

# Does reading the Venice Charter help the good Lord when He moves out? Considerations for expanding the Venice Charter to prevent the loss of church monuments

## Será que ler a Carta de Veneza ajuda o bom Deus quando Ele se muda? Considerações para expandir a Carta de Veneza de modo a evitar a perda de monumentos da igreja

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### Abstract

The Catholic Church owns too many monuments and too few members to maintain them. A true loss for our society is looming. Experts in preservation, politicians, and Church officials are aware of the problem. They respond with resolutions and guideline documents. The compliance of the Charter exerts a restraining influence on the development of responsible strategies for dealing with the abandonment of monuments. Examining the situation of the Church, shows the importance to enhance the priority of this desideratum. Holzhausen is developing an instrument from Vitruvius's criteria for buildings (*firmitas, utilitas, venustas*) to address it. She complements the terms with *historia* to achieve and reinforce the heritage conservation emphasis. Holzhausen's concept enables a process of dialogue between owners, users and professionals when a decision on disposal of a monument becomes necessary. The inclusion of this concept in the Charter would be decisive and should warrant a sustained shift in perspective.

### Resumo

A Igreja Católica possui demasiados monumentos e poucos membros para os manter. Uma verdadeira perda para a nossa sociedade está iminente. Especialistas em preservação, políticos e responsáveis da Igreja estão cientes do problema. Respondem com resoluções e documentos orientadores. O cumprimento da Carta exerce uma influência restritiva no desenvolvimento de estratégias responsáveis para lidar com o abandono de monumentos. A análise da situação da Igreja mostra a importância de reforçar a prioridade deste desiderato. Holzhausen está a desenvolver um instrumento a partir dos critérios Vitruvianos para edifícios (*firmitas, utilitas, venustas*) para abordar esta questão. Complementa os termos com *historia* para alcançar e reforçar a ênfase na conservação do património. O conceito de Holzhausen permite um diálogo entre proprietários, utilizadores e profissionais quando é necessário tomar uma decisão sobre a alienação de um monumento. A inclusão deste conceito na Carta seria decisiva e deveria justificar uma mudança sustentada de perspectiva.

### KEYWORDS

Church preservation  
Guidelines  
Reuse  
Venice Charter  
Vitruvian principles  
Monument criteria

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Preservação de igrejas  
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Reutilização  
Carta de Veneza  
Princípios Vitruvianos  
Critérios para monumentos

## Introduction

For quite some time, the Catholic Church in the German-speaking region has been grappling with two phenomena. Dealing with both is challenging. Both phenomena concern listed churches. On the one hand, the redundancy of places of worship has increased steadily for the past ten years. Sparse worshippers attend the church services. As a result, the remaining congregation feels lost in the large space. Furthermore, the overall willingness to engage in building preservation is decreasing. Nevertheless, the maintenance costs remain the same, whether 400 people attend the service or only 40. This creates an economic bottleneck that has already pushed some dioceses into insolvency. On the other hand, there is the phenomenon of mass emotionalization / sensibility when churches – whether due to force majeure or by decision of the owners – are in danger of being destroyed. The fire at Notre-Dame in Paris is the best example for this special mass emotivity. The whole world held its breath on April 15, 2019. Agnostics, devout Catholics, members of other religious communities, and people without religious affiliation gathered, specifically in Paris, candles were lit, and people flocked together to mourn. This happened in other corners of the world as well, the pain was universal.

In Germany, two amateur videos showing the demolition of the Neo-Romanesque parish church in Immerath, a small village near the Dutch border, reached over a million viewers (Figure 1).

The late historicist building stands so prominently in the landscape, characterized by its typically low horizon, that the local population referred to their parish church as the cathedral of Immerath. This ecclesiastically incorrect term reflects both its significance for the people and its landscape-shaping impact. This prominent church made way for a lignite mine. In newspaper articles, on radio – and television broadcasts, burst of emotions were captured and nourished. For a moment, Germany saw itself reflected in Immerath (Figure 2).

