



FLORENCE AND THE CULTURAL INHERITANCE OF ITS RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

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CONTEXT

Florence is famous throughout the world for its stunning artistic and cultural heritage: a city that is “a unique social and urban achievement, the result of persistent and long-lasting creativity, which includes museums, churches, buildings and artworks of immeasurable worth” (UNESCO, 1982).

Florence, which has always been a commercial and cultural crossroads, has a long history of hospitality and interreligious and intercultural exchanges. Nowadays, the presence of the various religious communities that populate the city is visible in its different places of worship: besides the numerous Catholic churches of different orders, the city also boasts some Evangelical Baptist, Methodist and Waldensian churches, a Russian Orthodox church, an Israeli temple, and an Islamic cultural center. The Fig. 1 shows the plurality of Catholic and non-Catholic worship places located both in the Historic Centre of Florence, UNESCO World Heritage site, and in its Buffer Zone. This area – which comprehends four different municipalities in the territory, namely the municipalities of Florence, Bagno a Ripoli, Fiesole and Scandicci - provides an additional layer of protection to a World Heritage Site and is intended to ensure the preservation of the immediate background, principal views, and other structural and functional features of the site (UNESCO, 2019).

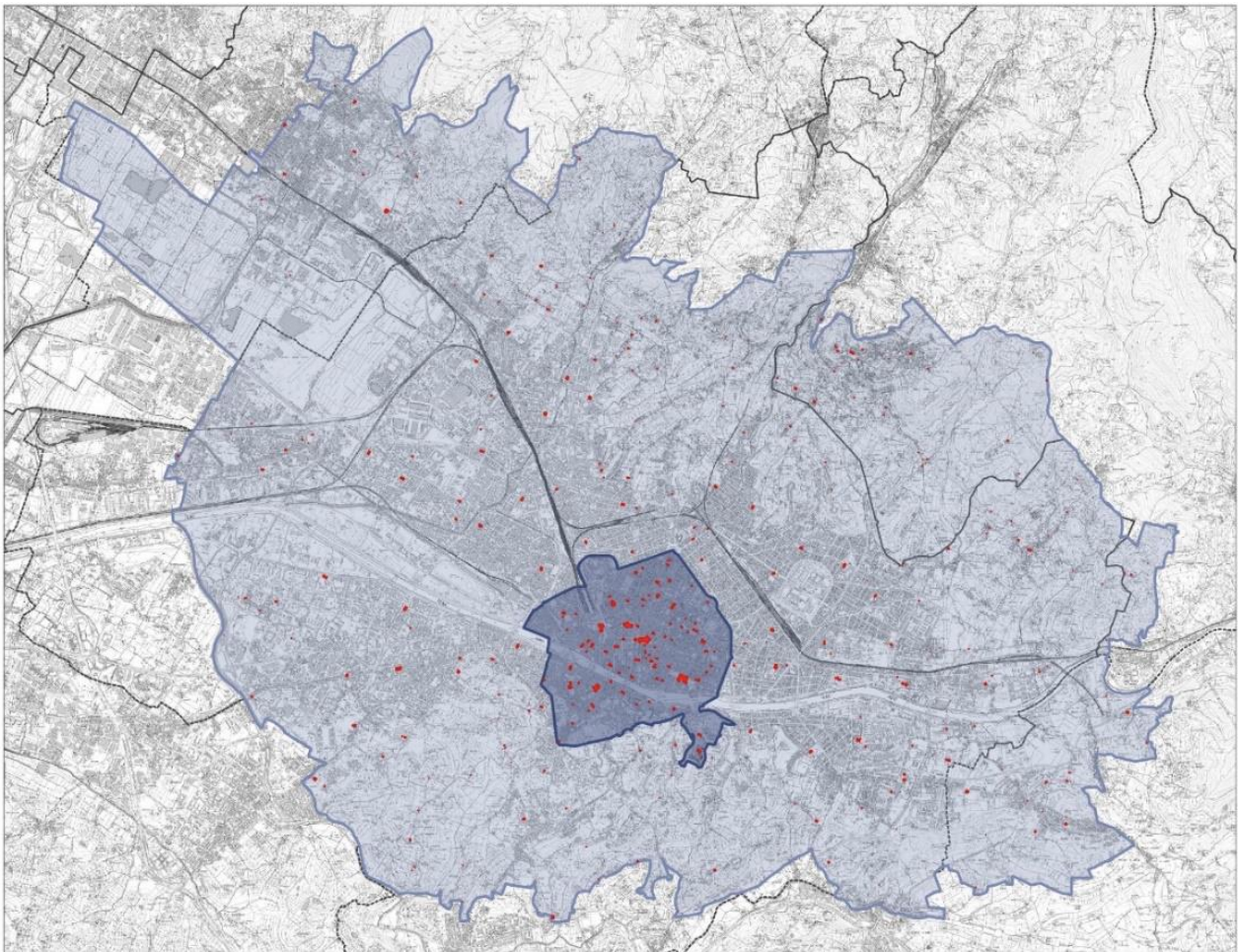


Fig 1. Catholic and non-Catholic worship places (highlighted in red-color) in the UNESCO World Heritage site “Historic Centre of Florence” (blue-colored) and its Buffer Zone (light blue-colored)

THE FRAMEWORK OF THE UNESCO *INITIATIVE ON HERITAGE OF RELIGIOUS INTEREST*

A point of reference for the conservation and protection of cultural heritage, UNESCO plays a leading role in the development of guidelines for religious heritage conservation and management. Since 2016, UNESCO has coordinated a cycle of thematic consultations and workshops at the international level that brought together experts, stakeholders and representatives of different religious communities providing a unique platform for intercultural dialogue.

The necessity for a particular strategy for management of religious heritage has repeatedly been highlighted by the Advisory Bodies of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, ICCROM, ICOMOS and IUCN. This necessity stems both from the density of religious heritage as part of the general cultural heritage and from the numerosity of stakeholders, including clerical authorities, managerial bodies and the local community, that are involved in its management.

