

The Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Lomello Thousand Years of History (1025-2025) between signs and meanings

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Abstract

The experimentation of new academic approaches and pedagogical programs needs the collaboration of different institutions. Since 2022 at the University of Pavia, a new methodological approach has been explored and developed for the conservation of the religious sites. This paper aims to show this academic approach where the dialogue between the academic community, the ecclesiastical community and the local people allowed the activation of cultural, social initiatives with the great result of an urban and spiritual regeneration of high relevance. In fact, in 2022, the architectural restoration class of the University of Pavia signed an agreement with the Diocese of Vigevano, Parish of Lomello, to contribute to the knowledge and conservation of this important sacred place located in an area of significant importance to produce rice. The Basilica is located in the historical center of this small village in Lomellina, where the local community was involved in many activities. So, since autumn 2023 the architectural restoration course is based in this Basilica and now every activity is finalized to know very well this heritage and at the same time to valorize it with the help of the local community. The Basilica is a Jubilee seat and in 2025 it will celebrate its thousandth anniversary.

Keywords: Lomello; Religious Heritage; Community; Education; Architectural Restoration

Introduction

In 2022, the Architectural Restoration course at the University of Pavia signed an institutional agreement with the parish of Lomello, of the Diocese of Vigevano, to activate a collaboration programme aimed at enhancing the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (Figure 1). Since its origins, the history of this Basilica has marked the development of the village and its agricultural territory, and the presence of important rivers has certainly favoured settlement since Roman times. All this is testified by important archaeological presences that characterise the historical centre of Lomello (Zucchi 1904). Meanwhile, the territory is also marked by important late-medieval cultural heritages, such as Romanesque parish churches and castles, which testify to Lomellina's wealth of production and its role as a major communication area between Western Europe and the Mediterranean basin, along the Po river that crosses the Po Valley to its outlet in the Adriatic Sea, an important link with the Middle East. Therefore, from the very beginning, waterways have played a pivotal role in the development of this territory, which is now mainly dedicated to rice production. And it is precisely among the large rice fields in the province of Pavia that the thousand-year-old Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore is preserved.



Figure 1. Lomello, Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (XI century) [Archive O. Niglio, 2024]

2. Premises of the project: the sacred

In recent years we are witnessing the realisation of numerous research projects on the topic of heritage religious heritage. There is no doubt that man constantly questions the significance of cultural heritage, which is subject to new interpretations within a social context increasingly connected to ephemeral contents. Indeed, we are living through a 'winter' of Western culture where the community is involved in a process of rupture with the past through the creation of human relations supported by temporary behaviour and symbolic contents. These contents move us away from the space of religiosity, thus passing from the 'culture of the cult to the cult of culture' (Dall'Asta 2022).

This dimension of the cult of culture has produced a decline about which many scholars and theologians are questioning, and all because the dimension of the sacred has become increasingly distant from the planning of the everyday life of communities. However, it is interesting to note that although this dimension of religiosity seems to have been downplayed in our daily lives, this is not the case because in order to understand our cultural heritage we cannot but start from the very meaning of the sacred and how this has contributed to constructing the places of living (Niglio, 2021). Meanwhile, this very vision of the sacred must be reconnected to religious experience, to the experience of communication of the human with the divine, with the transcendence that exceeds but at the same time limits man. It is precisely the experience of the

sacred that is fundamental to the life of man and his process of humanisation. Man discovers the sacred because it manifests itself.

With this discovery, man reaches the certainty of transcendent reality, and in the face of this revelation he begins a quest to communicate this reality. Thus the sacred becomes the subject of a revelation where man feels himself to be its recipient (Ries, 2012). Thus thanks to this revelation, man experiences an encounter, a thunderbolt of beauty that he translates and communicates through art and architecture. So man through an act of creativity intends to make the transcendent visible and to translate it into forms and colours capable of expressing its beauty, the source of harmony. Meanwhile, the forms and colours through which we represent the sacred vary from one community to another, from one culture to another, but these do not change the substantial dialectic that is the foundation of humanity's religious life.