The catholic church hardly has any practical strategies to cope with either of the two phenomena. The power of solidarity and identification dissipates, church attendance at Sunday Mass continues to decline, leading dioceses to divest themselves of further buildings. The process of divestment evokes solidarity again, which then dissipates, it is leading to a vicious cycle. Only an open, dialogical discourse about the purpose of monuments can interrupt this turbulent process and at the same time foster the power of general identification. The following will demonstrate, what happens when there are no valid criteria and what requirements criteria must meet. In a next step, the role of the Venice Charter regarding the identified desideratum will be examined. Finally, a valid proposal for criteria and their implementation into the Venice Charter will be put up for discussion. The argumentation is based on case studies from the Archdiocese of Vienna. However, the scope of both the problem and the potential applicability of the proposed solution significantly transcends the regional boundaries of the Archdiocese of Vienna and the German-speaking territories. It should be noted that due to the concordat between German-speaking countries and the Vatican, the issue of structural maintenance has a more direct impact on parish communities. Therefore, organisations like TRANSARA were founded in Germany [2]. This group of volunteer experts sees itself as a dialogue-seeking counterpart to the church owners. They aim to engage in constructive conversations, bridging the gap between their expertise and the interests of the religious institutions that own the properties in question. With the same aim the *Kirchenmanifest* was published in 2024 [3]. This document brings the importance of religious buildings for society as a whole, regardless of their religious affiliation in a dogmatic sense, into the focus of the public. Up to now almost 22400 people signed it.

Even though it seems to be a more pressing problem in German speaking countries, the decision which church to keep, and which to give will inevitably arise across nearly every country in Europe. The situations observed in the Netherlands and France already indicate that this is a problem of Europe-wide significance.



**Figure 1.** Immerath: *a*) demolition; *b*) police protection; *c*) protests; *d*) demolition of the altar (Photos: K. Heinz Laufs).



**Figure 2.** The “Cathedral” of Immerath (Photo: J. Bakker [1]).

## **The analysis and the cross-regional insights of the first reuse of a church in the Archdiocese of Vienna**

The Archdiocese of Vienna, like all others, faces the task of divesting itself of buildings to preserve others. By examining the genesis of the first disposals in the Archdiocese of Vienna, certain problem areas can be highlighted.

A pilot project in 2014 ended in a dispute between the local parish priest, the diocesan leadership, and the people living in the urban neighbourhoods. The disagreement became public knowledge.

The Archbishop of Vienna was vindicated, but undeserved damage was borne by the Church leadership, the community, and even the protected building, which has since lost its character through the reuse [4]. For this reason, the head of the diocesan construction office and I, as diocesan conservator, were tasked to produce a catalogue of criteria in order to support the decision-making process regarding disposals. A seemingly simple task: since Immanuel Kant's seminal writings on judgment, we know how difficult it is to judge without stable criteria. Stability of criteria can only be achieved where comparable foundational experiences exist. Immanuel Kant refers to it as the problem between a priori and a posteriori criterion [5]. In the decision-making bodies of the Archdiocese of Vienna, an architectural assessment of buildings was presented, based on a concept from the City of Vienna and the Czech City of Brno [6]. This was developed to classify endangered post-war buildings in the region between Vienna and Brno. Through this classification, the buildings to be preserved were to be identified. The precise checklist included essential structural questions, down to the number and quality of electrical outlets. The catalogue was very useful for an architecture firm. It is well suited and

necessary for planning and decision making. However, for the decision-makers in the Archdiocese of Vienna, the criteria catalogue was of little use. Therefore, the concept was shelved. What had happened? While the criteria demonstrated clear structure and strong domain expertise, they were drawn from the experiences of specialised actors rather than from those of the authorities within the Archdiocese.

