

Valorisation of the cultural heritage created by the living of religious orders

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Abstract

This article explores the valorisation of the cultural heritage created by religious orders, focusing on the material and immaterial legacies preserved within these communities. It begins by highlighting the rich architectural, artistic, and liturgical heritage generated by religious orders over centuries, often intertwined with the unique spiritual and social values of the communities that produced them. The article underscores the importance of understanding how these religious assets - ranging from buildings and movable objects to archives and libraries - bear witness to the evolving religious practices and histories of monastic life. We propose to delve into the impact of the suppression of religious orders in the 19th and 20th centuries, which led to the fragmentation and dispersion of these invaluable resources. Despite challenges in tracking and preserving these elements, there should be renewed focus on their cultural valorisation through interdisciplinary research and modern technological tools. Special attention is given to the integration of archives, libraries, and museums, which can collectively enhance the historical narrative of religious communities. Additionally, the article examines the intersections of cultural heritage with gender, spirituality, and intercultural dialogue. It concludes by stressing the need for a comprehensive, collaborative approach to safeguard and reframe religious heritage as a vital cultural resource, contributing to both local and global historical understanding.

Keywords: religious heritage, cultural valorisation, monastic life

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Introduction

The undeniable value of the architectural, archival, liturgical and artistic heritage that religious communities have created and preserved is well known and recognised. Many religious families enjoy a set of cultural assets that unite past and present, local life and models from other cultures and sensitivities.

The stability of the place of the monasteries would imply a lasting permanence, a natural sedimentation, altered only by political regimes and their adversities. In some European countries, the suppression of religious orders in the 19th and 20th centuries significantly altered the configuration and disposition of a large part of a displaced, dispersed and mistreated heritage. Aware of the limits of these tribulations, I try to identify typical and unique elements of the cultural heritage of communities of consecrated life (Bartolomei, 2018).

The cultural assets of a religious house are the fruit of investment, donations, renovations, destruction and even theft. Sometimes it's difficult for historians to trace the path of isolated objects and know their itinerary. The historian knows how many ruptures, closures and transformations accompany the loss of sources and data. This is part of history itself. On the other hand, shared awareness allows us to find answers and help communities, while always respecting both the spirit within the principles of secularism and property.

The autonomy of each ecclesiastical body prevails over shared actions and heritage, when studied, is based on discontinuous and distorted surveys in terms of cataloguing criteria and analysis methods. Collaboration between institutes and the search for professionally trained staff to manage these assets is also now underway for the cultural heritage sector.

The current cultural valorisation of knowledge production is a priority and a real axis in local and university institutions. Today there is a fruitful dynamism in research and knowledge production. New paths are opening up through the intersection of competences and contacts. Investing more in the field of religious heritage will have the effect of renewing history of monasticism and religious congregations.

The awareness of the importance of collecting, conserving and exploring religious heritage is an essential sign and can lead to the multiplication of scientific projects, looking at heritage and the history of societies, as has been done around the history of the book, the book of piety and the liturgical book¹.

Everything should be inventoried according to the models of the museological, archival and bibliographic disciplines. The concentration of objects from multiple religious houses can facilitate conservation and collective enjoyment, without harming what is linked to local history. Care and dedication to objects, whether handcrafted or erudite, can raise awareness of new experiences of humanity and faith.

In this context, I've chosen just a few points: in the introductory paragraph I consider the valorisation of heritage as the discovery of spiritual vitality. Then I continue with the characterisation of different lines: valuing space through the development of the relationship between architecture and community lifestyles, learning about everyday life through movable heritage, valuing the visible memory of a charism through musealisation, the archive as an instrument of identity and fidelity to a charism, bibliographic material as a sign of wisdom, pastoral service and spiritual life. Finally, I address the appreciation of intercultural dialogue in the evangelising mission and the appreciation of the female gender heritage.

¹ See the national research projects coordinated by the Historian of Art Catarina Fernandes Barreira on the liturgical books of Alcobaça and Lórvão: "Cistercian Horizons. Studying and characterizing a medieval *scriptorium* and its production: Alcobaça. Local identities and liturgical uniformity in dialogue" (PTDC/ART-HIS/29522/2017), concluded in September 2022; and the project "Books, Rituals and Space in a Cistercian Nunnery. Living, Praying and Reading in Lórvão, 13th – 16th Centuries" (PTDC/ART-HIS/0739/2020). More information in <https://iem.fcsh.unl.pt/en/projects/>.

