

Article

Food and Religion in Sicily—A New Green Tourist Destination by an Ancient Route from the Past

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Abstract: The *Francigena Way* (*Via Francigena*) is a long international itinerary that was awarded recognition as a Culture Route of the Council of Europe. It starts in Canterbury (UK), touches 13 European regions and ends in Rome. An ancient track of this route is in Sicily (Southern Italy), and its name is *Magna Via Francigena* (*Great Francigena Way*). This track is a pilgrimage route that connects two ancient port cities, Palermo and Agrigento, passing through internal rural territories that now deal with the exodus of population from rural to urban areas. The route passes through the Sicilian territory named “Upper-Belice corleonese”, a rural area around the city of Corleone (a little village known worldwide for the sad Mafia events) that includes a number of municipalities. In the past, this religious pilgrimage was a fundamental part of the expression of faith for Christians and now still represents for Sicilians a strong symbol of Christian identity. In recent decades, pilgrimage tourism around the world has grown significantly each year. The aim of the study is to know the pilgrims’ motivations for choosing the *Magna Via Francigena* pilgrimage as a vacation and any possible similarities between pilgrimage tourism and food and wine tourism, in the wider context of sustainable and slow tourism. The Policy Delphi method was applied to collect the opinions of the stakeholders involved. The study highlighted the strong link between religious motivations and local enogastronomy, culture, art and nature. Results will support policy-making in the development of integrated territorial tourist marketing strategies.

Keywords: pilgrimage tourism; rural tourism; food and wine tourism; green tourism; integrated territorial marketing



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1. Introduction

The UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) and other institutional or academic sources give several definitions of the tourist. According to these references, the tourist is “any person on a trip outside his/her own country of residence (irrespective of the purpose of travel and means of transport used, and even though s/he may be traveling on foot)”. Moreover, tourism comprises “the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes.” Also, tourism “refers to all activities of visitors, including both *tourists* (over-night visitors) and *same-day visitors*” [1].

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest growing sectors of the economy in the world. The number of international arrivals exceeded 1.6 billion in 2019, with a forecast of 1.8 billion by 2030 [2]. Religious tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the world tourism market. During the last decades there has been a growing trend for religious tourism in Italy. In fact, the Italian territory, with more than 100,000 churches and just over 1700 sanctuaries, accounts for more than 50 million visitors who travel every year to discover these places scattered throughout the country. Most of these visitors are pilgrims—both elderly and young people—who travel along routes and paths across

the Italian territory with specific motivations, sharing a desire for spirituality and social unity [3,4]. Religious tourism, particularly pilgrimage tourism, is a diversified type of tourism that links together devotional practice and cultural visits to places associated with folklore, food and wine, etc. It is important to point out that, along with itinerant pilgrimages, the so-called “static religious tourism” has also increased in recent years.

Pilgrimage sites are also important destinations for general heritage tourism. Despite their global importance and growing popularity, there is still a lack of knowledge about the complexity, multidimensionality, and diversity of journeys to pilgrimage centers.

Following the proclamation by the Italian Minister of Heritage and Cultural Activities, and Tourism (Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo—MiBACT) of 2016 as “The Year of Walks” [5], many Italian places typically unapproachable, and therefore not very attractive to tourists, became appealing new tourist destinations. Moreover, changes in people’s lifestyles and behaviors increased the desire to discover unknown places or routes far from the typical mass tourist destinations. Among the European Cultural Itineraries (1985), there is the *Francigena Way (Via Francigena)*, a long international itinerary that was awarded recognition as a Culture Route of the Council of Europe. Stretching from Canterbury to Rome, the Way crosses four countries: England, France, Switzerland and Italy, touching 13 European regions [5]. In Sicily (Southern Italy), there is the *Magna Via Francigena (Great Francigena Way)*, which is the last track of the *Francigena Way (Via Francigena)*, a pilgrimage route that has represented and still represents for Sicilians a strong symbol of Christian identity [6]. This route goes along rural territories that today face problems of depopulation (abandonment of the countryside) as a result of the economic crisis, historic centers and architecture scattered in the landscape [7,8]. This study focuses on the pilgrimage along the *Magna Via Francigena* in the Corleone area (Province of Palermo) of Sicily [7,9] a destination for pilgrims and hikers. The aim was to study the attractiveness of this pilgrimage inside the larger context of sustainable and slow tourism in the territory. Slow tourism is an approach to travel that promotes the quality and slowness of the tourist experience, as opposed to speed. The purpose of this research was to investigate the possibility of a correlation/interaction between the attractions of the *Magna Via Francigena* (in the territory of “Upper-Belice corleonese”, Corleone, Province of Palermo, Sicily, Southern Italy) as a tourist destination and the economic development of the surrounding rural territory. Using the Policy Delphi (PD) methodology [10,11], this study attempts to highlight the real opinion of stakeholders about this pilgrimage and provides solutions to enhance the development of this Sicilian disadvantaged area. In particular, the objectives were to identify the opinions of experts and stakeholders regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the pilgrimage along the *Magna Via Francigena* and the connections among the main and additional motivations to walk through this route and pilgrims’ behaviors. Moreover, the pilgrims’ motivations for choosing the *Magna Via Francigena* pilgrimage as a vacation and any possible similarities between pilgrimage tourism and enogastronomic tourism were investigated. We wanted to contribute in the context of religious tourism in order to design a better local tourist offer.

The Corleone area, which is along the *Magna Via Francigena* route, is rich in religious memories, agro-food traditions, and natural landscapes. Nowadays the local territorial administrations are developing territorial marketing projects and schemes to promote the history, landscape, and rural economy of the territory to enhance its attractiveness [12–14]. This is also demonstrated by the recent strategies adopted by territorial administrations that exploit the existing cultural heritage to promote the territory, i.e., the links between landscape, agriculture, quality food products, and tourism. In this sense, integrated territorial marketing, as a local development strategy [15], can use specific tools to enhance the tangible and intangible territorial heritage based on the “principles of Sustainable Tourism” to which the United Nations Organization specifically dedicated the year 2017. Findings may contribute to designing integrated tourist marketing strategies for the enhancement of this particular rural geographic area.

2. Conceptual Framework

Several studies conducted on religious tourism have explored the impacts of pilgrimage routes on various tourist destinations. Religious tourism combines faith, cultural heritage, typical food, and leisure [16–18], and it is one of the fastest growing and changing sectors of the world tourism market, also due to the changes in people’s lifestyles during the last decades [19]. In 1987 the European Council launched the European Cultural Routes program [20]. Today, the Enlarged Partial Agreement (EPA) on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, established in 2010, follows the guidelines of the European Council to determine the program strategy and award the certification of “European Council Cultural Routes” [20]. In particular, the EPA seeks to reinforce the potential of Cultural Routes for cultural cooperation, sustainable territorial development, and social cohesion, with a specific focus on themes of symbolic importance for European unity, history, culture, and values together with the discovery of less-known destinations. Another objective of the EPA is to protect and enhance cultural and natural heritage as a source for enhancing the quality of life and a source of social, economic, and cultural development; and to give high relevance to cultural tourism and especially sustainable tourism [20]. Representatives from ministries of member states join the Board of the EPA, which awards the certification “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” (the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, the European Commission, UNWTO, UNESCO and the OECD participate in its work). Nowadays 26 member states have joined the EPA.

