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### **Rodrigo Pais Photo Archive, a Resource of Good Practices for the Religious Heritage. The Exhibition “Catholic Church and Society in Italy in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century”**

Furini, G.\*  
Gambetta, G.†  
University of Bologna (Italy)

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#### ABSTRACT

Sometimes we underestimate the importance of linking together different cultural assets in order to implement enhancement strategies suitable to cross the sectorial borders. Instead, we tend to consider watertight compartments and run the risk to target single cultural products which could be potentially offered to a wider audience. The photographic exhibition “*Catholic Church and Society in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century*” aimed, ever since its beginning, to cross these borders with a thematic selection of shots taken by photographer Rodrigo Pais, on display in the hall of the former oratory of the Basilica of San Martino Maggiore. The building is currently in a poor conservation status, although its ordinary splendor is still visible in both the architectural structure and decoration elements, featuring a large fresco dating back to the 17th century entirely covering one of the four walls of the hall. This place requires a proper visibility in order to regain its vitality and be able to foster once again cultural exchanges.

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**Keywords:** Photographic Exhibitions; Rodrigo Pais; Basilica of San Martino Maggiore (Bologna); Cultural Heritage

Non sempre si riflette sull’importanza di saper relazionare tra loro beni culturali differenti per riuscire a mettere in atto strategie di valorizzazione capaci di varcare i limiti settoriali. Si tende invece a ragionare per compartimenti separati con il rischio di targettizzare un prodotto culturale che invece dovrebbe essere promosso ad un pubblico di ampio respiro. La mostra fotografica “Chiesa e società in Italia nella seconda metà del Novecento” si è proposta fin dalla nascita di varcare questa separazione attraverso la messa in mostra di una selezione tematica di fotografie del

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\* E-mail address: [glenda.furini@gmail.com](mailto:glenda.furini@gmail.com)

† E-mail address: [gguido.gambetta@unibo.it](mailto:gguido.gambetta@unibo.it)

fotografo Rodrigo Pais, esposte all'interno della sala dell'ex oratorio della Basilica di San Martino Maggiore. Luogo che oggi non si trova in ottimali condizioni conservative pur mantenendo l'originario splendore sia nella componente architettonica sia negli elementi decorativi, caratterizzati dal grande affresco secentesco che ricopre interamente una delle quattro pareti della sala, e necessita visibilità per poter tornare ad essere un luogo vivo e vivace di scambi culturali.

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**Keywords:** Mostre Fotografiche; Rodrigo Pais; Basilica di San Martino Maggiore (Bologna); Beni Culturali

## Introduction

Under some circumstances, different categories of cultural assets may intertwine, creating unique occasions for social gatherings. This was the case for the photographic exhibition “*Church and society in Italy in the second half of the twentieth century*” (**Figure 1**) set up in the big oratory of the San Martino Maggiore Basilica, situated at the heart of the historical centre of Bologna. On this occasion, 62 pictures taken by Roman photographer Rodrigo Pais filled the hall (which has been empty for years now) of the former oratory. Over time, the place has played a relevant role in fostering cultural and artistic exchange as a library, theatre, cinema and lecture hall. Here, the beauty of the pictures is highlighted at its best. At the same time, the exhibition has drawn the attention to a place which does not deserve to be neglected.

### 1. The archive of photographer Rodrigo Pais

The photographic heritage produced by Rodrigo Pais during his about 50 years of photo-journalistic activity is a valuable documentary resource in historical, artistic and cultural terms, which describes the Italian society and history after the Second World War, until 1995. Rodrigo Pais was born in Rome in 1930 to a Sardinian father and an Abruzzese mother, who had both moved to Rome looking for a job. Firstborn of two sons, he spent his childhood and adolescence in the central rione Monti, where he attended primary school. As a very young boy, he worked as a shoeblick, hatter and shop boy. At 16 years of age, he started working as a pressman assistant in the photographic laboratory Binazzi & Lombardini and after several years of experience, the passion for photography and politics led him to the weekly magazine *Vie Nuove*, where he worked as a photoreporter. In 1954 he also started collaborating with newspapers like *Paese*, *Paese Sera* and *l'Unità*, but also *Corriere della Sera*, *Corriere d'Informazione*, *La Stampa*, *Il Giornale d'Italia* and the monthly magazine *Il Mondo*. He then founded, together with the colleague photographer Giorgio Sartarelli the agency Pais & Sartarelli, seated in Via dei Taurini (also the headquarter of *Paese Sera* from 1956 to 1979), which closed in 1972. From a geographic point of view, Rome and its surroundings are the focus of his work, although several photo shoots were also taken in Abruzzo, Calabria, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Sardinia, Sicily, Tuscany and Umbria. He also worked abroad, where he collaborated with the *l'Unità* correspondents. Among his works, a wide reportage carried out in 1961 with journalist Arminio Savioli in Cuba, Brasilia, Mexico and Argentina. In December 1963, he followed the journey of Pope Paul VI to India. He then headed to Pakistan (1960), Budapest (1957 and 1962), Jerusalem (1962 and 1964), Prague (1968, 1977 and 1987), Moscow (1957, 1962, 1974 and 1979) and Thailand (1990.) His activity as a photoreporter came to an end in 1998; after retiring, he spent the last years of his life cataloguing his wide photographic archive, the historical relevance of which was acknowledged by the Superintendence of

