their populations decline to the point that it has become difficult for their Christian communities to sustain multiple places of worship and a plurality of parishes.

7. In the great urban areas of the West, beside the growth of fluidity in the matters of belonging and anonymity, a drop in religious practice – due to various causes both inside and outside the Church – has led to a drop in the numbers of the faithful and of financial resources. This has drastically reduced the need for churches. In addition, there is also the situation of the clergy, with many elderly priests and few ordinations. All this has led to the reordering, joining and merging of parishes, and to the consequent underuse and abandonment of churches.

8. A careful territorial-historical reading leads, nevertheless, to an awareness that not all the churches that today belong to our historical heritage were destined for pastoral care (as were parish churches). Rather, they were expressions of confraternities, guilds, seigniories, national presences, civil authorities and private families when the multiplication of churches could be an instrument of self-presentation by social and political structures. Mostly, these institutions no longer exist or are no longer able to ensure the continued conservation of these religious buildings.

9. The many changes that have marked our societies and our cultures have challenged the way the Church perceives, uses and manages cultural heritage, especially the excess places of worship. Conscious that churches which are abandoned or in a dangerous state actually constitute a counter-testimony, many dioceses have decided to attribute a non-liturgical use to worship buildings while retaining ownership of the property, or selling them to an institution or private person, or, sometimes, when there is no artistic, historical or architectural value, proceeding to demolish them. Some dioceses, however, ask how to identify new pastoral responses that are more adequate to the emerging needs of peoples and communities seeking space for social, cultural, recreational or hospitality purposes.

10. When Pope Francis states that "the renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them

more mission-oriented,"[3] he is alluding to our theme. Investing in the missionary direction of the Church can counter the ongoing processes of secularization.

11. Finally, considering that social inclusion and the safeguarding of creation (ecology) are the two fundamental challenges of the day[4] – both are connected to the wider challenge of the "humanization" of both city and land – then the functional reuse of decommissioned churches could constitute an opportunity if viewed through the lens of a circular economy inspired by nature and grounded in reuse, restoration, regeneration and recycling.

2. The sphere of canon law

12. Respecting the individual legal norms of the different nations, canon law generally imposes on ecclesiastical authority the duty to conserve heritage, whether it consists of buildings or moveable furnishings.[5] Consequently, in cases of alienation it guarantees the safeguarding of heritage and fixes limits for licenses (cf. canons 638, 1291, 1292 § 1, 1295); moreover, it ratifies the principle of the responsibility of administrators and indemnity against damage (cf. canons 1273-1289). In particular, it is the task of the person who is immediately responsible for a juridical person that owns goods, for example a parish priest as administrator of goods (cf. canons 532 and 1279, § 1) to oversee, under the supervision of the Ordinary (cf. canon 1276), the conservation and supervision of the goods lest they be destroyed or damaged. If considered opportune this can be done by signing insurance policies (cf. canon 1284, § 2, No.1). Beyond ensuring the above-mentioned supervision, Ordinaries must also carefully oversee the entire administration of goods by giving special instructions within the limits of universal and particular law (cf. canons 1276, § 2); they also have the faculty of intervening where negligence by an administrator of goods occurs (cf. canon 1279, § 1). The faithful, for their part, have the right to show pastors of the Church their own needs (cf. canon 212, § 2-3).

13. Generally, properties and furnishings, especially cultural goods, must be listed on an inventory (cf. canon 1283, Nos. 2 and 3 and 1284, § 2, No. 9); it is completely illicit to sell sacred relics (cf. canon 1190, § 1) or definitively transfer relics that are significant or venerated with great popular piety without the license of the Apostolic See (cf. canon 1190, § 2[6]); the same is said for sacred images that are

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[3] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24 , 2013, No. 27.

[4] Cf. Francis, Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* on the care of our common home, May 24, 2015, Nos. 109; 92 and 175.

[5] This text refers to the *Code of Canon Law*, but what it states applies by analogy to the Churches subject to the *Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches*.

[6] See also: Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Instruction *Relics in the Church: Authenticity*

venerated with great popular piety in some churches (cf. canon 1190, § 3).

