

DIO NON ABITA PIÙ QUI?

Dismissione di luoghi di culto e gestione integrata
dei beni culturali ecclesiastici

DOESN'T GOD

DWELL HERE ANYMORE?

Decommissioning places of worship and integrated
management of ecclesiastical cultural heritage

a cura di /edited by

Fabrizio Capanni

THE TRAINING OF AGENTS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: THE PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCE

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This patrimony belongs to everyone,
and so must become dear and familiar to all
(Saint John Paul II)¹

The growing acknowledgement of the importance of protecting and valuing Ecclesiastical Heritage has become apparent, in recent times years, in the implementation of structural measures and in the greater focus given to the training of the different agents involved. Notwithstanding the many efforts to create a new dynamic within the services, to consolidate projects or to suggest new procedures, this situation continues to be very novel. Until recently, works regarding the Cultural Heritage often lacked a solid strategy and standardised procedures.

In Portugal, there are numerous diocesan structures that value this area as a fundamental aspect of their intent to extend and broaden their pastoral work to a larger part of society. In keeping with this approach, we have reorganised departments, allocated to this effort services and highly qualified professionals. Like never before, we are currently witnessing a clear movement towards the consolidation of projects headed by experts and implemented by skilled technicians. This has resulted in a multiplication of meticulous interventions, involving widespread research and the ample dissemination of information regarding cultural heritage.

Invited to speak on the Portuguese experience on the training of agents and stimulation of community involvement, I would start by evoking the very simple but poignant words of Saint John Paul II (1997) on the importance of Ecclesiastical Heritage:

It is also necessary to shed greater light on the pastoral meaning of this commitment, so that it may be perceived by the contemporary world, by believers and non-believers. To this end it is appropriate to encourage periods of formation in the communities (...) for all those interested, so that the cultural heritage may be fully appreciated in culture and catechetical fields².

¹ John Paul II 1997, n. 3.

² *Ibid.*



Fig. 1. Church of Madre de Deus, Lisbon. © SNBCI. Foto Ricardo Perna.



Fig. 2. Church of Misericórdia, Torre de Moncorvo. © SNBCI. Foto Nuno Saldanha.



Fig. 3. “How to visit a church”. © SNBCI.

In Portugal, this is a field of action that has emerged as a priority and as one of the main challenges of Cultural Heritage, affecting multiple areas of intervention and involving numerous and diverse players.

But in which areas, with which actors and with what purpose in mind?

The groundwork focused primarily on the preparation of local communities (parishes, congregations), to eliminate, within each parish, any training shortcomings in those people dealing with religious heritage – promoting an active involvement in the protection and valuing of this heritage. This effort has also been extended to the people entrusted with the mission of implementing structuring measures on each territory, namely the pastoral agents, professionals, and other experts working with heritage or culture (ecclesial, state or local institutions).

THE PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCE: SOME EXAMPLES

I would now like to highlight some examples of the Portuguese experience regarding the training of operators and community involvement, within the scope of the protection and fruition of the Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage.

It is a domain of action encompassing multiple meanings that should be encouraged and developed. I would like to start by focusing on action aimed at enhancing pastoral mission, which is essential to the Church. Considering the

fundamental purpose of this heritage, the main objective of this action is to reinforce the meaning of different artistic expressions, and their role in further enhancing the pastoral mission associated to them. In fact, in order to allow heritage to be used as an instrument of the Church's action and for the growth of Faith, one must bear well in mind its purpose. Deciphering this legacy, therefore, means to perpetuate their evangelic dimension. The need to interpret this heritage – whether it is a building, a tradition or a work of art – which is irreplaceable in the mission of the Church besides being a key element even within secularised societies, plays a key role in enabling fruition: a “concrete and beneficial appearance to the historical memory of Christianity”³.

“How to Visit a Church” was the theme of an important event created to redefine visits to Catholic churches. Considering the growing significance of religious heritage as a unique source of cultural fruition and one of the principal tourist resources worldwide, the absence of a well-defined strategy in this field has prompted numerous recommendations regarding the specialised training of all agents involved in organising tours to Catholic churches. This event explored the specificity of this type of heritage, providing further context and incorporating it in a broader plan of action. This not only adds value and enhances the experience, but also contributes to the elimination of a superficial approach, which continues to be widespread and contrary to the purpose and mission of these institutions. It is true that churches aren't museums *per se*, and the value and significance of their heritage are more than a work of art in a museum. It is exclusively in their natural context that they achieve their purposefulness. This is the key that allows us to read an object and its function, and enables the creation of a dynamic experience to the visitor – highlighting the various meanings of the work of art, encouraging people to appreciate the transmission and experience of Faith. In other words, putting into context the discourse and the beauty of the works according to its purpose is a fundamental understanding for anyone visiting a church. The visitor should be able to understand the essence of this heritage, should know how to read space and be captivated by the beauty of Christian Art, discovering the message contained in each monument and its works – these have been our main spheres of action.