Currently, there are 32 European Cultural Routes, and among them the Way of St. James of Compostela (France, Spain, and Portugal) and the Francigena Way (from Canterbury, England, to Italy) are the two most important pilgrimage routes in the Christian West [20]. There is no doubt that pilgrimages (examples of devotional and penitential pilgrimages) have historically represented one of the simplest and oldest examples of tourism. Both in Christianity and in Islam, there are famous historical pilgrimage destinations, e.g., the path of the Three Wise Kings, Jerusalem–Holy Land (Israel), Rome (Italy), Santiago de Compostela (Spain), Canterbury (UK), and the journey to Mecca for Muslims. However, even in the past, when Egyptians went to the temple of Menfi, this custom acquired a higher spiritual meaning, one innate to historical and artistic values [21].

The *Magna Via Francigena* in Sicily (Southern Italy) is an ancient major artery of communication that connected, in a north–south direction, Agrigento with Palermo, crossing the transhumance route toward the Madonie Mountains in the territory of *Corleone* and *Castronovo di Sicilia* (in the Province of Palermo). The *Magna Via Francigena* route begins at the Arab-Norman Cathedral in Palermo (UNESCO Heritage Site) and ends in front of the steps of the Cathedral of Saints Gregory and James, which welcomes pilgrims at the end of their 183 km journey. In 2019, 3500 visitors made the pilgrimage of the *Magna Via Francigena*: 89% Italian pilgrims, 8% German, French and from the UK, 2% from USA and Brazil. These pilgrims were mostly aged between 40 and 65 years old (60%) and 37% of them were female (63% males). This route connects two ancient port cities, Palermo and Agrigento, via a system of *trazzere*, i.e., ancient dirt tracks that link inland villages and passes through internal rural territories that now deal with the exodus from the countryside to urban areas, with consequent scattering in the agricultural landscape. For centuries, dominators who controlled the territory also controlled its communication routes, bridges, places of duty, and customs. Over the course of time, the *Magna Via* had many names that testified to the passage and control of people who came from afar. For the Romans, whose armies set their sights on Panormus in the 2nd century C.B., it was a place of great importance; the Roman consul Aurelius Cotta made the route easily accessible and fast. The Byzantines who, after the Ostrogoths, inherited these territories and established Sicily as the new province of the Eastern Roman Empire, considered this road as a strategic control point, for men and animals, and they referred to it as *odos basiliké*: the royal road. The Muslim power of Emirs and Caliphs set up their monumental and prestigious headquarters in Panormus and called it *Balarm*, while Agrigento, from then on named *Kirknt*,

remained the fort of the resistance to the invading Berber contingent. The Muslim conquest of Sicily and parts of southern Italy lasted 75 years. By the 7th century, the island had already suffered many Muslim incursions, after the Arabs had established themselves on the African side of the Mediterranean Sea. Having conquered part of Spain, the islands of Malta and Pantelleria, Sicily was considered strategic for the control of the Mediterranean at the expense of its Byzantine rivals. Islamic rule over Sicily began in 827 A.C. when Muslim ships sailed from Suso (Tunisia), today's Sousse, to Mazara del Vallo (TP). The Muslims conquered Sicily, removing it from the dominion of their great rival of the time: the Byzantine Empire. Replacing Syracuse, the Byzantine capital of Sicily, Palermo became the main city of Muslim rule on the island. The road linking the two strongholds would be called *tarik al askar*, the road of the armies, because of its importance for the territory's control by both the Byzantines and the Romans. Palermo, the main center of Muslim power in Sicily, fell in 1072, conquered by the Normans, who invaded Sicily in 1060, occupied *Balarn* (Palermo), converted the population to Christianity, and built hundreds of churches and abbeys throughout the territory, especially where pockets of Arab resistance were strongest, in the agricultural areas of Corleone and lower Agrigento. Finally at the end of the 12th century, under the Swabian court of Constance of Altavilla, wife of Emperor Henry VI and mother of Frederick II of Swabia, this route was named by its actual name (in Latin), i.e., "*Viam Magnam Francigenam Castrinovi*", now *Magna Via Francigena* [6].

The pilgrim and the classical tourist differ in their motivations for the journey and, consequently, the value given to the visited area is divergent [15]. Pilgrims face an intentional journey, limited in time, aimed at visiting new places different from their own homes; this phenomenon, which can be traced back to different lifestyles and behaviors, is increasingly directed toward a sustainable and responsible idea of tourism [22–25]. Although minimized in the past by religious institutions, in most places of pilgrimage today, the presence of "laypeople" has a similar if not greater importance than that of religious people [26,27]. Several authors have drawn attention to the fact that modern pilgrims are looking for "slow movement" and therefore seek tranquility while enjoying the gastronomy of the places visited [17,28]. With the appreciation of new types of tourism, such as sustainable and slow tourism, and wine and food tourism, ancient tourist destinations like pilgrimages become something more than a simple choice of faith. In fact, only a small percentage of pilgrimages nowadays are carried out for religious reasons. Recent surveys and interviews have shown how most pilgrims embark on a religious journey for reasons related to the search for a new, highly emotional holiday experience [4]: a new experience that fits perfectly with the so-called slow tourism, a type of travel that promotes the quality and slowness of the tourist experience, as opposed to speed.

Slow tourism is a new philosophy that focuses on the details and takes the tourist on a journey of discovery of hidden places, different cultures, and local products while respecting the environment; all of this is done calmly and slowly so as to capture every extraordinary detail, including the typical food products of a region [29–31].

Religious tourism is linked to "green" tourism and therefore fits very well with territorial strategies of local self-sustainable development, precisely in those economically disadvantaged areas with a very high tourism potential associated with religion (precious heritage of goods, architecture, culture, food, and wine) [8,23,32]. It is recognized that typical local food of a particular destination contributes to the overall satisfaction of the tourist experience [33–35]. Food is an essential element of the activities of religious and non-religious tourists, an integral part of their routine, considered significantly in their travel budget [36]. Variables such as foreign cuisine, different ways of preparing meals, typical local products, and ways of tasting food often fascinate visitors. These variables make the culture of the destination recognizable and consequently attractive to tourists [37–39].

3. Research Design and Methodology

The Delphi Method (DM) was developed in the 1950s in the USA in problem-solving studies and evaluation techniques focused on decision-making. The first research paper on

the Delphi methodology was published in 1963 after many years of experimentation in the research offices of the Rand Corporation [39].

The goals of the DM are to describe a variety of alternatives to a policy issue and to provide a constructive forum in which consensus may occur. The DM consists of exposing one or more topics to a panel of experts who are able to give precise evaluations, increasingly convergent with each other, assisted by a process of validation of the observations. During the various steps or rounds, researchers/observers give further information about the topic under review, leading to the manifestation of a unified group opinion [40,41].

The DM is a tool for qualitative analysis of a complex system that focuses on the extrapolation of awareness in a heterogeneous group of experts [42–44]. Rowe et al. [45] assumed that “the opinion of the group is better than the opinion of the individual.” The Delphi technique is a methodology typical of social research [46–48], which allows interviewing a selected group (also called a panel) of experts who are called to express in an anonymous way their opinions and views on a specific issue in order to validate some of them through mutual comparison and progressive sharing. The DM is often used in situations where there is a lack of consensus or agreement on the solutions to be adopted [48,49].