14. In particular, according to the canonical norms, a church is essentially a building used for Catholic divine worship (cf. canon 1214). Once such use ceases legitimately, it is no longer a church. Based on this principle, canon law foresees the possibility of reducing a church to profane use (cf. canon 1222). The conditions to do this were indicated in a document from the Congregation for the Clergy. This is the point of reference in the juridical domain.[7]

15. In this area, however, even when acting in good faith, ecclesiastical authorities can occasionally operate in such a way as to give rise to juridical complaints, as jurisprudence shows. We present here some examples of such behavior so that they might be avoided in the future: a) reducing a church to profane use without any of the necessary grave causes (today this is almost always identified with the impossibility of safely maintaining a building); b) planning for an improper use ("sordid" cf. canon 1222) of a church after its reduction to profane status; c) confusing the suppression of a parish with the reduction of a church to profane use; d) suppressing a parish in an extinctive union (with another parish) in order to reduce an ex-parish church to profane use; e) causing the cessation of divine worship by the actual closure of the church with the intention of reducing it to profane use; f) ceasing Catholic worship through transfer of the sacred building to a non-Catholic or non-Christian community, with the risk of a successive reduction to profane use; g) reducing part of the church to a profane use; h) habitually using the church for an activity other than divine worship (concert hall, conference centers, etc.), with sporadic celebrations of religious functions.

16. It is therefore necessary to consider some issues usually connected to the process of reduction of a church to a profane use: (i) the need to preserve from improper ("sordid") use those former churches that have already been reduced to a profane use in their passing from one owner to another; (ii) the need to avoid situations that can give offence to the religious sentiment of a Christian people; (iii) the need to consider the destination of altars, which can never lose their dedication or blessing even after a church has been reduced to a profane use (cf. can. 1238, § 2). Concerning altars, the canonical practice of destroying the table in some cases can find itself in clear opposition to civil norms concerning the conservation of cultural heritage.

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and Preservation, December 16, 2017, art. 4 and art. 5: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/csaints/documents/rc_con_csaints_doc_20171208_istruzione-reliquie_en.html

[7] Congregation for Clergy, *Procedural Guidelines for the Modification of Parishes, the Closure or Relegation of Churches to Profane but not Sordid Use, and the Alienation of the Same*, April 30, 2013, in *EV* 29/2013 (Bologna 2015) 562a-562ii. Cf. Also published in English in *The Jurist* 73 (2013) 211-219.

3. Points for reflection in the international norms on cultural heritage

17. The above-mentioned 1987 document from the Central Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy, *Charter on the Use of Former Sacred Edifices*, refers to a series of international resolutions (restoration charters, declarations, conventions) that summarize the philosophy of restoration codified after the Second World War. These have remained substantially valid as a reference for conservation interventions on cultural heritage in all its forms. In recent years reflection on the conservation and use of material and immaterial cultural heritage has also taken on a dimension that is more attentive to the issues posed by globalization and multiculturality. In particular, attention has shifted from individual monuments to vast sites and to urban and rural contexts (where religious interests clearly have a significant role), with particular attention given to identifying the use of different types of heritage, their reciprocal relations, and the cultural and social values underpinning such processes.[8]

18. Developments in the culture of conservation have opened up broader areas. This also applies in the field of religious heritage conservation: in cities as well as in the countryside, ecclesiastical cultural goods are pre-eminent elements of cultural recognition and social aggregation beyond their specific liturgical or spiritual content. Considering ecclesiastical goods within the wider disciplines of safeguarding, conservation and use of heritage, the scientific community has looked at the specifics of this particular type of good, both when it is still destined for liturgical uses, and when it has ceased its original function and been assigned to museums, reused for other purposes, or abandoned.