In keeping with this notion, the training programmes on Christian iconography are also key to a more adequate understanding and interpretation of the work of art. An essential teaching tool for the professionals working on inventory, or in the tourism industry, the efficacy of these programmes can be witnessed first-hand on the conference tours «(Re)view Christian Art», targeting a wide range of audiences. Here, the specific heritage of a given church is tested in a comprehensive tour that can be adjusted to different churches, according to their

³ *Ibid.*



Fig. 4. Guide for the interpretation of religious heritage. © SNBCI.

specific features. These tours constitute a permanent training instrument and an unlimited resource of cultural fruition, offering a fresh insight on religious art as an expression of faith, integrated in its liturgical purpose. By decoding the message present in each work, which complements the material analysis, these tours provide an immersive in-context approach, rooted on the very essence of the religious experience, and are part of a wider communication programme that includes the iconographic interpretation as a factor that adds value and enhances the visit to a Catholic church.

A Guide for the Interpretation of Religious Heritage was compiled to set down some of these targets⁴. The main purpose of this guide is to define and consolidate good practices regarding the interpretation of ecclesiastical heritage. It offers useful information to professionals and ecclesial agents to stimulate the interpretation of these resources thereby offering an enhanced tour experience where they can be fully perceived by the audience.

⁴ Secretariado Nacional 2014.



Fig. 5. “Christian Iconography”. © SNBCI.

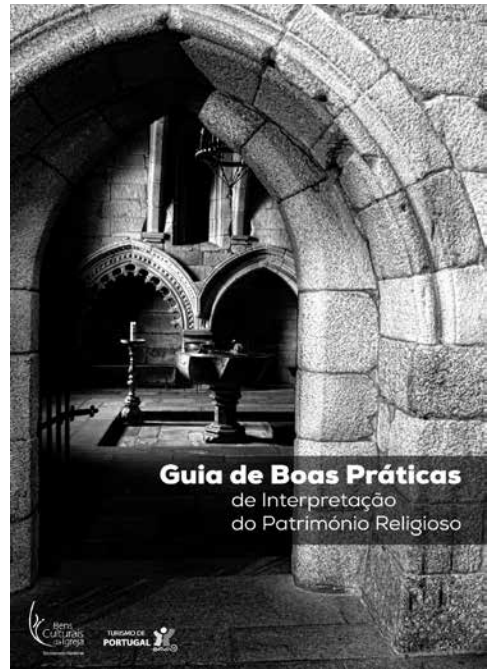


Fig. 7. Guide for the interpretation of religious heritage. © SNBCI.



Fig. 6. “(Re)view christian Art”. © SNBCI.





Fig. 8. National day of ecclesiastical cultural heritage. © SNBCI.

To fulfil the ultimate goal of enhancing the involvement of various sectors of society through the promotion of dialogue between institutions (ecclesial and civil, public or private), and the boosting of resources and synergies, Portugal declared the 18th October, St. Luke's day, patron of the artists, National Day of Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage. This initiative is aimed at stimulating a reflection on and the sharing of all work developed within Portuguese dioceses, in parallel with a debate on the new operative proposals, the difficulties and the other challenges that have emerged. This affords a better visibility to a wider range of people, both from the ecclesial and other backgrounds, in an effort to extend these actions to the entire country, which is achieved by enabling more communication opportunities between institutions in this area. The "duty of making its knowledge and fruition a reality, in a cultural dialogue, constitutes also, to the Church, a pastoral dialogue"⁵. People are urged to promote a new view of religious art, intended as an expression of worship rooted in the very essence of religious experience. A wide range of institutions adhere to this event each year, by programming dozens of activities focused on the assessment and interpretation of Christian art. The cultural programmes available on those days include conferences, exhibitions, book launches, presentations on restoration initiatives,

⁵ Conferência Episcopal Portuguesa 1997.



Fig. 9. Inventory of ecclesiastical cultural heritage. © SNBCI.



Fig. 10. Handbook of procedures for the inventory. © SNBCI.

guided tours, concerts, besides other events involving religious art, libraries and archives, or immaterial heritage.

I would also like to emphasise, within the scope of the training programmes and the involvement of communities, a number of more technical measures, namely in the field of inventory, preventive conservation, and restoration of Cultural Heritage.

