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Religious Heritage: Sharing and Integrating Values, Fruition, Resources, Responsibilities

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Abstract Religious heritage has a distinctive nature and presents more intrinsic critical factors than any other category of heritage. It is our continent's biggest (living) heritage, subject to a range of converging interests and extended uses, other than just devotional. An ever increasing demand for access by new stakeholders, and the lack of financial, human and technical resources, raise unprecedented challenges for this, shared space. This article sheds some light on several, mutually intertwined issues that affect management and governance of religious sites and then investigates the case of Chorus to see how preservation and enhancement of historical religious sites can benefit from a sharing-and-integration approach.

Keywords Religious heritage. Management and governance. Sharing and integration. Chorus.

1 Religious Heritage: Difficulties, Opportunities, and Challenges

A new awareness-raising process on the importance of safeguarding one country's religious heritage is being recorded worldwide. Sacred sites are attracting growing attention from scholars, policymakers and local communities, who see them more and more as a *common heritage*, hence the need to preserve their integrity and authenticity. Religious heritage is our continent's biggest living historical, architectural and social heritage. Across Europe there are over 500,000 churches, synagogues, temples and mosques.[1] In November 2010 UNESCO finally recognized the distinctive nature of religious World Heritage properties within the framework of the

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WHC both for being *living heritage* and having *a continuing nature*. Therefore, UNESCO does encourage new forms of dialogue between old and new stakeholders and new forms of action on the purpose of safeguarding religious heritage of outstanding universal value for future generations.[2]

Yet, only in June 2015 did the EP acknowledge religious heritage (sites, practices and objects linked to religious faiths) to be an opportunity and a challenge in the development of a true *democratic and participative narrative* for European heritage. This recognition is clearly highlighted in *Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe*, a report by the Committee on Culture and Education:[3] regardless of its religious origins, religious heritage should not be disregarded or discriminated in a discourse of European CH, but preserved for its cultural value and as an intangible part of Europe's CH.

About 20% of the *cultural properties* inscribed on the World HL have a religious or spiritual nature and are labelled as *religious properties*.[4] They belong to different traditions and beliefs, but are about 50% of Christian affiliation and located in the northern hemisphere (Shackley 2001). The largest single category on the list, it is claimed to have distinctive characteristics and to present more intrinsic critical factors than other forms of heritage, since it is a *living heritage* (ICCROM 2005).[5]

Ever since the '70s the Italian Church Authorities, namely the CEI and the Pontifical Commission for the CH (now Pontifical Council for Culture), have been addressing repeated exhortations in terms of religious heritage such as: the acknowledgement of a range of diverse converging interests (liturgical, devotional, cultural, juridical, touristic, technical);[6] the need to

1 See: FRH-Future for Religious Heritage – letter published by *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/29/religious-buildings-are-part-of-europes-heritage-they-should-be-part-of-its-future (2017-12-15).

2 Kyiv Statement, 5 November 2010. Available at http://whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/ (2017-12-15).

3 Report 2014/2149(INI), 24 June 2015. Available at www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+REPORT+A8-2015-0207+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN (2017-12-15).

4 See http://whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/. The term "religious property", as used in the ICOMOS study *Filling the Gaps-An Action Plan for the Future* (2005), defines "any form of property with religious or spiritual associations: churches, monasteries, shrines, sanctuaries, mosques, synagogues, temples, sacred landscapes, sacred groves, and other landscape features, etc.".

5 *Conservation of Living Heritage* – Papers from The ICCROM Forum 2003 on Living Religious Heritage: conserving the sacred. ICCROM 2005.

6 CEI, *Norme per la tutela e la conservazione del patrimonio storico-artistico della Chiesa in Italia*, 14 giugno 1974.

coin an *ad hoc* definition ('cultural properties of religious interest');[7] the necessity to care for them and allow 'new publics' to enjoy them to the full; the acknowledgement of further levels of interpretation and fruition,[8] thus evoking the idea of religious heritage having a dual, social and liturgical nature (Timothy, Olsen 2006; Olsen 2008), and being the expression of the culture and the identity of a territory.[9] A brand new perspective, which looks beyond their primary traditional function as places of cult and faith: what is now being highlighted is their role in educating future generations.