19. As far back as 1989, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Resolution 916) had brought to the attention of Member States the problem of the vulnerability of redundant religious buildings,[9] stating among other things that it is desirable that "when a religious building is no longer viable as such, effort should be made to ensure a future use, whether religious or cultural, as far

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[8] See for example the *Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas* by ICOMOS (Washington, 1987), which refers (Principles and Objectives) to the set of "material and spiritual elements" that express the image of the historic character of cities (2) and the participation of residents (3); the *Principles for Conservation and Restoration of Built Heritage* (Krakow Charter 2000) extending attention to the area of environment and landscape (8 and 9) and recalling, in the preamble, the relation between collective memory, community, and values for conservation; finally, the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* from UNESCO (2011), which underlines the relations between the physical form of the cities, the social, cultural and economic values underlying them (5), and the fact that part of the urban heritage is the whole of the practices and social and cultural values on which different identities are defined (9).

[9] http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=16327&lang=en (accessed: 09.08.2018).

as possible compatible with the original intention of its construction" (7) and that local communities are the subjects needing to be encouraged "to rediscover a shared interest and a future role for such buildings" (8). The resolution invited the collaboration of the Churches, governments and local authorities to record and monitor religious heritage that is not in use (including modern ones), with the objective of ensuring it has an appropriate redeployment, compatible with its original meaning, encouraging continuous maintenance, interventions to make buildings safe until they can be adapted, work that does not introduce irreversible alterations, and "a more imaginative use of existing religious buildings."

20. An important moment of international and interreligious study was promoted by ICCROM in 2003, with the forum *Conservation of Living Religious Heritage*.[10] Faced with the risk of an instrumental and conflictual use of religious heritage, its possible abandonment or abusive use, the scientific community underlined the close co-responsibility of the religious communities and conservation professionals tasked with safeguarding heritage. The "vitality" of religious heritage is expressed in different material and immaterial ways: spaces for worship inevitably undergo transformations as rites change, creating possible conflict between material conservation and liturgical function, but especially the risks of closure are noted, due to changing of religious practice, political conflicts, natural disasters or, indeed, the demands of tourism. The scientific community, while highlighting the conservational issues, underlines that "the care of this heritage is primarily the responsibility of the religious community for whom this heritage has importance, at local and/or global levels. The conservation of living religious heritage is ideally initiated by the religious community and carried out in collaboration with conservation professionals and all those concerned"[11] recognizing their different roles and smoothing out potential conflicts.

21. The role of communities and participatory processes is underlined by all the most recent international documents, such as the *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* by the Council of Europe (Faro, 2005).[12] The recognition of individual and collective responsibilities (1b, 4b, 8c) implies the construction of "heritage communities" or communities of people that, through public acts commit themselves to transmitting specific aspects of heritage to future generations, and pursuing social, cultural and economic objectives of general interest. Numerous other documents develop these guidelines,

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[10] *Conservation of Living Religious Heritage. Papers form the ICCROM 2003 Forum on Living Religious Heritage: conserving the sacred*, H. Stovel – N. Stanley-Price – R. Killick (eds), ICCROM, Rome 2005: (https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/ICCROM_ICS03_ReligiousHeritage_en.pdf; accessed: 09 08 2018).

[11] *Ibid.,* 10.

[12] Council of Europe Treaty Series, No. 199 (https://rm.coe.int/1680083746; accessed: 09 08 2018).

underlining the connection between communities and shared spiritual values and heritage: we recall the *Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas* (Xi'an, 2005),[13] or the *Québec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place* (Québec, 2008)[14] promoted by ICOMOS, calling for awareness of material and immaterial cultural heritage, which must grow both in the population and in local authorities through multiple means, both formal and informal (articles 4 and 9). The *Burra Charter*, proposed by ICOMOS Australia and adopted in 2013, underlines the centrality of the cultural significance of heritage. Its recognition implies a complex process that is attentive to the themes of compatible usage and participation (articles 6, 7, 12 and 14).[15] The issue of participation of religious communities was developed by the *Statement on the Protection of Religious Properties within the Framework of the World Heritage Convention* (Kiev, 2010),[16] which was widely received within the UNESCO debates.