Starting from this questioning of the meaning of the "sacred", the architectural restoration course of the University of Pavia, in collaboration with the Diocese of Vigevano, has launched a programme of knowledge and enhancement of the millenary Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Lomello, evidence of a historical stratification where sacredness, through art and architecture, is a clear manifestation of a religious evolution linked to its community. Thus through the direct study of this important Lomellina monument, supported by different human experiences, the architectural restoration course aimed to rewrite a sacred history of the Basilica.

In according with the cooperation agreement signed on March 2023 with the parish of Lomello and the Diocese of Vigevano, the restoration course had place at the Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore where every academic activity has been developed in relationship with the need of the local community and to finalize the enhancing of this millenary monument. So, since October 2023, definitely the restoration course has been transferred at the Basilica in Lomello. So, both the theoretical lessons and the experimental laboratory had as main purpose the history of the Basilica, the analysis of the structures and materials, the study of the most suitable conservative principles for the valorisation of this sacred place. This academic organization has favored the inclusion of the local community and the local institution and all together have started a new program to know and develop the land and the local resources. This new approach allows us to start an interesting path finalized to the *integrated conservation*. Following the "Convention for the protection of the architectural heritage of Europe" (1985) the *integrated conservation* promotes the concept of the heritage, previously confined to individual monuments (religious buildings, castles, fortifications etc), being broadened to include groups of historic buildings also in small towns and works of vernacular architecture in relationship with the local community (Convention, 1985). At the end the experience in Lomello allowed to develop the people-centred approaches to cultural heritage in accordance with the Resolution 20GA/19 promoted by the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 2019 (Resolution 20GA/19).

3. Regeneration of an architectural palimpsest

The Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Lomello is an important palimpsest of our history. Just as in palaeography, scholars often analyse documents where the original text has been erased and replaced by new texts, in the same way this basilica was built on important pre-existing Roman artefacts, but who's rewriting also allowed a process of preservation of the original text, and thus of the archaeological finds on which it rests. In order to analyse this architectural re-writing, a 'knowledge project' was activated according to a pedagogical model where the dialogue between contemporary technological skills and traditional methodologies made it possible to pursue important cognitive results for the preservation of the palimpsest (Musso, 2016)

Designing on the existing means enhancing the history and knowledge of the construction techniques that have allowed the monument to reach the present day. All this implies a 'Renaissance' approach that

harmoniously combines the relationship between culture and technique, between knowledge and poetics, between research and experimentation.

The restoration project is an architectural project and as such implies a path of research, of elaboration of ideas based on harmony. This project implies an interdisciplinary approach where profound knowledge of the history and art of building intertwine and dialogue (Campo Baeza 2021). In particular, a restoration project is not pure creativity, but rather an action that acts on a pre-existing creativity where virtues are conserved in a methodological process that we need to know in order to favour its transmission to the future. So the restoration project is a project of regeneration and re-signification of the cultural heritage and in the case of the Basilica of Lomello we have dealt with the significance of its religious heritage today.

4. The cultural significance of ecclesiastical heritage

The Basilica of S. Maria Maggiore in Lomello (De Marchi and Marina 2014) stands as an emblematic case of the cultural significance of ecclesiastical heritage, due to a series of conditions that allowed the emergence of a common feeling and a shared cultural passion. No one would dare to claim that the cultural heritage expressed in the Basilica complex, its Baptistry and its Rectory is of little interest. Just by looking at them and considering the alterations and restoration work carried out so far, one realises that one is dealing with a monument of the highest historical and artistic importance.

The first desire is to search, to understand what happened in history, what the monumental remains teach us about our past, both from a technical and historical point of view, and from an artistic and religious one. To begin research, comparative or otherwise, starting from what there is in Lomello is a true and profound provocation that immediately springs up in the heart of those who look with some cultural passion. All one has to do is try, and it opens up multiple and intersecting fields of research that give us back glimpses of the thinking, feeling and living of that territory and those communities, in addition to all the aspects related to technique and research methods.