Religious heritage of Christian affiliation, and especially places of worship such as churches, cathedrals, monasteries and convents, is actually facing unprecedented issues and getting into increasing difficulties. A growing number of religious buildings are neglected as congregations dwindle, or the nature of one country's population changes. Secularization, the lack of faithful and volunteers, a negative demographic trend, the redistribution of the population on the territory, are the main facts explaining a significant decrease in the attendance of many places of cult, hence their redundancy. In the same way, other factors are undermining the survival of most places of cult: a remarkable drop of religious vocations, increasing safekeeping and management costs and current limited private and public resources/fundings. Their management structures are all subject to increasing pressure as the traditional implicit support for religious buildings is reduced. As a result, religious heritage is facing several major risks, including the decay of the buildings, the original worship use, the historical and artistic heritage (Cavana 2012). The lack of human, technical, and financial resources is undermining the maintenance standard requirements of the sites, their functionality and accessibility, up to their closure, change of use, or sale.

And yet, there is nowadays an ever increasing demand for access to sacred sites. There has been indeed a continuous growth of religious tourism and pilgrimages in the last decades, as well as of tourists who visit sacred sites for their historical and cultural value. According to WTO estimates, 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world´s key religious sites every year, with approximately 600 million national and international religious voyages in the world, 40% of which take place in Europe. Europe's two most popular sites are both churches, and of Christian affiliation: Notre-Dame

7 *Revised Agreement of the Lateran Concordat*, 1984 – a definition adopted in the 2004 Urbani Code, art. 9(1).

8 Pontificia Commissione per i Beni Culturali della Chiesa, *Lettera circolare sulla necessità e urgenza dell'inventariazione e catalogazione dei beni culturali della Chiesa*, 8 dicembre 1999.

9 Pontificia Commissione per i Beni Culturali della Chiesa, *Lettera circolare sulla necessità e urgenza dell'inventariazione e catalogazione dei beni culturali della Chiesa*, 8 dicembre 1999.

(13 million visitors/ year) and the Sacre-Coeur (11 million/year). In the UK, church worshipping communities are declining at exactly the same time as tourist numbers are rapidly increasing (Shackley 2005, 35) and in most European cities of art, these 'new stakeholders' are about to outnumber the faithful.

Leaving aside worship and contemplation, people access and visit sacred sites for a variety of reasons, as they are seen as a chance for a cultural and educational experience, or simply because they are part of their tour programme. On the one hand, this represents an opportunity of revitalization through the development of diversified visit experiences, and a possible source of income, so extra resources for the restoration and the keeping of the sites. On the other hand, it determines problems of compatibility since these sites become places where religious, cultural, and tourism-related practices converge – which also implies the risk of commodification of religious places for mere tourist consumption (Olsen 2003). In terms of management and governance of this living heritage, the challenge now is to find a way so as to balance different stakeholder interests and pressures, different uses of the spaces, and increasing lack of financial, human and technical resources.

The purpose of this paper is actually to shed light on the several mutually intertwined issues affecting the management and the safeguarding of religious sites, and on how their preservation and enhancement can benefit from a *sharing-and-integration approach*, as it seems to happen in the hereunder presented case of Chorus, a lay, not-for-profit organization, which has taken a number of inspiring, bottom-up initiatives in this direction.

2 Intertwined Issues Affecting the Management of Religious Sites

Many places of worship across Europe are underused or considered redundant in urban areas as well as in the countryside, and are at risk of demolition or privatization (Alter Heritage 2015). These sites are not able to collect sufficient funds nor attract enough visitors as sources of extra income, although, in many cases, they harbor an artistic, architectural and historical heritage of significance. Others, on the contrary, have difficulty in addressing adequately the increasing waves of visitors brought by mass tourism. Facing a large number of people implies the planning, organization, and provision of adequate facilities and services, and therefore the need of resources to invest and of management skills to employ. Moreover, crowds of people with different fruition motivations and behaviours can jeopardize 'the sense of place':

> visitors to sacred sites often complain that the sheer pressure of numbers prevents them experiencing the numinous, and some site management strategies have been developed to address this issue. (Shackley 2001, 8)

The safeguarding and the preservation of sacred spaces definitely require management strategies and practices able to face the new emerging challenges and enhance sustainability. Of course, management issues can be considered, in many ways, akin to those related to the management of CH and of tourist attractions in general, but there are several mutually intertwined issues that affect the management of religious sites, in particular of those ones that are still officiated and of great significance to their community of faithful but, at the same time, also embody an artistic and historical heritage of high value.