Approximately 20 percent of the UNESCO World Heritage sites are places associated with the religiosity or spirituality of various cultures and traditions around the world: therefore, these sites constitute the largest category of properties on the UNESCO World Heritage List. For this category of properties, the Outstanding Universal Value - defined as “cultural and/or natural significance so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and be of common importance to present and future generations of all humanity” (UNESCO, 2019) - is given precisely by the strong, specific and unique spiritual significance to these places that these properties bear for one or more communities. It is because of this intrinsic value that the properties are eligible for inclusion on the World Heritage List, an inscription provided if they meet the Selection Criteria, the conditions of Integrity and Authenticity, and have an adequate System of Protection and Management.

Taking in consideration the high concentration and value of religious properties as a category of cultural heritage, and that many historic World Heritage cities have places of religious interest – with many of them also recognized as holy cities by various communities, the World Heritage Committee requested the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, in consultation with its Advisory Bodies, to facilitate the adequate protection of property of religious interest. Therefore, the Advisory Bodies have conducted a series of research studies, meetings and activities on the topic of heritage of religious interest and sacred sites. As a result, two recommendations, crucial not only for World Heritage sites but for every site which value is connected to spirituality, were elaborated:

- [Conservation of Living Religious Heritage](#): a reference volume containing the proceedings of the "Forum on the conservation of Living Religious Heritage" organized by ICCROM in 2003. During the Forum, various challenges were addressed, such as the pressing issue of conservation of sacred movable objects and places of heritage value, which must be reconciled with their function as part of a living religion.
- [2005 ICOMOS General Assembly resolution](#) which called for "the establishment of an International Thematic Program for Religious Heritage" (§32. Religious Heritage).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project *Florence and the cultural inheritance of its religious heritage* draws inspiration from UNESCO's Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest, promoting its general principles. Launched in 2017, the project began in conjunction with the 35th anniversary of the Historic Center of Florence being listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site on December 17, 1982.

