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Ecclesiastical Museums and the Pontifical Letter on Its Pastoral Functions

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Abstract: The Catholic Church arrogates a long tradition of protecting and using heritage to complement its evangelisation ministry from the medieval ecclesiastical treasures included in museology proto-history. While these treasures have adopted museographic features, other typologies of ecclesiastical museums have appeared, demanding regulations that could orient their activities. After the Second Vatican Council, the Church became increasingly focused on guaranteeing a worthy destination for the objects left over from worship. In 2001, the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church published the Circular Letter *The pastoral function of ecclesiastical museums*, establishing that the ecclesiastical museum is an adequate solution for these objects, keeping them close to the cultural group of origin and providing continuity to its original catechetical function. Two decades later, a critical analysis of the Letter is proposed in the theoretical frame of museum studies. Considering the recovery object's original meaning in the museum discourse, the connection to territory, and the interaction with the plural and heterogeneous audience, the conformity of the Letter with the museum theory is underlined. With a focus on its general accuracy, the aim of this study is to evaluate how the Letter remains actualised and adapted to contemporaneity in addition to the challenges and transformations now faced by museums.

Keywords: Catholic Church; ecclesiastical museums; museology of religion; museum studies; religious heritage

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1. Introduction

In 2001, the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church (PCCHC 2001) sent the catholic bishops the Circular Letter, *The pastoral function of ecclesiastical museums*. The ecclesiastical museum was defined as 'a place that documents not only the human genius but also offers an insight into the cultural and religious life in order to guarantee its existence at the present time' (PCCHC 2001, sec. Introduction), outlining its role for the care, valorisation, and promotion of their collections. The importance of this document is linked to high significance of the religious heritage within the global cultural heritage and, in particular, the Catholic heritage prominent in Southern European countries.

Throughout centuries, Catholic Church art patronage fulfilled a fundamental role in the development of art by establishing forms, contents, and meanings and simultaneously functioned as a proof of wealth and social status and as an instrument of power and propaganda. However, from the evolution of modern European nations, the secularisation of public life, and the rise of the art market, the role of the Church in commissioning works of art and its collection has broken down.

In the second half of the 20th century, and during the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church called for art and architecture simplification, austerity, and a decorative stripping of religious spaces. These orientations imply the disaffection of many works of art and artefacts in disuse. A museological destiny appeared as an appropriate solution for their protection, avoiding the risks of damage and loss. While considering that the Church mission is not focused on the preservation or interpretation of cultural heritage but

evangelisation, the Circular Letter proposed the ecclesiastical museum as a way to valorise art and use it for a pastoral purpose.

Two decades after the Circular Letter, it is considered appropriate to reflect on the relevance of their principles and impact, evaluating how it refers to the museological theory and practices. The aim is to analyse the Circular Letter in the light of current museum studies, describing their essential concepts, emphasising those more remarkable by their updating and innovating features, and verifying eventual gaps. Although studies focusing on the Circular Letter are scarce, the text by Marta Tigano (2021), with an analysis of the impact of the principles stated therein and the role of ecclesiastical museums in contemporary society, and that of Domenica Primerano (2020), former President of the Association of Italian Ecclesiastical Museums (AMEI) (2015–2020), stand out, analysing the museum's mission from this document and Pope Francis' message to the private audience granted access to AMEI on 24 May 2019.

The internal analysis of the document is complemented by bibliographical research on religious museum studies. The theoretical frame about museums of religion is based on the works of Crispin Paine (Buggeln et al. 2017; Paine 1999, 2013, 2019), Françoise Mairesse (2003, 2014), and Maria Isabel Roque (2011, 2013, 2020) as well as the proceedings of the 41st Symposium organised by ICOFOM under the general theme 'Museology and the Sacred' (Mairesse 2018), held in Tehran on 15–19 October 2018, and the ICOFOM Study Series special issue 'Museology and the sacred' (Mairesse 2019). In a broader view of the mission, management, fruition, and connection to the territory of ecclesiastical museums, and with the benefit of including case studies, there is also the work edited by Sibilio and Matacena (2021).

This paper is structured into three parts: the first, introductory, aims to briefly present the ecclesiastical heritage and the collecting history within Catholic Church; the second begins with an introductory note about the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican to contextualise the descriptive presentation of the Circular Letter *The pastoral function of ecclesiastical museums*, following its structure; and in the third, the document guidelines are discussed in terms of current museology.

2. Historical Context of Ecclesiastical Heritage and Collecting within the Catholic Church

The recognition of Christianity as religio licita by the Edict of Milan in 313 allowed the public and triumphant exteriorisation of the cult (Drake 2012). Emperor Constantine initiated a vast programme of temple construction in Rome and the Holy Land, providing them with dignified furnishings, such as chalices and patens in precious metals and rich altar adornments. At the same time, Saint Helena, Constantine's mother, converted to Christianity and began a pilgrimage to the holy places in Palestine, where tradition attributes the inventio (Jensen 2017), or discovery, of the site of the crucifixion, whose relics she brought back to Rome. Religious relics of saints and martyrs constitute the starting point for the constitution of medieval ecclesiastical treasures whose dominant value is of a spiritual order, such as thesaurus gratiarum. However, allied to this was the patrimonial and artistic value of the reliquaries and the church's set of tools and vestments, constituting a treasure in a literal sense (Cordez 2005, p. 57), which contributed to consolidating the concept of interdiction. Brief apparitions, either in liturgical use or in a sporadic presentation to the admiration and veneration of the faithful, contribute to underlining the intrinsic condition of the separation due to the sacred things. The ecclesiastical treasures fulfilled inventory, reserve, preservation, and exhibition tasks that, as we say today, are inherent to museological activities. They are, therefore, not only an obligatory reference in the proto-history of museology but also the historical background of ecclesiastical museums.

