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Cardinal Ravasi: "For the cultural heritage of religious orders, we need innovative, shared projects"

A conversation with Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, on the future of the cultural heritage of religious orders and on strategies for its conservation

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The Pontifical Council for Culture and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life have announced for September 2021 an **international conference** "Catalogues, management and innovation regarding the cultural heritage of institutes of consecrated life". In view of this important appointment **we met with Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi**, president of the Pontifical Council and promoter of this initiative, of which our journal is media partner.

The conference Charism and Creativity considers only the cultural heritage of Institutes of Consecrated Life, that is, the assets of all religious orders and congregations whose members profess the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity

and obedience. With respect to the ecclesiastical heritage of dioceses and territorial Churches, what role does the cultural heritage of institutes of consecrated life have in the universal Church?

Within the overall ecclesiastical cultural heritage, the peculiarity of religious communities is in their ability to adapt to various human contexts and the particular needs of the times. This was already underlined by a circular letter from the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church to the superiors of Religious Orders in 1994: "The life of religious communities, in substantial fidelity to their original project, knows how to adapt to the signs of the various eras and to the nature of the people where it takes root [...] organizing a harmonious integration between nova and vetera".

This is a general characteristic of the Church, but in the course of history, monks and consecrated persons have often been able to anticipate the ordinary pastoral action of bishops and parish priests. We can recall the way classical and patristic culture was preserved in the scriptoria of Benedictine monasteries; or the importance of the presence of monasteries and churches of the mendicant orders in the "suburbs" of medieval and Renaissance cities; or again the role exercised by the Orders born after the Council of Trent (Jesuits, Theatines, Camillians, Oratorians, Passionists) covering highly specialized areas: university teaching, education of the clergy, hospital assistance, popular preaching, etc. Finally, we should also think of the male (Salesian) and female Congregations that arose in the 19th century to cope with new social problems in industrial cities.

All these organizations cannot be considered separately from their corresponding architecture, which are spaces in the image of particular charisms, and at the service of the needs manifested in time and places in Europe as well as in the Americas, in some parts of Asia and in the rest of the world, reached more recently by missionary Congregations.

The challenge that opens up today, which this conference wants to address is to intuit and build strategies to correspond to current times, involving the entire wealth of religious communities: both that of their deep spiritual heritage, and that of their material, cultural one. In our time, which is defined in all areas of culture with the suffix "post" (post-secular, post-modern, etc.), it is inevitable that many people are actually very interested in the past, our roots. Hence, precisely the cultural heritage and all the cultural resources that religious communities possess can become an antidote to uncertainty, offering identity in our times, and also a source for a re-orientation, so as to foresee a possible common future.

In the Italian context, since the year 2000 we have been witnessing a pervasive censorship campaign relating to Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage, undertaken by the Conference of Italian Bishops and made available by the BEweb portal, of which a recent volume celebrates its twentieth year. While respecting the autonomy of religious orders, what can the Holy See do for the protection and valorization of the cultural heritage of institutes of consecrated life, while taking into account the trend of a reduction in the number of their members?

In recent decades, the safeguarding of cultural heritage has become more significant throughout the Church. This is demonstrated by both the recent documents of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life (Economy at the service of the charism and mission, 2018) and by a conference organized by the Pontifical Council, Doesn't God dwell here anymore? which ended not only with the publication of its proceedings, but also with official guidelines on the reuse of churches, in 2018.

In Italy, it is true, the catalogue of ecclesiastical cultural heritage has been underway since the '90s, following agreements with the Ministry of Cultural Heritage. But it it only concerns dioceses and not religious orders. These, in fact, are autonomous in their organization and therefore also in the management of their assets, according to canon law. And so, in Italy as in much of the world, neither the quality nor the consistency of the cultural heritage of the institutes of consecrated life is known with precision.

This situation is serious because, despite the nineteenth-century suppressions, religious communities are often owners of a multitude of assets of considerable cultural and identity value, both with reference to movable and immovable properties, which is significant also in terms of landscape identity. In very many cases not even a simple inventory has been drawn up, despite the fact that it is prescribed by canon law.