The first striking element, but this is always the case with monuments of this type, is the monument's impressiveness in a rural, non-urban context. Such a building stands out strikingly in an agricultural and, we would say today improperly, but spontaneously, natural landscape, not strongly modified by man, and thus signalling a kind of historical and cultural discontinuity. After astonishment, curiosity arises to understand how and why. This is precisely what has happened thanks to the scientific research interest that the University of Pavia has put in place in recent months, precisely with the intention of critically and scientifically enhancing the historical, artistic and religious memory of the Basilica. This multidisciplinary and critical approach has virtuously initiated a synodal type of interest, we would say today within the Catholic vocabulary, in many subjects that refer to the monument in question.

Astonishment and criticality have provoked a synergetic path of interest and humble, yet fruitful, study by many stakeholders.

4.1. The community of Lomello

The first subject that appears in a significant way is the one that felt a surge of pride in those who realise that they have a very rich treasure of culture at home, which also arouses interest and deep attention in those who come to look at these monuments and who also express a desire for critical and in-depth research. In short, the pride of a community to enter history in the true sense, because qualified attention has stopped here with reason.

This is what has happened to the population of Lomello and Lomellina in recent years, because a journey of appreciation of its monuments has begun. This is an event of symbolic value that enriches and defines the community identity of a place. This is certainly an important piece of cultural significance.

In the post-modern era, the search for symbolic events and places, including religious ones, that allow for the elaboration and strengthening of a shared and desired identity for a social group, is indicated by studies of great scientific importance as a strongly identifying element at a social and cultural level with an aggregating and signifying function. Transforming a culture of non-places used, but not lived in, into a culture of lived and identifying places is certainly something that has been experienced in Lomello thanks to the work of different factors and actors in synergic action centred precisely on the basilica.

Having become a place, Lomello has activated paths of interest and appreciation that were previously lacking, and has led to the activation of collaborations centred more on common and aggregating interests than on particular, often disruptive ones. What has happened in this case is that the discovery of an important cultural heritage has ignited in the hearts of the Lomellesi a consciousness that was there, but could not express itself. Once activated, it turned into a constructive search for new and interesting hypotheses for an identity felt to be common.

4.2. The scientific and institutional community

The monument's cultural and research importance and provocative nature have also aroused a desire for collaboration between scientific and study departments that often find other sources of inspiration, not exactly convergent, for their research programmes. The Ministry of Culture and the University of Pavia, but also the Parish and the Diocese, the Municipality and the territory, immediately perceived that there was much to investigate and research in a manner consistent with the institutional criteria of each body involved. That important memory awakened critical and institutional interests that opened up new research hypotheses and instructed previously unsuspected solutions. There is a common human also in the research paths that allows one not to close oneself up in the narrow spheres of procedural specialisation, but to open oneself up to a desire to be open to reality that is much broader than methodological criteria and specialised interests (Figure 2).

Each approach feels that it is constructively provoked in posing questions and finding answers that feed the common quest. There is, in short, something that is perceived as both important and new, precisely because it is not yet consolidated in established and static criteria of evaluation and protection. So, it has been possible to converge on a common goal capable of giving identity of purpose to different and not yet well-defined paths.

This cultural and specialised focus consists, to approximate, of two types of approach.

1. The first is that linked to the study of the theoretical and technical aspects that the monument embodies, the second, on the other hand, is that linked to the symbolic value of the artefact. Both of these directions entail an important cultural significance. This church, with its dimensions, with the historical events that accompanied it, with the technologies that its creators had at their disposal, with the scientific and theoretical knowledge that these entailed and that was passed on, with the problems of economic sustainability and the availability of materials, with the political and social events that forced different decisions... hides within this artefact a whole series of questions that research is stimulated to explain and to answer. All this has an undoubted cultural interest, not only in a natural scientific sense, as when man wants to understand why a phenomenon happens in a certain way, but also in a historical and cultural sense to trace the meaning of the events that this artefact conceals and manifests. The need to work in synergy in this field is easy to understand, although it is not always easy to achieve, also for methodological reasons. This is why the Lomello experience seems to me instructive and full of good promise.

