

Cultural Heritage in Catholic Church

Subjects: Art

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The 2003 UNESCO Convention definition of intangible heritage also covers religious practices and rites. Catholic religious traditions constitute a significant part of the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of religious provenance.

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1. The Tangible Heritage of the Catholic Church

With regard to the Church's tangible heritage, a high degree of cooperation between the Holy See and UNESCO has been established. Significantly, the initiative for the Holy See to join the signatories of the World Heritage Convention by UNESCO came from the latter organisation. At the 21st session of the General Conference of UNESCO in Belgrade in 1980, the Intergovernmental Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage considered it "desirable that the Vatican City be protected under the World Heritage Convention and therefore recommended that, in conformity to the article 31 thereof, an invitation to accede to the Convention be addressed by the General Conference of UNESCO to the Holy See" ([UNESCO General Conference 1980](#)). The inscription of the Vatican City, in recognition of its role as a witness to a history of two millennia and to a formidable spiritual venture, on the UNESCO World Heritage List was made during the eighth session of the World Heritage Committee in Buenos Aires, 29 October–2 November 1984 ([UNESCO World Heritage Committee 1984](#)). In 1990, the Holy See and Italy jointly and successfully applied for an extension of the Historic Centre of Rome site on the World Heritage List. Following the World Heritage Committee's recommendation expressed as early as 1980 for the Historic Centre of Rome to be inscribed on the List, the World Heritage List of properties has since started to include the Properties of the Holy See in that City Enjoying Extraterritorial Rights and San Paolo Fuori le Mura ([UNESCO World Heritage Committee 1990](#)).

Following the inscription of the Vatican City on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the Church began to devote more space in her documents to the need to protect this heritage, recognizing the great pastoral potential of Christian art and architecture ([von Bühren 2008](#)), as well as their role in carrying out the work of evangelization ([Pontifical Commission for the Conservation of the Artistic and Historical Patrimony of the Church 1992](#)). Church documents relating to cultural heritage and its protection definitely focus on material, i.e., tangible, heritage. The Pontifical Commission for Preserving the Patrimony of Art and History was established under the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* within the Congregation for Clergy in 1988. The Commission absorbed and took over the tasks of other previously existing organisations, such as the Central Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Italy, established by Pius XI in 1924, and the Pontifical Commission for Church Archives in Italy, established by Pius XII in 1954 ([Settis n.d.](#)). It had the task of acting as a curator of the artistic and historical patrimony of the whole Church, with this patrimony including 'in the first place, all works of every kind of art of the past, works that must be kept and preserved with the greatest care' (Art. 100). In particular, documents and materials (Art. 101) and movable objects (Art. 175) are to be kept, if necessary, in museums, archives, and libraries (Art. 102). The Constitution directed the Commission to work closely with the Congregation for Seminaries and Educational Institutions and the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in order "to make the people of God more and more aware of the need and importance of conserving the artistic and historical patrimony of the Church" (Art. 103) ([John Paul II 1988a](#)).

Subsequent documents have emphasized the need for bishops and priests to make "a renewed effort" "regarding the conservation of these goods and their cultural and pastoral valorisation, and an awareness of their role in the work of evangelization, the liturgy, and the deepening of the faith" ([Pontifical Commission for the Conservation of the Artistic and Historical Patrimony of the Church 1992](#)). When, in his Apostolic Letter *Inde a pontificatus* on 25 March 1993, Pope John Paul II renamed the aforementioned commission the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church, he also included material objects among this heritage: "works of art, historical documents, books and everything kept in museums, libraries and archives" ([John Paul II 1993](#)). The Commission, in its 1994 letter to religious families, defined the scope of heritage to be protected as follows: "from majestic cathedrals to smaller objects; from the marvellous works of art

of the great masters to the smaller expressions of the poorer arts; from the most penetrating literary works to the apparently arid financial registers which follow step by step the life of the people of God” ([Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church 1994b](#)). “Books and parchments” as well as the role of libraries were specifically mentioned in the Commission’s letter about the ecclesiastical libraries, drawing upon the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council from 7 December 1965, n. 58 ([Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church 1994a](#)). In his address to the participants at the First Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church in 1995, Pope John Paul II defined cultural goods as “first of all the patrimony of painting, sculpture, architecture, mosaics and music, put at the service of the mission of the Church [...], the wealth of books contained in ecclesiastical libraries and the historical documents preserved in the archives of the ecclesial communities [as well as] the literary, theatrical and cinematographic works produced by the mass media” ([John Paul II 1995](#)). In 2000, the Pope drew attention to the importance and need for local churches to make appropriate use of their own cultural heritage ([John Paul II 2000](#)).