Firstly, management has to cope with *manifold fruitions and needs that overlap*. The presence of different, converging meanings and a manifest heterogeneity in the use of the sites, and so the need to meet different requirements simultaneously, may lead to challenging strategic and operational choices. The coexistence of lay and religious values amplifies the conflict between collective and private interests which increases the level of management complexity (Lo Presti, Petrillo 2010, 303). Places where religion and tourism overlap and commingle with one another, raise questions about the management, maintenance, interpretation and meaning of sacred sites (Olsen 2003, 100). Revenue from visitors is often vital to the maintenance of a site although the generation of such revenue (donations, admission fees, catering, merchandising) is often highly controversial (Shackley 2005, 34). Dealing with living religious heritage means having to face a range of issues concerning worship and various notions of sacredness, as the latter often defines attitudes towards ownership, access to non-devotional visitors, and co-operation with museum/heritage institutions. From a service delivery perspective, the quality of experience that both worshippers and non-worshippers receive at sacred sites poses several issues about access, layout, the way artworks and cultural properties are displayed, control and safety, considering that different motivations, expectations, and behavioral patterns need to coexist in a shared space. The perceived risk of touristification and/or museumification of their heritage and values, can make hosting worship communities more reluctant towards displaying their cultural properties and providing access to cultural visitors and tourists, and towards the principles of contemporary museology (Alexopoulus 2013).

Secondly, *responsibilities on religious heritage sites tend to be diversified and distributed*, and especially in the case of those sites of worship still in use, "two legitimate aims are at stake in the same place: ensuring effective religious freedom and preserving cultural heritage" (Fornerod 2010, 7).

These two aims, according to domestic specificities in the Church-State relationships of each country, are reflected in the ownership and in the funding systems, on the one hand, and in the heritage conservation policies, on the other. The hybrid nature of religious heritage – devotional, social, cultural – leads to the involvement of several institutions and players with different responsibilities and rights to intervention: from the State to religious authorities to private individuals. As far as Italy is concerned, churches may be owned by the State (Agenzia del Demanio), the Fondo Edifici di Culto (F.E.C.), religious orders, confraternities, or by the Church, which is the title-holder via the multiplicity of ecclesiastical entities (for the most part dioceses, parishes, and religious institutes) spread all over the national territory. In addition,

> the majority, if not all, of the churches of historical value are classified nowadays as 'cultural goods of religious interest' and − "if belonging to entities and institutions of the Catholic Church, or other religious denominations' − are subject to a protection regime which provides for, beside the operative duties of the Ministry of cultural affairs as well as of the Regional bodies, the necessary agreement of the religious authority 'regarding the requirements of worship". (Cavana 2012, 24)

Thirdly, the issue of *heterogeneity concerning location, size, attendance, historical-artistic value*. The number and the geographical dispersion of religious sites, their differences in terms of size, location and historical and artistic value, the type and degree of attendance, the visitors' profiles entail complex issues in terms of costs of maintenance and enhancement of functions, strategies aimed to balance the needs of visitors and communities, and relationships with the other stakeholders in general. Large and famous sacred sites, with significant levels of international visitation, face the challenge of managing the waves of tourists and of preserving 'the sense of place' but, at the same time, they can generate a remarkable income thanks to different sources, like admissions charges, donations, commercial activities. These kinds of sites have greater opportunities than the small ones, whose visitation levels are lower and dominated by the domestic and diocesan public (Shackley , 37):

> Most tourists visit only the most popular heritage religious site in a region, and as a consequence, these sites are well funded, while less popular sites lack funds for preservation and maintenance. (Levi, Kocher 2009, 20)

As a consequence, there is an emerging need to clustering and networking, especially when the religious heritage is scattered all over the territory in a number of small and medium-sized sites, most of them being the goal of just a few visitors.

3 Preservation and Enhancement through Sharing and Integration

The preservation of sacred spaces should have a safeguarding approach. Safeguarding is defined as

> measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion and enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and informal education, as well as revitalization of various aspects of such heritage. (2003 Convention, art. 2(3))

Such an approach requires the sustainability of each (tangible and intangible) heritage to be developed through both conservation and exploitation, which implies the use of consistent management practices.