The main objective of the DM is the ability to reach the most valid consensual opinion in a group of experts [50]. It is a multistage process involving the initial measurement of opinions (first stage), followed by data analysis, design of a new questionnaire based on group response to the previous questions, and a second measurement of opinions [51,52]. In fact, as the communication process develops, always mediated by the interviewer, the judgments expressed by the group members, originally heterogeneous, gradually converge to a shared line of action. Following this methodology, the subjective opinion of the experts, progressively collected in the various phases, should not be considered as a simple sum of opinions, but rather as a sort of shared common project to be implemented [45,53]. For this reason, it is mainly used for the implementation of action strategies, to determine the possible measures to be chosen to solve a problem, assess their feasibility, and identify the pros and cons associated with this implementation [46,50,53,54].

However, in this method the opinion of the group is unknown to the group itself (unlike the Focus Group method), and each respondent answers anonymously without knowing the answers of the others. It is not the group that converges toward a shared opinion (different from the Focus Group), but the researcher who, by analyzing the answers of the various interlocutors, discovers the solution/opinion expressed by the majority of the experts interviewed. For these reasons, the DM assumes that the members of the panel of experts do not meet or know each other, and therefore they are consulted anonymously through written questions [42,46]. The reason for this lies in not convincing others with one’s own propositions and not influencing their judgment, which is a limitation of the Focus Group technique. Moreover, the Delphi technique is characterized by some fundamental aspects that differentiate it from the Focus Group. One of these is that the group of respondents can be a minimum of 6 persons to a maximum of 30, which is impossible in the Focus Group (due to its characteristic of having to start the discussion among participants around a table and with a moderator). Moreover, its use as a technique for interviewing a group of people makes it possible to avoid the organization of frequent face-to-face meetings and to obviate the need for limited time and high costs, in the event that experts are very busy and far away in terms of geographical location.

This technique envisages successive phases of data collection, characterized by the use of social research tools of various kinds (questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, etc.) and aimed at a progressive exploration and evaluation of the theme investigated. To this end, the interviewer has the task of mediating the comparison and evaluation of the opinions collected, favoring the synthesis of the judgments collected in each round with the results of the previous one (mediator). One main limitation of this method is the low involvement of all participants invited [10,49].

The methodology described above refers to the standard Delphi, where the panel is composed of experts, but this methodology can be omitted from the Policy Delphi variant (PD) where both stakeholders and policy-makers are involved and invited to evaluate future events that partly depend on their own actions [11,43,54].

The main features that distinguish PD from standard Delphi are:

1. a greater breadth and heterogeneity of the panel used, which also includes public administrators, political actors, business executives, etc., selected according to criteria of representativeness rather than technical expertise [10,40,51];
2. a different idea of consensus: the decision-maker should not have a unanimous opinion, but an exploded map of different points of view to choose from;
3. the articulation of the items into proposals, objectives, lines of action, the content of which can be completed by the participants themselves according to pre-established rules, and supported by arguments for or against;
4. the introduction of different evaluation criteria: in addition to the probability of realization of a given event or political decision, its desirability and feasibility are also assessed [51];
5. a more complex organizational structure.

Policy Delphi finds particularly interesting applications in the field of public decisions and in public administration, especially in the development of policies, for two reasons. The first is that it generates structured communication flows with very specific content and does not create a high redundancy of information, typical of emails, newsgroups, and forums, where the discussion often goes beyond the established themes. The second is that it provides the possibility of flanking the panel with other groups of participants who follow the proposals/opinions of the group of experts via the web and express their arguments, allowing decision-makers to share the exploratory phase of the decision-making process with self-selected groups of the population, thus giving rise to alternative forms of political participation.

As shown in Figure 1, the Policy Delphi method includes four phases.

Phase 1: Definition of the study's objects.

Phase 2: Choice of the reference panel of participants.

Phase 3: Two or more rounds of data collection (by the use of two or more questionnaires) and analysis of partial results.

Phase 4: Evaluation of results.

The concern was to focus on the *Magna Via Francigena* pilgrimage route in the Corleone area of Sicily, refs. [9,14], a tourist destination for faithful travelers. This area is rich in religious memories, agro-food traditions and natural landscapes. The aim was to analyze its attractiveness with regard to the larger context of an integrated tourist offer of sustainable and slow tourism in this territory. The objects of this research were the following. Firstly, to know the opinions of experts and stakeholders regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the pilgrimage along the *Magna Via Francigena* (in the territory of "Upper-Belice corleonese", Corleone, Province of Palermo, Sicily, Southern Italy). In addition, we wanted to know the motivations that drive tourists and pilgrims to walk this journey, paying particular attention to enogastronomy and the connections between pilgrimage and food. The interest in measuring how much the attractiveness of a pilgrimage would be influenced by the demand for other tourist attractions, such as culture, art, nature and, particularly, local food [11], was based on the assumption that the pilgrimage route could be considered a larger tourist offer as a unique and special tourist destination, thanks to proper marketing strategies.

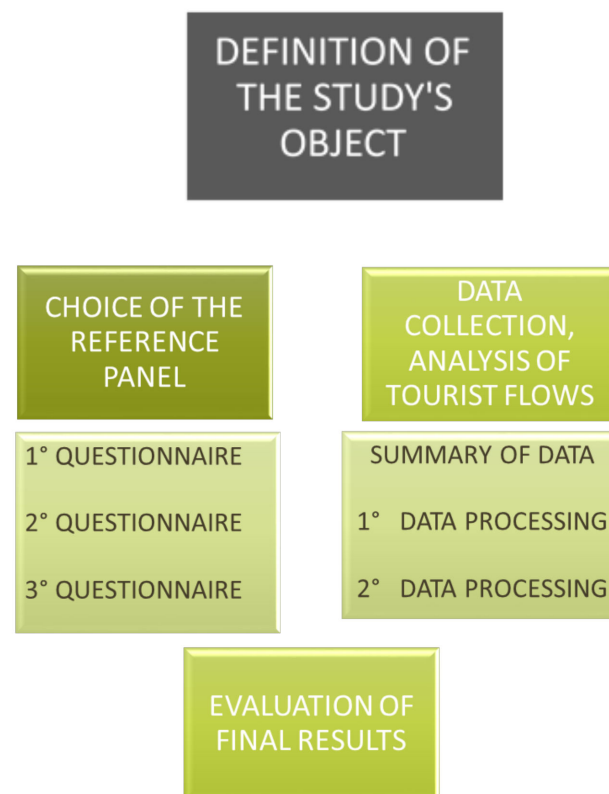


Figure 1. Policy Delphi method adopted.

3.1. Phase 1—Definition of the Study's Objects

Geolocation of the Study Area

The *Magna Via Francigena* crosses the route of the oldest “Roman Road” in Sicily, the Via Aurelia Palermo-Agrigento. The route starts at the Arab-Norman Cathedral in Palermo (UNESCO Heritage Site) and ends in front of the steps of the Cathedral of Saints Gregory and James in Agrigento, which welcomes pilgrims at the end of their 183 km journey. It connects two important, historically economic places located in the north and south of the island, which are Palermo and Agrigento. It covers the three provinces of Palermo, Caltanissetta, and Agrigento.