Regarding the task: what appears to be simple is not. Criteria must be formulated in a way that is neither too general nor too detailed. Furthermore, there needs to be a dialogical alignment of a contrasting range of experience from which the criteria are derived. Additionally, the criteria must be grouped to assign them to the scope of experience of certain professions or perspectives nourished by specific experience. The reason is that an architect assesses a building differently than the local parish priest or the bishop does. The perspective of the state monument conservator is again a quite different one. If there is no prior alignment of experiences and especially no consensus on which field of experiences should be included, the criteria cannot achieve stability, and applicability becomes unattainable. Against this background, the failure of the initial task of the diocesan leadership in the Archdiocese of Vienna must be reconsidered.

Due to the lack of consensus regarding the level of detail, the different perspectives on the buildings to be examined, and the lack of exchange about the images drawn from one's own horizon of experience, this submission project was destined to fail.

Both the emotional reactions of the public to the endangerment of post-war church buildings and the reactions of stakeholders in the specific project of the Archdiocese of Vienna clearly demonstrate that criteria must encompass all aspects of the building, that are relevant for the specific building under consideration, especially for all stakeholders. Because architecture is more than just buildings, it is a living space, zone of memory, point of identification, sometimes even art, and very often a projection surface for ideas, worldviews, and much more. The requirement is to find a system that is not so general as to slide into arbitrariness. Similarly, it must not be too narrowly defined, as this would exclude the perspectives of others.

### **When tolerance leads to monument loss: reflections on the impact of theological motifs in the abandoning decisions of sacred monuments**

Following this unanalysed dilemma of criteria, the diocesan leadership of the Archdiocese of Vienna made decisions on further church disposals without explicitly formulated criteria. Due to financial constraints, a process was initiated in 2022 that led to the decommissioning of one of Austria's most architecturally remarkable churches, located at the intersection of modern and postmodern design. The parish church at the Schöpfwerk, dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi, was handed over to the Serbian Orthodox Church. The building, designed by Vienna architect Victor Hufnagel between 1979 and 1981, is an integral part and centre of a large residential complex (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The church at the Schöpfwerk: *a)* its surroundings; *b)* inside the original Catholic church at the Schöpfwerk before adaptation to the Serbian Orthodox Church (Photos: Referat für Kunst und Denkmalpflege, Erzdiözese Wien).

Conceptually, the church, like the other components of the complex, is entirely geared towards the needs of the local population. Through the choice of facade materials, the church simultaneously defines the public space and provides the settlement with a centre. It was designed as a central building in line with the Second Vatican Council, with functional ancillary rooms that facilitate community life optimally. The architectural self-conception post the Second Vatican Council was embodied in the architecture across all areas. The interior fittings completely eschewed illustrative ornamentation. The church was adorned with ceramics by artist Franz Josef Altenburg in a way that preserved the static framework of the structure. This building represents a synthesis where building technology meets craftsmanship and reduction meets design. It is worth noting that the artist Altenburg was awarded the prestigious Austrian State Prize for Art, the highest honour bestowed by the Republic of Austria to artists, just the year preceding the disposal of the church. The building is under monument protection. The noteworthiness of this building according to architectural historians, architects, monument conservators, or artists, is so evident that the decision to give it to the Serbian orthodox church accepting all necessary changes in nearby future is incomprehensible to any specialist in architecture. In this case, experts in architectural art did not focus on the usage situation or the faith-immanent decision logic. However, from an internal Church perspective, the decision parameters for the responsible parties in the Archdiocese of Vienna appear quite different: fewer mass attendees, an aging Austrian population, an increasingly non-Catholic residential population, high costs of maintenance of the infrastructure and the structural integrity of the building, and the low personal attachment of decision-makers to buildings of this nature may carry more weight than any assessment by experts in architectural art. Additionally, with the Serbian Church's interest in the building, the central aspect of a religious continued use could be optimally addressed. Therefore, desecration becomes obsolete, and the place remains as a site of prayer and Eucharistic celebration. The preservation of churches as places of sacramental activity emerges as a central criterion for the decisions of the incumbent Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. Almost all efforts to reduce the building burden for the Archdiocese of Vienna were resolved in this way. Thus, Cardinal Schönborn lives out a central statement of faith in his practical decisions, as formulated by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*. In paragraph 223, late Jesuit Pope Francis (José Maria Bergoglio) emphasises giving precedence to time and processes in human communities over spatial and static considerations [7, p. 223]. In concrete terms, this means that a church handed over to the Serbian Orthodox Church enables further prayers and spiritual experiences for people, even if they no longer take place within the Catholic sphere.