From the perspective of their historical and cultural value, sacred sites share with the other cultural institutions that preserve and exhibit heritage the need to reach a greater accessibility, a wider participation, a deeper relationship with the territories and their social and economic communities. But at the same time, religious heritage embodies their own worship groups and communities: the bearers of a shared heritage that cannot be deprived of their devotional places, meanings, practices, respect of sacredness, and that contribute to the maintenance and vitality of the worship sites. As it is widely recognized in the notion of safeguarding, preservation and protection are combined with promotion, enhancement and transmission, with an emphasis on the need to ensure vitality. So, the issue of preserving and maintaining religious heritage sites cannot be separated from that of their 'use'. In addition, "it has been proved that the regular use of a historic monument, complying with its 'normal' use contributes to its conservation" (Fornerod 2010, 9). The extended use of religious properties, namely the development of a social and cultural use in 'co-habitation' with the worship and liturgy, seems to be a suitable way for the creation of a wider social and economic base and able to support them.

Opening up the places of worship to other uses and users, with the aim of a sustainable preservation and an enhanced vitality, is a matter of sharing and integration.

The multiplicity of visiting purposes, related to the spiritual, historical, aesthetic and cultural significance of the sites, implies the capability of welcoming visitors with different motivations, expectations, and behavioural patterns, that have to co-habit in a 'shared space'. Consistent management practices can help to preserve the integrity of the place, and avoid conflicts and inappropriate behaviours (Griffiths 2011, 65 ff). Making different interpretations, meanings, practices available within the

site can be an effective way to enhance the visitor experience and the mutual compatibility among diversified users. Preparing and organizing different types of fruition implies the use of tools in order to manage the access control (i.e.: opening time, admission fees, staggered entrance), the setting of the visitor's experience (exhibition, layout, services, kind of events), and the interpretative proposal (information, communication, storytelling, guidance), the latter being indispensable to raise awareness on visitors and provide them with codes of understanding and behaviour (Gatrell, Collins-Kreiner 2006; Goral 2011; Poria et al. 2009).

Often, due to insufficient availability of funds and resources, the skills and competencies needed to implement such policies and to operate efficiently may be missing. This occurs especially when the religious heritage of a territory is fragmented in innumerable, scattered, small and medium sites, which may trigger the need of clustering and/or joining them in networks. In this way, sacred sites can pool and integrate resources and achieve economies of scale, supporting each other. Also, the externalization and coordination of activities which are difficult to manage individually – communication and promotion being often among these – may help to overcome organisational and economic constraints. Beside this, sacred sites can even cooperate within networks with other cultural institutions, associations and businesses in order to include their heritage in the cultural and touristic offer of the destination (city or countryside). There is actually a deep relationship between cultural properties – tangible and intangible – and the local context (Cerquetti 2011). The properties, the historical churches, convents, monasteries where they are preserved, and the town which hosts them are mutually linked (Chastel 1980), and therefore connected with the other historical buildings, museums, squares, monuments that together embody a CH, which hence can be defined as capillary, contextual, and complementary (Golinelli 2008). When an area contains a large number of CH attractions, tourists tend to visit only the most popular sites, but the offer of interpretation and appropriate visit experiences, combining different forms of itinerary, can help making tourists aware of alternative sites to visit (Levi, Korcher 2009, 18). So, it becomes more and more necessary to involve the diverse stakeholders (public, private, ecclesiastical) in sharing and integrating resources and activities to preserve their heritage and enhance the visitor's experience.

4 ‘Making Things Feasible’: the Case of Chorus

4.1 The Making of a Church Network

A case that stands out in the Italian scenario of religious heritage management is certainly that of *Chorus-Associazione per le Chiese del Patriarcato di Venezia* (Association for the Churches of the Venice Patriarchate), a lay, not-for-profit organization, established in 1997 in Venice. Chorus, a pioneer in the field, shows many traits of both the ‘mutually intertwined issues’ and the ‘sharing and integration approach’ that we have portrayed above.