2. However, and this is the second approach, this church carries a dream that techniques and knowledge have made possible. This dream expresses a wish and a vow of the people who wanted and built it. This church did not come into being by itself, it was not an existing reality simply adapted, it was not a building of mere practical utility. It wanted, as we say today, to be a work of art and worship. It wanted to express a public pride and vow according to shared and strong values and ideals.



Figure 2. Lomello. Baptistery of Santa Maria Maggiore. Academic laboratory in collaboration with local community [Archive O. Niglio, November 2024]

This intentionality also animated the desire to dare to delve into the field of knowledge and techniques to force matter to express the spirit. This dimension also calls for a synergetic interpretation of culture, but alludes to a dimension that does not possess the characteristics of the scientific criticality of the rational method, because it has to do with human freedom and creativity. The studies of aesthetics and art history are significant here, but they are intertwined with studies of the history of this territory, with those of religious and civil life, and they also invite us to reinterpret the assumptions of investigation that we put into this critical and interpretative effort.

In short, we are not neutral in this cultural significance.

4.3. The believing community

This appears from a fact that I would like to express somewhat provocatively. Perhaps what is striking is precisely that all these interests find clear expression in their very opposite, which really appears to be the case, namely in the feeling of abandonment or alienation that envelops this church. The effort of cultural recovery is clear precisely from the enthusiasm we are putting into it these days. In many ways, this church

seems to be a monument of the past, of something that today arouses no interest or a decidedly relative interest in the thing for which the building was built and modified over time. What is this church, so imposing, doing in this place and for so long? What moves and fuels the astonishment and positive surprise we are experiencing? Why keep these walls up and not leave them to their fate of decline?

Why has it not been enthusiastically inhabited for many years? Why has it been seen for so long as a building, albeit a beautiful one, but attributable to a normal and not very heartfelt function?

Today, the focus is on historical, artistic and cultural interest that celebrates man's ability to create something beautiful that attracts universal attention and showcases human genius in something positive and impressive. Man celebrates himself in his monuments, but also learns who he is in depth and to the test of time, thanks to the challenges he has faced over time and overcome with something that pleases and remains. I refer, at least vaguely, to a humanist orientation. Today, this demand seems well established in cultural and institutional awareness. And this is precisely what we are witnessing even today.

It is an aspect that becomes a concrete political and social line, which important institutions welcome, cultivate and protect, in order to nurture our civilisation and values.

But it remains difficult to define what this something is that has given life to the monument, but which the monument does not seem to have been able to keep equally alive, at least in all its dimensions. In particular, I refer to its religious dimension. This is what is said in ecclesiastical terms when establishing the dialectic between the church of people and the church of bricks. Here there is a risk that the brick church will conspire to awaken the church of people.

This aspect renews the age-old question of the relationship between faith and religion, which sees this building very much on the second side, that of religion. What is meant by religion? The position of this question raises perplexities and difficulties that are not easy to resolve. The approach to the religious fact is the subject of great and heated controversy among researchers. If the faith of a population is studied and understood as a cultural phenomenon of a religious type and that is all, then the outcome of the cultural scope of the monuments that express this need is fatally oriented towards the search for an interest that can be considered significant for those who no longer believe or believe in something different, that is to say, for something dead, because it is no longer capable of sustaining the radical question to which religious faith provides an answer. If, instead, faith constitutes the foundation of the truthful approach to the fundamental questions of human life, then religion and its monuments become existential and social provocations of vital interest. Observing these monuments means finding provocations to the meaning of personal and social life. But questions of meaning vary with history and people. The first fact that this monument highlights is that it is a monument that was born and wants to express something of great social relevance. The monument says something that feeds the life of society in an important and decisive way about the identity of intent in the lives of the people who built it. They built this church because that community wanted to express in it a wish, a need, a vow. In this monument it derived a reason for joy, life and honour. Today, it is the monument and its preservation that stimulate reasons for identity and commitment.