1. Valuing heritage means discovering spiritual vitality

Cultural heritage bears witness to the spirituality of each institute or society of apostolic life. Self-understanding and reinterpretation of this heritage must participate in inner and spiritual vitality. The charism is the true heritage to be safeguarded.

In religious communities, it is the intangible heritage that illuminates the material. There is a set of traditions (liturgical, ritual, recreational) capable of stratifying values and meanings on objects, as well as improving them and creating new ones. The cultural heritage bears witness to the inner vitality, liturgical, spiritual and devotional experience of apostolic institutes and societies. The artistic and documentary expressions of this spiritual experience are evident. Reading them must be accompanied by a knowledge of the charism that radiates itself in the visible forms of culture and art, nourished by an intense spirituality. The life of each community, in substantial fidelity to the original project, knew how to adapt to the grammar of the different times and the different geographies in which it was located, both in urban centres and in the enclosed solitude of rural or mountainous areas (Volzone & Fontes, 2020; Volzone, Fontes & Carapinha, 2023)².

Religious men and women have left social environments that influence their surroundings and behaviour. Depending on the era, contemplation and apostolic life determine particular physiognomies and change according to the spiritual influences received.

The renunciation of the mundane spirit and detachment from possessions, symbolised in the cloister as rupture, is expressed in the simplicity of the furniture and utensils and the rusticity of the clothes and fabrics. The exceptions are furniture and liturgical instruments that can be valuable, such as altarpieces, frescoes and images. Especially after Trent, the splendour of worship contaminated all the churches, through imitation and sometimes competition, especially in urban areas. The celebrations featured exquisite vestments and jewellery, especially precious reliquaries. The entry into the orders of people from high society (nobility or bourgeoisie) brought goods of artistic quality and supportive families offered valuable paintings and furniture as a token of gratitude.

2. The relationship between architecture and community lifestyle

Buildings, i.e. monasteries, convents or houses, should be considered elements that bear witness to ways of life and lifestyles on a landscape scale, interpreting charism and rule through space. They are often important assets in the landscape, both in scale and in historical and cultural representation. From a social point of view, these communities are, in most cases, at the centre of entrenched relationships, which make monasteries or convents points of condensation and drivers of territorial belonging. It is not uncommon for uncertain and opaque management or the disposal of assets to provoke a reaction from the local community, given the popular affection and relationship established with the sites³. The preventive involvement of communities in the decisions to be taken is very appropriate. Relationships with civil, local and state organisations sometimes become a fundamental means for the sustainability of a project. Daily life is guided by the liturgical rite and reinforces belonging to the monastery as a particular cosmos. Time is perceived there as a preparation for eternity and a permanent dialogue with the specific geographical location, giving shape to concrete objects and spaces.

The enclosures of communities of consecrated life constitute and preserve symbolic apparatuses that are stratified and plural, but extremely unitary and convergent. The dispersion of this symphony of elements seriously compromises the symbolic discourse, to the point of making it unrecognisable or reduced to fragments incapable of sustaining a unitary narrative.

² These articles are directly connected to the PhD thesis of Volzone (2020). In addition, four international conferences bearing the same title were organised by Rolando Volzone and Professor João Luís Fontes in 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2023. The outcomes have been compiled in two international publications (Volzone, Fontes & Martins, 2022; Volzone & Fontes, 2022), available at: <https://doi.org/10.34632/9789895328741>; <https://doi.org/10.34619/wsvj-jfis>.

³ During the 4th International Conference "Architectures of the Soul. RELIGIOUS HERITAGE: understanding the past, shaping the future", 19th-21st of October 2023 in Batalha Monastery, Sara Vermeulen and Kristof Lataire (Visit Flanders & Flanders Heritage Agency, Belgium) discussed how the future of religious heritage can be shaped starting from the spirit of place, looking at the case of Flanders, and posing questions like: Who is this place? What stories live here?.

In fact, many Orders had their own aesthetic canon. Thus, from the outset, Cistercian aesthetics sought absolute poverty, without displaying richness. In 1124, Bernard wrote an apology to William, a strong criticism of what he considered the excesses of the Cluny order (Bernardo de Claraval, 1997). In this letter, Bernard harshly criticised the sculpture, painting, ornaments and excessive size of the Cluniac churches. The Cistercians initially showed loyalty to this vision. A standard plan was applied to the construction of all the new monasteries. Thus, the church was orientated east-west with the transept facing east; the cloister was next to the church; the east wing of the cloister was dedicated to the monks' quarters, with the chapter house and the dormitory (accessed by two staircases, one leading inside the church and the other to the cloister) on the ground floor; in the wing of the cloister in front of the church were the refectory and kitchen; in the west wing (usually with independent access from the cloister), a ground floor building for converts and warehouses, with independent access from the back of the church (Teixeira, 2007).

