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CULT
TO
CULTURE

A SEMANTIC SHIFT OF CATHOLIC CHURCHES

Cult to Culture: a semantic shift of Catholic Churches

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All drawings in the report are created by the author unless stated otherwise.

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Elena

INTRODUCTION

METHODOLOGIES

1.   **What are the frictions or driving forces that either enable or hinder**

2.   **What can be defined as a "church" in contemporary society?**

3.   **What is the next evolutionary stage for Catholic churches?**

CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION

I WAS BORN IN ROME, A CITY WHERE
CHURCHES ARE NOT MERELY BUILDINGS
BUT DEEPLY ROOTED PRESENCES INTER-
WOVEN IN THE URBAN FABRIC.
THEIR DOMES BLEND WITH THE SKY,
THEIR DOORS — OPEN OR CLOSED —
HOLD COUNTLESS STORIES.

MY ROMAN, CATHOLIC FAMILY RAISED ME
IN THE STREAM OF GESTURES AND TRADITIONS
THAT HAD BEEN FOLLOWED FOR DECADES,
LIKE FOLLOWING THE COURSE OF A RIVER.
MY BAPTISM WAS A NATURAL ACT, A PART
OF THAT FLOW.
I REMEMBER SUNDAY IN THE MAIN SQUARE
OF CASTEL GANDOLFO, GAZING AT A
BALCONY AWAITING A PAPAL GREETING,
AFTERNOONS AT THE PARISH WITH FRIENDS.
A SIX-YEAR-OLD I DID NOT PONDER
FAITH — THE CHURCH WAS A PLACE
FOR PLAY AND LIFE! ITS COURTYARDS
FILLED WITH VOICES, BECOMING SUMMER
STAGES...

IT WAS EASY TO FEEL PART OF SOME-
THING, SIMPLY FOLLOWING THE RYTHM
OF THE COMMUNITY, WITHOUT QUESTIONING
WHY.

THEN, THAT "WHY" EMERGED.
GRADUALLY, I BEGAN QUESTIONING
THE MEANING OF THOSE GESTURES AND
TRADITIONS I HAD UNCOSCIOUSLY
ACCEPTED. WITH A MORE DINSTANT
EYE, I LOOKED AT RELIGION SEEKING
TO UNDERSTAND IF IT WAS GENUINELY
MINE.
TRUTH WAS, IT HAD BEEN MORE ABOUT
TOGETHERNESS — THAN FAITH.

THE DISTANCE I FELT SEEMED REFLECTED
IN THE CHURCHES THEMSELVES.
DOORS ONCE ALWAYS OPEN WERE NOW
CLOSED   WITHOUT EXPLANATION.
THAT ONCE VIBRANT COMMUNITY HAD
DISPERSED.

THIS RESEARCH STEMS FROM A DESIRE
TO UNDERSTAND.
IT IS A RETROSPECTIVE JOURNEY UP
THE RIVER OF TRADITION AND A
LEAP TOWARDS OPEN WATERS —
WHERE "WHYS" ARE NOT
                    LIMITATIONS BUT
OPPORTUNITIES TO UNCOVER NEW MEANINGS.

IT IS ABOUT OBSERVING
                 THE PAST
WITH NEW EYES —————

BEHIND EVERY CLOSED DOOR
LIES A STORY WAITING TO BE
REDISCOVERED.

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is currently the most widespread religion globally **(Dyvik, 2024)**. Its roots are deeply intertwined with the historical development of societies, variably guiding ethical and spiritual principles through the diverse schisms that have marked its history.

In particular, the European Catholic context reveals an enduring intent by the Church to "present itself as the bulwark of national identity and collective memory, positioning itself as the guarantor and defender of the cultural roots of entire peoples" **(Pace, 2011)**. Sacred buildings, alongside art, have for centuries borne the responsibility of embodying this set of values **(Shusterman, 2008)**, especially under the directives of the Vatican Councils.

This thesis project thus addresses the challenge of maintaining the Christian architectural heritage:

1. **What are the frictions or driving forces that either enable or hinder the transformation of catholic churches?**

2. **What can be defined as a "church" in contemporary society?**

3. **What is the next evolutionary stage for catholic churches?**

Valuing the specificity of each site, this thesis does not aim to reach universal conclusions but instead seeks to raise a series of questions and then attempt to answer them within the ubiquity of a single location. The research focuses on the former Church of Santa Rita da Cascia in Campitelli, located in the Rione Sant'Angelo district in Rome, just three kilometres from the Vatican City.

The thesis is divided into three parts, progressing from general considerations—applicable to medieval-founded cities of European origin—to the Italian context, which is of central importance as the physical seat of the Catholic Church.

The first section examines the conception and role of Catholic places of worship over time, aiming to rediscover the values that connect spaces dedicated to Catholicism to an urban scale, as well as the utility value that churches have long embodied.

The second part analyses Italian legislation as an example of the close physical and cultural proximity to the Vatican State. Italian law is interpreted as a snapshot of the possibilities within which to explore what defines and characterises the building of a church today. A comparison is then drawn with the measures adopted by the Netherlands, the leading European country in repurposing places of worship **(Interreg Europe, 2021)**. The Dutch approach treats sacred "objects"—furnishings and ornaments—with greater pragmatism.

Finally, the research explores, in light of ancestral values, utility, sacred objects, and the building itself, which elements may be modified to repurpose churches while transforming their typological history.

This thesis project aims to propose considerations useful for imagining a new evolutionary stage for the former Church of Santa Rita da Cascia and, more broadly, for the thousands of unused Catholic churches scattered across Europe.

METHODOLOGIES
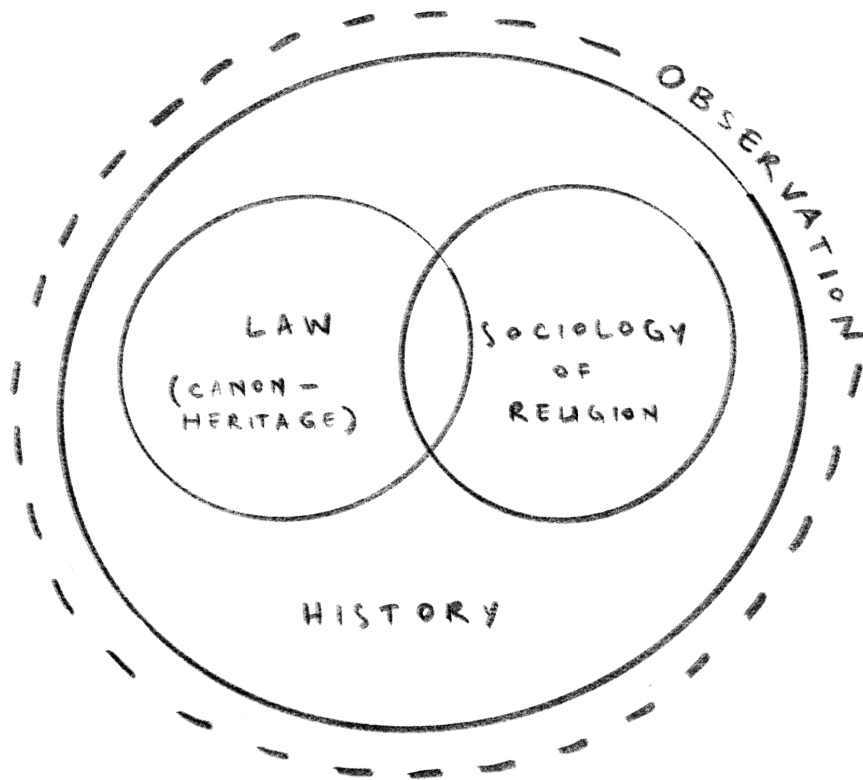
The methodology of this study was developed with the aim of systematically and thoroughly investigating the complexities characterising the transformation of places of worship. Through an investigation that integrates historical, sociological, legislative, and anthropological analyses, the research sought to provide a multifaceted vision of the reconversion of these buildings while maintaining the "church" as an open concept to be redefined within contemporary society.

The analysis of the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia in Rome served as the primary case study, selected not with the aim of drawing generalisable conclusions but to understand the unique dynamics and symbolic meanings that a historical and cultural context can offer.
Initially, the utility value of churches was explored through a review of historical literature. This study identified the "friction" elements that often hinder the transformation of churches, as well as the "propulsion" elements that favour their reuse. This contributed to understanding the tension between the necessity of preserving these buildings and the desire to adapt them to new social needs. Secondary sources tracing the evolution of churches as places of worship, identity symbols, and community spaces were included. This review highlighted the importance of religious buildings as custodians of values that transcend their liturgical function.

In parallel, the analysis of secularisation, supported by sociological research and integrated with current journalistic sources, contextualised the phenomenon of "emptiness" that characterises many churches today. This part of the research examined the gradual decline in religious participation, which has led many churches to become progressively abandoned as everyday gathering spaces. Journalistic sources provided a concrete and up-to-date overview of the situation, confirming secularisation as a process that, despite local specificities, extensively affects the utilisation of religious buildings across Europe.

A central aspect of the methodology was the legislative analysis, essential to understanding the constraints and opportunities influencing the repurposing of churches in Italy. Canon law, administrative law, and the cultural heritage code were examined, with particular attention to the provisions of the Lateran Pacts, revised in 1984, which still govern relations between the Italian State and the Catholic Church. This analysis identified the "use designation" constraints limiting the transformation of churches and clarified the legal relationships protecting the sacred value of these buildings. It provided an overview of regulations that restrict the possibility of profane use.
In understanding the transformation processes undertaken, the Dutch case provided a useful comparison. Characterised by advanced secularisation and a pragmatic approach to repurposing churches, the

Dutch context offers valuable insights into adapting churches for new uses. Since 2009, the Netherlands has developed pragmatic strategies summarising possibilities into a binary spectrum, prioritising the utility of space. This approach has met with criticism within local Catholic communities, highlighting the challenges of removing or reinterpreting symbols tied to Catholic liturgy and demonstrating how, even in highly secularised contexts, an identity and cultural bond complicates the repurposing of churches.

To rise above practical possibilities and explore novel options, the study integrated filmographic and artistic research. Through the analysis of contemporary works, visual representations of spirituality were explored, illustrating how even profane spaces can acquire a sacred aura through specific imagery or artistic practices. This approach clarified how the concept of "church" can be reinterpreted beyond traditional boundaries, liberating buildings from the burden of transmitting an ecumenical message.

Simultaneously, historical research through primary sources focused on the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia. The choice of this building is based on its particular historical and cultural role within the Rione Sant'Angelo district of Rome, a neighbourhood characterised by a strong identity and historical stratification reflecting Rome's social and urban transformations. The history of Santa Rita was reconstructed through archival documents and historical maps to understand how urban transformations influenced the perception of the building and its role in the community over time.

On an operational level, live surveys of the church were conducted, documenting its current state and collecting data on its architectural features. To enrich the analysis with a qualitative perspective, interviews were conducted with residents of the neighbourhood. These interviews provided insights into the perception and significance the building holds for the local community in a historical moment where its liturgical role is no longer active. This approach revealed how the collective perception of a sacred space can persist in memory and community culture even in the absence of a stable religious function, highlighting the symbolic and social importance these buildings maintain over time.

Finally, conclusions drawn from these analyses hypothesised a series of considerations for transforming Catholic churches, where the identity value—rather than the symbolic value—of the building can be preserved to adapt it to contemporary community needs. The case study of Santa Rita is emblematic of how a sacred building can be reinterpreted to become a space for cultural or artistic aggregation, offering a new approach to the concept of sacrality that aligns with contemporary society.

1. What are the frictions or driving forces that either enable or hinder

the transformation of Catholic churches?

Permanent Elements. What do church buildings represent beyond the worship they embody?
The enduring presence of churches is analysed starting from the Medieval period—a time rich in artistic and architectural commissions by the Vatican, as well as a period observable through the works of the leading architects of the era.

Churches have always played a central role in the urban planning of European cities. Walking through any city of medieval foundation, one immediately notices the proximity of buildings, which creates narrow streets that guide pedestrians towards large open squares. These empty spaces, as rare as they are significant, signify economic power and the need for capacity, and it is here that churches find their placement, alongside civic buildings of representation.

In **Francesco di Giorgio Martini**'s "Treatise on Civil and Military Architecture" **(1439)**, the church is depicted in a central position, corresponding to the "*navel*" of the city, in a metaphor that anthropomorphises the urban organism. Leon Battista Alberti, inspired by his encounter with Martini, and Andrea Palladio both confirmed the importance of the centrality of churches, emphasizing that they should be "*situated so that they can be seen from afar and so that their magnificence and dignity can be appreciated*" **(Palladio, 1508)**.

With the evolution of urban planning during the Baroque period, the role of churches as visual and symbolic landmarks in European cities was further emphasised. In Rome, under the guidance of Pope Alexander VII and the work of artists such as Gian Lorenzo Bernini, churches were integrated into a system of visual axes designed to amplify the magnificence of sacred buildings along major urban routes **(Krautheimer, 1985)**. This development marked a turning point in the conception of the Baroque city, where churches became visual fulcrums symbolically and perceptually connecting different

parts of the city, defining space and asserting themselves as central elements **(Blunt, 1983)**.

With the advent of the industrial era and urban expansion, especially in European contexts, growing urbanisation and the process of secularisation transformed the role of churches. They increasingly became symbolic landmarks but were less central to the new functional needs of the modern city. According to **Peter Hall (1998)**, industrial urbanisation led to a redistribution of sacred and civic spaces, turning some places of worship into "*cultural islands*" within the expanding industrial fabric. This transformation rendered churches not only symbols of continuity but also monuments that challenged the social and demographic changes of the city, preserving a historical connection.