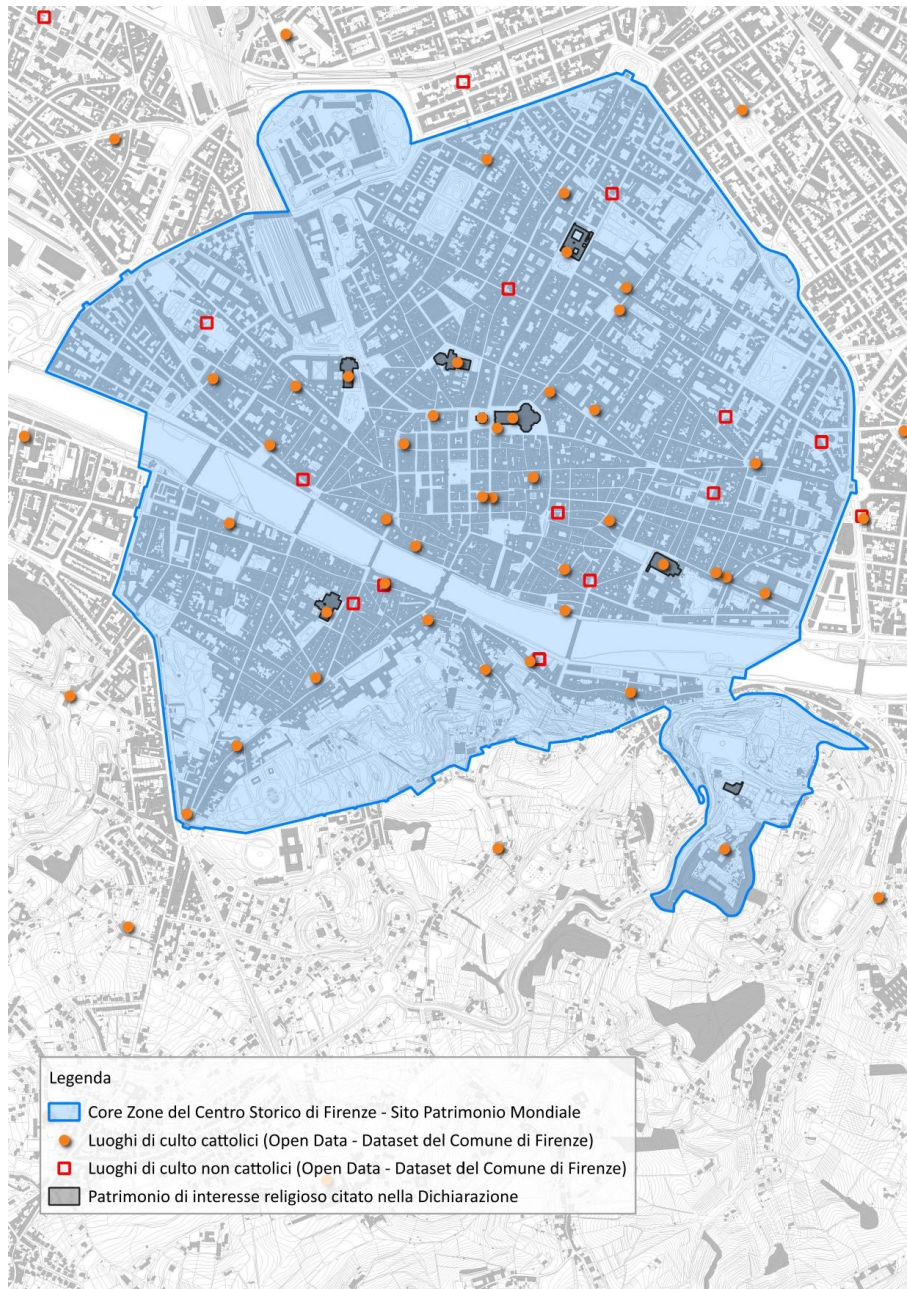
This anniversary underscored the need to place greater emphasis on the religious heritage within the World Heritage site and its buffer zone. Like all sites on the World Heritage List, the Historic Center of Florence is guided by a Management Plan (PdG), a flexible tool essential for the proper protection and enhancement of its *Outstanding Universal Value* (OUV). The OUV is articulated in the *Statement of Outstanding Universal Value* for the Historic Center of Florence (updated and revised in 2014) and codified through a series of criteria that delineate the site's specific identity and value within the framework of the 1972 World Heritage Convention.