The Poor Clares have also been the subject of specific studies to identify their architectural canon (Silva, 2009; Gomes, 2013). The Jesuits have favoured the same with churches and houses organised in the same way all over the world (Levy, 2017). The decorative and iconographic programme of a Franciscan, Carmelite, Dominican or Augustinian monastery or convent also reveals its specificities.

A particular contribution is made by hospitals, such as those of the Order of St John of God, which preserve materials for the history of medicine (Borges, 2009).

3. The need for a transversal, integral and digital approach to heritage

The best valorisation projects are those that integrate archives, libraries and museums into the convent's original spaces. The interaction between library, archive and museum manages to offer the community's history a realistic picture of truth, combining essential complementary information with a full knowledge of the community's evolution. This systemic co-operation will offer the church and society the virtuality of the cultural ecosystems that existed in the past and are perhaps still alive.

The digital methodology is applied to the integration of different cultural heritage⁴. (The digital description becomes a quick and effective aid in various ongoing projects. The online opening of material considered suitable is a service for sharing goods of evangelical value. In this way, meaning and a future are guaranteed for religious heritage. The use of new technologies promotes full accessibility to collections and allows for diversification in the way heritage is used.

Today, new strategies of cooperation with local authorities are opening up with the creation of systems of valorisation, with transmedia methods, for the benefit not only of tourism linked to cultural heritage, but also as a naturalistic, experiential and cultural attraction. Religious orders have a unique opportunity here, because they combine the landscape dimension with the experience and integration of tangible and intangible heritage. Cultural complexity involves the history of art, the history of crafts, the history of food, the history of spirituality, philosophy and theology.

Now I am dividing up the areas, just for the obvious advantage of respecting the methodology of each sector: movable heritage, museum, archive and library.

3.1 Understanding everyday life through mobile heritage

Cultural history's interest in everyday life finds in the knowledge of movable heritage a very interesting source to be valorized. The definition of the movable heritage of religious communities organises the researcher's reflective work in the context of the study of monastic or regular events. Characterising the types of objects preserved in religious communities demonstrates the variety

⁴ The interdisciplinary team of the international project "Franciscan Landscapes: the Observance between Italy, Portugal and Spain (F-ATLAS)" developed a digital methodology of documentation and knowledge for the conservation, protection, reuse, and promotion of religious heritage. The project has been funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, within the JPI Cultural Heritage project (agreement n° 6995237). More information are available at: <https://www.f-atlas.eu/>

and uniqueness of community life. In fact, movable heritage includes not only that strictly linked to worship (altars, liturgical vessels, liturgical vestments), but also liturgical books and reliquaries, organs and harmoniums, confessionals, chairs, sideboards, as well as images, paintings, tapestries. This legacy extends to musical instruments, clothing, everyday objects, pharmacies, agriculture, cookery, embroidery, especially in the women's convents.

The utilitarian furniture (bed, table, chair, kneeler, paintings, devotionals, images, crucifixes, sinks) may have little heritage value, but they illustrate the composition of a cell and how the vow of poverty was respected. The same can be said of the common places in the life of the religious house: chapter house, common room, refectory, with their furniture and objects. For those who live in these places, they have a particularly significant symbolic status.

Photographs are an element to be valued today and in the future. They record works and facts that are fundamental to knowing record works of art and essential data about a religious house. The photographic or video record of the elements of a house, before it is alienated or abandons its primary purpose, allows for a reconstruction that is closer to reality.

Part of this heritage, combined with everyday life, are religious customs, festivals, music and everything that today constitutes intangible heritage.

Moments of particular care and investment were the beatifications and canonisations of the founders. There, ephemeral or permanent external devices, rich jewels were legitimised. What happened at the canonisation of St Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier, of St Teresa of Avila, of St Philip Neri in 1622, 400 years ago, has since followed⁵. The feasts of the founding saints are repeated every year as manifestations of honour that produce new artistic goods. Many of the saints' personal objects take on the status of relics and allow us to discover elements of their common life. The material supports of the piety are fundamental to its dissemination. The originality of the piety is recognised more by engravings and simple but multiplied objects than by the richness of the heritage.