In the evolution of the modern city, a shift in the perception of these structures can be observed: once symbols of power, churches have become points of reference and orientation. **Kevin Lynch (1960)** considers them key elements for the "*legibility*" of the city, while **Aldo Rossi (1966)** describes them as "*permanent elements that define the structure of the city and influence its evolution over time*."

This transition highlights a new perspective: while cities once organised themselves around churches, today churches serve as anchors of stability in ever-changing urban environments. In constant transformation, permanence has become an identity feature. In "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture" **(1979)**, **Christian Norberg-Schulz** argues that *"churches embody the genius loci of a place, reflecting the spirit of the place and creating a sacred space that connects the earthly to the divine."* It is worth considering how these spaces, having served as the vigilant eyes of cities for so long, take on a value extended to those who live them daily and those who have lived them in the past.

From these considerations, two fundamental themes characterise churches: their permanence over time and—perhaps consequently—their ability to confer identity to a place. These buildings not only physically mark the urban landscape but enrich it with meanings, preserving the historical memory of cities.
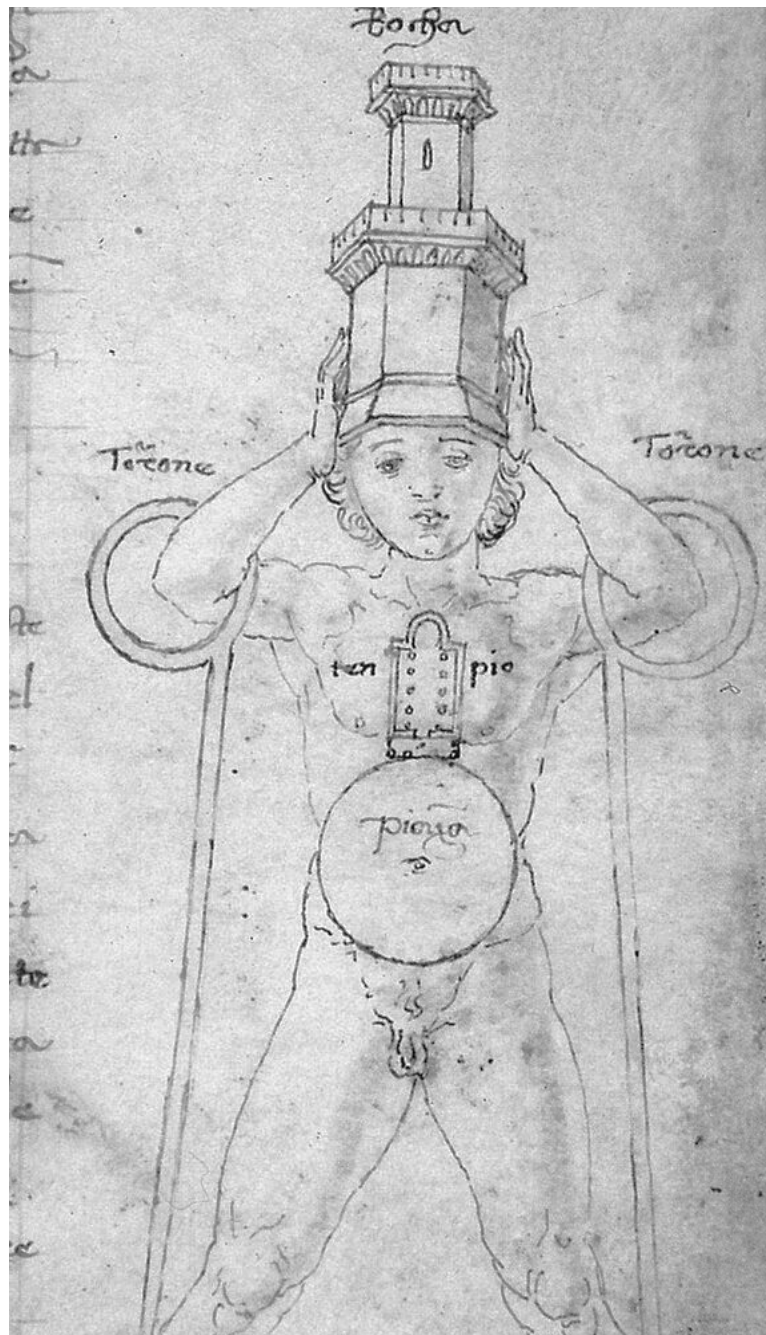
Di Giorgio Martini F., "Treatise on Civil and Military Architecture"
(**1439**)
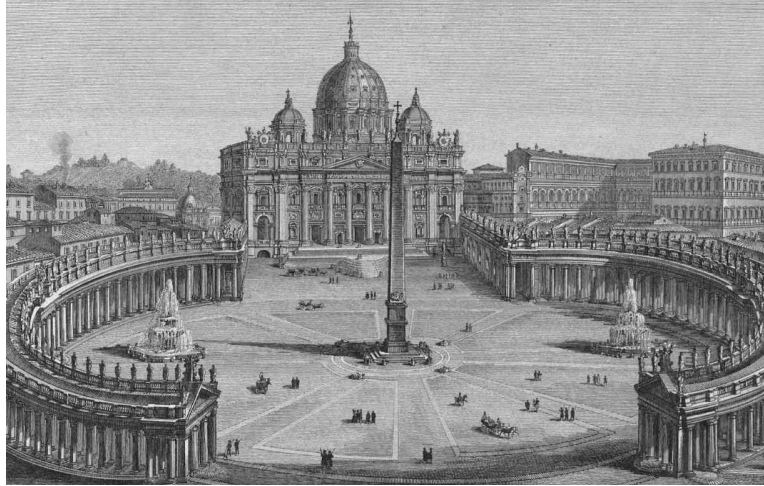
Drawing of Piazza San Pietro (**1835**), info.roma.it
Drawing of Sant'Andrea (**1799**), info.roma.it

Full Spaces Becoming Empty. This perspective on the function of churches as permanent elements and reference points in urban organisation leads to reflections on their evolution over time, particularly the changes in their use and meaning. While historically central—not only physically but also symbolically—churches today do not always retain the same internal vitality that characterised them in past centuries. Their presence persists in the urban fabric, but the phenomenon of secularisation has gradually reduced their role as centres of worship, leaving them as static monuments in a transforming public space.

Secularisation is a centuries-old process rooted in social, economic, political, and cultural changes. The term itself was first used in the Treaty of Westphalia **(1648)** at the conclusion of the Thirty Years' War, to describe the transfer of ecclesiastical property to civil ownership. In the 19th century, Max Weber expanded the concept, describing secularisation as the process of rationalisation and "disenchantment" of various aspects of social life originating from Judeo-Christian traditions **(Cartocci & Vanelli, 2015)**. In a broader context, such as Eastern Europe, this phenomenon is described as *"the emancipation of secular spheres (state, economy, science) from religious norms"* **(Casanova, 2006)**.

One of the most evident signs of this change is the progressive decline in religious observance. According to a study conducted by the European Social Survey in 2021, the highest rate of active religious participation in an EU country reached just 14.3%—the only one exceeding 10%. Meanwhile, most EU countries ranged between 8% and 3.1%, while the percentage of those declaring religion irrelevant
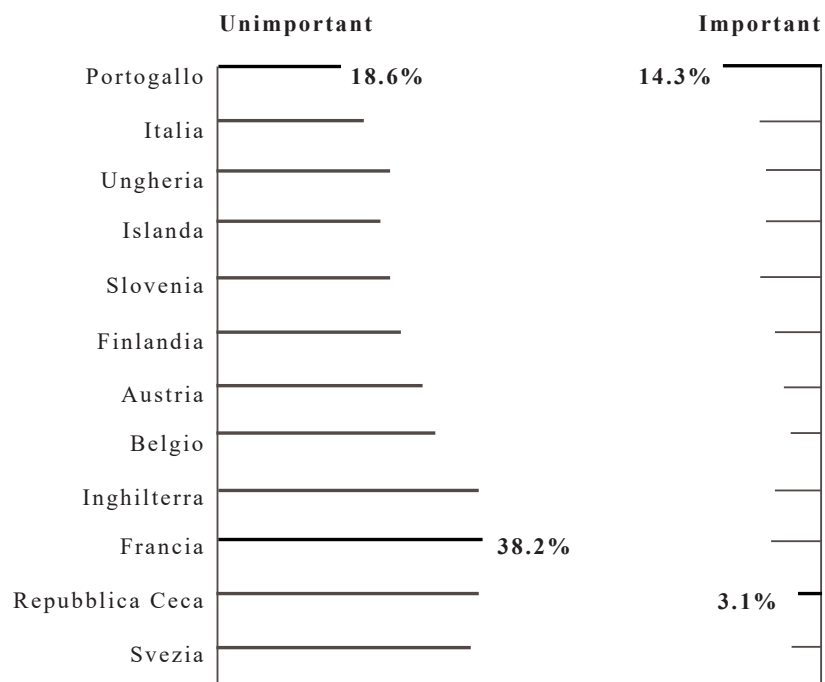
ranged from 18.6% to 38.2%, highlighting a marked detachment from religious practice on a continental scale **(European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure, 2021)**.

Evidence of this change is also visible in the progressive closure and demolition of religious buildings across Europe. In France, for example, one religious building is lost every two weeks, with many churches demolished or abandoned due to high maintenance and renovation costs **(Tadié, 2021)**. Germany sees a growing number of demolished Catholic churches, accompanied by a more open stance on repurposing them. Belgium, as reported by The Independent, offers various scenarios of transformation of former places of worship into hotels, cultural centres, bars, or nightclubs, driven by the decline in religious practice—only 10% of Belgians regularly attend church services **(Casert, 2023)**.

In Italy, despite a more cautious approach, similar dynamics are emerging. According to Il Messaggero **(Giansoldati, 2022)**, an increasing number of churches and monasteries are being closed or sold for conversion, sometimes fuelling real estate speculation. However, the Vatican has adopted a stricter line compared to other countries, establishing clear rules to prevent religious buildings from being transformed into bars, nightclubs, or pizzerias, as confirmed by recent directives against the misuse of such spaces **(Vecchi, 2018)**. This reflects a desire to preserve the symbolic significance of these buildings, even within the context of a crisis of their religious function. It is worth examining the reasons for this cautious Italian stance further.

Despite Italy being traditionally considered the cradle of Catholicism, it follows a trajectory similar to the rest of Europe. After the peak of religious fervour associated with the election of Karol Wojtyla (Pope Giovanni Paolo II) in 1978, religious practice has seen a steady decline **(Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2021)**. According to a 2021 ISTAT survey, regular church attendance has drastically decreased: while in 2001, 36% of the Italian population regularly attended church, with only 16% never attending, by 2021, the percentage of weekly practitioners had dropped to 18.9%, while 31.1% of the population never set foot in a church **(Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2021)**.

This phenomenon affects not only churches in rural areas, which have been emptied due to post-industrial migration to cities, but also many

2001　　　　　　　　　　2021

36%
34%
32%
30%
28%
26%
24%
22%
20%
18%
16%

Never / **31%**

Once a week / **18%**

Unimportant　　　　　　　　　　**Important**

Portogallo　　　　**18.6%**　　　　**14.3%**

Italia

Ungheria

Islanda

Slovenia

Finlandia

Austria

Belgio

Inghilterra

Francia　　　　　**38.2%**

Repubblica Ceca　　　　　　　　　**3.1%**

Svezia

From above: Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (**2021**)
European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (**2021**)

buildings located in urban centres. The progressive abandonment of churches, whether in cities or the countryside, is evident in cases such as Venice, where approximately thirty churches have been sealed off and described as *"archipelagos of voids"* that, nevertheless, continue to *"shape"* the urban landscape **(Marini et al., 2020)**.

In Naples, over 200 abandoned churches in the historic centre are regularly mentioned in the media, with emblematic cases such as San Carlo in Mortelle, near Piazza del Plebiscito, symbolising the economic difficulties associated with the maintenance and restoration of these historic buildings **(Rispoli et al., 2020)**.

Another crucial factor is the decline in priestly vocations. According to data collected from various journalistic sources, Italy has lost 6,200 priests over the past thirty years, with a global decrease of 37.4% from 1970 to 2018 **(Ansa.it, 2024; Istituto Centrale per il Sostentamento del Clero, 2021)**. This has led to the closure or merger of many parishes, as the number of priests is insufficient to manage the Church's vast architectural heritage **(Vinci, 2020)**. This decline has had a direct impact not only on the religious function of these buildings but also on their upkeep, as in many cases, it is the parish priest who is responsible for the building's management.

However, limiting the understanding of this phenomenon to issues of numbers or planning would be reductive. Churches are not merely workplaces for priests but spaces that have, for centuries, represented the beating heart of communities. Despite the evident decline, these buildings have not been promptly repurposed for other uses, as would happen with other architectural typologies. The closure of churches, therefore, does not appear to be dictated solely by economic or administrative reasons but reflects a deeper transformation of the role these structures have played in society.

The progressive abandonment of churches reflects not only secularisation and the decline in vocations but also a cultural shift that has weakened the bond between these structures and the daily lives of people.

In a context where the physical presence of these buildings clashes with the absence of an active function, churches become voids within the urban landscape, symbols of a glorious past yet detached from the needs and realities of the present.

Ruga P. (**1813**), geoportale.cittametropolitanaroma.it

2. What can be defined as a "church" in contemporary society?
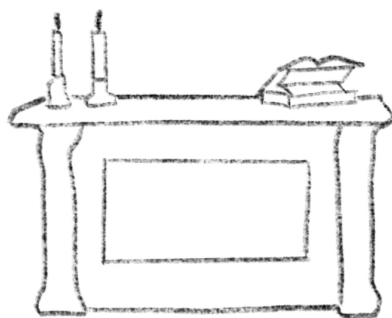
NO GELATI
NO ICE CREAM

NO DRINKS

NO BEER

NO CIBO
NO FOOD

NO PANCIA SCOPERTA
NO BARE BELLY

Use. The analysis of the progressive decline in the vitality of churches and their role as places of worship sets the stage for understanding how this phenomenon has been addressed in Italy, the heart of Catholicism, from both religious and legal perspectives. The protection of religious buildings and their potential secular use finds its roots not only in cultural dynamics but also in the relationship between the State and the Church.