During the Renaissance, the classical influence, conveyed by the humanist current, stimulated the taste for collecting genuine works or replicas from antiquity, paintings, sculptures, and exotic materials in the cabinets of curiosities. In the Capitol of Rome, Pope Sixtus IV founded the Antiquarium with a precious collection of ancient sculptures

that he offered to the city's people (Jacks 1993). Pope Julius II exhibited his collection of classical art at the Vatican (Piana 2020). Papal collecting stimulated the development of other ecclesiastical collections that functioned as a sign of dignity and prestige and a privileged instrument in searching for knowledge. However, these artistic collections are not distinguished from the royal or aristocratic collections of the time, where, except for iconography, there are no objects of a religious matrix (Roque 2011).

In the 18th century, Pope Clement XIV, under the direct influence of Joaquim Winckelmann, the founder of art historiography and the Vatican's librarian, began the construction of a museum where the precious art collections preserved by the Popes over the centuries could be exhibited to the public (Valeri 2020). The museum was completed in the papacy of Pius IV and is an example of the universalist museums that mark the beginning of the history of museology.

At the end of the 18th century, as a concept and organisational structure, the museum's institution coincided with the progressive secularisation of society, which led to the depreciation of many collections of religious origin. The recognition that liturgical objects express the excellence of artistic production over time has led to them being considered the explicit documents of art history as objects with heritage and artistic value. Museums have integrated liturgical and devotional objects into their collections, recruited them as works of art, and displayed them in an undifferentiated way alongside other artefacts and works of art (Roque 2011). This occurrence marks the pioneering conversion of a sacred or religious object into a museological object.

3. Circular Letter 'The Pastoral Function of Ecclesiastical Museums'

3.1. Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican

In the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Vatican Council 1963), namely in chapter VII entitled 'Sacred art and liturgical implements', the Second Vatican Council assumed the inevitability of human behaviour in reserving the most distinguished of its creations for worship and affirmed the importance of artistic creation for the worship. Within the continually recurring parameters of dignity, the search for material and aesthetic excellence is justified as a witness of faith and devotion.

The Second Vatican Council also expressed the goal of opening up to the multifaced world of contemporary art and the world's cultures. For this purpose, on 9 April 1965, Pope Paul VI created the 'Secretariat for Non-believers' (later renamed to 'Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-believers') and, on 7 December, promulgated the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes, addressed 'to the whole of humanity'. This document stipulated that arts 'are able to elevate human life, expressed in multifold forms according to various times and regions' (Pope Paul VI 1965, para. 53). John Paul II founded the Pontifical Council of Culture on 20 May 1982, renamed in 1993 as the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church to establish the dialogue between the Catholic Church and other contemporary cultures. The Commission was an autonomous body whose President was to be the Pontifical Council for Culture member to ensure their coordination. On 30 July 2012, Pope Benedict XVI merged the two bodies, suppressing the Commission and transferring its former objectives and activities to the Pontifical Council for Culture.

However, following the Second Vatican Council, the simplification of the ceremonial caused the disaffection of disused vessels and vestments, confirming that places and objects of worship participate in sacredness as material intermediaries in the course of divine service, and so buildings, implements, and vestments are subject to specific consecration rituals. Execration becomes implicit when the object is damaged or considered inappropriate to the cult as a strategy to avoid abusive use of things disaffected. Hence, the disaffected ritual objects are immediately and unequivocally deprived of their intrinsic sacred content, which releases them for the museological function. However, these objects are used to be sent to secondary or marginal spaces in the churches without conservation and security measures, making them prone to oblivion and disappearance.

Observing the risks caused by this situation, the Catholic Church expressed a growing concern to ensure that disaffected objects could have a destiny worthy of their initial liturgical condition, with the defence that an important role is still reserved for them in the service of catechesis and Christian culture. This is the sense of John Paul II's message to the participants in the Second Assembly of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church of 25 September 1997 and the various Circular Letters of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church.

3.2. Circular Letter Description and Analysis

Among the Commission's documents, the Circular Letter, *The pastoral role of ecclesiastical museums*, maintains its particular importance, even when commemorating two decades. Apart from the introductory and conclusive notes, the Circular Letter is structured of five main points concerning religious heritage conservation, the nature of the ecclesiastical museum and its organisation, and the enjoyment and training of both agents and audiences.

In the Introduction, the definition and objectives of the ecclesiastical museum are clearly stated. In brief, the museum is presented as a place that documents cultural and religious life development. The pastoral function is the axis of its action and the factor allowing distinction from non-ecclesiastical guardianship museums.

The ecclesiastical museum becomes a suitable destination for the objects no longer available for liturgy and worship, avoiding abandonment, dispersion, or destruction. At the same time, it ensures the dignity those objects deserve and the accuracy of the museological discourse interpreting them.