The Corleone territory is located in the innermost part of the island, poor in infrastructures and served essentially by state and provincial roads [9]. The island’s main infrastructures, such as ports, airports, train and bus stations, are over 50 km away. These distances have caused a large difference in economic development between coastal and inland areas over the years. Figure 2 shows the area under investigation that includes the pilgrimage of the *Magna Via Francigena* and the area of Corleone along the route [7]. The area is located in the central-western part of Sicily and is the epicenter for the main tourist centers in this part of the island. This area is classified a “fragile” rural area (i.e., economically poor, poorly built, with few services and infrastructure, and a prevalence of primary activities, small settlements, and large open spaces), according to the indicators applied by the EU in the Programming Documents [55,56]. Nevertheless, it is very important for the production of wine and other food products with quality certifications, such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG) [57]. These products with quality certifications contribute to the value of the so-called “Made in Sicily” brand worldwide and are well known to Italian and foreign consumers. Certainly, this is an inland area with potential for sustainable tourism. In fact, according to recent studies, sustainable tourism is an opportunity for inland areas to grow economically, and this can be the case for the micro-region of “Belice Corleonese” [9,15,23].



Figure 2. Route of the *Magna Via Francigena* in Sicily (from Palermo to Agrigento). Source: www.viefrancigenedisicilia.it/.

3.2. Phase 2—Choice of the Reference Panel of Participants

The choice of the suitable panel for this analysis is very crucial.

The participants in the PD process should be selected to represent a wide range of opinions. Depending on the policy issue area, the number and type of participants will vary. A typical PD sample size may range from 10 to more than 100 participants. In fact, as the complexity of the policy issue increases, the sample size needs to be larger to include the entire range of participants both for and against the policy issue area. The type of participants selected should include both formal and informal stakeholders with a vested interest in the policy issue. These participants should have varying degrees of influence, hold a variety of positions, and be affiliated with different groups.

For this study, it was desirable that the panel included members who could influence future decisions, at least partially. The panelists were representatives of communities and groups with different interests, like public administration managers, politicians, journalists, entrepreneurs, clerics, civil society representatives, pilgrims, and other stakeholders. Moreover, the panelists were selected in relation to the knowledge they had about rural tourism, pilgrimages, promotion of quality food, and, in addition, tourists/pilgrims were included.

To select the respondents according to the rationales described above professional networks and official databases were used to extract a stakeholders list. These individuals belonged to the following categories: university researchers, tour operators, tourist guides, landscape architects, pilgrims/tourists, clerics and policy-makers. From these lists, a sample was extracted using the stratified sampling method with random extraction from each homogenous stratum. The reference sample size was $n = 102$ potential respondents. A formal invitation was emailed to them to take part. All panelists remained anonymous during the phases of analysis and related feedback. In line with other Policy Delphi studies, there was a decline in participants between the first and second round [58]: 102 participants completed the first round of the survey—although participants sometimes skipped questions. More than a half ($n = 77$) also took part in Round 2. They were then given the opportunity to change their Round 1 response and offer any additional comments. Since a Policy Delphi does not seek to establish consensus, the process ends once views have been judged to have stabilized, which in this case occurred at the third round. At the end of the third round, the total number of participants was 53.

3.3. Phase 3—Rounds of Data Collection and Analysis of Data

The PD method may include several rounds in which different questionnaires are submitted to a panel and a feedback is given to the opinions collected. Each questionnaire is prepared based on the results of the previous one: in the initial round, the questionnaires used can be open-ended, as they aim to explore the general opinions on the main topics of the research, while in the subsequent rounds the questionnaires are closed-ended, as they aim to analyze and evaluate the aspects that have emerged. The results of each round are used to construct the subsequent questionnaires, and they are returned to the interviewees in a less general format to check the previous results.

Following literature, the number of rounds may range between two and five [59].

For this study, the opinions of the group were determined through a process of three interactions or rounds.

Although most applications of the PD method rely on written questionnaires, some use in-person individual or group interviews, phone or email interviews, or computer conferencing procedures. In this study, the email procedure was used in order to significantly reduce response times and postage costs.

For this study, the method consisted of three rounds; therefore, three proper questionnaires were prepared ad hoc and subsequently submitted to the panelists.

In particular:

1. Round 1 (questionnaire 1) consisted of general *topics* to discuss;
2. Round 2 (questionnaire 2) consisted of discussion about secondary topics with the aim to discover a set of *variables* that explained the phenomenon;
3. Round 3 consisted of highlighting forecasts, issues, goals, and options with regard to the variables discovered.

Round 1 aimed at opening, facilitating, and extending the discussion about specific topics and, consequently, identifying general opinions with regard to the Magna Via Francigena pilgrimage. In this round, the mediator has a crucial role. In fact, the researcher must analyze and bring together the different contributions received from a large group of participants in order to highlight the topics in which most individuals seem to be most interested.

The topics were developed through several months of desk-based research and collaboration between the authors, through advice and feedback at a project steering group, as well as a pilot phase.

In order to know the strengths, weaknesses, benefits, opportunities, and the actual potential of religious tourism to contribute to the economic enhancement of the investigated territory, the topics developed were the following [60]:

1. Conditions for the development of religious tourism in the area;
2. Organization of this territory for religious tourism;
3. Economic impacts of this pilgrimage and profitability;
4. Possibilities to enhance tourism in this area and integration with transports, hospitality, culture, and local enogastronomy;
5. Main motivations and additional motivations to walk this journey and pilgrims' behaviors;
6. Service deficiencies and opportunities for improvement.

The first questionnaire (for the first round) was divided into two parts. The first part was aimed at obtaining information about the panelists and carrying out a first socio-demographic analysis of participants. Moreover, the first part of the questionnaire was also aimed at knowing preferred tourist information channels, frequency of travels and trips during the year, booking methods and evaluation of some important components of religious tourism [61]. The second part of the first questionnaire investigated all the topics observed using general questions or statements that invited respondents to express their opinions about this pilgrimage [62].

For the questionnaire preparation, the Regional Strategic Plan 2019–2023 for the development of tourism in Sicily, where general objectives for the island's tourism sector are presented, was used as source of additional information with regard to religious tourism.

This round allowed us to obtain a list of secondary topics (outcomes) to be discussed in Round 2. Based on the secondary topics worked out from Round 1 (outcomes), a set of variables was derived/discovered.

The aim of Round 2 was to highlight cases of concordance/discordance of opinions with regard to the variables discovered at the end of Round 1. In this round respondents were asked to score the variables, presented in the form of statements, using a 5-point Likert scale with an additional option of "undecided/cannot say" [43,54,63]. For this round, another proper questionnaire was prepared.