The *Statement* identifies numerous palaces, churches, museums, and monuments that define the site. Among these, many monumental complexes are associated with cultural heritage of religious interest, including:

- * Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore with the Baptistery of San Giovanni and Giotto's Campanile
- * Complex of San Lorenzo (including the Sacristy of San Lorenzo, the Medici Chapels, and the Laurentian Library)
- * Complex of Santa Maria Novella
- * Complex of Santa Croce with the Pazzi Chapel
- * Basilica of Santo Spirito
- * Church of San Miniato
- * Convent of San Marco

The extent, variety, and complexity of this heritage prompted engagement with those responsible for managing these sites to better understand the current situation. This dialogue covered topics ranging from the examination of various conservation and maintenance actions undertaken over time to an understanding of how management and enhancement practices have either strengthened or weakened the OUV.

The ultimate goal of the project is to explore, in collaboration with all stakeholders, how this heritage can be fundamental in interpreting the OUV, thereby fostering an intercultural dialogue concerning the intangible dimension of religious heritage.



LEGEND

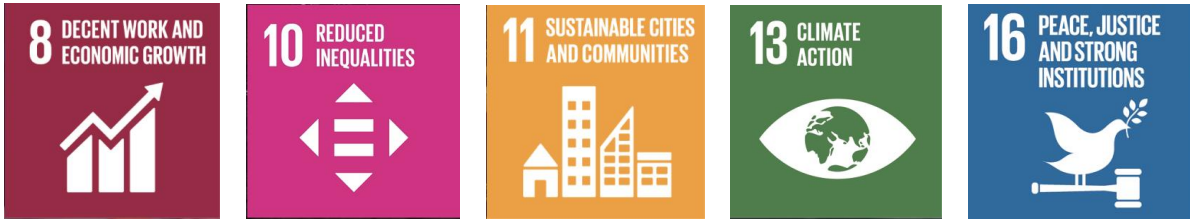
World Heritage Site area | **blu**

Catholic Places of Worship (Open Data - Municipality of Florence dataset) | **orange**

Non-Catholic Places of Worship (Open Data - Municipality of Florence dataset) | **red**

Religious heritage mentioned in the *Declaration* | **black**

The project was integrated into the 2016 *Management Plan Monitoring* and, starting from 2022, has been included in the *Action Plan* within the updated *Management Plan of the Historic Center of Florence*. As a strategic project, it aims to support the site's Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).



OBLJECTIVES

1. Monitor the conservation of religious heritage in its broadest sense (tangible and intangible, immovable and movable) by organizing periodic meetings with various stakeholders.
2. Promote the sustainable development of the management systems related to the monumental complexes of religious interest within the World Heritage site and its Buffer Zone.
3. Identify short, medium, and long-term strategies for the protection and enhancement of religious heritage.

EXPECTED RESULTS

1. Establish a thematic network with stakeholders involved in the management and conservation of religious heritage in the Historic Centre of Florence.
2. Identify strategies for the sustainable development of religious heritage over the short, medium, and long term.
3. Develop, refine, and disseminate comprehensive plans and methodologies aimed at optimizing the management of religious heritage by responsible institutions within the Historic Center, while identifying examples of good practices for future comparison with other national and international contexts.

TIMELINE

MEETINGS HELD

First Meeting | December 15, 2017 | Santa Croce Complex

“Towards Sustainable Management of Monumental Complexes of Religious Interest in the Historic Center of Florence UNESCO World Heritage Site.”

This inaugural meeting, held in collaboration with the Opera di Santa Croce, marked the 35th anniversary of the inscription of the Historic Center of Florence on the UNESCO World Heritage List (December 17, 1982). Representatives from local institutions attended to provide an initial overview and identify conservation, maintenance, management, and enhancement actions undertaken over time and their impact on the



Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the Historic Center of Florence World Heritage Site. The meeting featured two dedicated working groups:

- Conservation:

Analysis and sharing of best practices in the organization and management of restorations, development of multidisciplinary studies and research on religious complexes, and the search for funding for heritage conservation.

- Management and Communication:

Sharing best practices in staff management and training, organizing visits to monumental complexes, producing informational materials in both print and digital formats, and organizing events.

A particular focus was on designing a management system that involves tour guides working directly with ecclesiastical staff to better understand the artworks within these sites.

Second Meeting | December 18, 2018 | Santa Maria Novella Complex “Conservation through Knowledge, Management, and Communication.”

The second meeting, dedicated to the conservation of religious complexes and the management of digital cataloging, took place on December 18, 2018, at the Visitor Centre of the Santa Maria Novella Complex. The meeting focused on defining the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved in the cataloging and communication of restoration and maintenance data.