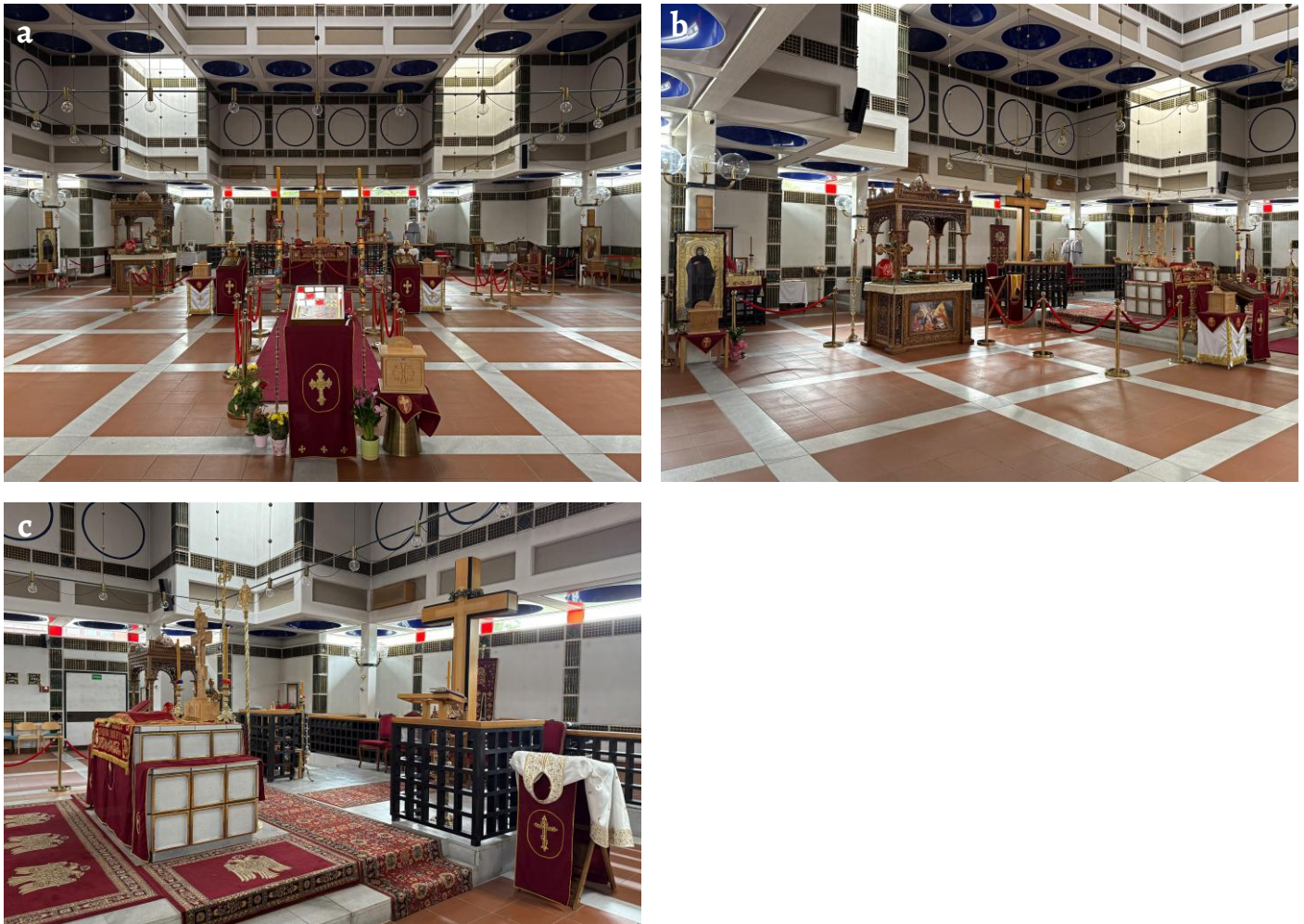
According to Catholic belief, these spiritual experiences and prayers have a lasting influence on future society. The disposal of protected churches to Orthodox communities highlights a contradiction between the intention of the Venice Charter and the genuine catholic intention to preserve churches as places of prayer and sacramental life. The Venice Charter's intention is to keep the church in its authentic physical appearance and the catholic intention is to keep the site as a place of worship with all the necessary changes. The general and unsolvable contradiction is obvious. On top of that, Austrian legislation applies unique provisions to religious buildings, often to the detriment of the monument. This warrants closer examination of the Austrian monument protection laws. With those provisions, religious communities are guaranteed the ability to make changes to historical buildings insofar as they are necessary for the practice of their religion [8, §5/4 of the 2025 Heritage Protection Amendment]. For the Catholic Church, these are primarily changes affecting liturgical practices derived from the demands of the Second Vatican Council and the accessibility of the buildings. The church at the Schöpfwerk was built in the spirit of the liturgy of the Second Vatican Council. Accordingly, no modifications are required to accommodate Catholic use. Based on this fact, any application from the community or diocesan representatives in this area would have been rejected if submitted. For the church at the Schöpfwerk, this means that as long as this space is a Catholic church, the monument protection office does not need to approve changes that significantly alter the character of the architecture. However, once the building is in the possession of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the legal situation changes fundamentally. Because in Orthodoxy, an iconostasis is required, and the fixed altar facing the people becomes obsolete. Furthermore, sculptures and paintings are no longer needed. In return, a complete fresco decoration in the icon tradition is required, as such images in Orthodox theology are not merely decorative but carry a deep religious message imbued with the character of holiness. As a result, the Federal Monuments Office is likely to grant an application from the Serbian Orthodox community of the church at the Schöpfwerk under §4 Abs.5. Consequently, the indoor space will completely lose the character that distinguishes it as a listed monument.