In most studies using the Policy Delphi method, the change of opinion between the rounds (transitions) is assessed using qualitative methods [10,62,64,65]. Similarly to other studies, in this study transitions were analyzed using the de Loë's 2016 [63] qualitative method [64–68]. According to de Loë et al., Policy Delphi designs are intended to "identify opposing positions and opinions on policy questions" (de Loë et al., 2016, p. 79) [63], setting out the range of perspectives on a complex issue. For the quantitative Likert-scale data, we applied de Loë's (1995, p.62) [51] consensus measure in order to calculate the extent of consensus reached for each statement. As shown in Table 1, this allowed us to measure consensus on a scale between "none" and "high", depending on how the responses are spread across the categories (highly unlikely, unlikely, likely, or highly likely), taking into account that there are contiguous categories (i.e., highly likely and likely; or unlikely and highly unlikely) [47]. In this study a statement will have a "high" consensus score if 65 to 100% of the valid answers are in a single category, or if 80 to 100% of the valid answers are in two contiguous categories (e.g., likely and highly likely).

Table 1. Percentage used for measuring levels of agreement of respondents using the de Loë's method for measuring Delphi Survey consensus (de Loë, 1995).

Level of Agreement	% within One Category	% in Two Contiguous Categories
High	100–65	100–80
Middle	65–45	65–50
Low	45–20	45–30

Table 1 shows the percentage of consensus for each level of agreement in one category or in two contiguous categories that were considered in this study.

After having scored each variable, respondents had to explain the reasoning behind their score, possibly with reference to relevant supporting evidence. In this way, the survey captured the diversity of expectations among respondents and enabled us to understand the reasons and contingencies underlying these differences.

The aim of Round 3 was to converge toward more shared opinions about this tourist destination. To do so, the derived/discovered variables were clustered in four categories of items: forecast, issue, options, and goal. Participants were asked to judge the reliability of the information presented. For this round, a third questionnaire was prepared [66]. Forecast items provided the participant with a statistic or estimate of a future event. With regard to issue items, respondents had to score issues in terms of their importance compared to each other. Regarding options items, respondents identified the likelihood that specific options could be feasible policy goals. Finally, goal items elicited opinions about the desirability of certain policy goals.

For this round, a third questionnaire was prepared [66]. Particularly, respondents were asked to assess the likelihood of different propositions (statements) containing one variable each, using one of the four “three level” Likert-type scales used. The response choices for forecast items ranged from certainly reliable to unreliable. For issue items, response categories ranged from very important to unimportant. For option items, the range was from definitely feasible to definitely unfeasible. The response choices for goal items ranged from very desirable to very undesirable. Also in this round, the mediator’s activity is fundamental, as he/she had to periodically summarize the contents of the answers provided, manage the difference of opinions by clarifying the degree of agreement or disagreement among the participants about some issues and at the same time trying to reduce the distance between divergent positions.

Data processing was carried out in order to obtain optimal results [53] using SPSS v.21 and NVIVO 11 statistical software packages.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the sample units’ distribution with respect to the main socio-demographic variables.

Respondents during Round 1 were 52% female and 48% male, and this balance remained very similar from Round 1 to Round 3. The balance among the age ranges also was maintained during the three rounds, except the particular case of Round 3 where 34% were <30 years old; it is important to highlight that these millennials had a high education level: PhD, MSc/MBA or at least Bachelor’s degree. However, mean and median values were around the central value of the distribution.

At Round 1, there was a higher variability in the category of education level with respect to Round 3. Nevertheless, a similar proportion between the groups “Undergraduate/Bachelor” and “MSc/MBA/PhD/other” remained, comparing Round 1 (64%/36%) with Round 3 (74%/26%), even if at Round 3 there was a higher percentage (+10%) of respondents with a higher education level.

The largest group of respondents were pilgrims or tourists of the Magna Via Francigena (49%, Round 1, 39% Round 2, and 30% Round 3). Nevertheless, the incidence of this category of stakeholders from Round 1 to Round 3 decreased (from 49% to 30% of the final sample) while that of researchers, tourist guides, and policy-makers increased moderately. Little increase was observed in other categories of stakeholders to offset the overall decrease in tourists.

Table 2. Demographic summary of respondents ($n_1 = 102$; $n_2 = 77$; $n_3 = 53$).

Category	Response Option	Round 1		Round 2		Round 3	
		Counts	%	Counts	%	Counts	%
Gender	Female	53	52%	41	53%	27	51%
	Male	49	48%	36	47%	26	49%
Age (years)	<30	26	25%	21	27%	18	34%
	30–39	13	13%	11	14%	8	15%
	40–49	23	23%	16	21%	11	21%
	50–59	30	29%	22	29%	10	19%
	>60	10	10%	7	9%	6	11%
Education	Undergraduate	15	15%	12	16%	21	40%
	Bachelor	50	49%	37	48%	18	34%
	MSc/MBA	4	4%	3	4%	3	6%
	PhD	10	10%	9	12%	7	13%
	Others	23	23%	16	21%	4	8%
Experience in tourism sector (years)	never	60	59%	48	62%	23	43%
	5–10	27	26%	15	19%	16	30%
	11–19	10	10%	9	12%	9	17%
	>20	5	5%	5	6%	5	9%
Stakeholders	Pilgrim/tourist	50	49%	30	39%	16	30%
	Cleric	5	5%	3	4%	3	6%
	Researcher	9	9%	8	10%	8	15%
	Tour operator	10	10%	13	17%	7	13%
	Tourist guide	8	8%	7	9%	6	11%
	Local entrepreneur	10	10%	8	10%	5	9%
	Policy maker	5	5%	5	6%	5	9%
University student	5	5%	3	4%	3	6%	

Source: Our elaboration on direct survey.

The first round of analysis highlighted the characteristics of this tourist destination based on the six topics developed. The vast majority of pilgrims stated that they had walked the *Magna Via Francigena*, taking an average of 10 days to complete it (from north to south), visiting the municipalities along the route. This time was confirmed also by the other categories of respondents according to their knowledge and competences.

Among the preferences given to pilgrimage attractiveness, the most important attractions of this destination appeared to be the cultural ones, such as monuments, churches, and places of artistic interest in general. Moreover, in their comments, participants emphasized the strong link they experienced between nature, agriculture, local food, and territory [69]. The main motivation for this journey/destination was religious interest; nevertheless, the possibility to enjoy all features of this pilgrimage (nature, agriculture, local food, and territory) was the strong secondary motivation. In particular, with regard to agriculture a specific consideration should be made. The need to balance the daily routine of urban life with the quiet of a rural territory is the opportunity for the agricultural system to satisfy a demand for recreational, wellness, and environmental services, in addition to the primary offer/supply of food. Agriculture opens up to the direct use of services and, in some cases, to direct contact with the consumer. A different declination, but based on the same assumptions, is the orientation toward quality productions and, in particular, to those of territorial value (both typical products and those with designation of origin), which rise to the role of icons of rurality and a means of communication between man and the territory mediated by food.

Some of the most relevant comments are transcribed as follows.