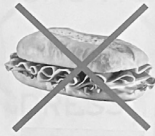The legal relationship between the Italian State and the Vatican State began with the Lateran Pacts of 11 February 1929. The document was drafted under Pope Pius XI and King Victor Emmanuel III, in the presence of Cardinal Gasparri and Prime Minister Benito Mussolini. For the first time in history, the discord between the two entities was resolved for reasons of "*convenience*" **(Trattato Tra La Santa Sede e l'Italia (Patti Lateranensi), 1929)**. Primarily, the Catholic religion was established as the national faith, subsequently transferring ownership of worship buildings to the Vatican State.

This agreement was later updated in 1984 **(Accordo Di Modifica Del Concordato Lateranense, 18 Febbraio 1984)**, under the leadership of Bettino Craxi and Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, to affirm or distinguish their respective spheres of action. These distinctions primarily applied to education, opening a window to freedom of worship, the recognition of academic titles, and, finally, the distinction of immovable property ownership.

Regarding the latter, the transformation of religious property—or rather, the impossibility of such transformation—was mentioned for the first time:
"Buildings open to worship cannot be requisitioned, occupied, expropriated, or demolished except for serious reasons and with prior agreement with the competent ecclesiastical authority." **(Accordo**

Di Modifica Del Concordato Lateranense, 18 Febbraio 1984).
It is noteworthy how the statement begins with an immediate negation, concluding with a constraint. Although the phrasing implies dual limitations, the constraint is, in fact, singular and linked to the subjective perception of "*gravity*" by the ecclesiastical authority. But what defines a "*serious reason*"?

This term was already mentioned in the Code of Canon Law, updated in 1983 **(Codice Di Diritto Canonico, 1983)**. The most recent response belongs to a 2016 case presented to the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura **(Dimodugno, 2017)**. On this occasion, Catholic faithful concerned about the reduction of churches to secular use requested a definition to defend their prayer spaces. Only eight years ago, the intentionality of considering the meaning and weight of "gravity" as subjective was reaffirmed, with the Bishop deemed the most suitable figure to evaluate the *"circumstances of place, patrimony, and persons"* **(Reductionis Ecclesiae in Usum Profanum, 1996)**.

This subjectivity applies, therefore, first to the administrative decision to transition a church to deconsecrated status, and second to the judgement of the future use of such space, which is only permissible if deemed "*not indecorous*" by the Bishop. Moreover, the Bishop retains an absolute veto right, as they may intervene and potentially block the property transfer process at any time **(Schoch, 2007).**

A clearer expression of these principles can be found in a 1940 regulation **(Regolamento per l'Esecuzione del Testo Unico delle Leggi di Pubblica Sicurezza, 1940)**, summarising a deeply ingrained sentiment that is rarely explicitly articulated. Article 20, paragraph 2 of this regulation states:*"The use of churches and other sacred places for purposes unrelated to religious sentiment or for objectives not pertinent to worship is prohibited."*

This highlights the need to seek avenues of possibility within the framework of feasibility represented by the law.
Despite the evident reluctance of the Code of Canon Law and administrative law, the transformation of a place of worship into a cultural space is indeed possible, even in Italy. Citing lawyer **Dimodugno**'s dissertation: *"There is no absolute inalienability*

constraint on Catholic places of worship, but only a 'destination constraint' linked to the deputatio ad cultum, which only ecclesiastical authority can terminate, and which, at the same time, does not exclude their seizable or possessable status" **(Dimodugno, 2017)**.

The loss of *deputatio ad cultum* is described in Article 1212 **(Codice Di Diritto Canonico, 1983)**: *"Sacred places lose their dedication or blessing if they have been largely destroyed or permanently assigned to secular uses by decree of the competent Ordinary or by fact."*

The treatment of deconsecrated buildings is further distinguished between their fixed and movable parts. The structure itself is protected—primarily—by cultural heritage regulations **(Codice Dei Beni Culturali e Del Paesaggio, 2004, art. 10, p. II)**, with additional provisions concerning the altar, as mentioned in the Code of Canon Law: *"Altars, fixed or movable, do not lose their dedication or blessing if the church or another sacred place is reduced to secular use"* **(Codice Di Diritto Canonico, 1983, art. 1238, p.2).** However, it is immediately clarified: *"The altar, whether fixed or movable, must be reserved exclusively for divine worship, entirely excluding any secular use"* **(Codice Di Diritto Canonico, 1983, art. 1239)**.

Additionally, upon the reduction of a church to secular use, movable furnishings must, whenever possible, be relocated. However, the final destination of these objects remains unclear. The Congregation for the Clergy prescribes that: *"Before alienation, all sacred objects, relics, sacred furnishings, stained glass, bells, confessionals, altars, etc., must be removed for use in other sacred buildings or kept under ecclesiastical custody. Since altars can never be reduced to secular use, if they cannot be removed, they must be destroyed"* **(Codice Di Diritto Canonico, 1983, art. 1212 and 1238; Pontificium Consilium de Cultura, 2018)**.

This evident contradiction is pressing: on one hand, regulations aim to protect the integrity of cultural assets; on the other, the removal of sacred furnishings marks the transition to secular use of the deconsecrated building **(Codice Dei Beni Culturali e Del Paesaggio, 2004)**.

Dedicatio ad cultum Parish of San Lorenzo Martire Narni (**2024**),
diocesi.terni.it
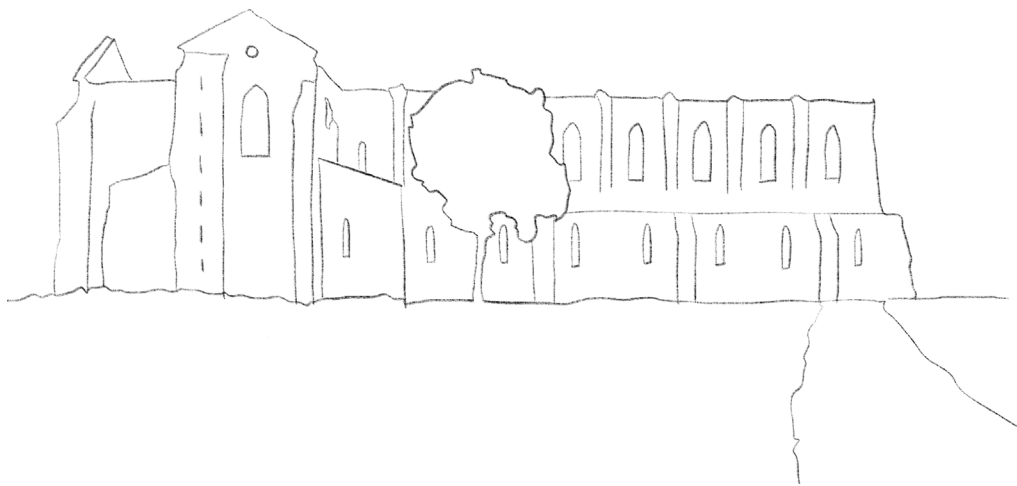
IF (TIME) DEFEATS THE
CHURCH — BUILDING ...
THEN   "AD CULTUM"
IS GONE ——

BUT IF SOCIOLOGICAL
CHANGES DEFEAT
"AD CULTUM" THEN
TRANSFORMING THE
CHURCH-BUILDING
IS STILL NOT AN OPTION?

Objects. It is assumed that the removal of sacred objects is an immediate reflection of the lack of use of the place of worship—a relocation. The example of the Netherlands (de Beyer & Takke, 2012) reveals a pragmatic approach to the emptying and reuse of places of worship. The "Reuse of Religious Heritage" conference (2009) outlined the guidelines for transforming such spaces into secular venues. A comparison is thus drawn with the measures adopted by the Dutch state, a leader in Europe for repurposing religious buildings (Interreg Europe, 2021).

The Dutch case is profoundly influenced by the internal divisions within Christianity under the Reformation **(Carmo, 2003)**. While Luther rejected papal infallibility and questioned the use of sacred images, Andreas Karlstadt in Wittenberg condemned the veneration of images as idolatry, sparking iconoclastic campaigns. Although Erasmus and Butzer accepted depictions of Christ's life, they rejected the veneration of saints. Huldrych Zwingli, taking a radical stance, entirely banned the use of images, deeming them impure due to their human origin **(Sassu, 2014)**.

This position deeply influenced the architecture of Protestant churches, which, unlike Catholic churches, eschewed figurative decorations, focusing instead on functional, austere spaces intended for preaching the Word of God **(Sassu, 2014)**.

As the detachment from religious institutions became more pronounced, the Netherlands reacted swiftly and pragmatically. By 2009, the conference Reuse of Religious Heritage in the Netherlands was openly examining the economic value of the land occupied by churches and the financial burden of maintaining unused or abandoned buildings **(Ben de Vries & Vienna, 2009)**. This approach

drew a stark distinction between Catholic and Protestant places of worship: *"The Catholics think in a two-way concept: the church stays open as a house of God, or it will be demolished. Generally, they are not in favour of reuse. As a result, 53% of Catholic churches have been demolished already. But as the Protestants think less reluctantly about giving a second life to religious heritage, only 10% of the Protestant churches are demolished"* **(Ben de Vries & Vienna, 2009)**.

The "*reversible*" approach of Catholic churches, which aims to cause the least possible offence to individual sensitivities, highlights a different stance compared to Protestant places of worship, where functionality takes precedence over symbolic implications.

Despite this pragmatism, the real issue lies not solely in the economic management of these spaces but in the meaning attached to the building itself. The "Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects" **(2012)**, proposed by the National Museum for Christian Art and Culture in the Netherlands, represent a practical resolution to this dilemma, offering a collaborative plan between government and church to address the reuse of buildings and sacred objects.

However, even in this context, the removal of furnishings—and objects more broadly, as indicated by the title—may seem like a final act that frees the building from its sacred character. Yet, a critical question arises: can the sacredness of a space be entirely erased simply through the elimination of its physical symbols? Is it sufficient to introduce a new, secular use to alter the meaning of a building?

What, then, defines a church?

Jansz Saenredam P. (**1660**), "Interior of the Choir of St. Bavo at Haarlem"

Ben de Vries & Vienna (**2009**)

3. What is the next evolutionary stage for Catholic churches?

INTEGRITY ←————————————————————→ CHANGE

"Church"

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church **(Catechismo Della Chiesa Cattolica, n.d., Chapter 3, Article 9, para. 1, 752)**:
*"In Christian language, the term 'Church' refers to the liturgical assembly, but also to the local community or the whole universal community of believers. In fact, these three meanings are inseparable. The 'Church' is the people God gathers across the whole world. It exists in local communities and is realised as a liturgical assembly, particularly Eucharistic. It lives through the Word and the Body of Christ, thus becoming itself the Body of Christ."*

This definition thus identifies a human network, occupying the said building and performing rituals daily. However, this community—as described in the first chapter—is progressively shrinking, both in terms of vocations and of the faithful, thereby emptying the initial definition, at least within the buildings ideally intended to host these gatherings **(European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure, 2021; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2021)**.

Alternatively, the Church can become an ensemble of human rituals that imbue a building—any building—with the sacred.
Ken Loach's latest film, "The Old Oak" **(2023)**, demonstrates precisely this: the community, evicted from the parish church, ends up gathering in the back room of the pub that gives the film its title. The New York Times dubbed it *"the audacity of hope"* **(Wilkinson, 2024)**, almost suggesting that the cohesion of the community itself confers a sacred aura. Similarly, the work described by Matilde Cassani under the title "Sacred Interiors in Profane Buildings" **(Cassani & Bern, 2011)** takes on even greater relevance. Particularly in her early research Spiritual Devices **(Cassani, 2010)**, she seeks to represent the possibility of generating a 1x2-metre instrument encapsulating spirituality within a mobile spatial module.

In this light, the removal of sacred objects—described in the regulations as a necessary step to enable the change of function of a church—can be read as an act of *intra-doxa* **(Bourdieu, 1977)**,
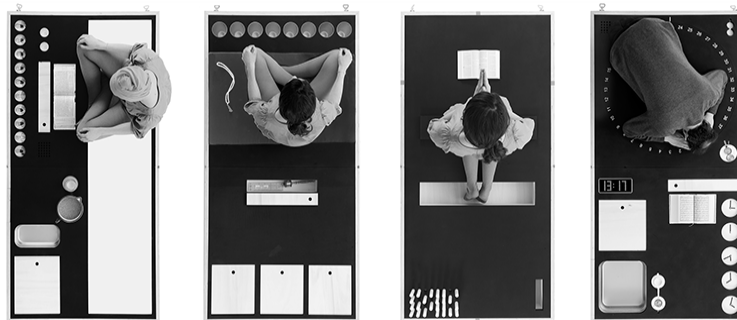
an internal movement within tradition that questions the shared and unconscious presumption that sacred furnishings are essential to the church's identity. In this process of material and symbolic "emptying," the habitual perception that a church is complete only when adorned with the objects that characterise it is destabilised—an action that Bourdieu **(1977)** would categorise as doxa, a set of cultural practices experienced as natural and indisputable. This destabilisation is not merely a material process but introduces a profound reflection on the value that sacred objects confer to the context, creating a tension between what is perceived as sacred and what is simply functional.