the Lazio region as “a source of immeasurable value to retrace the history of the last century and a unique and singular evidence of the political and social life of our country and European and extra-European countries”. Rodrigo Pais died in Rome in March 2007. Although he worked on several subjects, for some of them there is more available material – with special reference to crimes, Italian and foreign politics, urban development, traditions and life conditions, the work and agricultural world, protests and occupations, strikes and rallies, movies and the Dolce vita, the intellectual world of writers, painters and winners of literature prizes, and, of course, the Catholic Church and religion issues. The photos on display at the exhibition were selected from the latter area of research. The great availability of shots and the excellent quality of precious images allowed to set up several exhibitions on different subjects, with constantly new proposals for a valorisation of the photographic heritage. A great number of photos having politics as a main subject were displayed at the exhibitions “Centro-sinistra. Da Fanfani a Moro, 1958-1968” and “Adone Zoli, un padre della Repubblica”; the event “Pais del cinema. Gli anni d’oro del cinema italiano nel racconto per immagini di un grande fotografo”, had cinema as a main focus, whilst the exhibitions “Il fotografo in borgata”, “Abitare a Roma, in periferia” and “Roma in libertà”, were devoted to Rome and its outskirts. Food inspired “Come mangiavamo. Viaggio tra le immagini di Rodrigo Pais”, whilst “Poveri ma belli” provided a portrait of Italy in the second half of the ‘50s. Finally, “L’occhio di Pais: religione e società nella seconda metà del ‘900” and “Chiesa e società in Italia nella seconda metà del ‘900” analysed the relationship among society, Church and religion.



**Figure 1:** The image symbol of the photographic exhibition: nuns attending the funeral procession after the death of Pope Pius XII. Rome, October 10, 1958

Source: photo by Rodrigo Pais, Rodrigo Pais archive

## 2. Photography as a tool of geographic enhancement

The photographic exhibition “Catholic Church and society in Italy in the second half of the twentieth century” set up at the large oratory inside the Basilica of San Martino Maggiore (**Figure 2**) is a project based on the idea developed by The San Martino Cultural Centre, with the aim to breathe new life into a neglected place. The

enhancement project of the oratory hall originated from the proposal to secure the large fresco (104 m) decorating one of its four walls. The piece of art, also called *La disputa di San Cirillo* and dating back to 1629, was painted by Lucio Massari and squared by Girolamo Curti, called Dentone, within a complex and monumental illusive architecture. The hall of the large upper oratory, built between 1625 and 1629 by architect Giovanni Battista Falcetti, is located over the sacristy and was originally the library of the Carmelite convent, where theology students also used to study. From 1798, after the suppression of the convent, the place underwent several changes. After retaining its role as a library, in 1889 it was turned into an oratory, then it became a theatre and a parish cinema. It was also a lecture hall from 1984 to 1990. In 1993, as a theatre, it hosted several events and a dance school. The place hasn't been used for some years now and the big hall is currently in a state of serious deterioration, due to some water infiltrations from the roof, a circumstance that is threatening the integrity of the fresco and the whole place. The choice of this venue is thus anticipating the roof securing project and the raising of awareness among citizens on the importance of a common asset which is currently seriously threatened. On this occasion, a relatively new cultural asset such as photography has come to the aid of a fresco (another cultural asset) and, more generally, of the wider cultural heritage of the complex. Moreover, it has supported both promotion and enhancement of a currently endangered place of great value, giving rise to a sort of pact of solidarity between cultural assets which may be turned into a good practice of enhancement with good chances of replicability. This would fill the gap between ancient and contemporary cultural assets. Of course, it is also photography that benefits from being integrated in a scenic place of remarkable historical value.



**Figure 2:** The setting up of the photographic exhibition

Source: Photo by Glenda Furini

### 3. The exhibition in the hall of the former oratory

The photographic exhibition illustrates in four sections great events and daily life episodes providing evidence of the influence of the Catholic Church in Italy in the second half of the twentieth century. In the first part, the photos show the two sessions of the Second Vatican Council: the first was presided by Pope John XXIII in 1962, and the second by Pope Paul VI in 1963. The images highlight the solemnity of the Council, the majestic entrance of Pope John XXIII in the St Peter's Basilica, on his gestatorial chair, the procession of the Conciliar Fathers, the papal tiara and the golden mitre, the Christian (non-Catholic) Patriarchs in the role of observers and a kneeling Pope reciting the ancient *Adsumus* prayer or reading the allocution *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*. At the death of John XXIII, the new Pope Paul VI resumed the ceremony with the same solemnity by reading the opening speech of the second stage of the Council, flanked by Cardinals Alfredo Ottaviani and Francesco Roberti. The section is completed by the pictures of the procession of the Conciliar Fathers and the conciliar hall in the central nave of the St. Peter's Basilica, at the presence of tv professionals and photographers, reporting the ceremony as it unfolded.