3.2 Valuing the visible memory of a charism in museums

The most common way of valorising movable cultural heritage is through the museum. Today's museology has evolved greatly. It allows cultural heritage to become a visible reserve and memory of charisms, placed at the service of society. For some monasteries, abbeys, convents, or religious houses, a lasting historical presentation of the building or the congregation's life could be considered. On the other hand, temporary exhibitions can explore these heritage collections and bring them back to life. Today, virtual exhibitions and virtual tours are also being developed (Allal-Chérif, 2022).

We know that the art object of a religious community, out of context, is like a Greek vase in a shop window or in an antique shop. The traceability is at the centre of the future conservation of this heritage.

On the one hand, the increase in the symbolic illiteracy of religion makes many works of Christian art incomprehensible and, on the other, the process of cultural and social pluralism, with users from other faiths and religions, requires work that guarantees conceptual accessibility for visitors to a museum and exhibition (ACRI, 2021).

Another form of valorisation will be through protocols with civic museums, conservation and restoration services, the academic world, cultural societies or foundations. Inter-institutional dialogue with various public and private bodies will feed a cultural project. The museum thus becomes a space for dialogue between the religious order and society on an artistic, historical and spiritual level.

Virtual exhibitions have great potential as an exhibition model with broad support. They can open up informational horizons due to their hybrid, chronological, historiographical and iconographic nature.

⁵ The project "Reliquarium", currently underway at the São Roque Museum, seeks to examine relics in all their manifestations. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, it transcends the physical aspects to include intangible elements: devotions, memories, affections, among others. The exhibition catalog is available at: <https://lojadacultura.scm.l.pt/products/reliquias-o-projeto-reliquarium/>.

3.3 The archive as an instrument of identity and fidelity to a charism

Archival material documents history and provides the thread that allows us to follow the concrete life of communities and the religious family, their growth and crisis, geographical expansion and contraction, due to internal or external factors (Loparco, 2001). These documentary collections, whether housed in state archives, private repositories, or within the communities themselves, provide the basis for multiple analyses, from palaeography to statistics, from sociology to economics, from demography to communication sciences. The typology of the documents is diverse: from professional records to registry books, from chapter minutes to chronicles of the various houses, from accounting records to property inventories, from identity cards to detailed and specific sacramental practices. The archives shed light on the history not only of the institution, but also of the art objects and the place where it is located.

The return to the origins, desired by the Second Vatican Council, has consequences for revisiting archives and sources, especially those of the founders and initial communities, as paradigms for getting to know the specificity of the apostolate and spirituality. Scientific biographies, editions of spiritual writings, collections of letters, serve to arrive at a pedagogical vision of the models and discover how to correctly interpret and verify the inculturation of the charism⁶. The attention paid to sources and their scientific editing has led to the publication of studies. These works lead to the correction of outdated hagiographic models and to a critical awareness of one's own history (Sobral, 2007)⁷

The future of the archival heritage of some religious communities is in danger. The artistic heritage of religious orders remains difficult to trace, identify and reconstruct. Archives, on the other hand, bear the marks of the place, of the congregation they come from, even if these goods are found in the attic or at the book market. Both the donation of objects of worship for a feast or celebration, for reasons of different devotions, and the making of vestments and ornaments are frequently evoked in archival sources, in the annals of religious families, from the 17th to the 20th century.

Only archives, sometimes combined with local tradition, make it possible to fill in gaps in information about objects of art, altarpieces and furniture that were lost due to revolutionary acts, the removal of a religious house or being handed over to a regional or national museum or neighbouring church.

In the case of the closing of the houses of religious communities, the archives have a clear symbolic weight. They are transported to other funds, if the congregation has a confederal concentration, or deposited in diocesan or even public archives to ensure their preservation.

3.4 Libraries, a sign of wisdom, pastoral service and spiritual life

The book material reflects in depth the religious and cultural service of religious families (Campos, 2014; Giurgevich & Leitão, 2016)⁸. They range from medieval codices to the most recent printed publications, from school notes to collections of letters, from manuscript volumes to profound

6 The collections that, in the context of the Second Vatican Council, initiated the systematic study and edition of these works are well known, such as "Sources Chrétiennes" or the "Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos". In the Portuguese case, alongside some initiatives that ultimately did not have a continuity – such as the "Philokalia collection", centered on ancient Christian texts – the editions of sources, whether normative or related to spirituality, have been more scattered, being mainly linked to university research centers. It is important to highlight the "Bibliography of Ancient Galician and Portuguese Texts" (BITAGAP database) – which gathers all texts originally composed in Galician-Portuguese, Portuguese, and Galician, or translated into these languages during the medieval period, and in which many texts of spirituality related to the Portuguese Medieval Age and their respective editions can be catalogued (https://philobiblon.upf.edu/html/bitagap_en.html). Also noteworthy are the works associated with the Center for the History of Spirituality at the University of Porto, which is highly dedicated to the edition and study of medieval and modern spirituality texts under the coordination of José Adriano Freitas de Carvalho.