The Commission’s circular letter *The Pastoral Function of Ecclesiastical Museums* ([Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church 2001](#)) mentioned “the cultural treasures of the Church” and “cultural goods [as] an expression of historical memory”, i.e., “works of different generations [whose] artistic value reveals the creative capacity of artists, craftsmen and local guild traditions that have been able to imprint on what is visible their religious experience and the devotion of the Christian community”. The importance of handing down the Church’s own patrimony of cultural goods was emphasized therein ([Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church 2001](#)). The document pays attention to the valorisation of objects that have been withdrawn from use, for example as a result of liturgical reform (1.1): “In the cultural patrimony of the Church, we find the immense art-historical patrimony disseminated around the world. It owes its identity to the use by the Church it was created for and this end should not be forgotten. For this reason, the Church needs to work on strategies designed to appreciate and present the art-historical patrimony in all its richness. Even when pieces have fallen into disuse, for example, because of liturgical reform, or because they are too old to be used, the pieces should be placed among the goods in use in order to show the interest of the Church in expressing in a variety of styles her catechesis, worship, culture and charity” ([Pontifical Commission for the Conservation of the Artistic and Historical Patrimony of the Church 1992](#)).

In 2002, Pope John Paul II stressed the necessity of an “effective collaboration with administrations and civil institutions in order to create together, each according to his/her own competence, effective working synergies to defend and safeguard the universal artistic heritage” ([John Paul II 2002](#)).

The years covering the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI and the pontificate of Pope Francis to date have not been rich in documents on the Church’s cultural heritage. In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI, by his Apostolic Letter *Pulchritudinis fidei*, closed the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, transferring its tasks and activities to the Pontifical Commission for Culture, due to the convergence of the roles of the two bodies ([Benedict XVI 2012](#)). However, a statement by Pope Francis on the occasion of a conference on the sad issue of decommissioning places of worship should be quoted. The Pope noted that cultural heritage is “part of the sacred liturgy, of evangelization and of the exercise of charity. In fact, [it is] 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 \(1930\)](#), ‘*res ad sacrum cultum pertinentes*’, according to the definition of the conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (122)” ([Francis 2018](#)). Noting further that “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,” the Pope has thereby encouraged the formulation of a theological discourse on cultural heritage ([Francis 2018](#)).

2. The Intangible Heritage of the Catholic Church

While many official documents of the Catholic Church note the importance of the preservation of the Church’s cultural heritage, these tend to focus on tangible heritage—buildings, liturgical items, and documents. Nevertheless, they underline principles that can be extended to intangible heritage, and also draw attention to a problem created by the Church’s liturgical reform, carried out mostly in the 1960s and early 1970s, which rendered many hitherto familiar cultural artefacts redundant, or largely so, including the Church’s patrimony of liturgical music, and the cultural artifact of the Traditional Latin Mass (TLM) itself.

One apparently firm regulation of the cultural heritage represented by liturgical rites can be found in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated by Paul VI on 4 December 1963. Article 4 of the Constitution stated: “In faithful obedience to tradition, the sacred Council declares that holy Mother

Church holds all lawfully acknowledged rites to be of equal right and dignity; that she wishes to preserve them in the future and to foster them in every way.” Article 36 (1) of the Constitution stipulated that “the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites”, apart from the exceptions laid down by particular laws. Furthermore, Article 114 of the Constitution provided that “[t]he treasure of sacred music is to be preserved and fostered with great care” and urged bishops and other pastors to take care of the musical education of the faithful so that they can actively participate in liturgical singing. Finally, the Constitution (Art. 129) directed that care be taken to educate clerics in the history and development of ecclesiastical art, so that “they will be able to appreciate and preserve the Church’s venerable monuments, and be in a position to aid, by good advice, artists who are engaged in producing works of art” (Sacrosanctum Concilium 1963).

The circular letter regarding the cultural and pastoral training of future priests in their upcoming responsibilities concerning the artistic and historic heritage of the Church stressed the perennial tradition of the Church to “perceive the promotion, the custody, and the valorisation of the highest expressions of the human spirit in the artistic and historic fields as an integral part of her ministry”, adding that “this constant attention of the Church has enriched humanity with an immense treasure of testimonials of human ingenuity and its adhesion to the faith. This constitutes a conspicuous part of the cultural patrimony of humanity” (Pontifical Commission for the Conservation of the Artistic and Historical Patrimony of the Church 1992).