The tourist communication evokes an inseparable (and sometimes unconscious) link with the quality of local food, using advertising campaigns that empathize the qualitative and organoleptic uniqueness of a product in its place of origin. It is therefore important to

invite (directly or implicitly) the pilgrims-consumers-tasters to transform themselves into virtual or real travelers in the terroirs of production. (Owner)

The pleasantness of the walk was fostered by the wonderful welcome of the local people, by having the opportunity to meet other pilgrims along the way, and by the magnificence of the places and the landscape. (Pilgrim)

[. . .] the link between the pilgrimage and the area has a very important influence on the choice of the tourist offer. (Researcher)

The activities of religious tourism intertwine with other sectors, such as the possibility to taste quality food and wine in their area of production [70]. This is thanks to events aimed at enhancing local activities, and along the journey pilgrims go to restaurants, wine bars, and museums and attend festivals, events, courses, workshops, farmers' markets etc. Moreover, they stop at small villages along the way and spend the night there, using accommodation facilities and services and visiting other centers of interest, typical of a religious tourist destination [71].

In a context that is traditionally characterized by a strong religious and gastronomic identity (Sicily), the primary aim must be to be recognized as standing out from the competition. (Researcher)

The tourist-religious attraction can be the element around which to develop strategies to relaunch an already developed religious location in need to re-position itself in an innovative and competitive way from the tourist point of view. (Tour operators of the religious sector)

A statement shared by the panel was that “territorial heritage and tangible and intangible assets must necessarily become the object of more targeted policy actions”. Only in this way can these assets be the chosen tool to strengthen the local project of enhancing the territorial heritage: resources, vocations, and territorial agricultural productions.

Regarding the factors considered important for the success of the pilgrimage route and the area, the panelists said:

The pilgrimage is not simply a journey, but a real path of discovery, from the artistic centers to the coastal landscapes, from the scent of typical products to the social bonding with people who animate it. (Cleric)

Most of the opinions maximized the link between religious tourism and the qualities of the landscape in which it is embedded:

Promoting a pilgrimage is like promoting an entire geographic area, these are two sides of the same coin. (Pilgrim)

Finally, with regard to the issue of integrated tourism development, the majority of respondents answered as follows:

Pilgrims (visitors and tourists) are a very important resource for our island, and even more so for this territory. They know our land and convey our history. At the same time, their presence gives the possibility to many small local accommodation and catering facilities to work and this is not always easy in rural areas that would hardly be reached by simple tourists. (Entrepreneur)

This is an important opportunity for tourism that should be encouraged even more by the Municipalities and the Region. (Local administrator)

According to the panelists, the relationship between pilgrims and the route with its heritage (landscape, culture, typical food products, etc.) had not a merely aesthetic value, but was a complex system of material and immaterial elements able to attract even non-religious tourists and visitors.

The first round of the analysis allowed highlighting the most relevant outcomes. These outcomes were observed and finally a set of variables that summarized the output of Round 1 (Table 3) was derived. The 16 variables derived/discovered were subsequently

categorized using the categories chosen for this study, which are: forecast, issue, option and goal (Table 3). Forecast means “reliability”, being confident that something can be implemented, and expressing the likelihood of it being accomplished. Issue represents the themes of greater importance in the pilgrimage, the content that underlies the choice of this type of destination; more generally, we mean the reasons for the journey. Option is related to “feasibility”, viability, possibility of being realized. Finally, goal is “desirability”, what is considered useful and vital, crucial, fundamental.

Table 3. Outcomes and variables resulting from Round 1, with each category if items.

n.	Outcomes from Round 1 (Secondary Topics)	Variables Derived/Discovered	Categories
1	Customer satisfaction Customer experience	Pilgrim satisfaction	forecast
2	Religious beliefs	Spirituality	issue
3	Cultural heritage Natural heritage	Cultural heritage	issue
4	No negative impact on the environment Health and relaxation	Natural heritage	issue
5	Tourism and social network	Pilgrimage promotion by social network	options
6	Festivals, Tastings, Folk culture Exchange locals/visitors	Festivals, Tastings, Folk culture	forecast
7	Family/religious groups Reciprocity/mutuality Trust	Social bonding between pilgrims and local community	options
8	Local culture and products	Local culture and local quality food products	issue
9	Infrastructure	Infrastructure	goal
10	Tradition Cultural background	Preserving tradition	goal
11	Public policy and plans Government policies	Government policies to enhance tourism and tourism certification	goal
12	Economic and social development Cooperation for mutual benefit	Economic and social development	goal
13	Employee benefits Human resources Relationship with agricultural farms	Relationship with agricultural farms	forecast
14	Social networks	Effective communication of the pilgrimage	options
15	Unconventional tourist routes Knowledge of the territory	Unconventional tourist routes	forecast
16	Affordable accommodation Guided tours	Guided tours	options

Source: Our elaboration on direct survey.

Among the outcomes from Round 1, creating parking spaces, providing a comfortable resting place, facilitating the exchange of ideas, interacting with people, disseminating information through totems, and improving transportation did not arise, unlike in other studies [72]. However, this can be explained by the particular territory and the particular type of religious tourism observed, which is a pilgrimage on foot, along an ancient route that crosses rural territories and passes through small villages in the interior areas of the region.

During Round 2 respondents were asked to give a score to the 16 variables derived from Round 1. The respondents had the possibility to return to their evaluations, review the results and correct them, until the final evaluation.

Figure 3 shows the different percentages of appreciation expressed by the panel for the importance of the 16 variables identified.

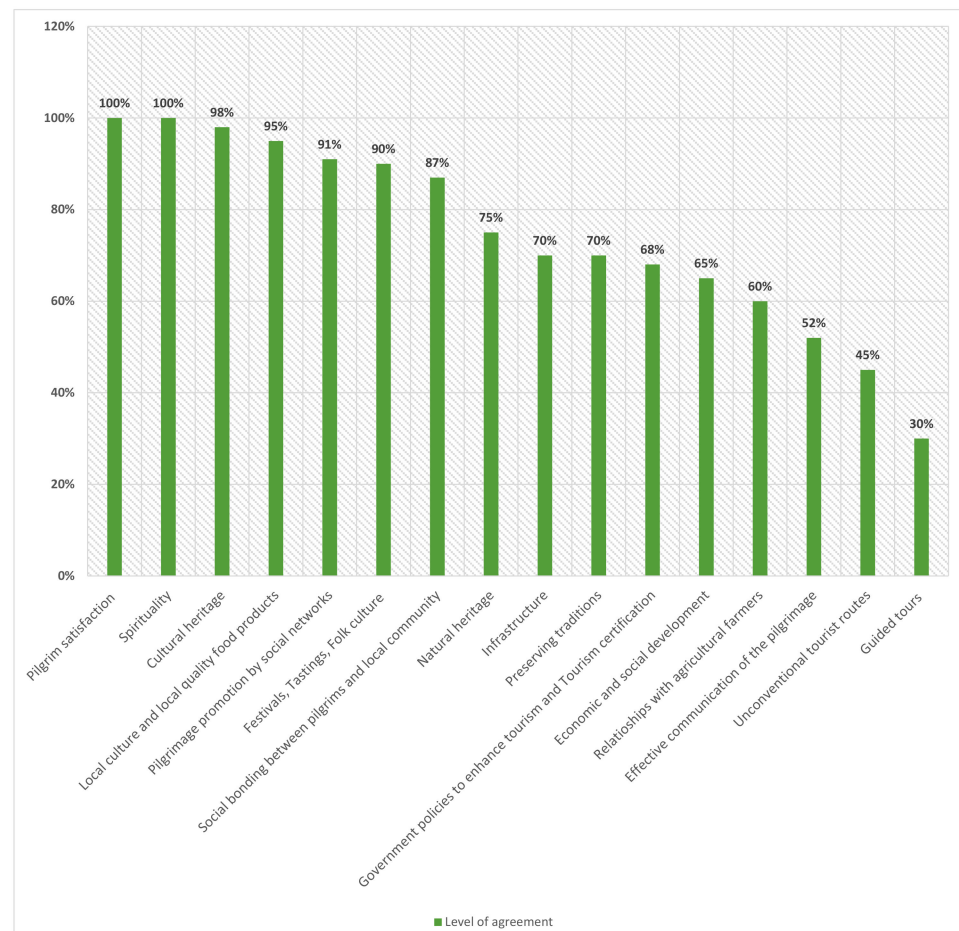


Figure 3. Percentage of appreciation of the relevant variables according to the stakeholders.