7 It is important to highlight the "Corpus de textos antigos em português até 1525" project, coordinated by Cristina Sobral, which provides a considerable collection of editions of hagiographical and medieval spirituality texts (available at <http://teitok.clul.ul.pt/cta/>). Such editions, as well as the systematic use of archival sources, have allowed for a renewal in the history of religious orders and their communities in Portugal. For an update on this subject, see Sousa (2016).

8 Fortunately, we have, at least for Portugal, an extraordinary working tool *Clavis Bibliothecarum* (Giurgevich & Leitão, 2016). It has managed to collect around 1,000 inventories and catalogues that materialise the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the communities, even though they were removed, neglected and redistributed or destroyed in 1834.

reflections in the various fields of theological and scientific research, from architectural drawings and projects to scores of music composed for instruments, large choirs or a popular audience. It is a meticulous and secular work that elaborates human science, transforming it into wisdom about the things of God, into a profession of faith illustrated by intellectual speculation and sung by sacred music. The study of libraries and ancient books offers valuable support to research, especially when approached in a systematic and comprehensive manner for religious orders. As the existing work for Portugal states: 'The libraries of the congregations served very different purposes. They were centres of spirituality and religious life, but also centres for the accumulation and conservation of ancient knowledge and great repositories of knowledge from all eras.' For example, a congregation dedicated to education finds in study manuals a tool for learning about educational developments at different levels.

Furniture and books, especially the old ones with a more obvious market value, are subject to dispersal and constitute a loss for the historian when they are not identified by their origin. The historian needs to know the origin of the heritage in order to establish parallels, approximations and link the archives to the heritage. Aware of the importance of transmitting knowledge, the historian can propose solutions, even if these have to be reconciled with human and material availability.

4. Valuing intercultural dialogue in the mission of evangelisation

The commitment to the mission of evangelisation has led religious communities into dialogue with diverse cultures and has proven capable of reconfiguring expressions and adapting to the local contexts in which they have settled. In terms of heritage, one can think of the consequences of being present in mission lands abroad: objects from mission countries enter the communities' private collections. This has a profound influence on the historian. The current cultural trend sometimes considers the encounter between the evangelising missionaries and the people of the mission lands as colonisation, instead developing the peaceful and constructive encounter that in many cases took place between different cultures.

The houses of religious men and women have collected countless testimonies of faith lived in an intercultural dimension. This heritage has sometimes been systematised and placed in museums, broadening visitors' horizons and making them aware of how a diversity of expressions arises from a single faith.

Cultural heritage can be a driving force behind diplomacy and the promotion of inter-religious dialogue in a pluralistic society.

5. The valorisation of women's gender heritage

In recent decades, the search for elements to understand the female gender has gained ground. Women's contemplative communities take on a particular characteristic because they create a legacy of the female gender. Textile art is a case in point. Female religiosity finds a fundamental element of study, a precious source, in objects and spaces, in the material and immaterial culture of communities. The communities' archives and libraries preserve studied texts, spiritual writings, devotional books written down by women, as scores for liturgical songs were gradually prepared for women's voices. Ex-votos made from current materials are multiplying in women's houses. They demonstrate the role of convents as a centre of urban devotion. The nuns devoted themselves to sewing, embroidery and cookery.

6. Conclusions

Without knowing this legacy, we cannot delve into the life of the institutes, read in the global context of the history of the Church. The link between the history of objects and people and the life of monasteries and convents will be an essential database. The ideas are clear, what is lacking is the political will to define objectives and means, to mobilise interest and evaluate the success of the decisions taken.

The international conference “Architectures of the Soul” had another valuable contribution to the re-appropriation of memory, identifying the cultural expressions of the founding charisms and promoting a project to valorise heritage, through a testimonial approach. Museography, along with archival and bibliographic conservation, is not shrouded in mystery; rather, it serves to make the spiritual and ecclesial experiences that testify to creative humanity more visible.

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