The church, then, says that the building is for an assembly of people who come together to do something special, which has to do with God and which space and furnishings define and determine in a symbolic way. In this church, one can clearly see the changing aesthetic and devotional taste over time. The symbolic perception of the place is important here precisely because the last restoration carried out clearly showed the diversity of religious ambience suggested by Romanesque simplicity rather than Baroque decorative complexity. It would be interesting to evaluate the diversity of religious sentiment that the different epochs testify to and correlate it to the relative demand for faith that they interpret.

This is one of the basic problems even today of the relationship between church managers and the National Superintendency of Historical and Artistic Heritage, but it is also the basic problem of interpreting the truth that the liturgy affirms for every believing community. What is the heart of the religious mystery that the monument and the liturgy, which is celebrated in it, want to realise? What is the coherence between the

different ways of believing and confessing faith and the heart of the Christian Gospel? But also one must ask what is really the heart of the Christian Gospel, given that it is expressed in so many different ways?

At the heart of this theme is the fundamental problem raised by the Protestant Reformation in a polemical manner: does Sola Scriptura or does Scripture and Tradition define radical fidelity to the Christian Gospel? But even more radically, is the truth of the faith universal or tied to proclamation and therefore to historical and institutional witness? To what extent is the heart of human history, which defines the truth of freedom, dependent on man and linked to the question of God and the variety of relations between men and the world? Where culture is born, the question of meaning and therefore of truth arises, which cannot be separated from relations with the cosmos, with men and with the foundation. The attitude with which these questions are addressed is entrusted to the absoluteness of the ego, which can only be defined as freedom and not as a denotative and critical capacity alone.

In short, the question of the relationship between faith and reason, to which history has accustomed us, must be clearly reformulated, seeking to integrate into it also the aesthetic point of view, whose universality does not correspond to the rational and denotative one, and the historical point of view with its eventual dimensions (événements).

Here opens up an even more suggestive and important world of cultural significance that a monument of this kind delivers to us. The parish, the institution that owns the property in question, cannot treat this building as a private, albeit enlightened, person might. It must link the use and appreciation of the building to the faith that built and lived it, at least as long as there is a Christian with his believing community. But the logic of this Christian would still be missionary, that is, that of one who lives to announce the Easter of the Lord as the absolute event of salvation for each and all. Universal philanthropy is not enough.

The sacredness that the state in some way reserves for monuments of this kind, preserving, protecting and promoting them, precisely to enhance their cultural significance, appeals to an ideality that continues over time and that the apathy or ignorance of the present must not diminish, precisely because it is that which allows for the intimate and profound content of the identity of the people that expresses it through a value that unites and stimulates. And this is precisely what we call cultural and ideal heritage.

Along these lines, the Church proposes a sacredness that refers to history as the place where God himself manifests himself and communicates himself, precisely by binding men together in a constant and grateful search for a love that gives profound meaning to all life and manifests itself precisely in the communion sought, desired and witnessed by all men. This sacred dimension, however, is implemented and based on the life of a man who died on the cross two thousand years ago and whom God raised from the dead and exalted to his right hand for the salvation of all. Reference to this man and his witnesses is not optional, but neither is it available to the heuristic creativity of men. This sacredness is therefore configured as a proclamation and as an appeal: you too are called to enter here and find here the response of goodness that animates your heart, meeting this man through the witness of his believing community.

But another constitutive element of the Christian faith appears here. The truth of faith is linked to the quality of communion in the life of those who believe, so that the witness of charity that binds people together in freedom and love, finds its foundation precisely in the love of God that animates the heart and is nourished by the Word proclaimed and celebrated. Accepting the Gospel of Christ means building a believing and loving community that is expressed and nourished precisely in the memory of the Lord. The communion and community dimension of cultural significance, therefore, is part of the believing witness that this place inspires and encourages. By discovering the true depths of the human heart, it is possible to create the conditions to welcome the proclamation of the Gospel.