Contributions from stakeholders representing various religious denominations provided an opportunity to compare diverse cultural paradigms reflected both materially and immaterially in places associated with the spirituality of different cultures. Sharing varied approaches and best practices contributed to a mutual understanding of the policies and methods used to protect and enhance cultural heritage associated with religious values.

The fruitful discussion highlighted the cultural complexity involved in managing religious heritage and led to several project proposals aimed at fostering collaboration among the interested parties. In particular, new networking opportunities were identified to facilitate the technical, economic, and educational programming of religious heritage management. These included creating an integrated database, establishing a unified visitor route through Santa Croce, Casa Buonarroti, and the Synagogue, and founding a stonemasonry training school in synergy with the Opera del Duomo.

Preparatory Focus Group for the Third Meeting | June 20, 2019 | Santa Maria Novella Complex

The preparatory focus group for the third meeting aimed to provide a platform for discussion to determine the main topics related to the sustainable conversion and reuse of decommissioned ecclesiastical buildings in the Historic Center of Florence.

Two case studies of the refunctionalization of decommissioned ecclesiastical complexes were presented, serving as a starting point for reflecting on the specifics of reusing religious heritage. The speakers also

highlighted possible solutions for developing a conversion strategy that emphasizes the relationship between cultural heritage and the community.

Planning the refunctionalization of disused areas in the core zone of Florence requires considering the values and attributes involved in the transformation. To identify the qualities that characterize these properties and the impact of their transformation on the OUV of the Historic Center of Florence as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the *Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO office* of the Municipality of Florence, together with the joint laboratory *HeRe_Lab*, presented the experimental use of a preliminary survey model during the meeting. This tool represents a phase of the overall *Heritage Impact Assessment* (HIA) methodology, developed to identify and mitigate potential negative effects of transformation projects on World Heritage sites, applied to the proposed development project for the Ex Ospedale San Gallo transformation area.

Third Meeting | December 18, 2019 | Jewish Community of Florence

“Christian housing and accomodation: challenges and opportunities for the functional recovery of religious heritage”

Building on the focus group held on June 20, 2019, the third meeting of the project took place within the framework of the European *ATLAS World Heritage - Heritage in the Atlantic Area* project. This meeting focused on the sustainable reuse of decommissioned ecclesiastical complexes, particularly promoting religious hospitality in the historic center of Florence. It brought together representatives from various religious communities, advisory bodies, regional and municipal entities to explore the opportunities of promoting religious hospitality in the historic center of Florence.

Discussions emphasized the concept of participatory and lived conservation of places of worship. Presentations of positive experiences clearly demonstrated the dual value of the functional reconversion of religious heritage: it not only has intrinsic value but also serves to disseminate the history, tradition, and knowledge of the community.

Contributors agreed that refunctionalization and enhancement programs for such properties, involving the entire system surrounding the place of worship, must be capable of evolving and adapting to changing circumstances and environments. Consequently, *guidelines* on reuse and recovery processes were discussed, aimed at addressing one of the most significant challenges facing religious complexes: reconciling the three fundamental dimensions underlying an ecclesiastical property - the intangible values associated with the consecrated place, its cultural and tourist appeal, and its usability by communities.

Preparatory Focus Group for the Fourth Meeting | September 16, 2020 | Online conference

This technical meeting aimed to draft a program for the fourth meeting (scheduled for December 2020), jointly determining the topics to be addressed in greater depth. All participants were invited to actively share their opinions and experiences regarding the measures adopted by individual religious entities during the lockdown and the subsequent reopening. The topics discussed, outlined below, were identified as potential strategic actions to address the challenges created by COVID-19 in the city's places of worship:

1) Cloisters as Urban Oases: Open, Shared, and Accessible Spaces

The Historic Center of Florence is dotted with numerous parks and gardens, intertwined with its extraordinary variety of monuments and works of art. However, most of these green oases belong to private buildings and are not accessible to the public. The historic center lacks public green spaces

that serve as everyday places for residents. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the collective need for green spaces available to the population. Therefore, opening cloisters—such as those of Santa Croce, Santissima Annunziata, Santa Maria del Carmine, Santo Spirito, and San Lorenzo—could be a strategic action, not only for revitalizing these often little-known or forgotten areas with appropriate uses and functions but also for offering a place of well-being for residents, workers, students, and tourists.