Thus, cultural heritage is exposed to serious risks of sale and dispersion, especially when the number of members within religious communities are rapidly diminishing. The problem is even more serious for sui iuris monasteries, especially those of women, who find themselves facing the difficulties of managing vast properties in an increasingly stringent regulatory horizon, which requires specific competences and more and more professionals.

The first objective of the conference we are preparing is therefore to urge consecrated male and female communities to know and appreciate the patrimony they have inherited and to consider

it as a common patrimony of the Church with consequent duties regarding responsibilities (and also new possibilities) relating to its safeguarding. It is necessary to make known exemplary solutions for its management and valorization, so that it may no longer be seen only as a burden, as something to get rid of without caring about it, but rather as an opportunity for a new apostolate at the service of the community and especially of the poorest, as the Code of Canon Law already affirms.

What role can these assets play for the development (cultural, economic and social) of local communities and to bear witness to that "outward looking Church", "field hospital" to which Pope Francis has referred several times?

A recent study – based on data from the Annuarium statisticum Ecclesiae – hypothesizes that in Flanders the last monastery will close in 2030. In Italy, if the current decrease is maintained, the last convent will close in 2046! Of course, this will not happen, because the future is not just the product of a mathematical projection. Even so, the theme of the dismission of the ecclesiastical patrimony of religious communities is becoming more and more recurrent.

The guidelines already mentioned as an outcome of the 2018 conference, "The decommissioning and ecclesial reuse of churches", can also provide orientation in these cases. Since these goods represent a heritage of the Church that reflects the identity of the Christian and civil community, any solution must be shared with the communities themselves.

The guidelines do not exclude extreme solutions such as divestment and sale, however it is hoped that these are not the result of hasty decisions but are considered within a sustainable and planning awareness of what ecclesiastical heritage can still serve and signify.

In this sense, before any other decision, it would be necessary to carefully evaluate the wishes of Pope Francis when he states: "I hope for the streamlining of structures, the re-use of large houses in favor of works that are more responsive to the current needs of evangelization and charity, the adaptation of works to the new needs" (Apostolic Letter "To all consecrated persons", 21 November 2014)

In summary, the decline in the number of religious members exposes cultural heritage to a condition of fragility that can also be seen as an opportunity: that of an "outward looking Church", which is not interested in occupying spaces and positions, but rather "initiating processes" (to use the words of Pope Francis).

Specifically, processes that aim to share this wide and deep heritage with civil communities,

with institutions that deal with its protection and promotion, with associations and the third sector, which is also largely dedicated to the preservation and re-narration of cultural heritage.

In general, Your Eminence, what do you expect as a result of this conference?
The conference is still under construction. It will not only involve invited speakers. We decided to launch a call for papers addressed both to the academic world and to the religious themselves, and to the many experts who, acting as professionals or with the third sector, are promoting innovative actions and research in the field of managing the cultural heritage of institutes of consecrated life.
The conference will be an opportunity to exchange points of view and experiences, collect a multitude of cases and outline some management models with exemplary features.
But the most impactful outcome that is hoped from this appointment is the birth of a team of specialists – architects and art historians, experts in administration, management and law – who in every nation will constitute themselves as a permanent facilitator group for communities of consecrated life.
A project that starts from the most fragile and isolated ones. Without taking the place of each community's local experts and contact persons, these specialists should facilitate an ecclesially responsible management of cultural heritage, relieving the burden of the proprietary communities and cautiously promoting a new vision of it, as the object of their own pastoral and missionary planning.
These facilitator groups, working in synergy, could initiate an intra-ecclesial reflection on management and valorization of cultural heritage of religious communities, being aware of national peculiarities but equally comprehensive of the universal orientation of the Church, so as to calibrate the general choices on a multitude of known cases and with a broad horizon, both in a territorial sense and in terms of vision and foresight.
With such a view, these highly skilled professional teams could also become a point of contact between the realities of religious orders and other ecclesial structures responsible for the protection of ecclesiastical cultural heritage (dioceses and Episcopal Conferences), reaching the point of involving all the institutions of the local communities that are interested in culture, in the evolution of society, and in the progress of local communities.

Read the article in Italian language

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