Besides keeping the objects in the religious scope, the ecclesiastical museums used to maintain them in the territory, in close proximity to their cultural group of origin. This connection is beneficial as the community identifies with the religious heritage and, thus, tends to be committed to its protection and knowledge. These aspects have been widely defended by the museological theory, emphasising the importance of local community involvement in the museum's activities (Golding and Modest 2016; Munro 2014; Taylor 2020; Waterton and Watson 2010, 2013) and its role in the development of feelings of belonging and collective identity.

In point 1, the importance of religious heritage is defined through its artistic value, cultural content, theological meaning, and liturgical functionality, to which the Circular Letter adds a universal destination—a possibility of collective achievement.

It is up to the museum to perform inventory and study functions, preservation, and restoration, as stated in the Circular Letter. The tasks of the exhibition, interpretation, communication, or cultural mediation should be added at this point, as they are implicitly referred to in the document. All the functions fulfilment and museum competencies depend on heritage knowledge, valorisation, and use in the museological context.

Similarly to all the museological functions, the exhibition of religious objects and their underlying narratives depend on the knowledge of the particularities of their heritage. The main distinction derives from the liturgical and devotional use, but the Circular Letter points to another use, not always considered, that proceeds from the spread of Catholic culture in other regions, civilisations, and cultures. As a result of the inculturation process, with reciprocal appropriations and recreations, the liturgy, devotional practices, and objects they used have different formulations depending on the cultural contexts in other times and geographies. Despite the plurality of formalisations, a universal identity character comes from religion, or, as the Circular Letter reads, from 'the use by the Church it was created' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 1.1).

Above all, the object is integrated into the museum as a historic–artistic heritage. Still, it tends to be valued as a document (Robinson 2018) that provides information about its cultural context and contributes to enhancing the knowledge about the communities that produced it and those that followed them. This concept promotes the object, with no significant historical or artistic value, as anthropological heritage, bearing meanings that justify it in the museological discourse.

While confirming these objects' values, the Circular Letter referred to both material and immaterial conservation, even before the UNESCO *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage* (UNESCO 2003). In defending that 'the artefact with an aesthetic value may not be totally detached from its pastoral function or its historical, social, environmental, and devotional context which it is expressed and witnessed to' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 1: 1.2), the Circular Letter focuses on the intangible components that contribute to knowing and understanding its material features, confirming the object's value as a document. The recognition of religious heritage and its spiritual values and meanings as intangible heritage, as well as its relevance to the pastoral mission of the ecclesiastical museum, will have favoured this recommendation.

In this sense, the preservation and enhancement programmes of cultural heritage, in addition to prevention, security, and restoration actions, must include research about the original function and history of objects, the contexts in which they were involved, the information on how the liturgy and devotional practices have evolved, comparing the past with current uses and establishing the logic that guided their development and gives meaning to the heritage. If all these practices should be regular for all museums, the ecclesiastical museum assumes the use of these objects in a pastoral and catechetical dimension, without prejudice to the required scientific rigour, and, eventually, can be taken in liturgy service.

Point 2 focuses on the ecclesiastical museum's nature, aim, and typology.

The ecclesiastical museum's nature (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.1) is described in terms of religious heritage conservation and enhancement in a pastoral context, applying the concepts outlined in the previous point.

Establishing what distinguishes the ecclesiastical museum from others is precisely the pastoral mission, assuming that 'an instrument of Christian evangelisation' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.1.1) is strongly linked to the territory and community in which it operates. It is considered an ecclesial place as it is a part of the Church's mission and bears witness to its historical development and the different circumstances of its activity. In addition, it stimulates the understanding of the sacred through beauty.

The concept of object underlies the ecclesiastical museum's precise nature. In the Circular Letter, the object is presented close to the concept of musealium, or musealia, (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010, pp. 61–64), considering that the musealisation process changes the object's status as a sign. After being decontextualised and losing its initial function, the object is used as a proxy. It is exhibited and observed in its material and visual features, but it integrates the museological discourse to represent something that transcends it. As in any museum, the objects displayed in ecclesiastical museums were not designed and produced for this function. However, what distinguishes the musealia in the ecclesiastical museum is that this one, by its nature, extends the discourse to the original object functionality in worship, catechesis, or devotion.

The ecclesiastical museum's aim (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.2) is centred on safeguarding memory, to which the museological functions converge. According to the definition of the term consigned by ICOM (International Council of Museums) at the Extraordinary General Assembly in August 2022, 'A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage' (ICOM n.d.). Besides these functions, the Circular Letter adds the representation of the 'stable memory of the Christian community' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.2.1) until the present and the 'comparison with other cultural expressions characterising the territory' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.2.1). In this sense, it approaches the idea of the museum as a 'place of memory' (Black 2011; Willis 2015), from the concept developed by Pierre Nora: 'a lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community' (Nora 1996, p. XVII). This definition allows encompassing the museum in a network of relationships with other cultural institutions, places, traditions, and experiences in the territory. As stated in the Circular Letter, the objects in the museum,

despite their diversity, 'even if different, make reference to one unique 'cultural system' and help reconstruct the theological, liturgical and devotional attitude of the community' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.2.2). In this framework, the concept of musealia in ecclesiastical museums gains a particular meaning: even when it loses the function of initial use and becomes obsolete, the object is seen as a relic of the historical past and allows the 'pastoral action through memory' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.2.2).