This is why this church, in its millennium of construction, has been designated as a jubilee church within the Ordinary Jubilee of the Catholic Church in 2025, so that it does not remain a mere, albeit valuable, monument of history and culture, but becomes an opportunity to proclaim the truth that gives meaning to life.

5. Millennium of the Basilica (1025-2025) and Jubilee Year (2025)

This in-depth analysis on the significance of the religious heritage of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Lomello was essential to properly approach a methodology aimed at the restoration project of the monumental complex, which in 2025 will be exactly 1,000 years old since its foundation. However, the origins of this basilica have been the subject of important studies by both archaeologists and historians of medieval art and architecture, both Italian and foreign, who have discussed the settlement events from the late Roman republican age to the early Middle Ages (Blake, Maccabruni, Pearce, 1987).

Thus on the occasion of the millennium of the Basilica and its attribution as a jubilee seat, the close collaboration between the Diocese of Vigevano, parish of Lomello and the architectural restoration course of the University of Pavia, have made it possible to elaborate an academic program aimed at promoting direct knowledge of the building and tracing all the construction phases and restorations carried out to date. Of particular historical importance are the studies carried out by architect Carlo Nigra, especially with reference to the hypotheses for the reconstruction of the Basilica's main elevation, the stylistic features of which clearly echo those of Lombard Romanesque churches (Nigra, 1936). Architect Nigra had made a detailed survey of the monument that proved very useful for the restorations planned starting in 1939 at the hands of Superintendent Gino Chierici, who at the same time was engaged in Milan on the construction sites of the church of San Satiro and at the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. His efforts continued until 1951 when he was then replaced by architect Luigi Crema who completed the work in May 1954. These restorations were mainly concerned with the liberation of the buildings perimeter to the baptistery (Figure 3), the restoration of the baptistery itself, and the de-restoration of the basilica to remove all Baroque superstructures and thus restore the church to its original stylistic language (Chierici 1941).

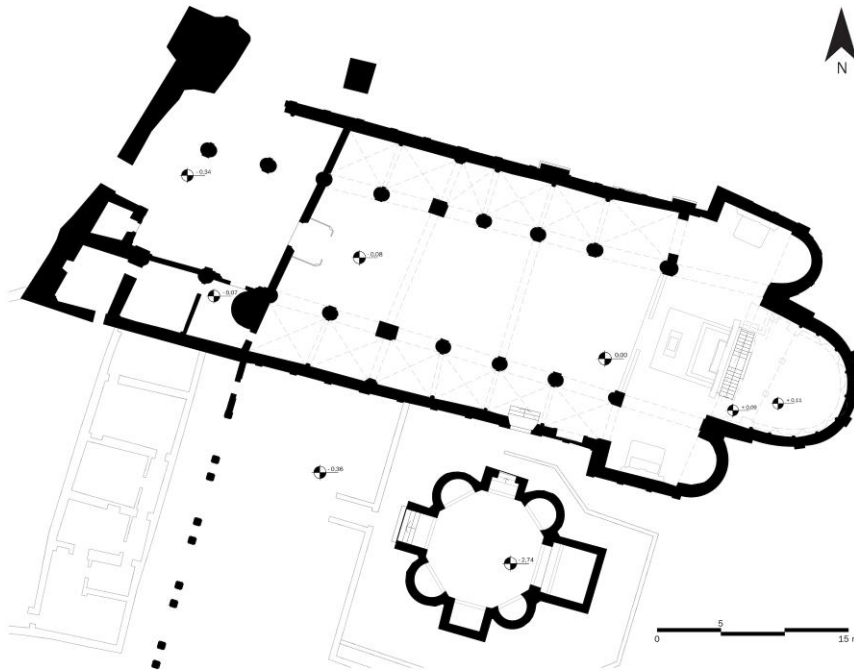


Figure 3 Lomello. Baptistry of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore
Restoration project by Gino Chierici (1939-1945) [Reconstruction by O. Niglio, 2024.

