
AlmaTourism

Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development

Knowing, Preserving and Enhancing. The Cultural-Religious Heritage

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According to a survey carried out by the Italian Episcopal Conference, cultural assets of ecclesiastical ownership of our country are quite impressive: about 95,000 churches, 3,000 ecclesiastical libraries and 28,000 parish and diocesan archives, not to mention affiliated academic institutes and other similar organizations. Such an immense cultural heritage of religious interest – as Saint John Paul II reminds us – is to the service of the church mission: pieces of art help our soul to reach out for God and may represent forms of asceticism and catechesis. However, if this heritage is to provide a contribution, it must be protected and well preserved. More specifically, in the letter drafted on occasion of the Foundation of the Pontifical Council for Culture on May 20, 1982, Saint John Paul II stated (Letter of Foundation of the Pontifical Council for Culture, 1982):

«[...] And if culture is that by which man as man becomes more man, what is at stake in this case is the very destiny of man. Hence the importance for the Church, whose concern it is, of a careful and far-sighted pastoral activity with regard to culture, and in a particular way with regard to what is called living culture, that is, the whole of the principles and values which make up the ethos of a people: “The synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith... A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not faithfully lived out”».

These words highlight the role that cultural heritage of religious interest has always accomplished within the multiculturalism which is typical to every community, both in the eastern and in the western part of the world. Additionally, this diplomatic role of faith and culture that, today more than ever, is of paramount importance within the development of the international community has been also underlined by the constitution of *Gaudium et spes* of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The latter analyses the fundamental dialogue between faith and culture, faith and art, and, thus,

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faith and cultural heritage, in a world where the progress of science and globalization phenomena have been questioning once again the concept of culture in itself.

For this reason, it is essential to deepen the knowledge of priorities in enhancing the cultural heritage and to reaffirm the centrality of man, the community and all those principles that represent the milestones of a growth based on interculturalism, which necessarily implies a process of a constructive and proactive interest in other cultures and religions, as well as a process of an open and true helpfulness and tolerance towards our neighbor (Follo, 2010: 66). Here is why the cultural-religious heritage has a crucial role, with culture regaining ground as a main priority within policies of international collaboration and cooperation. Culture becomes a geopolitical tool for sharing, also useful to support an open dialogue and development, to the benefit of the individual freedom (Niglio, 2017).

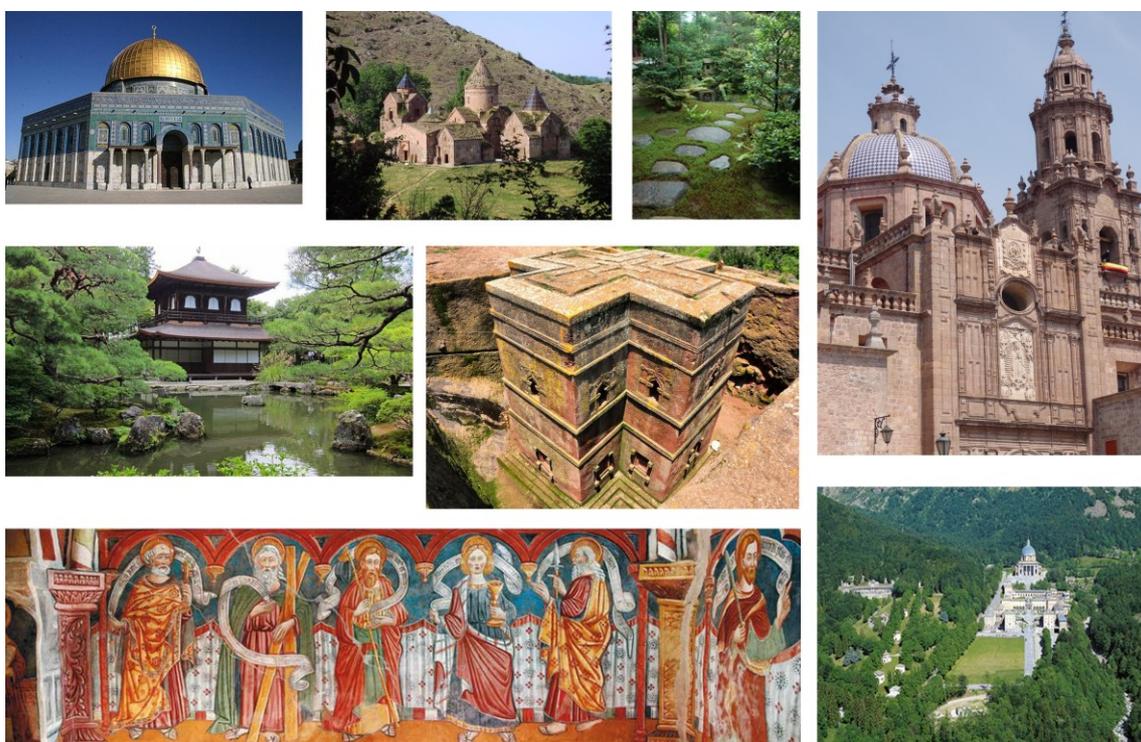


Figure 1: Cultural heritage of religious interest: Dome of the Rock, Monastery of Goshavank, Japanese sacred garden, Cathedral of Morelia, Ginkaku-ji Temple, New Jerusalem in Lalibela, Frescoes in Valle di Non, Oropa sacred mountain in Biella [pictures arrangement by Olimpia Niglio]

But according to which methods and criteria can we protect and preserve such a valuable diplomatic heritage, accounting for nearly two thirds of the whole Italian artistic and cultural asset?