The ecclesiastical museum assumes itself as the repository of the history of Christianity in the territory, witnessing the religious experience of the Christian community. From the Circular Letter, it is inferred that the inclusion of the ecclesiastical museum in the scope of the territory museology (Rivière 1989) recovering the social intention of an interactive insertion in the community, albeit from a doctrinal and catechetical perspective.

Regarding typology (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.3), the Circular Letter establishes it around ownerships (or tutelages) and collections.

Thus, in the typology of museums, the historical model of cathedral treasuries stands out, and currently, in the post-conciliar period, the following types are distinguished: diocesan, inter-parish, and parish museums; monastic, convent, or religious institutions museums, including the missionary museums; museums of confraternities or other ecclesiastical institutions. In Portugal, the Lisbon Cathedral's Treasury is worth mentioning as an example of a diocesan museum; as a religious order and missionary museum, the Consolata Museum—Sacred Art and Ethnology at Fátima—and as a museum of the confraternity, the Misericórdia Museum of Porto.

Despite having a common matrix, the museums included in this typology have different natures and objectives: diocesan, inter-parish, and parish museums are defined by their connection to the territory in which they are inserted, reflecting the culture and identity of the place; the museums of religious institutions refer to the historical and spatial landmarks in which the institute acted and the parameters of this action; the missionary museums focus on inculturation, witnessing the cultures they were confronted with and offering a relevant contribution to the studies of cultural anthropology.

Concerning the collections or objects gathered (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.3.2), it is discerned between those for liturgical or para-liturgical use, which, in turn, are grouped in another order of categories: works of art; sacred vessels; furnishings; reliquaries and ex-votos; liturgical and ecclesiastical vestments and other textiles and fabrics; musical instruments; manuscripts, liturgical books, choir books, and print resources. The possibility of archival and library materials' custody is also mentioned. Thus, artistic, archaeological, and scientific collections of non-Christian nature are excluded even if they are ecclesiastical property. Conversely and pioneeringly, the Circular Letter encouraged the collection and preservation of 'the memory of those traditions, customs, habits, characteristic of the Church community and civil society' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.3.2).

Regardless of the category, the museum must show the meaning of works on display and those in storage through their artistic, historical, anthropological, or cultural values, spiritual and religious dimensions, and complex senses.

The whole experience of the religious is in close connection with the material object used in the liturgy or private devotion: the gestures used; the litanies and prayers associated with it; the manifestations of faith which it had aroused. Thus, the effectiveness of a museological presentation is dependent on adequate reference to these subjective data and is in accordance with the correct contextualisation of the religious object in the museum.

This point ends with the regulations related to the museum's institution (PCCHC 2001, sec. 2.4), defining the responsibilities and competencies of the various bodies responsible for the ecclesiastical heritage.

Point 3, concerning the organisation of the ecclesiastical museum, is configured as a brief treatise on museography in the sense that it presents a set of techniques and practices applied to the museum regarding the building structure, the arrangement of the exhibition space and adjacent areas, security installations, and its surveillance and administration.

Introduced are some indications regarding the structural architecture (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1), showing a preference for historic buildings of ecclesiastical property, such as 'ancient monasteries, convents, seminaries, episcopal palaces, clerical environments' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.1). The affinity between the structure and the exhibit should attenuate the decontextualisation effect inherent to the religious objects' musealisation process.

However, this indicates that the task of arranging the space and adapting it to the museological function must be given to an architect, who collaborates with other specialists in the theoretical and technical plan of the exhibition. Museology should be introduced as a crucial discipline (Rusnak 2021). On the other hand, two decades after the Circular Letter, experience adverts to the risk of handing over the design of the museum space to the architect alone. This risk is more significant when the space is constructed from scratch by a so-called 'starchitect', who creates designs with impressive visual impact prevailing over its functionality (Cominelli and Jacquot 2020; Klimek 2014). The manifest tendency to render the container predominate over the content—that is, the exhibition space and the exhibitors over the objects—may turn out to be a prestigious building in detriment to the effectiveness of the museological plan. Thus, along with the architect, the presence of a museologist is essential to ensure that the construction of the exhibition space is suitable for the elaboration of the exhibition discourse, especially since the building is a pre-existence whose identity must be preserved.

The Circular Letter points to the need for accessibility 'for disabled visitors, in conformity with the national and international legislation on the subject' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.1). Currently connected, the construction of inclusive factors goes beyond the concept of space accessible to relevant factors for a suitable social and cultural space. The new definition of museum, approved by ICOM, introduces this change: 'Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability' (ICOM 2022). Inclusion involves creating true accessibility rather than simply providing accommodations, implying the integration and participation of all and eliminating intellectual barriers (Galla 2016). Among these are illiteracy and, in the particular case of the ecclesiastical museum, religious illiteracy within the scope of Catholicism.