The concerted efforts aimed at qualifying inventory projects has proven to be a crucial tool for the overall process of protecting and valuing religious heritage. In this sense, we offer a wide range of training options that could address multiple needs. Focusing specially on the inventory of cultural heritage, the institution supports different initiatives with practical approaches that include the recognition of techniques, the identification of materials and the adoption of accurate terminology. Our programme, based on the use of analysis, identification and interpretation methodologies, encourages trainees to formulate assessments on quality and value. This helps them develop the required catalogue and classification skills. The comprehensiveness of this programme, the way it addresses all aspects of inventory work, was specifically designed to qualify professionals who can deal with the distinctive qualities of Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage. The effort to standardise methodologies and procedures resulted in a joint effort with



Fig. 11. Preventive conservation. © SNBCI.

various dioceses aimed at producing a *Handbook of Procedures for the Inventory*⁶, focusing specially on ecclesial heritage.

Preventive conservation has also been one of our core approaches for quite some time. Namely, through courses aimed at local communities, in close conjunction with the various services. We're aware that the responsibility for protecting this heritage lies with its most direct guardians. Initiatives implemented throughout the country try to address the most urgent issues in this area. The analysis of practical cases, using straightforward language aimed at non-specialist audiences, provides basic diagnostic and maintenance instructions, as well as very simple recommendations and basic principles regarding conservation. These procedures can all be easily incorporated into the daily routines of parishes. They are aimed at all the people who are in permanent contact with the artistic heritage of churches, either in managing or maintenance tasks (priests, volunteers, finance commissions, etc), as well as supervisors, technical personnel, and staff members operating throughout the many areas relating to this heritage.

Conservation and restoration, an activity performed by qualified personnel only, has also been, for quite a long time, both a priority as well as one of our

⁶ Secretariado Nacional 2018.



Fig. 12. Conservation and restoration seminars. © SNBCI.



Fig. 13. National Library of Portugal. © SNBCI. Foto Ricardo Perna.

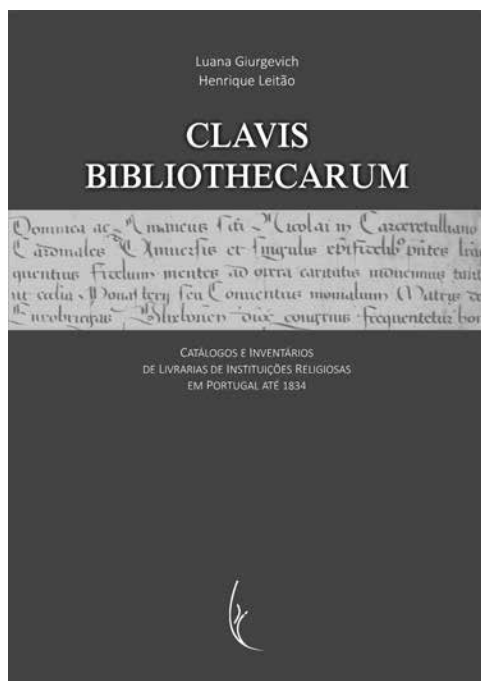


Fig. 14. *Clavis Bibliothecarum*. © SNBCI.



Fig. 15. Ecclesiastical cultural heritage collection. © SNBCI.

most complex fields of action. There are numerous challenges associated to this area: inadequate procedures, harmful interventions and lack of appropriate technical monitoring, to name a few. The critical relevance that underlies the act of sharing and promoting good practices should also be put to work in order to address the need to educate the public and raise awareness in communities. With this in view, technical conservation and restoration seminars are regularly organised in collaboration with diocesan services. In these seminars, the actual requalification and conservation work developed in each region is fully discussed, as are the procedures used and the good practices. These aspects aren't always perceived and understood by the lay public.

On the other hand, by acknowledging the need to invest in knowledge, namely through studies and initiatives held by academic institutions (universities, research centres), we reinforce our commitment to reconciling the critical mass provided by art history, iconography or conservation, with the work of pastoral agents.

The accord between Church and Science, however, which is essential to the process of communication, sharing, and fruition of the ecclesial heritage, has not yet been fully reached. Not only due to difficult communication and access to the works, but mainly because of the underuse of results, which would be ex-