The shared perception of a church as a sacred space is not merely an expression of the building's function; it also reflects a form of normative internalisation where the religious object, from simple ornament, becomes essential to understanding the space itself. Objects

like altars, paintings, and sculptures are not merely decorations: they are symbols that explicitly convey precise meanings. The Catholic Church has always upheld the value of visual arts as an immediate and evocative means of transmitting its faith, sometimes considered even more potent than words **(Ravasi, 2011; Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1963; Piacenza, 2006; Intervista, 2024)**. This intrinsic correlation between objects and sacred space underscores how their removal cannot be considered a mere technical or administrative gesture but rather an act implying a conceptual and spiritual redefinition of the building.

Through this expressive intentionality, sacred furnishings are imbued with symbolic meaning that links them inextricably to the specific church building, the Catholic institution, the Vatican, the Christian-Catholic faith, and ultimately to God Himself. These objects function in such a way that each individual element becomes representative of the whole: the part reflects the entirety and imbues the entire building with an aura of sacredness. The removal of such objects, therefore, not only physically empties the space but also weakens the symbolic connection that gave the church its perception of "completeness."

In this context, Baudrillard's theory of the *simulacrum* **(1994)** provides further insight into this phenomenon. According to Baudrillard, the representative object progressively detaches from its original reality, transforming into a simulacrum and, eventually, a simulation **(Schirò, 2017)**. Similarly, the process of removing sacred objects turns them into *simulacra*: once separated from their original context, they lose their connection to the space for which they were conceived, retaining only an abstract representation of the sacred.

The process of emptying, therefore, becomes a force that not only materially strips the church but also invites questioning the symbolic link between these objects and the perception of the building's completeness. It impacts the very identity of the building, which sees its symbolic and spiritual connection to its original function waver without being entirely annulled.

Thus, the definition of a church cannot be reduced to the mere removal of its movable components. However, this act of emptying introduces a significant transformation in the church's identity, as the

removed objects previously completed its symbolic meaning. Their absence promotes a wavering of the *doxa* **(Bourdieu, 1977)**, challenging the traditional perception of the building and paving the way for new interpretations and functions, revealing simulations and simulacra **(Baudrillard, 1994)**.

When the congregation, rituals, and movable objects are removed—and it is clarified that none of these is a sufficient condition to define a church—what remains?

One might hypothesise that a church is not merely an architectural typology responding to functionalism but that the need to abstract through symbolism is a primary necessity to be sought immediately in the design of the structure itself.

On the theme of the intentionality of bestowing symbolism upon space, Cardinal Mauro Piacenza **(Piacenza, 2005)** outlines principles for the construction of churches. In this sense, he explicates the symbolic representation of each part of the building, the interaction the faithful should have with it, and correspondingly what the architect must prepare to facilitate this. The Cardinal himself asserts:
"In keeping with the logic of incarnation, whereby spiritual realities find expression in tangible ones, the sacred place is the corporeal covering of the liturgical action; it is an 'iconic symbol' of the Church considered as the 'mystical body' of Christ" **(Piacenza, 2005; Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1963; Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, 1980)**.

If the church building itself becomes an "iconic symbol," the same reasoning applied to sacred objects—whose symbolic charge is scrutinised through Baudrillard's theory **(1994)**—can be extended. Unlike the conclusion reached for objects, which become simulations of the sacred once detached from their context of origin, the scale of the building necessitates a further step.

Consider the extreme case of total detachment **(Baudrillard, 1994)** of the entire building from its place of origin, that is, its complete demolition. This scenario is illustrated in the documentary "Making Dust" (**Hallinan, 2024)**, portraying the demolition of the Church of the Annunciation, the second-largest Catholic church in Ireland.

As scenes unfold of massive metallic dinosaurs devouring the already gutted concrete structure, the filmmaker pairs the imagery with voices from the Finglas West neighbourhood where the church stood. Despite being entirely razed, and thus no longer existing in the visible and material world, residents continue to recall moments of communion within the building, moments when they sat closely together in pews and "f*elt part of something.*"

The sacred quality of a church thus lies in its permanence **(Rossi, 1966)** over time and space, inextricably layered into collective memory. However, its permanence can be recognised as having a simulational character, no longer corresponding to the sacredness of Catholic religion but to the memory of it.

Today, the building of a Catholic church is defined by memory **(Hallinan, 2024),** the simulation **(Baudrillard, 1994)** of the sacred **(Cassani & Bern, 2011)**, and the absence of a visible community **(Loach, 2023).**
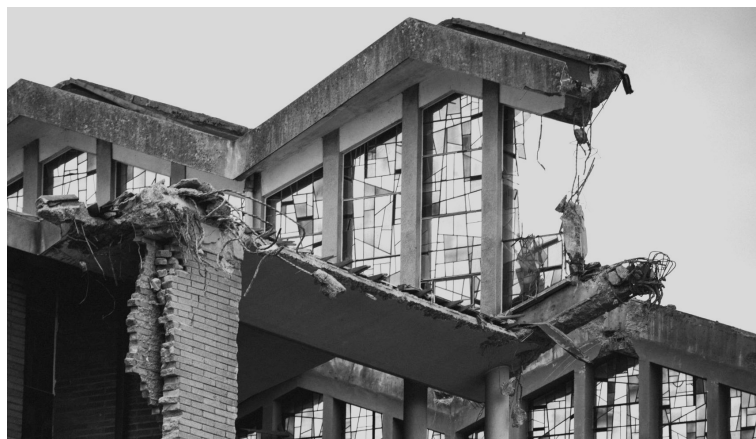
Images encountered in this chapter:
Loach K. (**2023**), frame of "The Old Oak"
Cassani M. (**2010**), "Spiritual Devices"
Hallinan F. (**2024**), "Making Dust"

Permanent Structure. To develop a meaningful and practical intervention, it is necessary to examine memory, the simulation of the sacred, and the absence of collectivity within a single location.

The analysis of the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia in Campitelli serves as an exemplary case for addressing the theme of the reconversion of ecclesiastical buildings, albeit without claims of universality. The uniqueness of each church is tied to the historical and social stratification of its specific site, and thus every reuse project must be interpreted according to the unrepeatable characteristics of its urban and cultural context. Churches are not merely places of worship but unique historical and architectural testimonies, expressions of the temporal and social contexts in which they were built.

In this case, the location of the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia within the Rione Sant'Angelo in Rome—a district rich in historical layers and strong identity—makes it an example of great symbolic value, though it cannot be generalised to all Italian or European churches.

This study, therefore, focuses on the singularity of Santa Rita da Cascia to demonstrate how the historical and symbolic elements of the structure can be reinterpreted, respecting the identity of the place while also addressing the current needs of the community. The aim is not to propose a universal solu-

tion but to investigate how a careful analysis of the memory of the place and the physical configuration of the building can lead to a specific recovery model. It is the particularity of the site—its dialogue with the context and the local community—that allows for the full grasp of the symbolic significance and spatial meaning of the church, enabling possible forms of interaction that break the simulation of the sacred to promote new uses.

This case study demonstrates that any reuse and redevelopment intervention must be calibrated to the intrinsic peculiarities of each ecclesiastical building to be truly meaningful. With Santa Rita da Cascia, the exploration of new possibilities for use aims to preserve the structure's identity value while also responding to the needs of the contemporary urban fabric. This approach proves essential in sensitively addressing the transformation of historic churches, avoiding the impoverishment of their meaning while, instead, enhancing their uniqueness.

The Rione Sant'Angelo, where the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia is located, represents a unique urban fabric intertwined with centuries of Roman, medieval, and modern history. This rich stratification is rooted in the Circus Flaminius, an ancient public space situated in the Campus Martius **(Petruccioli, n.d.)**. More than a traditional circus, the Flaminius was an open space of great topographical and ritual significance, extending along the Via Tecta toward the Tiber and connected to the Via Triumphalis. In 221 BC, C. Flaminius donated
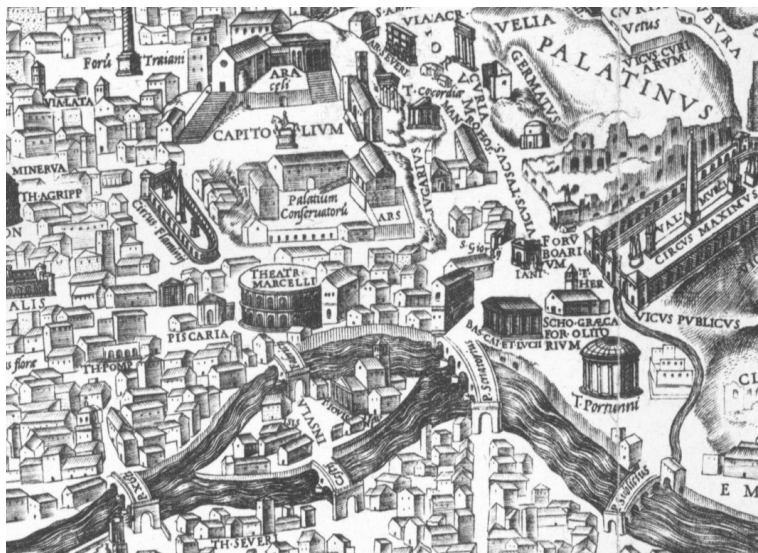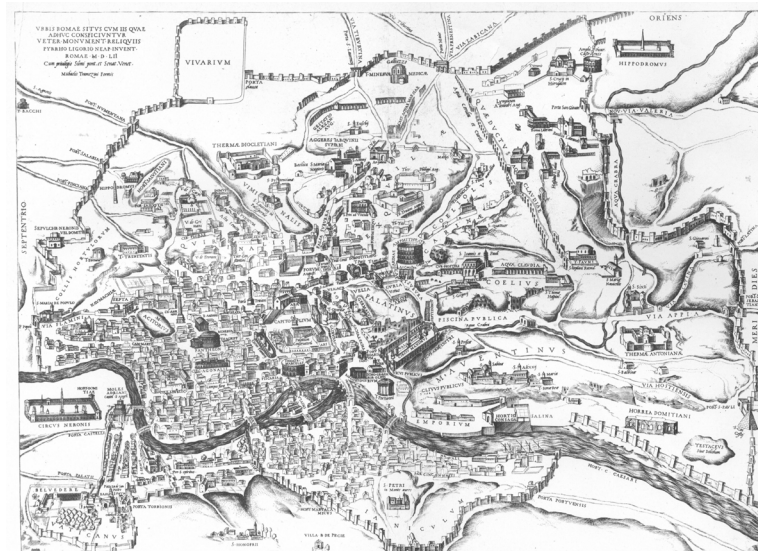
it to the Roman people, and over time it became dotted with temples and monuments dedicated to deities and victories, such as those of Iuppiter Stator, Iuno Regina, and Hercules Musarum, attesting to the sacred density and triumphal character of the place (Petruccioli, n.d.). During the Middle Ages, Rome's urban growth fostered the development of new dwellings over these remains, transforming the Circus Flaminius and incorporating the Theatre of Marcellus. In the Rione XI Sant'Angelo, the most radical transformation occurred in 1555 when Pope Paul IV established the Jewish ghetto with the papal bull Cum nimis absurdum, confining the Jewish community within divisive walls in a flood-prone area near the Tiber **(Di Nepi, 2013)**.

These restrictions were removed only in 1870, initiating a process of reclamation and redevelopment: the walls were demolished, and the reconfiguration of the Piazza delle Cinque Scole was completed in 1910. However, in 1938, the racial laws marked the beginning of a new period of persecution, culminating in the German roundups of 1943, leaving deep scars on the neighbourhood's human and social fabric **(Di Nepi, 2013)**.
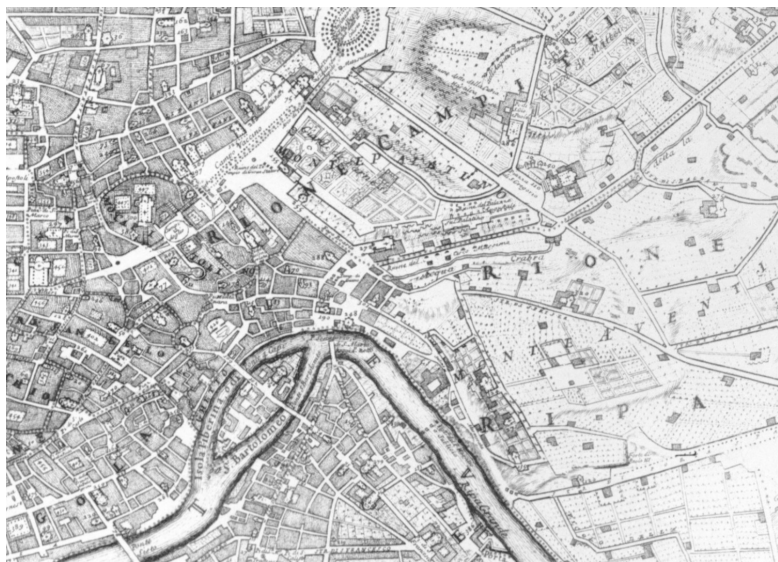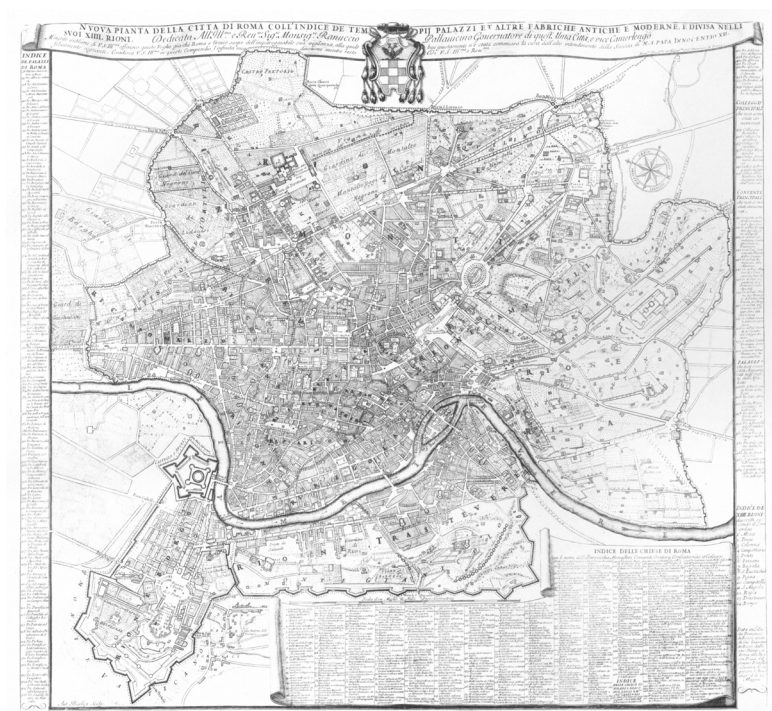
Today, the Rione Sant'Angelo tells its complex story through a combination of ancient and modern elements, excluding the medieval fabric, as it was uprooted during Mussolini's urban clearances **(Cederna, 1979)**. In the southern part of the district, among Roman ruins and monuments such as the Theatre of Marcellus, there is still a strongly rooted Jewish community that has made the Portico of Octavia the cornerstone of its heritage. Along Via del Portico d'Ottavia, the Jewish school and synagogue, built in 1904, are surrounded by kosher restaurants and shops run by the community. Social life concentrates along the avenue, animated by the greetings and smiles of local residents, while visitors, increasingly numerous, mingle with daily life under the constant watch of law enforcement. Tourist demand is evident: in this district alone, there are over 200 Airbnb accommodations **(2024)**, accentuating the cosmopolitan character of the area.