The first zone of contact is the entrance (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.2). It is described as the presentation and synthesis of the exhibition in order to 'highlight the museum's identity' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.2) and to 'grasp the criteria that lead to a global reading of the museum' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.2), under the heading of sobriety and clarity. It is a welcoming area, but it is also an area of transition between the exterior and interior space that, in this way, reflects the spatial organisation of the church preceded by the atrium or churchyard, creating an intermediate strip between the profane and the sacred that, in this way, accentuates the religious nature of the exhibition environment. Since the last decade of the previous century, several authors (Buggeln et al. 2017; Duncan 1995; Mairesse 2014) have highlighted the museum space sacralisation counteracting it, while, here, this is valued as a contextualisation factor.

The exhibition halls (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.3) are described as sober spaces where speech should be straight, logical, and explicitly presented. Thus, the exhibited objects must be arranged according to the logic of the discourse. Thus, 'the structure of the rooms and the itinerary through these spaces must be part of a unique and organic proposal, whose general criteria should be adapted to the specific situation and particular intentions' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.3).

Besides the original works, it is foreseen that the whole exhibit includes reproductions, texts, maps, and multimedia materials, which are currently mainly supported digitally. These requirements correspond to the systematic exhibition model where the objects, texts, and images are displayed in a chronological or taxonomic and defined order, as described by Rivière (1989). This model creates an artificial and illustrative prototype of the object's original function and use.

The Circular Letter recommends introducing rest areas and appropriate (and comfortable) spaces for contemplating the exhibited objects. When museums tend to eliminate

seats along the exhibition route to favour the movement of mass tourist groups, this is an element to be emphasised in ecclesiastical museums, given that the museology of religion must be contemplative (Duarte 2021).

Despite the preference for systematic museology, safety and conservation issues require articulation with the in vitro exhibition model, according to the terminology of Rivière (1989) regarding the use of display cases. Under the principles of sobriety and preservation, the Circular Letter states that the display cases must value the object, allowing its complete visualisation (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.4). The harmful effect of granting exhibitors the evidence of overlapping the object instead of using it as a support and instrument to accentuate its formal aspects is also highlighted. Hence, the display case is an element of service for object-effective conservation and accurate observation.

In this point related to display cases (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.4), the Circular Letter includes the reference to labels, attributing them a crucial role in the exhibition. It distinguishes between the identification and the interpretative labels. The identification labels provide the most basic information about the artefact: work title or designation, authorship, date of manufacture, material, provenance and inventory number, while the interpretative labels should include 'the liturgical or para-liturgical destination, the significance of the name, the original spatial-temporal context, the symbolism, and eventually references to more famous objects, iconographical explanations, hagiographical notes and brief bibliographical information' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.4). Although bibliography is not common, and its importance in a label can be disputed, all the other information effectively contributes to the reading and understanding of the object, clarifying its original meaning and justifying its function in the scope of the exhibition discourse. This model of labels began to be used in anthropology museums, later extending to art museums, where it is still very incipient and sporadic while being analysed in the broader framework of the debate about the role and scope of interpretation in a museum context (Fritsch 2021).

Temporary exhibitions (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.5) are subject to a specific theme that complements or extends the permanent exhibition. It is presupposed that the existence of their own space, which, although the Circular Letter does not mention it, should be modular, allowing its adaptation to different museographic projects and other cultural events. They are a pretext to restore and present artefacts in reserve and reinforce the connection to the territory.

In addition to the axial spaces of the museum, the Circular Letter refers to areas for training and research: halls for the education (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.6), envisioned for the educational service and extended to catechists and pastoral workers; cultural formation spaces (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.7), established as a more formal teaching space for the museum staff and collaborators but also opened to researchers and students; a specialised library (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.8), kept up-to-date in matters related to the museum collections and with digital support for multimedia content; the historical and current archives (PCCHC 2001, 3.1.9) to preserve the set of documents related to the collection and history of the objects.

Regarding the historical archive, the Circular Letter warns against the risk of the disappearance of documents related to deposit official acts or temporary loans. These materials are essential for clarifying issues related to the legal protection collection and the 'contextual knowledge of the art-historical patrimony' (PCCHC 2001, 3.1.9). To these documentary archives should be added the documents related to the planning and execution of permanent and temporary exhibitions, including the research and selections carried out, the texts and images produced, the architectural and museographic projects, and the administrative procedures of loan, insurance, and transport, which are generally neglected or lost but constitute relevant material for the history of the museum and museology.

The last of the public areas is the exit (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.10), which the Circular Letter advises to be in a different location from the entrance, a criterion established within the scope of sanitary practices resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The exit signifies the epilogue of the museum visit and, similar to the entrance, constitutes an intermediate

and transitional zone separating the exhibition from the outside. It includes a bookstore, with catalogues and guides of the present and past exhibitions and other publications related to the museum's issues, as well as a store where the visitor can acquire objects for the remembrance of the museum.

The Circular Letter also refers to places for refreshments (PCCHC 2001, 3.1.11) as a strategy to encourage visitors to stay and prolong the visit.

Private areas are facilities intended for management and other employees and services (PCCHC 2001, 3.1.12) and technical areas such as technical reserves and the restoration laboratory.