22. In synthesis, the international context leads the reflection on conservation of buildings and their contexts along three lines of research:

1) Each individual element of ecclesiastical heritage (and, more generally, of religious interest) is part of an urban or rural, territorial and landscape *system*

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[13] *Xi'an Declaration on the conservation of the setting of heritage structures, sites and areas, adopted in Xi'an, China, by the 15th General Assembly of ICOMOS on October 21, 2005*; by setting is meant "past or present social or spiritual practices, customs, traditional knowledge, use or activities and other forms of intangible cultural heritage aspects that created and form the space as well as the current and dynamic cultural, social and economic context" (1); the document concludes with the reminder: "Awareness of the significance of the setting in its various dimensions is the shared responsibility of professionals, institutions, associated and local communities, who should take into account the tangible and intangible dimensions of settings when making decisions" (13) (https://www.icomos.org/xian2005/xian-declaration.pdf; accessed: 09 08 2018).

[14] https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-646-2.pdf (accessed: 09 08 2018).

[15] *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*, 2013: https://australia.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Burra-Charter-2013-Adopted-31.10.2013.pdf. In particular, it states: "Change may be necessary to retain *cultural significance*, but is undesirable where it reduces cultural significance. The amount of change to a *place* and its *use* should be guided by the *cultural significance* of the place and its appropriate *interpretation*" (15.1).

[16] https://whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/ (accessed: 09 08 2018). Document subjected to the 35th session of the World Heritage Committee (Paris, 2011), and the theme returned in the discussions at the 36th (St. Petersburg, 2012) and 37th sessions (Phnom Penh, 2013), foreseeing the collaboration of the World Heritage Centre con ICOMOS, ICCROM and IUCN (Steering Group on Heritage of Religious Interest); On March 7, 2017 the ICOMOS Scientific Committee for Places of Religion and Ritual (PRERICO) was formally established, which institutionally started the collaboration with the UNESCO Steering Group on the occasion of the 41st session (Krakow, 2017); Davos Declaration "Towards a High-Quality *Baukultur* for Europe", Conference of European Ministers of Culture, Davos, Switzerland, January 22, 2018 (https://davosdeclaration2018.ch/programme/ (accessed: 20/11/2018).

whose relational identity is built on religious values and is often the bearer of its visible and cultural structure: any process of decommissioning and reuse will find its own social, cultural and religious value in a system of local relations;

2) *Immaterial heritage*, which includes both spiritual and religious heritage (rites, devotions, liturgical practices, social customs, etc.), allows for awareness of the value of the material heritage, and awareness of it cannot come without a correct interpretation of the meanings underlying every material good;

3) *Engagement* with the local religious or civil communities in the processes of consciousness-raising and decision-making is a fundamental element in every program of interventions for reuse; these can only be based on widespread awareness of the values in play at different levels.

23. These paths of international enquiry and research appear to be decisive in shaping the discussion on underused or decommissioned ecclesiastical heritage, whose reuse – considered as a widespread territorial problem – also requires deep knowledge and respect of the cultural and religious values that underpin them, and engagement by local Christian communities in the choice of projects of transformation, so that they can be sustainable from a technical, economic, social and cultural point of view in dialogue with civil communities and all interested public and private subjects.

4. Guiding criteria for heritage of sacred buildings

24. Sacred buildings are a visible sign of the presence of God in a society that is today more and more secularized and simultaneously multireligious. They often have a role in giving quality to an urban or rural environment, as well as in giving structure to that environment in architectural terms. Their evangelizing *readability* remains even if they lose their liturgical functionality. A church building, in fact, cannot be valued only in terms of functional use. A church space does not simply welcome something, but it can be seen as a container of acts that only acquire their full significance therein and at the same time confer on that place an identity which is immediately perceptible and lasting. So the cessation of the liturgical use of a space in no way automatically brings about its reduction to a building devoid of meaning and freely transformable into anything different; the significance it has acquired over time and its real presence within the community are not, in fact, reducible to technical or financial statistics. The challenge of its transformation is expressed then in terms of the re-composition of a "promise of indwelling," without overlooking what was the primary use of the space.