In the early ’90s the Venetian context was quite worrying, as clearly pictured in an article published in the *Corriere della Sera*: the opening of the over one hundred historic churches, each one both a museum and an extraordinary tourist attraction in itself, had become a *cultural hazard*.[10] The dwindling community of faithful as a consequence of an ongoing depopulation of the city, together with a pervasive process of secularization, had resulted in a lack of volunteers, offerings and donations within the parishes’ circles. Moreover, a series of remarkable funding cuts by both the Italian State (liable for the heritage of the whole country) and the City Council of Venice (since 1990 no longer liable for granting contributions to places of cult) had made the opening, maintenance and safekeeping of historic religious buildings and their artworks just unsustainable. Hence, the shocking announcement by Don Aldo Marangoni – the then president of the Venice Parish Priests’ Board (‘Collegio Urbano dei Parroci’) as well as the director of the Churches’ Office (‘Ufficio Chiese’), and a parish priest himself – who in February 1992 warned about the real threat of closing down all the churches by limiting their opening only to Holy Services.[11] The threat of a churches’ shut-down alarmed institutions, scholars, city lovers and the tourism industry. The total and/or partial closing of most Venetian churches would almost certainly carry with it increasing acts of vandalism and thefts, a general decay with an impact also to the newly restored ones, and the strong disappointment of visitors and tour operators. The religious heritage of the city was being put at risk more than ever before.

In 1997 Venice counted around 69,000 residents and together with a steady depopulation the city was – and still is – experiencing a remarkable increase of tourist flows every year. Many visitors were also increasingly demanding easy and regular access into sacred places of cultural interest. It was clear by then that these ‘other’ stakeholders would soon outnumber the

10 Claudio Pasqualetto. “Rubata in chiesa tela del Bellini ed è polemica sui tesori indifesi”. *Corriere della Sera*, 3 March 1993.

11 “Niente contributi c’è la serrata”. *Gente Veneta*, n. 8, 22 February 1992.

faithful and that the Venetian churches were running the risk of becoming spaces of conflict between the few pious and the many visitors. Don Aldo Marangoni and a group of other concerned parish priests looked at the big picture, and carefully considered all the issues. Firstly, the cost factor: 50,000-60,000 euros/year were necessary for the care and the day-to-day management and safekeeping of a single church. Secondly, the context: Venice, a World Heritage site since 1987, with its historic religious patrimony of outstanding universal value to be safeguarded for future generations, was then becoming a more and more 'ecumenical' attraction, a dual space where tourism and devotion often coincide. Thirdly, the geographical location of the city churches, as an ensemble: all detached from one another and scattered throughout the territory of the city, a veritable *widespread museum*, with thousands of *in situ* artworks. Lastly, the different nature of each religious building in terms of size, fame (most visited, least visited, worldwide known, unheard of), and chance to get spotted (central or marginal to the main, signposted paths). Notwithstanding the difficult circumstances, Don Aldo Marangoni and his circle of priest-friends committed themselves in an action to the advantage of both their own buildings and their communities of faithful. An act of conciliation between the secular and the sacred, with a mission and a goal: ensure the care, safekeeping, safeguarding, conservation, restoration, extended opening, promotion and enhancement of the historic Churches of Venice and the Venice Patriarchate. Their project in a nutshell: 1) creation of a network of churches; 2) activation of a mechanism of solidarity amongst churches; 3) introduction of a fixed contribution for the extended use of the sacred space; 4) convert all contributions (entrance fees) to services. In other words: they decided to cluster religious buildings of different nature in order to spread the funds generated by the few *stars* (famous churches) across the maintenance of all. They actually agreed upon to set up a network of churches (the churches at risk involved in the project were initially 13, the network now counts 17) within the framework of a lay, not-for-profit organization, which they named *Chorus* and for which they coined the slogan "Enjoy & Preserve" ("Fruire per conservare"). Their aim: to grant an extended and regular opening of the historic churches to the benefit of a wider range of stakeholders, thanks to an organized safekeeping service financed by thousands of small contributions (3,00 euros in 2016).

The start-up costs of the initiative (ca. 258,000 euros) were personally borne by the founder and president, Don Aldo Marangoni, who managed to get a bank credit in his own name. A regular statute was drawn, staff was hired, churches were provided with alarm devices and opened non-stop, seven hours a day (same opening times), six days a week. All the artworks were labelled and provided with an appropriate lighting; a non-invasive, indoor booth for the operator was set up in each church near the entrance; a factsheet with historical and artistic information was drawn to be handed over to visitors.

4.2 How the Network Works

Chorus is a network of churches, each one with a different status: ten are parish churches, four rectorial, and three vicarial. Also the ownership reflects their diversity: fourteen are owned by the Diocese, one by the Capuccini Friars, one by the Franciscans, and one by the Venice City Council. Responsible for every church is the parish priest. Through a signed agreement between *Chorus* and each and every parish priest, *Chorus* commits itself – free of charge and away from the Holy Service – to provide the relevant church with regular opening, safekeeping, cleaning, power and lighting, day-to-day maintenance, information to visitors, seven hours a day, six days a week, while ensuring the respectful use of the sacred space.