The scientific coordinators of the International Conference *Conoscere, conservare, valorizzare. Patrimonio Religioso Culturale*, which took place in Verona and Vicenza (March 9-11 2017), have tried to answer this question, thanks to the massive contribution provided by many Italian and foreign students, also coming from the Asian and American continent.

The conference, promoted by the Istituto Superiore Scienze Religiose “S. Maria di Monte Berico” of the Pontificia Facoltà Teologica Marianum, aimed at establishing an interdisciplinary dialogue between experts of the religious and secular community, in order to identify best methods to support an in-depth knowledge of the religious and cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, and select the most suitable technical and management criteria for a proper conservation and enhancement of such heritage. An heritage which is increasingly exposed to events that, due to different reasons and nature, have often threatened its continuity, thus jeopardising historical, artistic and symbolic values of a cultural asset that we have inherited and we have to protect and pass down to the next generation.

CONVEGNO

CONOSCERE, CONSERVARE, VALORIZZARE. Il Patrimonio Religioso Culturale



VERONA, Vescovado di Verona, 9 Marzo 2017

VICENZA, Fiera di Vicenza, 10-11 Marzo 2017

Figure 2: Poster of the International Conference “Conoscere, conservare, valorizzare. Il Patrimonio culturale religioso” Verona, Vicenza March 9-11, 2017 [composition by Rinaldo Pellizzari]. Central image: Giovanni di Papino Calderini da Figline, «Madonna con Santi» beginning of the 16th century, in the nearby of Verona.

The conference was structured in five thematic areas, namely Holy art and architecture; Landscapes and places of faith; Enhancement of the cultural-religious heritage; Phenomenology of pilgrimage; Safeguard of the religious heritage between prevention and emergency.

Within individual areas, preceded every day by *Lectio Magistralis*, an interesting intercultural and inter-disciplinary dialogue was established among akin- but often very distant - academic sectors, which shed a significant light on the role played today by the Church in directing and promoting, with an increasing expertise, the conservation of the historical and artistic heritage. However, although considered as a generally accepted, the concept of cultural heritage was at the centre of interesting discussions which correctly questioned what history has handed down to us, ascribing to the root of the term *patrimonio* (heritage) ideas originated from the culture of the 19th century - *patrimoine*, or *patrimoine national*, words which made their first appearance in France, between the Revolution of 1789 and the immediate Restoration. Yet this idea of heritage, which in Europe has always been inspired by the awareness and the centrality of the national culture (Settis, 2011: 32) and is confirmed within specific spiritual, ideological, institutional and identity-related values that cannot be generalized, obviously has no similarities with other cultures such as those of the American and, most of all, Asian continent, where the reasons of specific concepts have different origins. Such diverging opinions on the concept of cultural heritage allowed an interesting debate also addressing interreligious issues, a very important topic within peace processes currently in progress in many parts of the world. Starting from here, the concept of cultural heritage of religious interest, with important acknowledgements also dating back to 1989 with the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor bonus* with which John Paul II had established the Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, has been interestingly reanalyzed. After nearly 30 years, it is clear how the role and the function of the cultural heritage of the Church have to be reconsidered, taking into account the different meaning attributed to the concept in itself across the whole world. Moreover, this reflection has an important validation and consequences in a world where cohabitation rules are increasingly influenced by sharing and cultural diplomacy.

Considering the current scenario, the question is, again: how can we preserve and enhance the cultural and artistic heritage of religious interest, increasingly under threat also due to the many conflicts in progress? If it's true that during its thousand year old history the Church has always been able to renovate its line of thinking, however there is an urgent need of recognizing in the Church and its vast heritage an important "place" of cultural diplomacy suitable to foster a dialogue among different cultures, as well as promoting new and effective tools of integration without succumbing to homogenisation, but, on the contrary, valuing differences.

On this basis, the International Conference *Conoscere, conservare, valorizzare. Patrimonio Religioso Culturale*, was meant as an intercultural reflection thanks to the support of many and outstanding scholars, laying the foundations for in-depth studies and initiatives in coming months, to be followed by the establishment of an Academic Foundation to carry out research in the field of cultural-religious heritage, a tool suitable to re-build links to other cultural contexts.

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