The already implemented modifications, characterized by the introduction of orthodox liturgical furnishings and the strategic incorporation of textiles, serve as a clear indicator of the extensive alterations that are anticipated. These preliminary adjustments provide insight into the scope and nature of the impending transformation of the sacred space (Figure 4).

This example shows that the lack of alignment of each stakeholder's own criteria with that of the others leads to entrenched positions and ultimately to a condemnation of the Catholic Church's decision in the professional world and an unwillingness of the church owners to engage with the experts in architecture and urban planning. The professional world of monument preservation and architecture must engage with the Church's logic, and the Church leadership must seek dialogue in advance with someone who can explain the position on monument preservation. This can help identify buildings that have a high level of identification for the general population, including those who are estranged from the Church. This proposal should be tested in pilot projects, that in the best-case scenario, lead to role models. In this way, the vicious circle described at the beginning can be interrupted.

In the case of the church at the Schöpfwerk, this mutual misunderstanding and its effects, as well as the failure of a systematic architectural criteria catalogue, show how urgently criteria are needed, and how carefully they must be considered so that we can leave those monuments to future generations so that they can convincingly experience the artistic and historical significance of our era in their own materiality. The motives behind decommissioning churches often stand in irreconcilable tension with the prevailing societal aim of safeguarding architectural heritage for future generations. This goal conflict can only be negotiated in dialogue with adequate criteria. It is the question of use that must be reflected upon. Conflicting motives cannot be resolved through alignment of criteria alone. Here, society and the state must examine how important preservation is to them and then take appropriate action. A successful reuse might not be the same for different players. So, the Schöpfwerk

project can be deemed successful when evaluated through the prism of religious studies and pastoral theology. From this perspective, it serves as a role model. However, when examined through the lens of architectural history or heritage conservation, the project presents a markedly different profile. This dichotomy underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in project assessment. The key question is, if a reuse project of a sacred building can be successful through both lenses. Examinations of published public opinions on reuse projects don't show that.