Each process of conciliation needs a mediation. *Chorus*'s interface between sacred and profane is represented by its staff of 21 people (status: 2016), and their tasks. Four people in the backoffice, including *Chorus*'s director, sixteen people in the churches (one church is presently closed for restauration, one is administered by a religious order and the opening of another one is granted by a barock orchestra using it for their rehearsals and concerts) with a four-week turn-around. They all have an open-ended contract: as a matter of fact, *Chorus*'s other purpose was and still is to offer job opportunities in town. Not only does the staff take care of the safekeeping (opening/closing churches, activating/dis-activating alarm systems, checking attendance behaviour) but it is also supposed to promote the *Chorus* network and be ready to illustrate each venue.

Chorus was and is designed to create a virtuous self-financing system, which allows the opening and the maintenance of the buildings of the whole network (all of them being 'working' churches and some of them even parish churches), on the basis of a series of criteria, that can be briefly summed up as follows (status: 2016):

1. The involvement of the visitors in the project of safeguarding and promotion of the Venice religious heritage in general, and of that of the *Chorus* network in particular, by means of a fixed contribution: 3,00 euros for the visit of a single church and 12,00 euros for 17 churches (*Chorus Pass*, validity: one year), nonetheless granting free access to Venice residents, pilgrims, members of religious orders, disabled and accompanying carers, children under 10, members of ICOM and ICOMOS, authorised guides, group leaders on duty, school group leaders on duty, plus journalists, researchers and scholars (who need a *Chorus* accreditation)
2. The above-mentioned contribution is to be imposed only on the 'extended use' of each sacred site of the network, away from Holy Service times. It applies therefore exclusively on lay visitors (both foreign and Italian) and not on the faithful (from whichever country) or the locals (both lay and faithful). Everyone is granted reliable and

longer opening times, an adequate lighting system, museum-like labels on artworks, a clean environment, staff assistance. *Ad hoc* contributions are required by *Chorus* from those asking to make use of one or more religious buildings – where and when applicable (as a rule, rectorial or vicarial churches) – for the organization of non-invasive, unintrusive, church-friendly events, like selected temporary art exhibitions and/or concerts.

3. The activation of a mechanism of solidarity amongst churches: all contributions given to access/use the well-known (and most visited) churches of the network are also intended to finance the management of the least known (and less visited) ones. Every church plays a distinctive role in the network, each one serving the purpose of the network, and adding more value to the network, each one also shaping the structure and providing continuity to the network. The least visited benefit of a share of the wealth collected by the most famous (or geographically most favoured) ones, the famous/most favoured ones willingly accept to transfer a part of their share to serve the common good, and pride themselves to be the network's flagships.
4. The idea of providing an effective contribution to a more effective distribution of the tourist flows – one of the main issues of the city – by supplying the city guests with a map showing the location of all the 'Chorus-churches' (that are scattered all over Venice), implicitly suggesting new routes across the maze of streets and canals, and so inviting the curious travellers to explore and experience the beauty of less crowded surroundings, away from the so called 'must-see' destinations (Piazza San Marco, Rialto).

In this sense, *Chorus* appears to have been all the more innovative and far-sighted already from the beginning (1997), when, showing uncommon pragmatism and excellent problem-solving qualities, a group of citizen-priests decided to conciliate lay and religious needs – meanwhile rescuing 17 churches – by exploiting the potential and the power of a virtuous network, which other Venetian churches might need to join in the future, and by bringing forward a possible form of enhancement and safeguarding of CH in the territory through an innovative approach in the management of sacred spaces as common goods (*common heritage*), which aims at a conciliation between lay and religious needs, thus reducing the risk of conflicts among stakeholders.

Chorus proves to be a sustainable, virtuous network, a bottom-up initiative which can pride itself of a series of outcomes: the extended opening times of historic churches; the safekeeping and safeguarding of the buildings; an easily accessible and valuable cultural offer; a comfortable, enjoyable visiting experience (and thus the enhancement of the religious herit-

age value); a sustainable way to promote and divulgate culture (through the creation of an economy of scale); the enhancement of less known historic churches (otherwise at risk of marginality); concrete benefits for the Venetian community (faithful and laypersons); a steady job for twenty-one operators; an impulse to gain a different perspective on CH (a new discerning public); a renewed social engagement.