The reserves or long-term storage rooms (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.13) are essential to guarantee the safety and proper conservation of the collections not on display, according to their material specificities. Storage is recognised as part of the activities inherent to collection management. The value of the objects in storage is not necessarily lower than of those on display, selected according to the exhibition discourse and its capacity for representation. The Circular Letter underlines the importance of object circulation, either within the museum, in the reformulation of the permanent exhibition, for temporary exhibitions, or abroad, through loans to other institutions. For this reason, the objects in reserve must be arranged in an orderly and accessible manner, kept in good condition, and accurately inventoried and studied.

It is at this point that the Circular Letter addresses the inventory. It does so briefly, which is justified by the fact that, at that time, the digital database inventory was fairly new and had not yet been implemented in most museums, although it was perceived that support transition was imminent. Therefore, it advises the existence of two inventories: the general catalogue of the collection on display and the other for the stored artefacts. However, nowadays, the database catalogue is unique, allowing objects to be sorted by information fields and with different user profiles, including external users, hiding fields with confidential or restricted information.

Implementing a restoration laboratory (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.1.14) close to the storage rooms is considered opportune in the Circular Letter. At this time, having more than one restoration laboratory in each museum participating in preventive conservation activities is recommended to guarantee objects' material integrity. However, the so-called curative conservation involves specialised skills and procedures to interrupt an active process of active deterioration or introduce structural reinforcement and restoration, which seeks to recover the damage caused by the previous reversals or alterations. Therefore, these activities tend to become independent and require autonomous spaces, putting themselves at the service of several museums. Furthermore, with the creation of networks, grouping together several museums, technical reserves have also been centralised to optimise and maximise the investment in control and security equipment.

This issue resurfaces within the topic of the security (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.2). After the guidelines regarding the facilities (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.2.1), the Circular Letter addresses storage and protection of the collection (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.2.2). Security involves actions to protect against theft or vandalism, fire or flood, or riots, referring to national laws in these matters. However, it does provide some practical guidelines regarding preventive conservation of the building, collection, and surveillance in the exhibition space.

Then, and concluding this point, the Circular Letter deals with administrative issues, such as management (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.3), where it presents indications of a financial, legal, and communication nature, personnel (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.4), norms, internal regulations (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.5), and relations with other institutions (PCCHC 2001, sec. 3.6).

Point 4 concerns the fruition of the museum, interpreted in an ecclesiastical sense. Along with this point, the axial concept of the museum's pastoral function is developed, attributing to it the objective of highlighting the historical memory of the ecclesial experience and how it continues to manifest itself in the Christian communities of the place where it is inserted. Thus, fruition takes place in the context of the territory. In other

words, the ecclesiastical museum is defined as an 'ecclesial place' and a 'territorial place' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 4.3), with 'continuous physical and cultural contact with the surrounding environment' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 4.3). By identifying the object's provenance and relating it to the cultural context of origin, the museum emphasises the sense of belonging to the community and the identity characteristics of the ecclesial experience in the territory. These connections are easily implemented through an integrated and diffuse museum. Here, too, the innovative quality of the Circular Letter is noted, given that this concept, as described, is similar to current museum networks in a decentralised management model and under the coordination of the diocesan museum.

Point 5 focuses on the formation of the ecclesiastical personnel. Assuming the museum's cultural role, the Circular Letter recognises the importance of training all museum agents, preparing them to value the heritage and promote artistic creation in the tradition of the Church's patronage of the arts. Some generic skills are listed, such as responsibility, and the spirit of initiative and basic knowledge in the scientific domains of history, art, pedagogy, and pastoral care, advocating specialised training for each agent according to their role in the museum. However, it does not mention some currently considered essential disciplines, such as museology, cultural management, and communication. Nevertheless, as briefly mentioned, it already provides for the connection to academic centres in institutional collaboration. This collaborative approach with universities and centres of studies has been implemented to acquire interdisciplinary knowledge and encourage research on themes related to the collections.

The museum's cultural function implies a set of actions and strategies focused on its users. Currently, the term mediation appears in the literature (Bordeaux and Caillet 2013; Chiovatto 2020; Fraysse 2015), considering it a 'fundamentally dialectical notion that requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded' (Silverstone 2006, p. 189). Hence, in the museums, it designates various interventions to establish contact points between the exhibition and the audiences, providing them with the meanings inherent to the diverse components of the exhibition discourse. Mediation promotes sharing of the experiences and encourages the emergence of shared references with a view to a richer experience from an intellectual and emotional point of view. It implies planning segmented information and communication with different levels depending on the plurality of the audiences, as provided in the Circular Letter.

The Conclusion reinforces the idea of the pastoral function as an identity mark of the ecclesiastical museum, stating that 'ecclesiastical museums, as a place for the education of the faithful and the presentation of the art-historical patrimony, combine the value of memory with prophecy by conserving the tangible signs of the Church's Tradition' (PCCHC 2001, sec. Conclusion).

The axial objective of the ecclesiastical museum is to carry out a global project around cultural heritage, combining it with the diocesan or local pastoral project. The list of strategies to achieve this goal includes the experience of the visit, the preservation and enhancement of heritage, the inventory and research around the collections, the training and preparation of agents, the cultural function and communication based on interpretation and explanation, public participation, and the extension of the visit 'by placing a person in his own culture and by stimulating the desire to safeguard the art-historical treasures that he finds in his daily life' (PCCHC 2001, sec. Conclusion).