2) Reconnecting History and Heritage

This thematic discussion is centered on research projects or initiatives aimed at enhancing places of religious interest, recontextualizing movable heritage, and offering new cultural itineraries.

Fourth Meeting | January 28, 2021 | Videoconference *“Post COVID-19 Strategies: Cloisters as Urban Oases and Heritage to Reconnect Memory”*

The fourth meeting of the project was a pivotal moment for analyzing the results achieved thus far and for integrating new procedures, strategies, and solutions to address critical issues, particularly those arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The meeting’s content was based on key concepts and opinions that emerged during the September focus group.

This meeting provided a platform for discussing two main agenda items:

- 1) Presentation and integration of the survey results on the impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on places of religious interest in Florence, conducted between November and December 2020.
- 2) Exploring the concept of cloisters as urban oases and discussing possible ways to open these spaces.

The meeting proposed a dual perspective on cloisters. On one hand, cloisters are seen as social relational spaces, whose accessibility and usability would address the increased collective need for open and accessible spaces for the entire population. On the other hand, considering the goal of reconnecting history and memory in places of religious interest, envisioning cloisters as welcoming spaces can help reduce the perception of closed-off religious sites and provide a foundation for developing management guidelines.

Fifth Meeting | November 9, 2023 | Palazzo Vecchio *“The Role of the Diocese and Religious foundations (Opere) in the governance system of the Historic Centre of Florence”*

The primary objective of this meeting is to respond to the call from the Steering Committee of the Historic Centre of Florence, as expressed during the last meeting held on February 16, 2023. The committee emphasized the importance of actively involving stakeholders related to religious heritage in its operational processes. This initiative reflects a growing awareness of the need to integrate the contributions of the Opere and the Diocese into the decision-making processes for managing the Historic Centre.

In preparation for the Steering Committee meeting, the fifth project meeting served as a crucial moment to define the terms of involvement, representation, and coordination of the Opere and the Diocese for a more integrated and participatory management of the site.

The meeting facilitated a constructive dialogue on how the management system of ecclesiastical assets can be effectively represented within the Steering Committee, integrating the managers of religious heritage into its decision-making and operational processes.

Sixth Meeting | February 15, 2024 | Santo Spirito
“Towards a unified enhancement and use of the religious complexes in the Historic Centre of Florence”

The sixth meeting of the *Florence and the Cultural Inheritance of its Religious Heritage* project aimed to address the issue of fragmentation among religious complexes. This fragmentation, reflected in the current management structure, hinders a unified vision and use of these sites, limiting the proper understanding of their history and value.

During the Steering Committee meeting of the Historic Centre of Florence held on December 12, 2023, the need to overcome operational limitations in managing religious complexes was emphasized. The goal is to restore their integrated interpretation and promote greater accessibility. This theme also emerged in the context of the *Boundary Spaces* project, promoted by the *Florence World Heritage and relations with UNESCO Office* in collaboration with the *University of Florence*, which identified fragmentation as a major obstacle to the enhancement of religious compounds.

During the meeting, methods to guide common policies were explored, aiming to promote greater accessibility and a unified understanding of specific areas, particularly the cloisters.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Florence and the Cultural Inheritance of its Religious Heritage is a strategic project dedicated to the conservation and enhancement of the *Outstanding Universal Value* of the Historic Centre of Florence, World Heritage site. During the management plan's validity period, the *Florence World Heritage and relations with UNESCO Office* aims to continue activities that promote the knowledge, protection, use, and enhancement of religious heritage in Florence from a comprehensive and unified perspective.

Over the next five years, the project aims to establish a flexible set of operational rules, project ideas, and targeted actions in collaboration with various internal and external stakeholders to achieve its objectives. The project will continue to utilize stakeholder meetings (both public and private) as an effective means of monitoring progress and collecting data to identify new challenges and project development directions.

Future approaches will emphasize the involvement of local communities, who are often the first to signal the need for change and to perceive its consequences. By placing the community at the center, the project seeks to promote participatory and collaborative planning and a rediscovery of the value of religious heritage, fostering a renewed spirit of shared responsibility towards these sites.

MONITORING INDICATORS

1. Annual meeting: 1/1



2. Publication and dissemination of meeting reports