25. Churches, in fact, associate – in their historical multiplicity and theological nature – the spatial elements of both continuing identity and historical transfor-

mation: on one hand, their stability expresses the *plantatio ecclesiae* in a territory, a geographical, cultural and social context; on the other, considering the historical transformations of rites, spirituality and devotions, they have to be able to follow the life of the communities, who are called to operate with discernment in the dialectic between faithfulness to memory and faithfulness to their own time.

26. Read in the light of such a transformative dynamism, any process of decommissioning and reuse constitutes a sensitive moment that is often inserted as another element in the history of an increasingly complex community identity and an evolving sense of historical development. For this reason, historical analysis of the buildings being decommissioned should include an accurate breakdown of the stages of the constructive phases and their significance, particularly of the ways in which these churches were liturgically and socially influential, so as to identify, interpret and understand the elements on which a building's local and community origins and significance are based. The identity of the church will then result from the constitutive set of elements that are the fruit of successive transformations, alterations and choices made by communities or individuals over time. For the transformations required by the processes of reuse to be inserted in a conscious and respectful way in a community history of long duration, both the permanency of the original structures and the later stratifications have to be the subject of careful analysis in line with current conservation norms. In this way, they can also become interpretative elements and educational materials for the future.

27. Using current approaches to the understanding of historic buildings and how significance is evaluated allows for the identification of different possibilities for transformation. This always needs to be based on a full understanding of the significance of church patrimony and the need to take into account the concepts of resilience, sustainability, co-responsibility and planning.

a) In the course of history, churches have shown a great capacity for *resilience*, understood as the ability of heritage to undergo different types of intervention and pressure (catastrophes, ideological damage, change of use, devotional and liturgical adaptation etc.) without losing their own identity. In line with this perspective, when involved in natural or human transformative processes, if they are carried out correctly, churches are able to reach a state of dynamic equilibrium that is not identical to their starting point but which has recognizable foundational elements. Every religious building can have inherent character derived from its historical development and a relationship between memory and innovation can be developed with respect for the cultural and historical characteristics of the place itself.

b) A horizon of *sustainability* must shape the processes of transformation, keeping in mind not only environmental and economic factors but also the cultural-social and political-administrative sustainability of any intervention. Each process of transformation must in fact be sustainable in regards not only to the

transformational building work, but also to the management of the transformed building, in a temporal horizon at least over the medium term, on the basis of agreements that identify precise responsibilities and interests, cases of articulated use over time and space, control by competent managers, and clear rules of use.

c) The dimension of re-appropriation by the communities can be an interpretive and forward-looking criterion that allows for resilient and sustainable interventions for underused or decommissioned churches or those that have closed. In fact, a plurality of ecclesial uses co-exist that can be promoted by different organizations (not only the parish or the diocese as territorial entities), both in the liturgical sphere (places of worship for specialized pastoral activity) and for catechesis, charity, culture, recreation, etc. Ways of reusing an underused church can include tourism and creating spaces for silence and meditation open to all. Since many churches in the past did not have an immediate pastoral purpose (i.e. as a parish church) and came into being through the desire of the laity (for example, confraternities), so too today, some of them, in light of a vision of *co-responsibility* and diversification of strategies, could be entrusted to lay aggregations (associations, movements etc.) that would guarantee churches remain open and with better management of the heritage. In some areas there is the experience of mixed use of the space, giving it partially to the liturgy and partially to charitable or social uses. This solution would require a revision of canon law.

d) No intervention should remain in isolation: a unified territorial vision should be developed, including consideration of social dynamics (e.g. demographic change, current conservation and cultural policies, changes in labor markets etc.), pastoral strategies (different levels of territoriality of the dioceses and parishes, specialized pastoral work, etc.) and conservation emergencies (vulnerability of heritage, level of risk in the territory, intrinsic value of the building and its contents). This approach allows for the insertion of each church into a network of values and shared strategies. *Planning* for the use of the ecclesiastical built heritage is an essential instrument for the correct evaluation of the transformation of each individual church faced with being decommissioned.