The most innovative aspect of this Circular Letter—aligned with Church action throughout the last quarter of the 20th century, an indication of which is the creation of the Pontifical Commission in 1988—is its recognition of museology as a pastoral activity, foreseeing the benefit that will occur for the preservation of religious heritage. It is an indicator of a new mentality: while, until very recent times, the priests responsible for small parish collections justified the lack of attention paid to them by the fact that their action was of a pastoral nature, from now on, conservation issues, study, and dissemination of heritage are seen as an integral part of priestly activity.

4. Discussion: The Circular Letter in the Light of Current Museology

The Circular Letter is in line with the museology research, namely as it regards recovery of the function and the original meaning of an object in the museological discourse; the connection to the territory and the culture of the place from a global and diachronic perspective to the interaction with the multiple and heterogeneous audiences; and, in the organisation of space, the importance that is given to the reception and multipurpose areas for cultural and pedagogical actions.

4.1. Musealisation and Recontextualisation of the Religious Object in the Ecclesiastical Museum

The musealisation process of a religious object follows deviation from the original context and functionality. It is, as a rule, the least abusive solution given the object's values in its various material, historical, artistic and symbolic features, and functions as a safeguard for heritage at risk of abandonment, dispersion, abusive use, or irremediable loss. The effectiveness and efficiency of the process depend on the capacity of collections' curators to interrogate the meanings of objects and render them intellectually accessible to visitors.

A core concern in museum studies lies in determining how knowledge is created around objects (Dudley 2010; Fritsch 2021; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Pearce 1994; Thompson 1994; Whitehead 2012) while recognising that the object interpretation and meanings are not objective or inherent, but, instead, are subjective, being 'situated and contextual' (Macdonald 2006, p. 2). The ecclesiastical museum differs from the others, however, since it is confessional and assumes a catechetical function, inverting the norm of exemption that assists museological practice. Its programme is univocal, without duplicity in the reading and interpreting the facts and concepts it presents, as the Church assumes its doctrine as a unique and universal truth. Therefore, the capacity to propose religious experiences in the museological path is taken, transforming the museum routine into an evangelising mission. To the conventional cultural function of the museum, the Church juxtaposes a spiritual slope to the ones under its tutelage.

The advantage of the ecclesiastical museum arises from its material and symbolic proximity to the original context. The occurrence of shared supervision within the same institutional framework and the geographical proximity between the church and the museum allow some objects to interrupt their museological functioning and temporarily serve in the liturgy, keeping the function that gives them meaning active.

The object is taken as a semiological sign. Thus, inherent to musealisation, there is a process of semantisation of the object, recovering the meaning from its original functionality or use. Like linguistic signs, objects, as semiological signs, have two orders of signification, according to Barthes (2009): denotation and connotation. While, at the denotation level, there is a sign consisting of the signifier and the signified, the connotation uses the first sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified sign. For a long time, museums focused on the object's denotation or literal meaning. However, following the intangible heritage valuation, concern for connotation is growing, associating the object with a symbolic and expressive significance, which is dependent on the context in which it is used. The ecclesiastical museum focuses precisely on this second order of signification (connotation) with a pastoral purpose.

The catechetical use of the memory conveyed in the museum does not contradict museological pragmatics, provided that its execution should be rigorous in complying with the conservation and dissemination of collections, as determined by the *ICOM Code of ethics for museums* (ICOM 2017), adopted in 1986 and revised in 2004. Regarding the preservation of disaffected objects or those in permanent or temporary disuse, or the presentation of the respective theoretical fundamentals, the Church asserts itself as the most competent authority and the primary holder of the theological and liturgical knowledge that informs the religious heritage. By attaching catechesis to information, this circumstance works as a positive factor in the recontextualisation of the object in the ecclesiastical museum.

The religious sense is inherent to the programme of the ecclesiastical museum, assumed as an extension of the church and the pastoral action developed there. In this sense, the ecclesiastical museum offers the most favourable environment for the intelligibility of the religious object.

4.2. The Role of the Museum in the Relationship with the Territory, the Community, and the Public

There are several references to the articulation between the ecclesiastical museum and the territory throughout the Circular Letter within the conceptual framework of '*integrated and spread out museum*' (PCCHC 2001, sec. 4.3). The connection of the integrated museum to the territory takes place in a model of vertical coordination, in which local museums submit to the coordination of a leading museum, in this case, the diocesan one. The integrated-museum model has been criticised for restricting the community's participation in knowledge creation and institutional discourses and activities, while the integral museum is open to the territory in a dialogic process with residents (Ippoliti et al. 2019). However, in practice, these models have been revealed as hybrids, articulating the vertical coordination with the integrative perspective of territory and communities, which coincides with the dispositions of the Circular Letter.

The diffuse museum seeks to add different places and cultural institutions with complementary functions, material and immaterial cultural testimonies, and any other type of resource relevant to the territory's identity (Minucciani 2005). The museological action goes beyond the museum's physical space, covering the territory and interacting with the community. The territory becomes, in this way, an extension of the museum in a complex network of interactions: the museum values the cultural heritage of the territory and acts as an agent of identity construction of the place; the territory provides the memory of culture and historical and cultural heritage, in its tangible and intangible components. From the memories associated with heritage, the community produces content that the museum shares, stimulating new contributions and, in this way, expanding the epistemological field of the museum.