In contrast, the northern section of the Rione hosts a different area, which includes the Sala di Santa Rita da Cascia, the Church of Santa Maria in Campitelli, and the American Academy of Literature. Piazza delle Tartarughe marks the transition to a distinct cultural reality, where English is frequently spoken, and historical residences and offices prevail, many of which are dedicated to cultural heritage. Finally, along the northern boundary, united by its history and identity, the Polish community gathers at the Church of San Stanislao dei Polacchi, attesting to the historical and cultural pluralism that animates the Rione Sant'Angelo.

Ligorio P. (**1552**), geoportale.cittametropolitanaroma.it

Ligorio P. (**1561**), geoportale.cittametropolitanaroma.it

Barbey A. (**1697**), geoportale.cittametropolitanaroma.it

Hulsen C. (**1912**), geoportale.cittametropolitanaroma.it

History of Santa Rita da Cascia. The historical and social richness of the Rione Sant'Angelo offers an invaluable context for understanding the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia not merely as a sacred building but as an active witness to the cultural stratifications and urban transformations of Rome. Situated in a district that has experienced various epochs, the church becomes part of an urban fabric intertwining ancient Rome with medieval and modern traditions while hosting strong cultural identities such as the Jewish community.

Against this backdrop, the history of Santa Rita da Cascia emerges not just as an architectural narrative but as an example of the ever-sought balance between preserving memory and addressing the needs of an evolving urban fabric. Due to its location in the Rione Sant'Angelo, the church assumes a symbolic significance that transcends its religious function, and its history—from its original construction to demolition, reconstruction, and architectural reinterpretation—reflects the dynamics of a neighbourhood where every structure participates in a dialogue between past and present.

The story of Santa Rita da Cascia, therefore, is inseparably tied to its surrounding context and serves as an emblematic example of how religious architecture can integrate and adapt to urban and social changes. To fully grasp the relevance and

reuse potential of this church, it is necessary to retrace the main historical milestones that have shaped its architectural and social identity. The history of Santa Rita da Cascia allows for the observation of how transformations have affected its structure, giving it specific characteristics that influence contemporary and future interpretations of this space.

The Church of Santa Rita da Cascia, also known as the Church of San Biagio in Mercatello, was completed in 1653 along Via Giulio Romano and represented a significant example of Baroque architecture. The façade was designed by the architect Carlo Fontana and was one of the artistic highlights of the district.

As documented in 1929 **(Giovannoni, 1929)**, its location was directly adjacent to the Capitoline Hill, historically a symbol of power since Roman times **(Pisani Sartorio, 1995)**. This hill, once home to the Temple of Mars Ultor, the Roman god of war, needed to align with the new political and military power. Consequently, extensive demolition occurred, particularly with the removal of Santa Rita in 1930 over the course of just three months, though only after detailed surveys conducted by Lorenzo Casanelli **(Cederna, 1979)**. The primary objective was to improve the visibility of the newly erected Altare della Patria monument and to create a more functional urban area **(Affanni, 1995)**. However, this was achieved with *"the unreasonable pretension to solve everything through demolitions"* **(Cederna, 1979)**.

Due to its historical and artistic importance, the decision was made to reconstruct the Church of Santa Rita da Cascia. The project was entrusted to Gustavo Giovannoni, who initially published an article in the April 1929 issue of Capitolium criticising the aggressive demolition approach and lamenting the loss of the church's original

placement **(Cederna, 1979)**. Giovannoni proposed several sketches envisioning a new site along Via del Mare but faced significant challenges: the original plan featured an elongated octagon, while the new location required a regular octagon. Additionally, the original church had only one façade, designed by Fontana, while the new setting necessitated three additional façades. These were carefully designed, particularly the highly visible eastern side, which had to harmonise with the new axis of Via del Mare. The surrounding voids underscored this visual prominence and aligned with Mussolini's directive in the 1931 master plan: *"You will also liberate the majestic temples of Christian Rome from parasitic and profane constructions. The millenary monuments of our history must stand in necessary solitude"* **(Cederna, 1979)**.

This *"necessary solitude,"* however, resulted in the obliteration of much of the pre-existing urban fabric, often distorting its historical coherence **(Cederna, 1979)**. Despite these difficulties, Giovannoni and Vincenzo Fasolo collaborated on a reconstruction project, though their efforts diverged in execution. The Capitol Archive records a letter from Giovannoni expressing dissatisfaction with deviations from his designs made by Fasolo during construction.

Giovannoni and Fasolo's project aimed to merge ancient and modern architecture, recognising the importance of the church not only for its aesthetic value but also for its urbanistic function. The architects preserved the decorative interior and exterior elements of Fontana's original design, reconstructing them through anastylosis at the new site **(Giovannoni, 1929)**. The Capitol Archive documents payments for the creation of travertine decorations for the newly added side façades. These façades, maintaining a uniform rhythm and style, replicated the architectural elements of Fontana's original design.

The foundation work required significant engineering adjustments, as the site's structural integrity necessitated the use of drilled concrete piles to a depth of approximately 23 metres, where remnants of ancient masonry were discovered and are still preserved in the church's basement.

However, numerous modifications were made to adapt the design to its new context. Among these, the overall height of the building was

reduced to improve the view towards the Capitoline Hill, and a lowered apse was constructed to visually balance with the Aracoeli staircase **(Affanni, 1995)**. The central dome was replaced with a simpler conical roof, inspired by models of older Roman churches **(Affanni, 1995).** Although criticised for oversimplifying the original structure, this solution represented a compromise between preserving artistic heritage and meeting the urban planning needs of the Fascist regime.
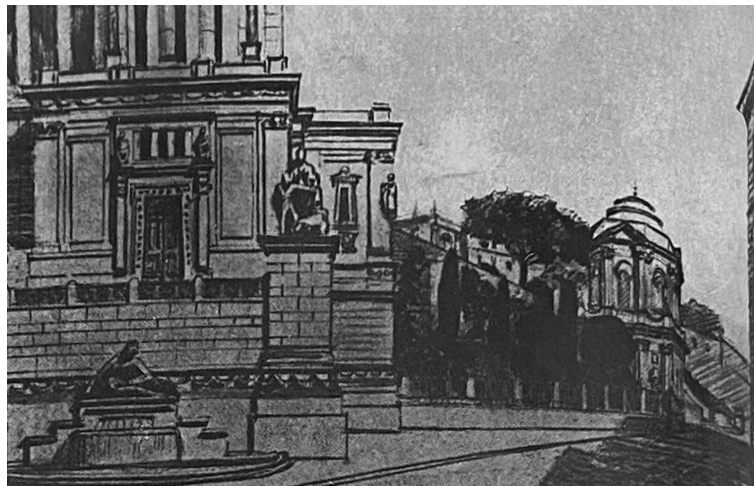
Affanni A. M. (**1995**), Demolition within the area of Teatro Marcello
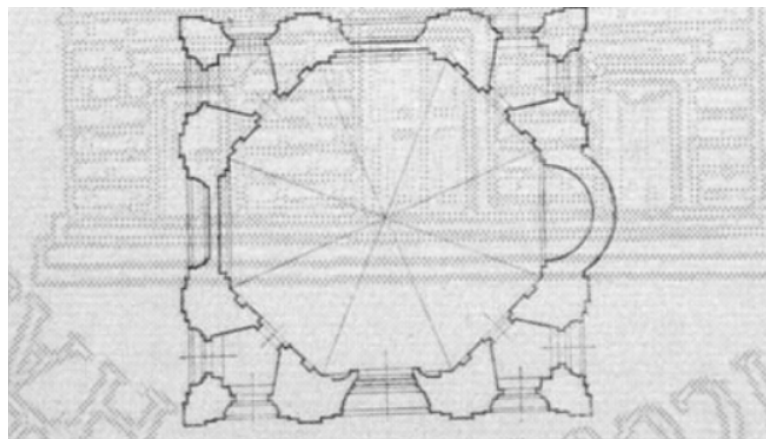Affanni A. M. (**1995**), Demolition within the area of Ara Caeli
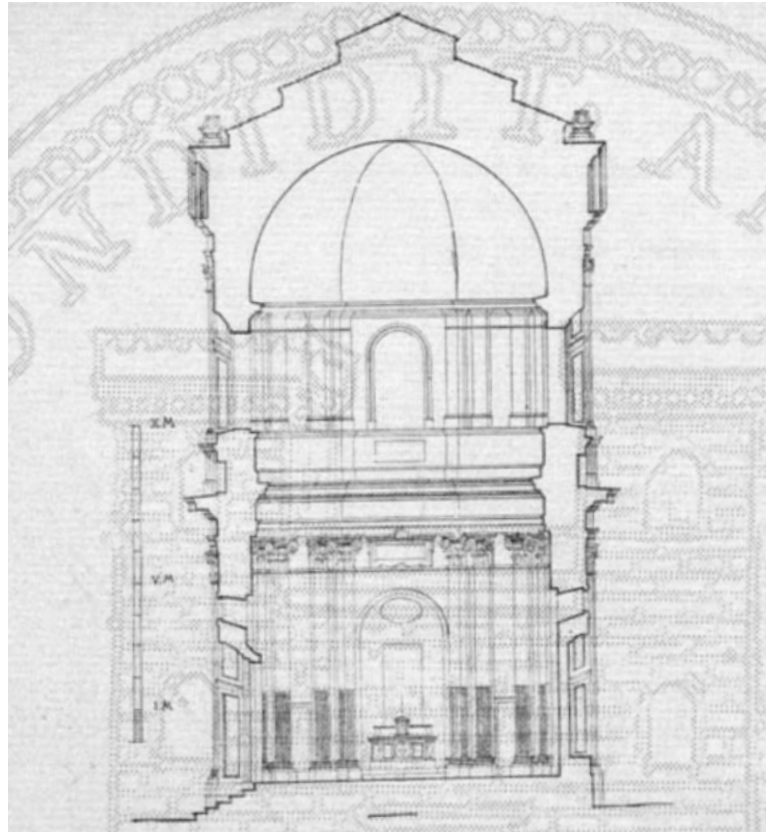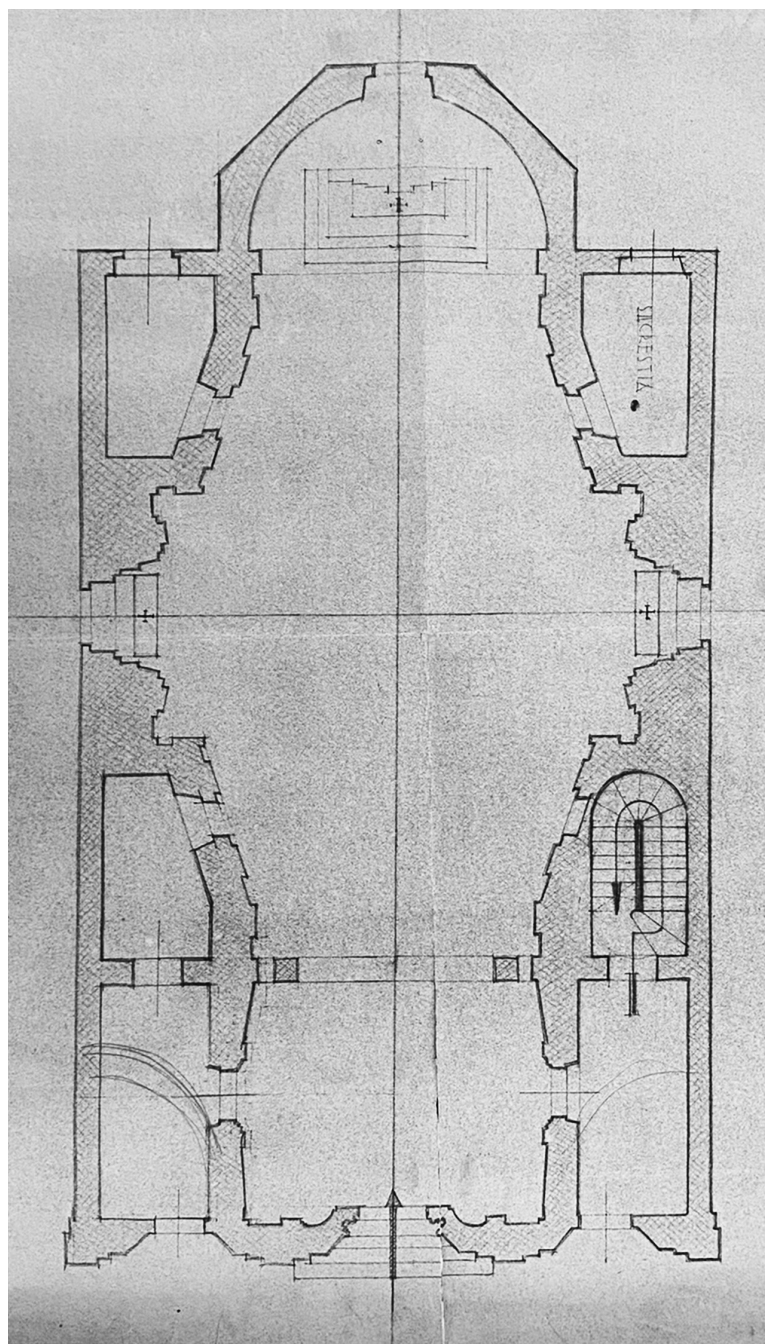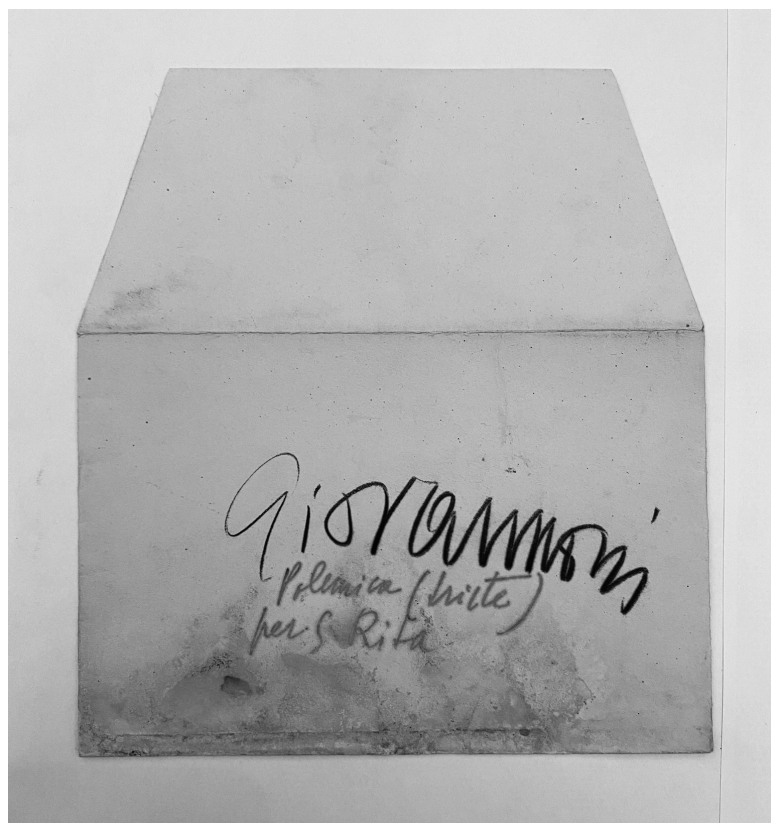
(**1928**), Istituto Luce