Pilgrim satisfaction and *Spirituality* were considered the most important drivers for pilgrimage, according to 100% of respondents. A very high level of agreement was achieved for *Cultural heritage* (98%) and *Local culture and local quality of food products* (95%). It is interesting to point out that these elements are strictly connected to *Pilgrimage promotion by social networks* (91%) and *Festivals, Tastings, Folk culture* (90%). This confirmed that culinary aspects, like the experience of tasting local wines and food prepared with local traditional recipes, are very important for this type of tourist [32,71,73], whose behavior is very similar to that of wine tourists.

These features showed a tourist profile similar to that of the enogastronomic tourist, which led us to think about a model of religious-cultural tourism where territorial traditions are very important. This is a system of relations among different resources (agro-food quality products, cultural and environmental heritage, tangible and intangible assets, reproducible and non-reproducible resources) that bases the key elements of territorial strategies and economic development in traditions. In fact, *Preserving traditions* (70% of agreement) is a concept that encompasses *Social bonding between pilgrims and local community* (87%), *Natural heritage* (75%), and infrastructures.

Round 3 allowed highlighting the opinions of stakeholders with regard to the four categories of variables discovered, as show in Table 4. This was an attempt to evidence the main issues of this pilgrimage, the main desired goals, the possible activities to improve this destination, and the connections between all these elements. Thanks to these findings, it will be possible to describe a complete scenario and suggest actions and strategies to improve the strengths and reduce the weaknesses of this particular tourist destination.

Table 4. Variables for each category with evaluations by stakeholders.

Forecast—Reliability											
<i>Pilgrim satisfaction</i>			<i>Festivals, Tastings, Folk culture</i>			<i>Relationship with agricultural farmers</i>			<i>Unconventional tourist routes</i>		
Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%
Very reliable	23	43%	Very reliable	45	85%	Very reliable	34	64%	Very reliable	18	34%
Reliable	18	34%	Reliable	6	11%	Reliable	6	11%	Reliable	19	36%
Unreliable	12	23%	Unreliable	2	4%	Unreliable	13	25%	Unreliable	16	30%
Issue—Importance											
<i>Spirituality</i>			<i>Cultural heritage</i>			<i>Local culture and local quality food products</i>			<i>Natural heritage</i>		
Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%
Very important	33	62%	Very important	48	91%	Very important	50	94%	Very important	46	87%
Important	5	9%	Important	5	9%	Important	3	6%	Important	6	11%
Unimportant	15	28%	Unimportant	0	-	Unimportant	0	-	Unimportant	1	2%
Options—Feasibility											
<i>Pilgrimage promotion by social networks</i>			<i>Social bonding between pilgrims and local community</i>			<i>Effective communication of the pilgrimage</i>			<i>Guided tours</i>		
Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%
Very likely	28	53%	Very likely	25	47%	Very likely	16	30%	Very likely	16	30%
Likely	15	28%	Likely	18	34%	Likely	24	45%	Likely	26	49%
Unlikely	10	19%	Unlikely	10	19%	Unlikely	13	25%	Unlikely	11	21%
Goal—Desirability											
<i>Infrastructure</i>			<i>Government policies to enhance tourism and tourism certification</i>			<i>Preserving traditions</i>			<i>Economic and social development</i>		
Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%	Response	N.	%
Very desirable	50	94%	Very desirable	46	87%	Very desirable	28	53%	Very desirable	10	19%
Desirable	3	6%	Desirable	7	13%	Desirable	25	47%	Desirable	42	79%
Undesirable	0	-	Undesirable	0	-	Undesirable	0	-	Undesirable	1	2%

Source: Our elaboration on direct survey.

Findings clearly showed that effective destination management must pay attention to issues of sustainability, accessibility, rationalization, and utilization of a location's tourism resources [74–76].

5. Discussions and Conclusions

The religious itinerary—the pilgrimage—has always represented a fundamental part of the manifestation of faith in Sicily. The tourist/pilgrim is the main stakeholder of a pilgrimage route, he/she is a particular visitor who is driven by faith or curiosity to know sacred places belonging to different religions and undertakes this type of walk along which he or she has also the possibility to carry out other desired activities [77]. Among the “European Cultural Itineraries” (1985), the *Magna Via Francigena* passes along Sicilian rural territories that today face problems of depopulation as a result of the economic crisis, population decline, and abandonment of the countryside [7,8], but it is a territory of great importance for the production of high quality food and wines with quality certifications.

This paper highlighted the relationship between religious tourism and local enogastronomy. Enogastronomy is one of the driving sectors of Italian tourism; according to much

research it is estimated that about one tourist out of four decides to visit Italy because of food and wine. Additionally, the Mediterranean diet is one of the major attractions of tourism from all over the world [78]. Typical and traditional Italian products such as pasta, pane (artisan/homemade bread), parmesan cheese, buffalo mozzarella, pizza, prosciutto di Parma (Parma ham), and many other products contribute to the success of Italian food worldwide, helping to reduce the risk of food counterfeiting [73,78]. Moreover, with a great variety and choice of quality wine certifications, for example, Nero d'Avola DOC (Sicily), Barolo DOCG (Piedmont), Chianti DOCG, and Brunello di Montalcino DOC (Tuscany), Amarone della Valpolicella DOCG (Veneto), Primitivo di Manduria DOC (Apulia), the Italian offer of food and wine is truly incomparable [57].

This study, based on a Policy Delphi analysis, Refs [10,53] highlighted a common vision of all the stakeholders surveyed about the relationship between this tourist destination—the pilgrimage of the *Magna Via Francigena*—and food as a supplementary offer of the territory. The results of this empirical study indicate that religious tourism and food tourism have a lot in common. The deep link between history, religion, and local culture, between the sense of collective belonging and local identity, generates positive externalities for the territory [15,26,27,29].

According to results, there is a “desire to undertake a cultural journey” (*Local culture and products*), which means to discover the culture that has characterized the evolution of a population during the centuries and that has its expression in the artistic and architectural forms as well as in its food. Results show that pilgrims love to stop along the way and taste typical local products in the company of other travelers or local people: food and religion are correlated and similarly attractive in the pilgrimage. The consumption of typical food products in the destination area builds a stronger social bond between tourists (non-resident) and locals (resident), develops tourists' knowledge of the local cuisine, and brings with it strong cultural and symbolic meanings [33,34]. Moreover, results highlighted that traditional and quality food is considered healthy by consumers because it is prepared using ancient recipes and traditional procedures and processes of preparation; therefore, traditional local food is largely and highly appreciated by foreign and domestic tourists [73].