5. Guidelines for movable heritage: fittings, fixtures and associated heritage other than buildings

28. "Christian art, an extremely important 'cultural asset,' continues to render an extraordinary service by powerfully communicating the history of the Covenant between God and humanity and the wealth of the revealed message … Cultural heritage has proven to be a remarkable record of the various moments in this

great spiritual history."[17]

29. The Church has always considered that the place where ecclesiastical cultural goods can best serve their main service – worship, catechesis, charity, culture – and can best be kept from danger and risk is the original place for which they were created: the church. Therefore, when decommissioning places of worship, issues arise concerning both material safeguarding and semantic continuity of such cultural goods. In fact, when a place of worship receives a new destination for profane use, or is alienated, or is destined for demolition, it becomes incompatible with the permanence inside it of sacred furnishings and objects. We must therefore reflect on the destination of movable heritage to be removed from a decommissioned building of worship so that elements will not end up being dispersed or inappropriately treated. Planning what should happen to the contents of churches intended for closure needs early consideration and expert advice should be sought.

30. The circular letter from the Congregation for the Clergy referred to above prescribes that "prior to alienation, all sacred objects, relics, sacred furnishings, stained-glass windows, bells, confessionals, altars, etc. are to be removed for use in other sacred edifices or to be stored in ecclesiastical custody. As altars can never be turned over to profane use, if they cannot be removed, they must be destroyed (cf. canons 1212 and 1238)."[18]

31. While due to the nature or the demands of civil law some objects cannot be removed, the first solution envisioned for moveable heritage is that of continuity of use and life in the setting of one or more regularly used sacred buildings with territorial continuity or historical linkage to the decommissioned church, or a new reality. Connected and prior to this is the need to submit movable ecclesiastical heritage to a sort of "functional bond" that can be guaranteed by an ecclesiastical authority with the power to ensure it is respected, and not just limited to being placed in a catalogue and identified for conservation, but must avoid in any way its alienation from the body of movable heritage.[19] The same ecclesiastical authority must normally answer to the civil norms that safeguard cultural goods, which normally foresee the verification of cultural interest before alienation is permitted.

32. Before any movable goods are transferred, an inventory prepared according to the norms of law (cf. can. 1283), or catalogue documents (in the desirable case that cataloguing by the Church or by the state has taken place) must be checked,

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[17] John Paul II, *Discourse to the III Plenary Assembly*, March 31, 2000, in www.vatican.va

[18] Congregation for Clergy, *Procedural Guidelines for the Modification of Parishes and the Closure, Relegation and Alienation of Churches*, April 30, 2013, *cit*. No. 3.g.

[19] *Ibid. No. 2.*

so that nothing be misplaced during the move. Otherwise, an accurate inventory should be prepared for the occasion.

33. The second solution foreseen by the above mentioned circular letter of the Congregation for the Clergy is that of "ecclesiastical custody"[20] which is to be understood as a safe place that is suitable for ecclesiastical property, or preferably an ecclesiastical museum. If, however, on one hand placing the object in a museum ensures the material safeguarding of the items, on the other hand, it compromises their formal authenticity, inasmuch as they are isolated from the context that produced them, conserving only one part of their value, the artistic one. Here again we note the potential ability of an ecclesiastical museum to offer a "new life" to sacred vessels, devotional statues, altar paintings, reliquaries etc., allowing them to continue witnessing in another form to the liturgy, devotion, history and life of faith of the people of God in a given region, so that, being "intimately connected with the mission of the Church, its content should not lose their intrinsic aim and destination in terms of the use for which it was created."[21]

6. Final recommendations

34. On the same occasion, the Pontifical Council for Culture and the delegates of the episcopal conferences of Europe, Canada, the United States and Australia present also approved the following "final recommendations":

1) The care of religious cultural heritage is mainly the responsibility of the whole community, particularly the religious community, for which this patrimony is important, locally and globally. Bearing in mind the variety of juridical situations of the different countries, the conservation of religious heritage is ideally initiated by the religious community and carried out in collaboration with professional conservationists, and all other interested parties including the appropriate state authorities.