All this, of course, had involved partial demolition works and the reconstruction of the roof of the Basilica as evidenced by drawings preserved in the Magenta archive in Lomello with Gino Chierici's autograph signature. Further restoration work on the Basilica then involved the stucco work and was carried out between 2005 and 2007 under the supervision of the Regional Directorate for Cultural and Landscape Heritage of Lombardy, which also edited an illustrated publication on the work carried out.

Twenty years after these latest restorations on the occasion of the Basilica's Millennium, specific studies have been prepared, the results of which will be exhibited throughout the Jubilee year inside the Basilica by means of an exhibition set up by the students of the architectural restoration course with the aim of illustrating the results of the research carried out and above all the outcome of a new and detailed survey of the Basilica carried out with direct methods and supported by verifications using information technology.

Academic activities were held at the Basilica, which took on the function of a teaching room, thereby also strengthening its religious function and the significance of its liturgical space (Figures 4 and 5). At the same time, the academic activities enabled extensive collaborative synergies with local institutions, particularly the Municipality of Lomello, primary and secondary schools and the Magnani Foundation. This synodal path allowed us to experience the opportunity to implement a participatory project where the community became an active part of the decisions and proposals for the enhancement of its cultural heritage.



Figure 4. Lomello. Basilica of Santa Maria Maggior. Interior. [Archive O. Niglio, November 2024



Figure 5. Lomello. Academic activities at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore
 [Archive O. Niglio, A.Y. 2024-2025]

6. Conclusions ... for starting

Academic engagement with the Lomello community has opened up new and interesting perspectives in both teaching and planning. One of the points of confrontation has also been the reuse of religious cultural heritage, which in many cases manifests itself through actions aimed at divesting this religious heritage. Differently, the project undertaken with the Diocese of Vigevano, from the beginning, intended to enhance and regenerate the sacred space of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Lomello in order to donate it to the community in its original function.

So at a time of strong social changes, academic activities in Lomello intend to enhance projects to restore churches to donate their original function to local communities.

Meanwhile, on December 17, 2018, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi (at that time President of the Pontifical Council for Culture) signed the guidelines regarding the divestment of ecclesiastical heritage with reference also to churches and in Article 9 we learn:

[...] The many changes that mark our societies and cultures also throw up major challenges in the way the Church perceives, values and manages ecclesiastical cultural heritage and especially surplus worship spaces. Realizing that an abandoned or endangered house of worship constitutes a counter-witness, many diocesan communities decide to give the house of worship a non-liturgical use while retaining ownership, or to sell it to an institution or a private individual, or, at other times, when it has no historical, artistic or architectural value, to proceed with its demolition. Other (perhaps more virtuous) diocesan communities are questioning how to identify new pastoral responses better suited to the new needs of the people and communities to whom they offer spaces for social, cultural, recreational, welcoming and relational purposes.

These are issues that affect not only our ecclesiastical heritage but many other geographies and cultures from which, however, we often have much to learn. In recent years, even in our role at the International Commission on Religious Heritage in UNESCO, many cases have been taken up with different communities around the world to protect and enhance religious cultural heritage in the best possible way.

Therefore, the purpose of focusing on the theme of the valorization of our religious cultural heritage stems precisely from these previous experiences in different cultural spheres as well as from the desire of a group

of scholars and researchers from the ecclesiastical and lay world engaged in research projects aimed at knowing, preserving and enhancing the cultural heritage of our Christian tradition and to share this knowledge with the community in order to activate a constructive path of approaching what has been handed down to us and that we must transmit to future generations. Thus was born the desire to activate a research program based on the meaning of religious cultural heritage and the significance it has assumed over time.

This academic journey was also created to begin a journey of shared and participated knowledge to enhance the “knowledge of meaning” of our heritage, well expressed by Pope Francis in his apostolic letter *Ad theologiam promovendam* (November 1, 2023) when he states that

[...] is fundamental, in the constant attention to the scientificity of theological reflection, transdisciplinary dialogue with other scientific, philosophical, humanistic and artistic knowledge, with believers and non-believers, with men and women of different Christian denominations and different religions. This will be able to happen by creating an academic community of shared faith and study that weaves a network of relationships with other formative, educational and cultural institutions and that knows how to penetrate, with originality and a spirit of imagination, into the existential places of the elaboration of knowledge, professions and Christian communities.