In 1997, at the Second Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, Pope John Paul II stressed that the work of this Commission was to culturally and pastorally animate ecclesial communities, valuing the *many forms of expression* that the Church has produced and continues to produce at the service of the new evangelisation of peoples. The Pope pointed out that “it is about preserving the memory of the past and *protecting the visible monuments of the spirit* through meticulous and continuous work of cataloguing, conservation, restoration, care and *defence* (our emphases)” (John Paul II 1997). The 1997 circular letter on the pastoral function of church archives, although focusing on the documentary heritage, contains important formulations on the importance of the pastoral transmission of “historical memory constitut[ing] an integral part of the life of every community” (1.3) (Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church 1997). The transmission of this memory and its preservation belong primarily to the sphere of the protection of ICH.

In 1999, a circular letter on the urgent need to inventurise and catalogue the Church’s cultural assets was issued. Including works of architecture, painting, sculpture, as well as furniture, furnishings, liturgical vestments, musical instruments, etc., in the heritage, the document stated that “[t]he uninterrupted cultural and ecclesial function that characterises these goods is the best support for their preservation. It is enough to think how difficult and costly it becomes for the community to maintain structures that have lost their original purpose and how complex the choices to identify new ones are” (Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Patrimony of the Church 1999). The letter further called for ‘contextualised conservation’, which can only be understood as the possibility of experiencing tangible cultural heritage in its original intangible context. The words of John Paul II’s address to the members of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church can be read in a similar vein. The Pope noted that “worship has always found a natural ally in art, because monuments of sacred art have a catechetical and cultic significance in addition to their intrinsic aesthetic value. It is therefore necessary to make the most of them, taking into account their liturgical ‘habitat,’ combining respect for history with attention to the current needs of the Christian community and ensuring that the artistic-historical patrimony at the service of the liturgy loses nothing of its eloquence” (5) (John Paul II 2000). He also stressed the need to further nurture the legal protection of this heritage among the various ecclesiastical institutions and civil authorities, in a spirit of cooperation with the various state authorities, while appreciating the help of associations that protect, preserve, and enrich cultural assets, as well as voluntary groups (6) (John Paul II 2000).

In 2002, Pope John Paul II, when addressing the members of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, also mentioned sacred music and theatre among a “storehouse of historical-artistic articles.” The Pope stressed the need to secure the legal protection of this heritage “through appropriate guidelines which take into account the religious, social, and cultural needs of the local populations” (John Paul II 2002).

The highest manifestation of concern for the protection of the TLM in Church documents in recent decades was the 2007 Apostolic Letter by Pope Benedict XVI, mentioned in the introduction. Although the notion of “heritage” or “cultural goods” is not mentioned, the Holy Father, citing the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (3rd ed., 2002, p. 397), emphasises the importance of an unbroken tradition in transmitting the faith in its integrity, in accordance with the ecclesiastical rule stating that the law of prayer (*lex orandi*) corresponds to its law of faith (*lex credendi*). Noting that “it enriched (...) the culture of numerous peoples”, and invoking the authority of St Gregory the Great, who ordered the codification and

preservation of the liturgy of the Mass, Pope Benedict created the conditions for the nurturing of this 'treasure of worship' and for making it more widely available to priests and the faithful ([Benedict XVI 2007a](#)).

Two years later, Pope Benedict applied the same logic to the liturgical heritage of Anglicans who wished to be reconciled to the Holy See. In the Apostolic Constitution *Anglicanorum Coetibus* ([Benedict XVI 2009](#)) III, he made the provision "to maintain the liturgical, spiritual and pastoral traditions of the Anglican Communion within the Catholic Church, as a precious gift nourishing the faith of the members of the Ordinariate and as a treasure to be shared" ([Benedict XVI 2009](#)). This led to the authorisation of a special liturgical form which incorporated elements of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*.

The Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate evangelium* promulgated by Pope Francis on 19 March 2022 put an end to the existence of the Pontifical Commission of Culture. Instead, its functions, and those of the Congregation for Catholic Education, are merged in a new Dicastery for Culture and Education. The Culture Section within the newly created Dicastery has, among other things, the task of 'enhancement of cultural heritage' (Art. 153 § 2). It "offers its assistance and cooperation so that diocesan/eparchial Bishops, Episcopal Conferences and the hierarchical structures of the Eastern Churches may protect and preserve their historical patrimony, particularly documents and juridical instruments concerning and attesting to the life and pastoral care of ecclesial entities, as well as their artistic and cultural heritage. These should be kept with the utmost care in archives, libraries and museums, churches and other buildings in order that they be available to all interested parties" (Art. 155). It "seeks to ensure that diocesan/eparchial Bishops, Episcopal Conferences and the hierarchical structures of the Eastern Churches enhance and *protect local cultures with their patrimony of wisdom and spirituality as a resource for the whole human family*" (Art 155 § 2). Finally, "in consultation with the Secretariat of State, it shows an interest in and follows the action programmes undertaken by States and international institutions aimed at the promotion of culture and the enhancement of cultural patrimony. It participates in these areas, as opportunity allows, in international forums and specialized conferences, and it promotes or supports congresses" (Art 157, § 2; our emphases) ([Francis 2022b](#)).

References to the Church's patrimony of music in the documents mentioned above illustrate a particular problem with the proposed programme for the preservation of cultural heritage. One could think of the preservation of music in terms of printed scores, to be kept in archives, whether physical or electronic, but such preservation fails to respect the place music has in cultural life. To be preserved, music must really be performed. The preservation of the Church's music in this sense, as an integral part of liturgical celebrations, was stressed in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* nn. 54 and 126.

Despite this, the reformed liturgy is only rarely accompanied either by the Gregorian Chant, the most characteristic form of traditional liturgical music, and still less by the sacred polyphony which has been composed over many centuries up to the present. This reality was apparent very quickly and Pope Paul VI urged the preservation of traditional forms of music in their liturgical setting in a series of documents: his Apostolic Letter *Sacrificium laudis* ([Paul VI 1966](#)), the Instruction *Musicam Sacram* ([Paul VI 1967](#)), an Address to the Italian St Cecilia Association ([Paul VI 1968](#)), and a Letter addressed to bishops, *Voluntati obsequens* (Sacred [Congregation for Divine Worship 1974](#)).

These documents, however, were apparently in vain. The reformed liturgy was felt to demand a different kind of music, simple enough for performance without preparation by untrained Mass-goers, and modern in feel. Echoes of this view, indeed, can be found in official documents. Pope Paul himself had admitted that Gregorian chant would be lost at least to a large extent in a General Audience Address in 1969, in which he admitted "We will lose a great part of that stupendous and incomparable artistic and spiritual thing, the Gregorian chant" ([Paul VI 1969](#)). Later, the Congregation for Divine Worship issued an instruction which, apparently conceding the point that the Church's great patrimony of music was unsuitable for liturgical use, made a provision for it to be performed in concerts ([Congregation for Divine Worship 1986](#)).

Traditional Catholic Liturgical Music, not the least of the artistic treasures created by the Catholic Church over the centuries, in this way illustrates a two-fold problem. First, its preservation implies an 'intangible' element: it is not enough for some record of it to exist, but it must be part of a cultural practice of performance. Second, because of the specific nature of the cultural context for which it was created, performance in a secularised setting is far from the ideal way to preserve it: this preserves only part of the intangible cultural practice which it represents.

The preservation of Catholic sacred music therefore can only be fully achieved in the context of the continuing celebration of the ancient liturgy for which it was composed. The same, in fact, can be said, not only of the liturgical items no longer in use, noted in passing above, but of the great places of worship which, like liturgical music, were designed and built with the ancient liturgy in mind. This point was made by no less a cultural commentator than Marcel Proust, who, writing in

1904, argued that France's cathedrals would be 'dead' if the liturgy for which they were designed were no longer celebrated in them: they would be "mere museum pieces and icy museums themselves" (Proust 2021). The preservation of intangible elements of Catholic culture is, in this way, necessary to the preservation even of what seems most tangible of all: large architectural monuments.

The foregoing review of Church documents from the last 50 years on the preservation of ecclesial heritage has demonstrated that, with the few exceptions just noted, almost no mention is made of the concept of tradition or other expressions of ICH. The concept of Sacred Tradition as something demanding respect has largely fallen into oblivion, and has ceased to provide an umbrella of protection for all the richness of the intangible heritage of the Catholic Church. In practice, it is observed that the Holy See is acting in flagrant contradiction to the principles of heritage protection: not only is it not promoting it as something valuable to the Catholic Church's own cultural identity, but by restricting the opportunities for the celebration of the TLM (Pope Francis 2021), it is deliberately suppressing attempts by the members of the faithful and clergy attached to it to experience it as a living heritage.

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