Affanni A. M. (**1995**), Drawings of Gustavo Giovannoni for proposals
of Santa Rita da Cascia's relocation

Giovannoni G. (**n.d.**), Archivio Capitolino
Plan proposal of Santa Rita da Cascia

Giovannoni G. (**1928**), Archivio Capitolino
Letter to Fasolo V., discussion on choices made for Santa Rita da Cascia

Roma, 11 febbr. 1928

Caro Fasolo,

speravo che il tempo trascorso le avrebbe portato consiglio per riconoscere il suo torto non lieve verso di me.

È stato dunque atto corretto e riguardoso il convenire a mia insaputa una soluzione contraria a quella che si era concordemente decisa e farmi trovare, senza avvertirmi, di fronte allo schermo del fatto compiuto? È rispetto alla verità l'affermare che nulla è stato pregiudicato, quando una muratura si è elevata per tutto un perimetro all'altezza di circa 3 metri? È lealtà il capovolgere le parti e mostrarsi offeso, piuttosto che confessare — e sarebbe onesta scusa — che si è trattato di una dimenticanza e non di proposito di mancare di rispetto a chi ha pieno diritto di richiederlo?

Giovannoni G. (**1928**), Archivio Capitolino
Letter to Fasolo V., discussion on choices made for Santa Rita da Cascia

Io non posso quindi che confermare quanto Le dissi l'altro giorno. È soltanto diverso il tono: non è più l'ira, che pure era giustificata dal Suo contegno, ma è il rammarico di vedere affievolirsi (spero temporaneamente) le Sue belle qualità, a cui era legata la mia antica, paterna amicizia.

Nei riguardi della chiesa di S. Rita non vi sarà più occasione di dissidi, perché ho inviato al Governatore le mie dimissioni da quella Commissione consultiva.

Cordiali saluti —

Gustavo Giovannoni

(**n.d.**), Archivio Capitolino
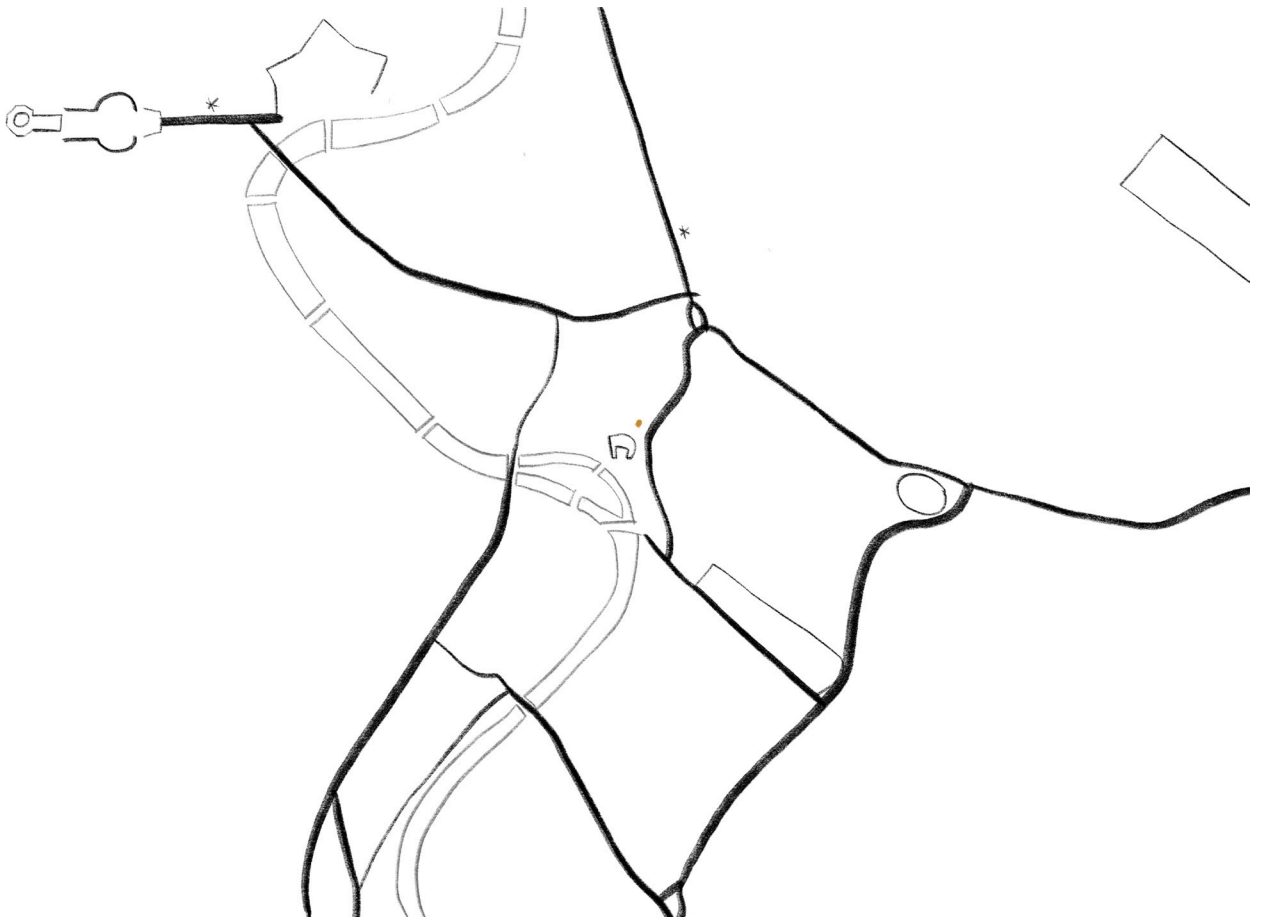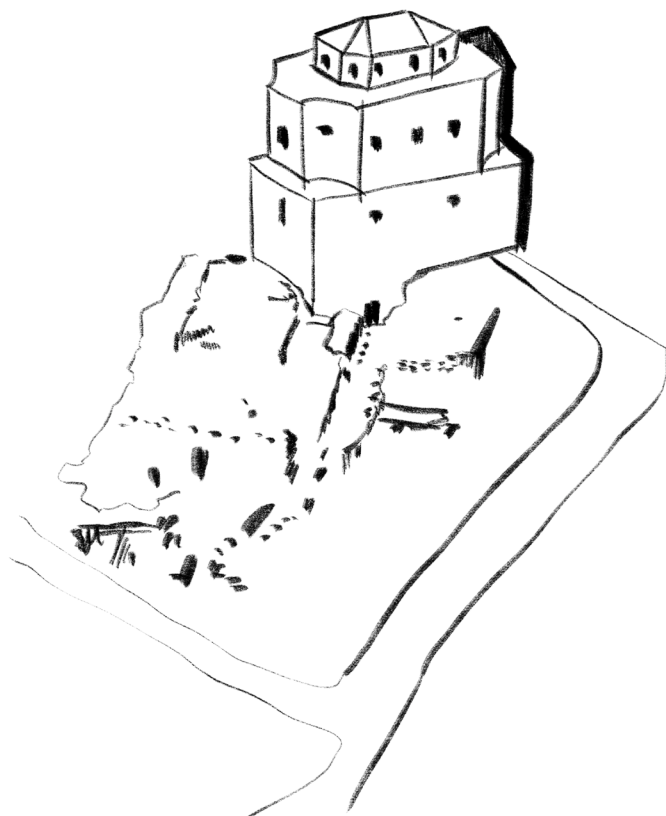
Structure and Symbols. The Church of Santa Rita da Cascia in Campitelli, originally built in 1653, underwent profound transformations over time, culminating in its demolition and reconstruction during the Fascist period. These interventions, aimed at integrating ancient 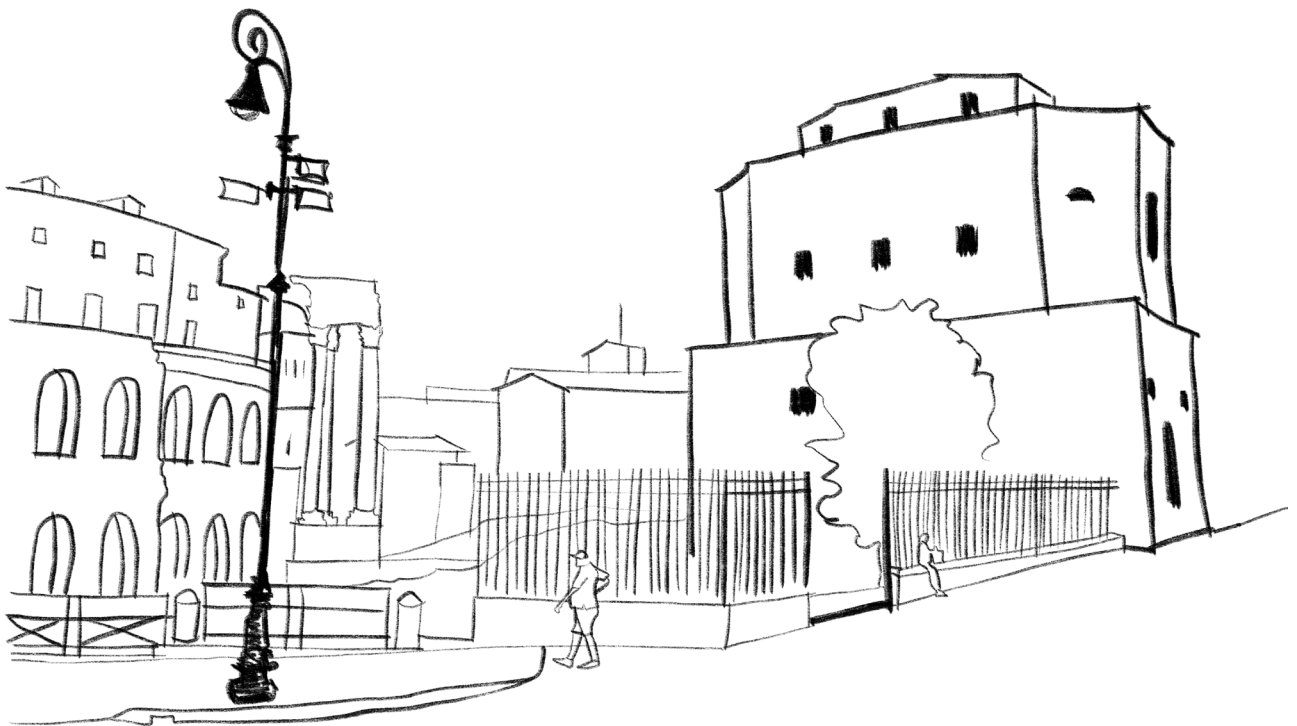and modern elements, redefined its role within the urban context and led to a reconfiguration that preserved some original features while altering its spatial and symbolic orientation. Subjected to various changes to accommodate new urban needs, the church became increasingly isolated and was perceived by residents more as a sculptural object than an active place of worship.