Considering that the relationship between museum and territory is built based on the community's self-perception, the systems of thought, and the values inherent to its culture, each museum, even in a model of integrated coordination, defines itself in a particular and dynamic way, dependent on space and time.

The search for more significant interaction with the community coincides with the emergence of museology centred on the public and the visitor's experience (Packer and Ballantyne 2016). The museum public is no longer an undifferentiated mass and is to be understood in its plurality, composed of active individuals, interpreters, and participants in elaborating the museological discourse and planning museological actions. The monological nature of the first museums is replaced by the dialogic and interactive models. Hence, by focusing on audiences, the museum tends to opt for a more participatory and co-creative relational model. Knowledge is produced through mixed and heterogeneous discourses, eventually contradictory, integrating the narratives and experiences of the community.

The models of Interaction between the museum and the community, whether participatory or co-creative (Antón et al. 2018; Long et al. 2019; Ross 2020; Simon 2010), point to a path of action already implicit in the Circular Letter. It suggests initiatives involving the community audiences to increase the sense of belonging to the heritage and the commitment to its preservation.

Recognition of the plurality of audiences has implications in terms of communication or cultural mediation. The museum tends to configure itself as an interpretive centre, adapting information to different audiences by distinguishing between believers and non-believers and, according to the different levels of knowledge, skills, sensitivities, and desires. In order to adapt to this reality, modalities of segmented communication have been advocated, with various levels and types of information by the plurality of audiences. Here, we highlight information and communication technologies that allow a variety

of knowledge transmission strategies suitable for different audience profiles, including virtual ones.

While most museums maintain mediation strategies limited to traditional analogue solutions, such as interpretive captions, panels, and room sheets, complemented with guided tours that formalise a direct museological discourse with similar interest groups, digital technology allows the creation of an interactive environment in the space museum, with greater effectiveness in acquiring knowledge and understanding the above. In this way, knowledge is no longer passively received, implying the effort without prejudice to its playful character and giving primacy to the receiver of the message in the choice of method and research instruments. On the other hand, using technologies makes it possible to send additional information to marginal or extrinsic spaces to the museological route without distorting the space, transforming it into a technological apparatus. Being minimally intrusive, the integration of connectors between the visitor and the information, such as barcodes, QR codes, or RFID, allows access to remotely enhanced textual and multimedia information. Other strategies, such as 3D modelling, web mapping, storytelling, augmented and virtual reality, non-invasive in the space materiality, customisable, and interactive, promote new forms of cognitive, emotional, and playful relationships with the exhibition. The use of technology in the mediation process, before, during, or after the museum visit, is the most relevant element missing in the Circular Letter and should be considered further in the guidelines related to the functioning of the ecclesiastical museum.

5. Conclusions

The Circular Letter proposes that the ecclesiastical museum is an instrument to preserve and safeguard the liturgical and devotional objects disaffected to the cult while keeping them close to the cultural group of origin and giving them a primary evangelisation role. This conceptualisation contradicts the principle of neutrality. However, it has been questioned, considering that a museological discourse is hardly neutral and tends to present a perspective of facts and phenomena. At the CIMAM Annual Conference *The 21st Century Art Museum: Is Context Everything?*, held in Sydney in 2018, Suay Aksoy, then ICOM President, stated that 'museums are not neutral. They never have and never will [be]. They are not separate from their social and historical context. [. . .] To accomplish their missions and serve the betterment of societies, museums do not need to be neutral' (Aksoy 2018). Aksoy's argument, reflecting a stance of increasing popularity in museum studies, supports the Circular Letter's proposals on ecclesiastical museum evangelisation. Thus, ecclesiastical museums assume a religious ideology aiming to educate, inform, dialogue, and co-create narratives with the community, but it is compelled to provide objective, rigorous, and validated information. Over the last two decades, ecclesiastical museums have been applying the standards defined by the Charter. In Portugal, the treasures or cathedral museums of Lisbon, Braga, Évora, and Funchal can be mentioned in addition to the temporary exhibitions promoted by the Museum of the Sanctuary of Fátima.

As enunciated in the starting hypothesis, the analysis of the Circular Letter and its discussion in museum studies within a theoretical frame confirm its accuracy, particularly regarding the recontextualisation of the religious object in the ecclesiastical museum, covering its materiality and intangible meanings and the role of the museum in the relationship with the territory, the community, and its heterogeneous public.

The time that has elapsed since the publication of the Circular Letter does not compromise its relevance, adequacy, and usefulness, following (and, sometimes, anticipating) advances in museum studies. Therefore, two decades later, it is proposed that the scope of the Circular Letter be broadened, applying the norms and procedures enunciated in the document to the musealisation of religious spaces. Considering the growing religious illiteracy of the public who attend and visit churches and sanctuaries with a cultural or touristic purpose, the musealisation of these spaces—in a discreet and non-invasive way, using digital communication—appears an appropriate strategy for fostering knowledge and interpretation of the place.

It is suggested that the process to further pursue the Circular Letter postulates and goals should involve a collaboration between the ecclesial institutions and universities to formalise academic research in this domain, contributing to a theoretical corpus to support the musealisation of religious objects or the museology of religion.

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