2) The theological formation of newly appointed bishops, future priests, deacons and the laity should promote knowledge of cultural heritage with specific courses or within already existent disciplines (canon law, liturgy, Church history etc.). This will prepare pastors and pastoral workers to be attentive to the importance of cultural heritage in the life and evangelizing mission of the Church and prepare them to engage with conservation professionals and secular government officials.

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[20] *Ibid. No.* 3.g.

[21] Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, Circular Letter *The Pastoral Function of Ecclesiastical Museums*, August 15, 2001, Vatican City 2001, 2.1.1.

3) It is recommended that every ecclesiastical body keep an inventory of its own buildings, furnishings and contents, together with an accurate catalogue of items of cultural interest. The appeal is made to be particularly careful about recording and monitoring religious heritage that is no longer used (including modern elements), and ensuring it is protected and maintained and that safety precautions are taken. It is desirable that a manual and international lexicon be produced and used that engages with the various experiences around the world.

4) Every decision about cultural heritage must be part of a coordinated territorial vision that includes social dynamics (demographic change, cultural politics, labor markets, attention to environmental and countryside sustainability etc.), pastoral strategies and conservation needs in agreement with international and national norms regarding cultural heritage, with the planning for the use of ecclesiastical buildings over at least a medium term scale. In this context it will be essential for the ecclesial community to engage with the civil community in the region, which should be disposed to give the heritage a wider use. The process discerning the future use of a decommissioned church must involve heritage and conservation specialists, architects and surveyors, together with the parish and the wider community having an interest in the building.

5) The grave decision to change the use of an edifice built as a sacred Christian place, following the presuppositions established by canonical or civil law, should be taken in partnership with the different ecclesial subjects involved (the entire people of God, the bishop, the parish priest, the pastoral council, religious orders, associations and ecclesial movements, the confraternities, other pastoral workers, and members of the parish) in order to find a realistic and appropriate solution. Discernment should be made keeping in mind both practical and symbolic realities.

6) In the documents of alienation (sale and transfer) efforts should be made to introduce a clause in defense of the sacred buildings, including the question of future sales. Civil authorities are to be invited to guarantee the dignity of the area with juridical means.

7) As far as possible and compatibly with the original intention of the building, it is desirable that when it can no longer be maintained as a religious building as such, an effort be made to ensure a new use, whether religious (for example, entrusting it to other Christian communities), cultural or charitable. Commercial for-profit reuses seem to be excluded, while social enterprise usage may be considered. What should be preferred are reuses with cultural aims (museums, conference halls, bookshops, libraries, archives, artistic workshops etc.), or social aims (meeting places, charity centers, healthcare clinics, foodbanks for the poor etc.). For buildings of lesser architectural value, transformation into private dwellings may be allowed.

8) Before being used for another purpose, decommissioned churches must be subjected to a study of any transformations that led the building to its current state. This will help evaluate which later transformations are compatible with the historical architecture so that they can be consciously inserted into the community's history and the new reality can conserve the meaning and memory of the urban and territorial system attained through its history (intrinsic value).

9) Generally, when reversible modifications cannot be made, it is desirable that for churches of historical value, the size and shape of the buildings remain intact, together with their constructive components, the functional and hierarchical distribution of the spaces, and any highly symbolic original elements. Thus, in redesigning internal spaces, different heights should be kept in sight together with key elements of the interior, its decoration and its setting. This will help those who use the building to be conscious of being in a space that has been rediscovered and remolded following contemporary methods.

10) Regarding movable heritage removed from decommissioned churches (furnishings, objects, images, vestments, windows, etc.) – except for those tied by state legislation – an appeal is made to seek their continuity of use and life in other churches that are in need of these materials in the same territory, or in poor Churches as a sign of fraternal sharing. Objects that are removed from their original purpose and that have a special importance should be documented and placed in a museum, preferably a church museum, allowing for a new ecclesial function and for memory. It is necessary to follow any guidelines of the local episcopal conference.

11) It is recommended that altars, lecterns, pulpits, sacred images and sacred furnishings generally be removed from decommissioned churches, as their presence can be in opposition to the new use of space. This would not need to be done when a church is being transformed into a museum. This should be done respecting current state laws and in agreement with the appropriate civil authorities.