This perception highlights the importance of creating an "intelligible structure," a reflection on the architectural traits that still retain symbolic value and the potential modifications necessary to meet contemporary needs.

Engagement with local residents enriched the understanding of the structure. Many interviewees described Santa Rita as *"monolithic,"* a church that stands prominently in the landscape yet lacks accessibility or a relationship with its surrounding space and community.
"Being inside [a church] means accepting Christianity in all its facets. From outside, you see it as a building, as a work of art. St Peter's, for example, is a masterpiece representing Christianity! What it stands for is something I dissociate from, but as craftsmanship, it still has value."

Defined alternatively as a "*shell*," the church is perceived primarily as an object to be observed rather than as a space for interaction.

The internal arrangement of Santa Rita, studied through surveys and confirmed by interviewees, reinforces this sense of isolation.
The structure has almost no openings, except for small apertures along the outer double-wall layer. This isolation signifies a disconnection from its surroundings, as the lack of natural light—filtered only through narrow openings—creates a closed-off environment that connects only internally within its sombre confines. This introspection is further emphasised by the single entrance door, located on the short side of the nave, serving as an additional filter to external life.
The primary participatory element is the nave, the space physically linking the entrance to the altar. Defined by Piacenza **(2005, 2006)** and the Italian Episcopal Conference **(1980)** as the centre and focal point of a church, this layout aligns with Bruno Zevi's **(1948)** description of the horizontal directionality of the Christian nave, symbolising the faithful's earthly journey. However, in the absence of this connection between entry and interior spiritual path, the building is perceived as *"self-sufficient"* and disconnected from the everyday life of the neighbourhood.

In conversations with interlocutors more attuned to the structure's religious aspects, Santa Rita was described not just as an architectural monument but as a space preserving significant liturgical symbols.
"When I enter a church, I first look at the altar, then at the crucifix, and then I ask myself where Jesus is truly present, so I genuinely look for the tabernacle."
Interviewees noted the absence of a tabernacle as an indicator of the church's non-sacred function, signifying the absence of the Eucharist. This space, culminating with the altar and the pulpit, maintains a strong symbolic directionality, drawing the gaze of the faithful from the nave to its focal point. Even in the absence of a tabernacle, this **horizontal directionality** remains evident, as described by Zevi (1948).

Beyond the horizontal axis, a perception of **vertical directionality** also emerges, evident in the building's height, described as a symbol of ascension towards the divine.
"In the Word of God, it is written, 'I will go up to the altar of God, the

God of my joy.' The psalms sung by pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem at Mount Zion were called ascensional psalms."

Vertical elements, such as staircases, are thus perceived as tangible symbols of an "ascensional movement" guiding the faithful towards a higher liturgical space, suggesting not just physical proximity to the altar but also spiritual elevation: *"Many churches have steps leading to the liturgical hall, and perhaps more steps to ascend the presbytery. This speaks of ascent and asceticism. When the Eucharist is celebrated, at the moment of consecration, the apsidal dome is said to align, and the door to heaven opens (…) we are in this ascensional movement. The steps are also very communicative and effective."*

Christian Norberg-Schulz (**1992**) provides a similar interpretation, arguing that sacred spaces serve as points of connection between heaven and earth, symbolising creation and, consequently, the sacredness of the space itself. He writes, *"It is the place of total encounter, where the space of creation is sensitised in its fundamental structure. That is, it must demonstrate the relationship between earth and heaven as such."*

This interpretation reinforces the idea that vertical orientation is a tangible testament of faith, a symbolic language that, while perceived and appreciated by the faithful, accentuates the separation between the church's interior and exterior. It brings the faithful closer to God while symbolically distancing them from the everyday.

Finally, an intriguing analogy between the church and the human body emerged during the interviews, a concept interpreted by the faithful as the "baptismality" of the building. This perception views the church as a consecrated body, much like the individual anointed with sacred oil during baptism.

"You must understand that the building is consecrated; the building is anointed like a body precisely because of this profound connection. When a church is consecrated, the altar is anointed with the chrism with which the faithful are anointed when they are baptised, and so are the walls of the church. The place is sacred, and therefore it represents me."

This association, as described by **Castellano** (**2023**), implies that the walls and altar of the church are perceived as symbols of a consecrated body rather than merely architectural elements.

Consequently, to address these contemporary needs, it becomes necessary to reconceptualise the structure of the church, no longer as an exclusively sacred space, but as a historical container—one that is not solely liturgical—capable of hosting new uses that are not necessarily tied to the simulation of Catholic symbols, while valuing the building's history and architecture in service of the present-day community.

It is therefore essential to break the symbolic association between the voluntary act of a believer's baptism and that of a building intended, temporarily, to host liturgical use. Action is required to modify the vertical and horizontal directionalities and their communication so as to fill what is currently perceived as a "shell" with a new function. This new function could forgo carrying the weight of simulating Catholic symbols and instead focus solely on the building's historical narrative.
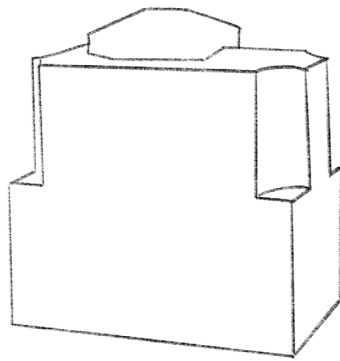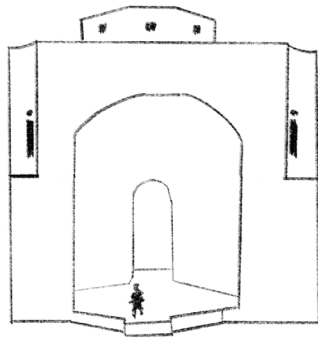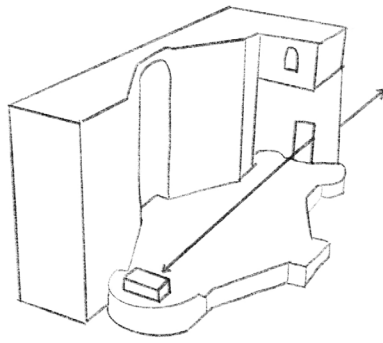
CONCLUSION

1. What are the frictions or driving forces that either enable or hinder the transformation of catholic churches?

The transformation of Catholic churches is hindered by a complex network of regulatory, legal, and symbolic constraints that render the process extremely delicate. The "Codex Iuris Canonici" (**1983**) represents one of the primary obstacles, imposing strict usage constraints that can only be lifted by the competent ecclesiastical authority. Article 1212 states that a church can lose its dedication or blessing only if it is largely destroyed or permanently designated for "*profane uses*." However, even in such cases, elements like altars must remain reserved exclusively for divine worship (**Art. 1238, §2**), significantly limiting the possibility of adapting these buildings to new functions.

The process of transformation also requires the removal and reassignment of sacred objects to other religious uses, or, where this is not possible, their destruction. This provision, established by the Congregation for the Clergy, reflects an institutional reluctance toward the reuse of sacred spaces. Added to this are the constraints imposed by the **Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape** (**2004**), which classifies many churches as cultural assets and limits any interventions that could alter their appearance or function, making modifications to historic structures particularly challenging.

Another obstacle is the ambiguity of ecclesiastical decisions, as the reduction to profane uses depends on the discretionary judgment of the ecclesiastical authority, particularly the bishop, who has absolute veto power. Transformation is permitted only if deemed "*not indecorous*," but this definition is subject to subjective interpretations. This opacity was confirmed during an appeal to the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura (**2016**), which reaffirmed the absence of clear criteria for assessing the decorousness of profane uses.

Furthermore, Italian regulations established in the 1984 Revision of the Lateran Concordat stipulate that buildings open to worship cannot be requisitioned, expropriated, or demolished except for "*grave reasons*" and with the agreement of the ecclesiastical authority. However, the term "*grave reasons*" remains vague, contributing to the complexity of transformations.

On the other hand, the transformation of Catholic churches is supported by a set of factors that facilitate their reuse in a contemporary context. An emblematic example is the Netherlands, where pragmatism has guided the management of disused places of worship. "The Reuse of Religious Heritage in the Netherlands" conference (**2009**) highlighted the direct and collaborative approach between government and religious institutions, focusing on an economic analysis of land value and maintenance costs. This model, supported by the "Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects" (**2012**), provides a practical framework for addressing the reuse of both spaces and sacred objects, balancing respect for symbolic meaning with functional needs.

The roots of this approach lie in the history of Protestantism, which, since the Reformation, embraced a more austere and functional aesthetic. The simplification of liturgical spaces and the rejection of image worship made the adaptation of Protestant buildings more straightforward. As noted by Ben de Vries & Vienna (**2009**), only 10% of Protestant churches in the Netherlands have been demolished, compared to 53% of Catholic churches—a statistic reflecting Protestantism's greater willingness to accept a "second life cycle" for its places of worship. In contrast, Catholic tradition, more closely tied to symbolism and the sacredness of spaces, tends to consider churches as either functional or destined for demolition.

Another element of propulsion is the concept of reversibility. This principle, also adopted in the Netherlands, aims to minimise irreversible modifications and preserve the original structure of buildings while respecting cultural and religious sensitivities. The removal of sacred objects, although seemingly a final act, instead represents the beginning of the reconversion process, freeing the space for new uses. However, this operation does not automatically erase the perceived sacredness of the building, a characteristic that requires time and the establishment of a shared new function to be transformed.

Thus, the transformation of Catholic churches is possible through a balance between pragmatism and respect for their historical and cultural significance. Collaboration between religious and civil institutions, coupled with the introduction of contemporary uses, represents the key to reintegrating these buildings into the social fabric, preserving their memory, and valorising them within a modern context.

2. What can be defined as a "church" in contemporary society?

In contemporary society, the concept of a "church" emerges as a complex and multifaceted reality that transcends mere architectural typology or liturgical function. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the term refers not only to the liturgical assembly but also to the universal community of believers—a human network that imbues the building with meaning through rituals (**Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.d.**). However, with the gradual decline in religious practice and vocations (**European Social Survey, 2021; ISTAT, 2021**), this network is contracting, leading to a "hollowing out" of the very definition of a church as a place of worship.

In the absence of active worship, the space of a contemporary "church" can be any location capable of containing collective memory. Ken Loach's film "The Old Oak" (**2023**) illustrates this point, showing how a community evicted from a parish church finds cohesion in a secular space, the back room of a pub. This example suggests that the sacred dimension is not necessarily tied to a religious building but rather to the community that

animates it. Matilde Cassini, in "Sacred Interiors in Profane Buildings" (**2011**), reinforces this idea by proposing the possibility of mobile or secular spaces capable of containing spirituality.

The removal of sacred objects, often considered a prerequisite for the reconversion of a church, destabilises the traditional perception of the building as a sacred space, challenging the doxa—the shared and unquestioned belief system—associated with the identity of the church itself (**Bourdieu, 1977**). Baudrillard (**1994**) observes that once removed from their original context, sacred objects become simulacra: abstract representations devoid of their original significance. However, the concept of a "church" is not exhausted by these tangible elements. Even when demolished, as in the case of the Church of the Annunciation in Ireland (**Making Dust, Hallinan, 2024**), the building can continue to live in collective memory as a symbol of social cohesion.

Thus, in contemporary society, a "church" is not necessarily an active Catholic place of worship but can be a space—physical or symbolic—that encapsulates memory, community cohesion, and a reinterpreted sense of sacredness. This new definition moves beyond religious worship, aligning with societal shifts towards secularisation, therefore rooting in its capacity to generate shared meaning and new narratives for a transforming collectivity.

3. What is the next evolutionary stage for catholic churches?

The next evolutionary stage of Catholic churches involves their necessary transformation from exclusively liturgical spaces into historical and cultural containers capable of hosting new uses, responding to the needs of an increasingly secularised contemporary society. This process requires reconsideration of both the symbolic identity of these buildings and their functions within the urban fabric, breaking the exclusive association between architectural structure and Catholic worship.

The Church of Santa Rita da Cascia in Campitelli serves as an emblematic example of this evolution, demonstrating how churches can be reimagined to preserve their historical and architectural relevance while adapting to new contexts and meanings. The history of Santa Rita highlights how urban transformations have redefined its role. Originally constructed in 1653 with strong Baroque and symbolic connotations, the church was demolished and reconstructed during the Fascist era, undergoing a series of modifications that altered its perception within the urban context. These interventions, led by architects such as Gustavo Giovannoni and Vincenzo Fasolo, sought to integrate the ancient with the modern, adapting the church to the urbanistic demands of the time but ultimately isolating it both physically and symbolically from the surrounding social fabric (**Giovannoni, 1929; Affanni, 1995**). The contemporary perception of the church as a "*shell*" or "*monolith*" underscores its lack of connection to the local community, highlighting the need for interventions that fill this symbolic and functional void.

Insights from resident interviews reveal notable considerations for the treatment of Santa Rita da Cascia. The vertical orientation of the structure, symbolising ascent toward the divine, and the horizontal directionality, representing the human journey, create a symbolic language that, while appreciated by the faithful, accentuates a separation between the sacred and the everyday (**Zevi, 1948; Norberg-Schulz, 1992**). Additionally, the perception of the church as a consecrated body—a metaphor directly linked to the rite of baptism (**Castellano, 2023**)—binds the spaces to a static and immutable image. To overcome this constraint, it is essential to separate the building's identity from its original function, valuing its history and architecture without necessarily reproducing Catholic symbols.