The second section is devoted to popes: we can see the images of the solemn funeral of Pius XII, the composure of the faithful and the majestic figure of the Dean, Cardinal Eugène Tisserant overseeing in his role of *camerlengo* the administration of the vacant seat. Furthermore, faithful and religious waiting for hours and entire days before the election of the Bishop of Rome, the new Pope John XXIII, who finally takes possession of the Basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano sitting in his majestic gestatorial chair. Finally, the section displays the amazing pictures of John XXIII traveling across Italy, and the foreign missions of Pope Paul VI (**Figure 3**).

We can also see Pope John and the spreading of his extraordinary humanity: he is the Pope who exits the Vatican to travel also as a pilgrim to Loreto and Assisi. And as extraordinary as that little journey might have seemed, Paul VI went further by traveling to the Holy Land and subsequently to India a few months after his election. At the time, some said and wrote that the Pope shouldn't have been traveling, as this was desecrating his image. But Paul VI demonstrated that the role of the pope was different to that of the statues located in church niches. A pope was first and foremost a missionary of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 3:** The setting up of the photographic exhibition

Source: Photo by Glenda Furini

The third section is dedicated to the role of the church in the daily life: the traditional old maid procession in the town of Palestrina, the blessing of the animals in the Church of Sant’Eusebio in Rome, the two children from Terni who saw the Virgin Mary, the popular consultations to decide the name of the Saint protector in a district of Messina, skirts length being checked at the entrance of the Saint Peter’s Basilica, a priest betting on the numbers corresponding to the date and hour of the death of Pope John XXIII.

Finally, the fourth section displays photos bearing witness of the contrasts between laypeople and Catholics with reference to most significant ethic issues and news events: the visit of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy to the Vatican, the police interrupting the theatrical opera *Il Vicario*, the national demonstration supporting divorce, the trial to movie director Pier Paolo Pasolini, accused of having insulted the state religion, a group of young Catholics contesting in 1969 the Pope’s hearing with President Richard Nixon, the protest of conscientious objectors in Saint Peter’s square and the demonstration in support of abortion (**Figure 4**).

The last two sections highlight the most striking differences between past and present times. Here we can see processions crowded with people, but also displays of a popular humanity and devotion that are rapidly dissolving today. The photos provide thus the evidence of a way to experience faith which is now expressed in other forms – undoubtedly less apparent but not necessarily lacking in emotions. It’s an exhibition that emphasises the extraordinary narration skills of images, of course requiring an expert photographer-narrator. A professional who is not only able to “seize the moment” (as we usually say in these cases), but also to sense the essence of a process, event, or disposition. In this sense, Rodrigo Pais was undoubtedly a master. We are glad and grateful that this heritage, instead of being lost, has been this time, as in previous occasions, wisely enhanced [...]. This is an exhibition providing us with the chance to explore our recent history, also reflecting on major changes occurred in the sixty years that separate us from these shots. The title of the exhibition – which has been used for many essays and articles – is exemplifying: Church and society, as if they were two separate dimensions with occasional points of contact. It was exactly like that, even in those times. Today, the gap is even more pronounced, because the Church has less visibility compared to the days when the pictures were taken. Besides, following the

guidelines issued during the Second Vatican Council, our religion has been able to mingle with society and realise that the age of contrasts was over. Already in 1889, Lev Tolstoj wrote in his diary: «We cannot purify ourselves by ourselves: it is only together that we can do it. Separating to not get dirty is the dirtiest thing».<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 4:** The setting up of the photographic exhibition

Source: Photo by Glenda Furini

The exhibition was set up paying special attention to the hosting venue: during the staging works, quadrangular self-supporting metal gratings were installed to integrate framed photos and illustrative panels. Gratings occupied about half of the hall, the one opposite the frescoed wall, so that the damaged painting could be perfectly visible (**Figure 5**). The event also provided the occasion to put the Chiostro dei Morti (literally the Cloister of the dead, due to presence, on the ground floor, of several gravestones bricked up into the walls) under the spotlight as the point of access to the exhibition. On the opening day, the cloister was decorated with torches emphasising its scenic allure. The exhibition has thus a double merit: on one hand, it has allowed the rediscovery of a place which is an ideal venue to host events, whilst on the other it has enhanced the valuable, accurate and peculiar interpretation of the Catholic world provided by Rodrigo Pais. In our times, we will face the challenge to enhance our cultural heritage with sharing and networking projects, leveraging on synergies able to include cultural assets and products featuring apparently different characteristics, thus having the potential to attract an heterogeneous audience.





**Figure 5:** Grand opening day of the photographic exhibition/ Opening speech by Enrico Galavotti, Guglielmo Pescatore, Guido Gambetta, Mons. Matteo Maria Zuppi and Paola Foschi

Source: Photos by Glenda Furini

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<sup>1</sup> From Enrico Galavotti speech during the exhibition opening.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*