Starting from these basic principles, the program of the architectural restoration course thanks to a transdisciplinary support and a harmonious dialogue within the diocesan community, intended to analyze the expressive spheres proper to humanity that over the centuries and with diverse methods and criteria have allowed us to weave our history and represent it through the beauty of creativity.

With reference precisely to the concept of “creative beauty,” on June 23, 2023 Pope Francis during the meeting with artists for the 50th anniversary of the Vatican Museums’ collection of modern art stated that

[...] the artist has something of the Spirit to bring about harmony [...] True beauty, in fact, is a reflection of harmony. It is, if I may say so, the operative virtue of beauty. It is its underlying spirit, in which the Spirit of God, the great harmonizer of the world, acts. Harmony is when there are parts, different from each other, yet making up a unity, different from each of the parts and different from the sum of the parts.

This harmony, the result of diversity in unity (as musicians know so well), is what we hope for as a guide not only in the framework of the academic activities carried out at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Lomello but above all in the journey that sees us daily committed to knowing, enhancing and transmitting this extraordinary cultural heritage to others, so that future generations may also have the opportunity to enjoy this beauty. All this because we are simple and temporary custodians of goods that do not belong to us but that we have the obligation to protect and transfer to the future. All this because Faith and Culture are not two independent factors but rather in a relationship of mutual and constant dependence.

As John Paul II taught us, “A faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully received, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”

Meanwhile, the fact that the average degree of knowledge and awareness of the value of the treasure of faith on the part of even believers is increasingly asphyxiated, without vitality, without interest except for the materiality that the good represents and not for the meaning it contains and conveys, leads us on a path where Faith and Culture now seem to be resources that have evaporated altogether, supplanted by models and content proposed by a world that emphasizes first and foremost the centrality of the ego rather than the centrality of our experience of faith.

As the theologian Romano Guardini states in many of his writings, only the awareness of the strong reciprocity that exists between Faith and Culture can help the Christian to understand the sense and meaning of the places we often pass through unconsciously but this unconsciousness becomes awareness when in that very place we have experienced the existence of Christ, when in that place our life has been renewed by His presence and therefore when our existence becomes the experience of a great act of love (Paganelli 2005).

All this, however, imposes a long, complex and continuous educational and formative path that invests all the competencies of the Church (lay and ecclesiastical) capable of opening dialogues and accepting the challenges to which we are invited to give concrete and useful answers to the community without letting ourselves be disheartened by preconceptions and let ourselves be carried away by fear by prejudices, greed and hatred, gray and smoky judgments and dead ideas. Otherwise, we must walk together and light, with few but good baggage, ready to imagine a truly human and sustainable world and above all be able to face the debate of innovations; in fact, there is no Faith and there is no Culture without a subject capable of starting again, renewing itself from what constitutes it and gives it face within the reality in which it lives. And as St. Paul said (Paul's letter to the Galatians 2:1-21), "I live no longer I: it is Christ who lives in me."

All of this invites us to embrace the many challenges that every day place at the center the "processes, objectives and methods" by which we must learn to design and decline them in respect of territorial, hence local, policies. The many debates, both in the ecclesiastical and secular spheres, call attention to priorities related to social justice, welfare innovation, environmental sustainability, the centrality of families and schools, welcome, integration, work and life, active participation to caring for one's neighbor but there is also a lot of talk about the "meaning of human existence", and it is precisely on this point that we must all work together because the Church's cultural heritage is the result of the existence of humanity and its faith and where different ideas coexist integrating, enriching and enlightening each other. From everyone, as Pope Francis states in the Encyclical *Brothers All* (215), something can be learned, no one is useless, no one is superfluous. This means including and sharing for the future of the common good.

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Figure 6. Lomello. Facade, Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore

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