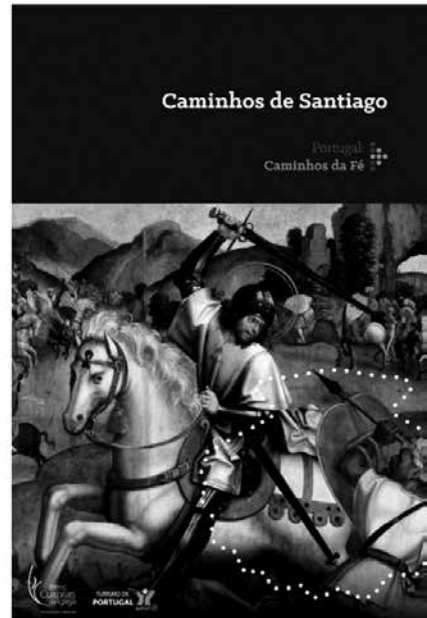
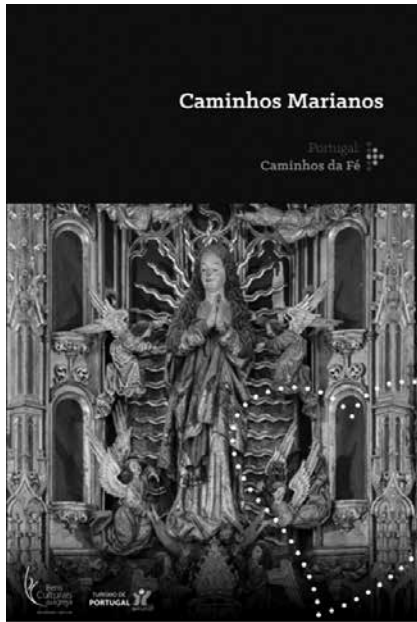


Fig. 16. Thematic guides. © SNBCI.

tremely beneficial to the Church. On the contrary, dubious publications, which totally lack critical mass, are still frequent and add little to the communities that enjoy that heritage. An adequate knowledge base, grounded in profound learning processes (such as theology, liturgy or iconology) is of utmost importance. However, institutions haven't yet fully realised how essential this is. There continues to be a perplexing rejection for a mass of work characteristically dismissed as being restricted to the closed circuit of academia. This is where error can set in. A professional can effectively communicate with any type of audience. Based on solid arguments and knowledge. By opening new roads and divulging infor-



Fig. 17. *Invenire*. Ecclesiastical cultural heritage magazine. © SNBCI.

mation, they are also adding value to their own field of study, to the importance of safeguarding and cherishing heritage. I can even argue that we are currently wasting the “scientific return” of such a process, where knowledge could be converted into tangible objectives, based on years of work and qualified projects.

The goal is, therefore, to turn this knowledge into more and better information on heritage. This could be achieved through partnerships, scientific and editorial projects, on a deeper level, or regarding the production of informative and promotion material.

In short, far from turning all this into a “new cultural industry” of superficial consumption, I will end by quoting, once more, the words of Saint John Paul II: “The Church [...] cannot fail to carry out the ministry of helping contemporary man to re-experience religious wonder at the fascination of beauty and wisdom stemming from all that history given us”⁷. The sole purpose of all initiatives in this field, and their adjustment to reality, is none other than to accentuate the fundamental announcement: “Jesus Christ yesterday, today, and for ever”⁸.

This is a passionate journey; it is now in our hands to fully take advantage of all this potential.

⁷ John Paul II 1997, n. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 2.

"Nell'anno europeo del patrimonio culturale, il dipartimento dei beni culturali del Pontificio Consiglio della Cultura, in collaborazione con l'Ufficio Nazionale per i beni culturali ecclesiastici e l'edilizia di culto della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana e la Facoltà di Storia e Beni Culturali della Chiesa della Pontificia Università Gregoriana, ha voluto convocare un Convegno con due tematiche attuali e ampiamente discusse: la dismissione di chiese e la gestione integrata dei beni culturali."

"Puntare l'attenzione sul fenomeno della nuova destinazione d'uso di antichi luoghi di culto si inserisce nella questione della gestione integrata dei beni culturali della Chiesa. L'ampia proporzione del problema è trasversale e sensibilizza non soltanto le comunità cristiane, ma anche l'opinione pubblica, in virtù della valenza simbolica e rappresentativa delle chiese nel tessuto urbano e paesaggistico."

Dall'Introduzione generale

"In the European Year of Cultural Heritage, the Department for Cultural Heritage of the Pontifical Council for Culture, in collaboration with the National Office for Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage and Religious Buildings of the Italian Episcopal Conference and the Faculty of History and Cultural Heritage of the Pontifical Gregorian University, convened an International Conference to focus on two current and widely discussed themes: the decommissioning of churches and the integral management of cultural assets."

"Drawing attention to the phenomenon of the new use of ancient places of worship is part of the question of the integrated management of the Church's cultural heritage. A large proportion of the problem is transversal and sensitizes not only the Christian communities, but also public opinion, by virtue of the symbolic and representative value of the churches in the urban landscape."

From General Introduction

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