The term "religion," derived from the Latin religio—"to bind together"—originally signified the intent of these buildings to unite people through a collective recognition of the sacred and the profane. However, in today's context, it is necessary to decouple these spaces from their religious ties to view them as historical assets capable of engaging with the present. This approach reinterprets the immutable history of Catholicism, transforming it into new, useful forms open to contemporary society rather than leaving it confined to the past.

Under this premise, rejecting the weight of Catholic symbolism within these buildings does not represent an act of denial but a form of liberation that enables a rebirth of spaces as purely collective places. The process of material and symbolic emptying, interpreted through Baudrillard's theory of *simulacra* (**1994**), does not strip the buildings of their value but questions the assumption that they must be defined solely by their liturgical function.

AM I THEN A CHURCH?
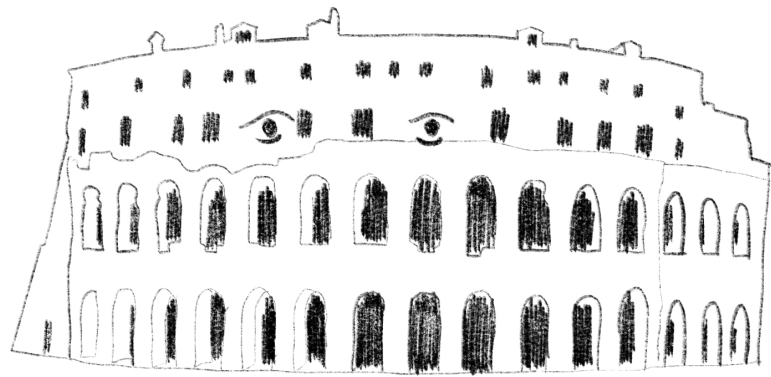
DISCUSSION

The reinterpretation of religious symbols in art, architecture, and public spaces constitutes one of the most controversial and stimulating themes in the dialogue between tradition and innovation. This debate lies at the crossroads of memory, provocation, and the necessity to adapt to the transformations of contemporary society. It is not a matter of denying the heritage of Catholic symbols but of reflecting on how to liberate them from a static and immutable interpretation.
A recent and significant example is the opening ceremony of the Paris 2024 Olympics, curated by Thomas Jolly (**"The Artistic Director of the Olympics Stated That the Most Controversial Scene of the Ceremony Was Not Inspired by the Last Supper," 2024**). The decision to reinterpret the Last Supper in a performative and secular manner, celebrating inclusivity and diversity, provoked harsh criticism from certain Catholic circles, who saw it as an act of desecration. However, examining the artist's intention, it is evident that the attempt was to transform a universal symbol to engage with a pluralistic and secularised society. This was not a gesture against Catholicism but an experiment reflecting the tensions between memory and renewal, between sacred and profane.

The freedom of artistic reinterpretation is not new and traverses the entire history of contemporary art. Works such as Piss Christ by Andres Serrano (**1987**) or La Nona Ora by Maurizio Cattelan (**1999**) have shaken collective sensitivities, questioning the boundaries between sacred and profane as traditionally understood within Catholicism. Serrano, by immersing a crucifix in a container of urine, did not destroy the symbol but exposed its vulnerability, revealing how the perception of the sacred is profoundly influenced by context. Cattelan, with his depiction of a pope struck down by a meteorite, transformed a symbolic image into an act of critical reflection, stimulating questions about power, faith, and human fragility. These examples demonstrate how art, despite provoking strong reactions, has the capacity to renegotiate the meaning of symbols in ways that architecture and public spaces rarely allow.

This is precisely the crux of the debate: *why is art granted greater freedom to provoke or alter symbolic associations, while architecture and public spaces are expected to remain untouchable containers?*
Religious buildings, especially Catholic churches, seem to exist in a limbo between historical monuments and functional spaces, yet with an increasingly diminished role in daily life. The trend, particularly evident in Italy, is to indissolubly link worship and culture, an association that can become a barrier to renewal.

An emblematic example of this complexity is the 2021 ruling by the Italian Court of Cassation regarding the crucifix in schools (**"The Court of Cassation Ruled That Schools Should Decide on the Crucifix in Classrooms," 2021**). While it was established that the crucifix can remain in classrooms, provided it is accompanied by symbols of other cultures and religions upon request, the debate underscored how religious symbols in Italy are often perceived as integral to culture, making it difficult to separate faith from shared history. This approach, while reflecting Catholicism's deep roots in Italian society, also hinders the exploration of an a-symbolic reality.

Architecture, however, could offer a prime example of dialogue, as demonstrated by successful cases. Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Museum in Cologne (**2007**) represents an emblematic model of dialogue between memory and contemporaneity. Integrating the remains of a Gothic church

destroyed during World War II, Zumthor created a new space that functions as both a museum and a place of reflection. Similarly, the Convent of Santa Maria do Bouro, reimagined by Eduardo Souto de Moura (**1997**), demonstrates how it is possible to preserve the memory of a sacred place without remaining anchored to a liturgical function. In both cases, the buildings transform the pre-existing structures into a canvas of historical stratifications, to which new contributions of equal value are added.

Nevertheless, as evident from the reactions that art—swifter in this process of questioning—is capable of eliciting, architecture still faces a long journey ahead. The public perception of such interventions often remains ambivalent, oscillating between appreciation for innovation and nostalgia for an idealised past.

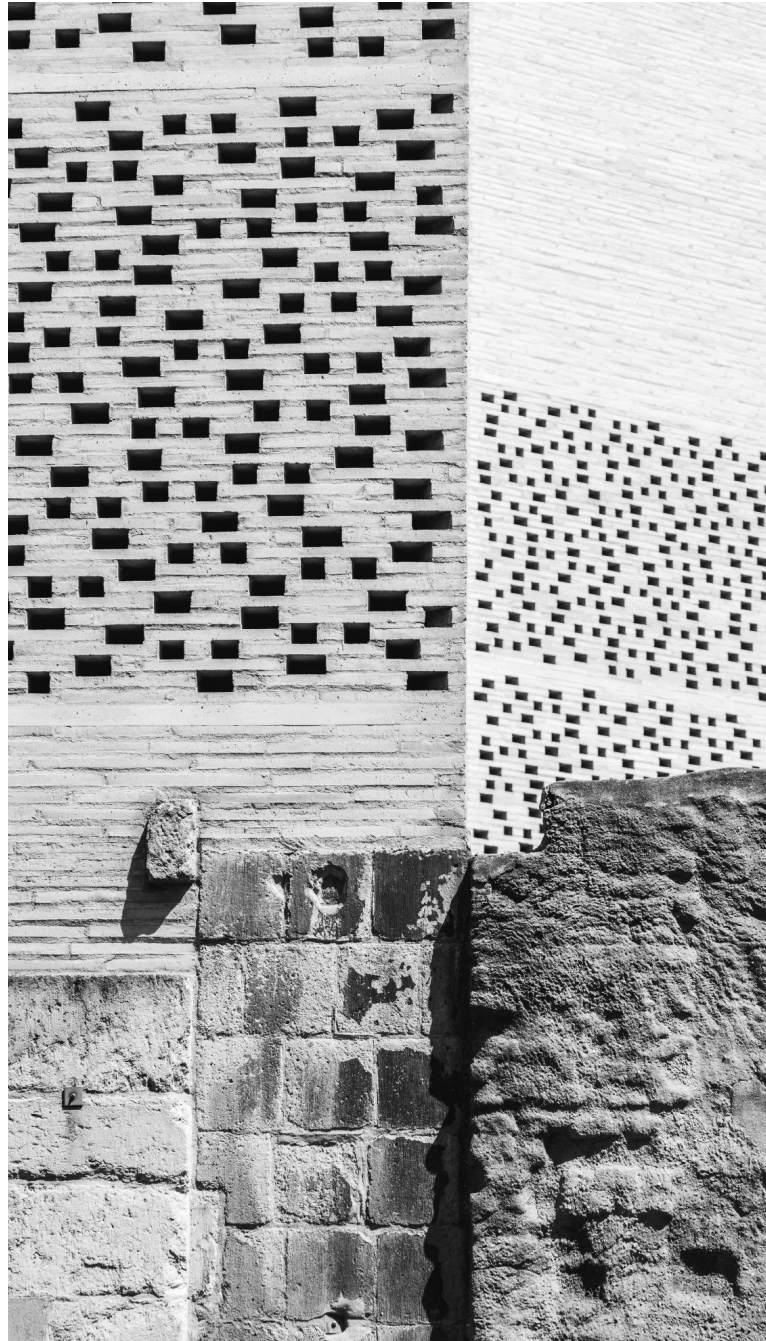Cattelan M. (**1999**), "La nona ora"

Souto de Moura E. (**1997**), Convent of Santa Maria do Bouro

Serrano A. (**1987**), "Piss Christ"

Zumthor P. (**2007**), Kolumba Museum

APPENDIX

To approach a renewed perception of worship spaces, free from cultural and legislative barriers, this study undertakes a reinterpretation of the design intentions behind church spaces. This process is enriched by collective reflection, carried out through semi-structured interviews that use as a starting point the text of general guidelines provided to architects designing churches.

To describe an intangible theme such as "intentions," an in-depth analysis was conducted on architectural guidelines published on the Vatican's official site. Among these documents, the section authored by the President of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church (Piacenza, 2005) was deemed the most comprehensive in its alignment with the spatial structure of churches in the neighbourhood and the most explicit in detailing the hierarchies and divisions intentionally imposed within Catholic worship architecture.

Fieldwork Methodology and Feedback

A total of ten interviews were conducted within a two-week timeframe. To ensure anonymity, the content was transposed into themes relevant to the research objectives. These interviews provided significant insights that are predominantly discussed in the third chapter, focusing on defining "church" within a contemporary context.

The fieldwork documentation highlights the positive reception of the printed format used during interviews: the format captured attention and implicitly informed interviewees about the request for their time and focus, presenting a specific question. However, many participants were intimidated by the complete reading of the text and preferred to rely on underlined sections or engage in informal discussions where I used keywords and questions as a guiding thread.

A more formal approach initially placed undue pressure on some participants. This was mitigated from the third day onward by distributing flowers as tokens of appreciation to those who contributed to the research. Furthermore, engaging with two local shopkeepers proved crucial; their kind assistance directed me to residents of the area who were willing to participate.

The Text Presented to Interviewees

The front page of the printed sheet contained the following text, occupying the entire page in Italian, with certain portions underlined to draw attention to specific elements:

The baptistery is where catechumens become Christians. As the catechumen does not yet belong to the Church, this space must be distinguished from the nave and particularly from the presbytery. The baptismal area should be clearly demarcated through lowered floors, wall screens, or enclosed volumes.
The presbytery is the primary space for worship and is reserved for sacred ministers. Architecturally, it is separated from the rest of the church through stepped platforms, colour distinctions, or architectural furnishings. It features three Christological poles—altar, ambo, and seat—and is surmounted by a crucifix.

The altar is the focal point of the entire church design. It serves as an altar of sacrifice, a table of communion, and a tomb recalling Christ's death and resurrection.

The ambo, akin to the altar, is the table of the Word. It should be fixed, distinct from the rest of the presbytery, and have an enclosing structure.

The seat symbolises the presidency of the assembly, occupied by the celebrant in persona Christi. Stylistically, the altar, ambo, and seat should be coordinated to iconographically link Christ as Word, Christ as Sacrifice, and Christ as Head.

The tabernacle is the place of Eucharistic reservation. New churches should include a chapel for Eucharistic adoration in architectural continuity with the presbytery. The tabernacle should avoid positions that conflict with other liturgical elements and must signify the real presence, encouraging personal adoration.

The nave is the assembly space, designed for ritual movement and ease of participation. It should include seating, kneelers, pathways, and thresholds while ensuring visibility of the presbytery and optimal acoustics for active participation.

The penitentiary is dedicated to reconciliation. Given the Church's requirement for auricular confession, it should provide a reserved space for meetings between confessor and penitent.

Additional votive chapels or burial spaces may exist, provided they do not disrupt the overall design. Artistic and devotional criteria must align with the Church's enduring faith and avoid personal preferences or ad hoc additions.

Back Page: Interview Questions

1.In your perception, do the descriptions provided by Mauro Piacenza still reflect the churches in your neighbourhood?
2.Are there any spaces or characteristics you find relevant that are missing from Mauro Piacenza's description? If so, please elaborate.
3.Could you rank these elements based on their importance to your perception?
4.What do you consider to be the main differences between being outside and inside a church?

Select Interview Highlights

Several poignant quotes from interviewees serve as inspiration for future research. These reflections underscore the interplay between architecture, community, and faith, offering fertile ground for ongoing research and dialogue.

"WHEN MY FRIENDS GOT MARRIED
I COULDN'T HELP BUT GO INSIDE
(THE CHURCH). I ONLY ENTER
FOR WEDDINGS AND FUNERALS."

"IF THERE ARE FEWER CHURCHES IT'S
BECAUSE THE NEIGHBOURHOOD HAS
TURNED INTO A TOURIST AREA FULL
OF B&B AND HOTELS. IN A BUILDING
WITH TEN APARTMENTS, FIVE ARE B&Bs."

"CHURCHES ARE EVERYWHERE, BUT NO
ONE ATTENDS THEM ANYMORE ... I ONLY
FREQUENTED IN THE 1970S WHEN
PARISHES WERE THE ONLY OPTION FOR
SOCIALISING."

"WHAT MATTERS IS THE PREACHER.
YOU COULD EVEN BE IN A DOORWAY OR
A BAR."

"TAKING THINGS REALISTICALLY — MY
HOPE IS FOR THESE SPACES TO BE
USED FOR 'NOBLE' PURPOSES, IF THEY
CEASE TO BE FOR WORSHIP. IT'S USELESS
TO LEAVE THEM CLOSED."

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