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Message of the Holy Father to the participants in the Conference “Doesn’t God dwell here any more? Decommissioning places of worship and integrated management of ecclesiastical cultural heritage” Pontifical Gregorian University, 29-30 November 2018)

The following is the message sent by the Holy Father Francis to the participants in the Conference “Doesn’t God dwell here any more? Decommissioning places of worship and integrated management of ecclesiastical cultural heritage”, organized by the Pontifical Council for Culture, in collaboration with the Pontifical Gregorian University and the Italian Episcopal Conference, taking place in Rome at the Pontifical Gregorian University from 29 to 30 November 2018, read at the opening of the works by His Eminence Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture:

Message of the Holy Father

To the Venerable Brother
Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi
President of the Pontifical Council for Culture

I address a warm greeting to the participants in the Conference, convened by the Pontifical Council for Culture, in collaboration with the Italian Episcopal Conference and the Pontifical Gregorian University, on the decommissioning of churches and their ecclesial re-use, and on the management of cultural heritages integrated in ordinary pastoral ministry, and I express my gratitude to the distinguished speakers and organizers of the initiative.

Saint Paul VI, a pastor who was very sensitive to the values of culture, addressing the participants in a conference of ecclesiastical archivists, affirmed that to care for documents was equivalent to caring for the worship of Christ, to having a sense of the Church, narrating to ourselves and to who follows after us the history of the *transitus Domini* of the world (cf. *Address to ecclesiastical archivists*, 26 September 1963: *Teachings*, I [1963], 61). This happy expression may naturally be extended to all the cultural assets of the Church.

Saint John Paul II too, particularly attentive to the pastoral relevance of art and of cultural assets, said: “In planning their pastoral projects, therefore, the local Churches should not fail to make appropriate use of their own cultural heritage. Indeed, the latter has a unique capacity to spur people to a greater perception of spiritual values and, by testifying in various ways to God's presence in human history and the Church's life, they prepare souls to accept the newness of the Gospel” (*Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church*, 31 March 2000: *Teachings*, XXIII [2000], 505).

I myself have intended to give a more markedly social expression to theological aesthetics, affirming, for example, in the Encyclical *Laudato si’*, that “by learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism” (215); as well as recalling, in a speech to the Pontifical Academies, the importance of the work of architects and artists in the redevelopment and rebirth of urban suburbs and in general in the creation of urban contexts that safeguard the dignity of man (cf. *Message to participants in the 21st Public Meeting of the Pontifical Academies*, 6 December 2016).

Following the thought of the ecclesial Magisterium, we can therefore almost formulate a theological discourse on cultural heritage, considering that it is part of the sacred liturgy, of evangelization and of the exercise of charity. In fact, they are in the first place among those “things” (*res*) that are (or were) instruments of worship, “holy signs” according to the expression of the theologian Romano Guardini (*The spirit of the liturgy*, 1930, 113-204), “*res ad sacrum cultum pertinentes*”, according to the definition of the conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (122). The common sense of the faithful perceives for the environments and objects destined for worship the permanence of a kind of imprint that does not end even after they have lost that role.

Furthermore, ecclesiastical cultural assets are witnesses to the faith of the community that has produced them over the centuries, and for this reason they are in their own way instruments of evangelization that accompany the usual tools of proclamation, preaching and catechesis. But their original eloquence can be preserved even when they are no longer used in the ordinary life of the people of God, especially through correct museum exhibition, which does not consider them only as documents of art history, but restores to them a new life, so that they can continue to carry out an ecclesial mission.

Finally, cultural assets are aimed at the charitable activities carried out by the ecclesial community. This is highlighted for example in the *Passio* of the Roman martyr Lawrence, where it is said that he “was ordered to deliver the treasures of the Church, showed the tyrant, making fun of him, the poor, whom he had nourished and dressed with the goods given in alms” (*Martyrologium Romanum*, editio altera, Typis Vaticanis 2004, 444). And sacred iconography has often interpreted this tradition by showing Saint Lawrence in the act of selling the precious items of worship and distributing the proceeds to the poor. This constitutes a constant ecclesial teaching which, while inculcating the duty of protection and conservation of the Church’s goods, and in particular of cultural heritage, declares that they do not have an absolute value, but in case of necessity they must serve the greater good of the human being and especially at the service of the poor.

Well, your Conference opportunely takes place in these days. The observation that many churches, which until a few years ago were necessary, are now no longer thus, due to a lack of faithful and clergy, or a different distribution of the population between cities and rural areas, should be welcomed in the Church not with anxiety, but as a sign of the times that invites us to reflection and requires us to adapt. It is what in a sense the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* affirms when, claiming the superiority of time over space, it declares that “giving priority to time means being concerned *about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces*. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return” (223).

This reflection, initiated a long time ago on the technical level in the academic and professional spheres, has already been addressed by some episcopates. The contribution of the present conference is certainly to make people perceive the breadth of the problems, but also to share virtuous experiences, thanks to the presence of the delegates from the Episcopal Conferences of Europe and some countries of North America and Oceania.

The conference will certainly give suggestions and indicate lines of action, but the concrete and ultimate choices

will be given to the bishops. I strongly recommend that every decision they make be the fruit of a concerned reflection conducted within the Christian community and in dialogue with the civil community. Decommissioning must not be first and only solution to be considered, nor must it be carried out with the scandal of the faithful. Should it become necessary, it should be inserted in the time of ordinary pastoral planning, be proceeded by adequate information, and be a shared decision, as far as possible.

In the first book of the Maccabees we read that, once Jerusalem had been liberated and the temple profaned by the pagans restored, the liberators, who had to decide the fate of the stones of the old demolished altar, preferred to set them aside “until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them” (4: 46). Even the building of a church or its new use are not operations that can be treated only in terms of their technical or economic profile, but which must be evaluated according to the spirit of prophecy: indeed, through these there is channelled the witness of the faith of the Church, who welcomes and values the presence of her Lord in history.

Wishing every success to the Conference, I heartily impart to you, dear brother, to the collaborators, speakers and all participants, my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 29 November 2018

Francis