4.3 New Challenges

A peak of visitors (322,224) was registered in 2008, and never matched again. In 2014 one of the leading churches broke the *Chorus*'s solidarity pact and quitted the network, undermining the sustainability of the latter. As a consequence, there was a drop of 60,000 visitors. Then, another church which was rented out for years as a venue hosting a pavilion of the *Biennale* exhibition, lost this prerogative, and also the income deriving from it. On the top of this, and despite the steady increase of tourist flows, the year 2014 registered a declining number of visitors in all museums of Venice, and subsequently, a substantial decrease of *Chorus*'s visitors up to a total of 191,491 in 2015, which had a serious impact on *Chorus*'s virtuous self-financing system.

Chorus is now facing new challenges. One for all: trying to raising a renewed interest on visitors and enhancing their churches' network by improving their communication skills (a new website) and using networking strategies (a Facebook account with over 5,000 thousands 'fans').

Chorus also strives for a deeper integration of their heritage within the city tourist policies as a veritable must-see, aiming at making it a more inclusive network, in harmony with its 'ecumenic' nature. In this respect, it has signed an agreement with Ve.La. S.p.A., a society of the AVM group, that deals with the marketing and the selling of 'Venezia Unica City Pass', a city card which can be customized by uploading different services (public transportation tickets and/or admission tickets to the major city attractions and/or events) at will. The *Chorus Pass* is in the list and has been uploaded by many users, along with the other city museums.

Chorus also favours any respectful, yet awareness-raising initiative that may be useful to change the mainstream perception of historic religious buildings and favour different levels of identification in what should be considered – at all times, regardless of any personal credo – a common heritage at risk. Indeed, Chorus has recently joined in a project by Venezia Arte Cultura & Turismo, a not-for-profit association based in Venice, whose members are all qualified guides of its heritage and work in synergy with Chorus and other organizations in order to promote a sustainable approach and facilitate the interaction between the visitors and the tangible and intangible heritage. 'Venezia ExtraOrdinaria by Venezia Arte Cultura

& Turismo' is a program of walking experiences, with a special focus on the over one hundred churches of Venice and their past relation with the hundreds of *Scuole* (fraternities and guilds), expressively designed so as to change in the visitors their patterns of perception of CH in general and that of religious heritage in particular, in order to bring to life the invisible threads between churches and the many fraternities that, for centuries, attended to their altars and often erected outstanding premises in their surroundings. Each walk provides a social-anthropological perspective, other than just a mere description of the artifacts, and an insight into unheard of aspects of the past 'extended-use' of the Venetian churches, and their former great importance, at any level, for each neighbouring community. This program was launched with much success in June 2016 on the occasion of the yearly event 'Art Night Venice 2016', under the label of 'Venezia ExtraOrdinaria/ExtraOrdinary Venice, Churches & Fraternities, Passion and Devotion', with Chorus and the Management of Arts and Culture Lab (m.a.c.lab) of the University Ca' Foscari as partners of the initiative. In order to maximize audience enjoyment and effectiveness of the guides' narration, availability was limited to 200 participants. The sold-out crowd praised 'Venezia Extraordinaria by Venezia Arte Cultura & Turismo' as "one of the best events in the "Art Night Venice 2016's' list" and as an experience that "has changed one's perception of religious heritage forever" (comments collected from the participants on the day of the event).

The issues and the approach presented in this work may suggest something relevant also in terms of safeguarding of CH in general. At a closer look, it is apparent that almost any artistic, historical, cultural sites is subject, to different degrees, to diverse interpretations, uses, stakeholders' interests. A lot of important pieces of our CH are at risk of conflicting interests, such as: conservation versus mass tourism; *patrimonialisation* and museumification of CH, yet at the expenses of the communities – those that in the past have created it and/or have benefited from it as an important part of their culture; resource allocation dilemmas between the preservation of the many CH sites and the shortage of public funds. Lastly, two critical aspects can be underlined: the ability to manage CH as a *shared space* within which one needs to conciliate different, sometimes conflicting, demands and interests; the need to cooperate within networks as a way to both overcome economical and organisational constraints and help visitors to fully enjoy a cultural experience otherwise fragmented in innumerable, scattered, small and medium sites, yet of a great importance.

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