It is interesting to note that both tour operators and clerics said that they feel that those who choose this type of holiday are looking for deep inner values to rediscover spirituality, thought, and reflection. The pilgrimage means being able to overcome geographical boundaries and distances, an opportunity to meet people coming from other cultures and countries with different background and interests. This study confirms previous research [3,4] highlighting the opportunity given by pilgrimages to people coming from different cultures to exchange experiences, share faith, values and symbols, enjoy and benefit from the typical characteristics of rural tourism.

Moreover, recent studies have stated that the preference for green and slow tourism has increased, in contrast to the past when mass tourism destinations were preferred [74]. This may be explained also by a slow transition process that goes from the need to appear to that of being. Moreover, the progressive, increasing social interest in environment protection and consumption reductions has considerably influenced people's behaviors [23]. It can be said, ultimately, that religious tourism is a multiple emotional experience. It is combined of different elements that all together constitute the final tourist offer to pilgrims. These elements are, first of all, faith and religion, followed by nature, food and wine, history, and art and culture [20,22,23,77]. Rural villages still constitute a special social and economic experimentation that is oriented toward offers of seasonal residence as an alternative to city life (a key determinant for sustainable tourism) and that supports quality agricultural production (bio-agriculture) [79]. This is confirmed by the current strategies of integrated tourism development of the Regional Administration that outline the so-called “integrated relational tourism”. The integrated relational tourism has the objective of defining a strategic reference framework related to tourism. It is focused on the discovery, interpretation, and support of the relational nature of the human person as a driving force for the creation and animation of thematic routes. In this way, the Sicilian rural villages are

connected by paths of soft mobility and the strengthening and renewal of the existing road network. According to this vision, tourism is intertwined with agriculture. Therefore, the “agricultural” green takes on other meanings that give it an added value, compared to the real estate investments, as alternatives to the failure of traditional agriculture. It is a niche tourism in Sicily, but it can be a stable territorial presidium in contrast to the abandonment of agricultural land. A tourism made of quiet or silence offers the possibility to capture the beauty of landscapes and of values of country life.

Another important finding is that—besides religion and nature—pilgrims and other stakeholders revealed the importance of enogastronomy. Similarly, pilgrimage tourism and wine and food tourism bring visitors to natural contexts hardly accessible, although more and more attractive, compared to common mass tourist destinations. This could be a starting point for future studies on motivations for tourists to choose this particular destination and for successful territorial marketing strategies. The large and diversified Sicilian tourist offer made to local and international tourists of seasonal and deseasonalized tourism, sea and mountain tourism, religious, green and sustainable tourism, wine tourism, and art cities, involves different types of organizations, private and public entities. The challenge is to develop a tourism supply chain able to provide added value to these particular destinations (pilgrimages) [54], and also to drive the economic development of other closely related sectors and activities like agriculture, trade, etc. Moreover, the discovered 16 variables helped to identify the key elements that add value to the pilgrimage [72]. Quality food (with certifications like Protected Origin Denomination), tourism, and nature [57] are important levers for the sustainable development of the rural area investigated. Indeed, the study highlighted that small territories may promote their tourist destinations by re-evaluating the correlation among all components [69]. In this vision, tourism becomes a catalyst for a number of peculiar territorial elements: extended cities, landscape archaeology, rural villages, quality agriculture and food, sustainable tourism, social-identity values, physical and non-physical relationships between coastal and inland areas. All these elements represent the “Integrated Relational Tourism” [79]. According to this new approach of territorial planning, each component will contribute to the enhancement of the territory and the economic growth of local firms.

These findings may be a good opportunity for valuing rural areas that are difficult to reach. Large areas of Sicily, thanks to the harshness of the mostly mountainous territory, which has prevented its exploitation (not surprisingly, the coastal areas are much more compromised), and the particular ecological richness, retain a natural capital likely to support development paths [79] based on quality and to offer hospitality to man.

Therefore, policy-makers should exploit and change the weaknesses of a fragile/rural territory into strengths, thus enhancing its sustainable economic development. The strength of a heritage made of religion, landscape, environment, food and wine is due to its exclusivity and non-reproducibility of resources [8,32]. Communities must regain their identity, the historical and landscape heritage to which they are heirs and witnesses, especially in a fragile and suffering context. A change must occur in the concept of traditional tourism that allows the survival of weak and marginal areas [80]. This approach will stimulate a multidisciplinary discussion aimed at an innovative alternative to an integrated relational territorial development. This development is autochthonous and self-managed, wherein not only the users can change their actions and their “modus operandi”, but also the territory itself becomes the object/subject of changes. These changes can allow the territory to strengthen its specific landscape, cultural, productive, and social identities.

Ultimately, it is important to focus on brand destination and marketing activities, in order to define models for managing and the guarantee of territorial brands, and for qualifying religious tourist itineraries. Therefore, local administrators should promote growth as coordinated and shared as possible with various local authorities and private individuals, to overcome the fragmentation that limits it and to define a systematic organization.

The analysis has potential application in other similar contexts and territories [81]. Moreover, results can be a good starting point for future research in the field of slow,

rural, and pilgrimage tourism. Following the principles of sustainable tourism—to which the United Nations Organization dedicated the year 2017—these findings suggest that integrated territorial marketing as a local development strategy [15] will help to enhance the resources (tangible and intangible) of a small territory.

This research is a first exploratory study that suggests a new integrated approach of territorial planning based on the relationship between pilgrimages and typical local food products.

Despite some limitations of this paper, which need to be improved, it is important to notice that there are no external factors that influence negatively the choice of a pilgrimage as a tourist destination, such as economic situations, global pandemics, etc. Therefore, this study is another contribution to the investigation of tourists' motivations and their behavior. It is recommended to further explore this topic with different methodologies and larger samples. Moreover, this paper can be of interest not only in the tourism literature but also for religious institutional stakeholders. In fact, for example, given the decline in church attendance or the sale of convents and other heritage structures of the Christian Catholic Church, other stakeholders, including clergy, may also be interested in ways to market this religious heritage, considering the importance, also economic, of this particular form of tourism.

Finally some considerations about the actual situation of religious tourism. Religious tourism and food tourism are significant sources of income for many tourist destinations in Sicily (and others) [36]. The relevance of the findings of this study are very pertinent in this COVID-19 context as they can give some suggestions for local destination marketing planning. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, mass religious tourism was banned. After more than a year of pandemic crisis, religious tourism is still limited, and related sectors are struggling to recover [82]. Nevertheless, this pandemic significantly changed some of the tourists' needs. People are now looking for vacations in the open air, surrounded by nature, in healthy places with clean air that are not crowded. Tourists look for destinations where they can relax, play sports, eat and taste new foods, often outside the cities and far from the virus. In this new scenario, pilgrimage tourism along routes immersed in nature, walking tourism, slow, green and sustainable tourism will be increasingly appreciated. Therefore, this is another opportunity for the pilgrimage of the *Magna Via Francigena* studied in this research and for all the other routes, both in Italy and abroad, to develop further.

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