**Figure 4.** Inside the church at the Schöpfwerk in use by the Serbian Orthodox community: *a*) without architectural change but with added orthodox church furniture; *b*) with the liturgical obligatory defined places; *c*) with interventions creating an invisible iconostasis (Photos: Referat für Kunst und Denkmalpflege, Erzdiözese Wien).

### **Power, impact, and limitations of the Venice Charter regarding the disposal of churches**

The cited case studies, process analyses, and public reactions have shown that church monument preservation in Europe is at a crucial turning point. Two decisions need to be made. Church owners must decide, under economic pressure, which buildings to relinquish. And society must decide which buildings it wants to preserve in accordance with the Venice Charter, even if they are no longer used for their original purpose.

This decision must then be supported by corresponding actions. The Venice Charter is a fundamental document for the thoughtful treatment of monuments in their inherited substance. It was and is formative in shaping awareness and remains an important basis for monument discourse to this day, as well as it is influential in shaping modes of thought. The

exploration of its origins has shown that the Charter essentially arose from a shortage caused by the war in Europe [9-12] and was heavily influenced by French and English concepts of monuments [13]. In the international community's debate over successor documents [14-15], it becomes clear that the focus on substance stems for a European perspective with partly colonial roots [16], which limits the term of what preservation is, and the concept of cultural heritage.

The intercultural discourse on preservation of substance in its utmost integrity as a paradigm for World Heritage is indispensable. In the debate over which sacred buildings should be relinquished, larger questions about cultural heritage tend to fade into the background.

It needs to be examined whether the systematic approach also applies to other concepts of monuments. It is worth noting that the Charter does not provide an approach to the question of how to consciously deal with the disposal of monuments. The same applies to the subsequent documents [10-12]. All these documents are based on consensus, reached through intensive debates on how to preserve. Hans Rudolf Mayer addresses, for the first time in his concluding summary of the Vienna Conference on the fiftieth anniversary of the Venice Charter, the necessity of considering what should no longer be preserved in the future [17]. He points out that the Charter does not provide an answer to this but also emphasizes the singular effectiveness of this document to this day. I share his assessment, albeit with a second connotation. On the one hand, there is Mayer's intended tribute to the Charter as the foundation for the successful preservation of cultural heritage worldwide. On the other hand, the effect of the exclusive focus on preservation as the goal in all successor documents is evident.

In the struggle to preserve churches in Europe, a series of documents have emerged focusing on sacred buildings. The publishers range from the Catholic Church itself to academic and governmental organizations. This diversified authorship clearly indicates that the necessity for action is recognized by multiple societal stakeholders across different domains. What unites all documents is, on the one hand, the addressing of the issue of church disposal, and on the other hand, either the implicit or explicit reference to the Venice Charter. The documents analysed below are not exhaustive but represent a subset of relevant documents. The selection criteria include binding or advisory status, frequency of citation, and applicability as practical implementation guides.

In 2005, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution on redundant religious buildings [18]. The aim is the best possible preservation of endangered sacred buildings. The resolution emphasises that churches are often an integral part of cultural heritage. In this document the Parliamentary Assembly applies to both religious and state authorities to do everything possible to preserve redundant churches and find appropriate reuse.

Groundbreaking is the understanding that this task does not solely fall to religious communities as owners but is also the responsibility of the member states. The Council of Europe underlines the need to support projects aimed at repurposing religious buildings. Furthermore, the Parliamentary Assembly calls for the provision of funds or tax benefits for the restoration, repair, and maintenance of religious buildings, whether in use or redundant, to ensure they are not abandoned. Although tax relief for religious communities would be a significant support, the question of which buildings to relinquish is not addressed. "Providing funds or tax benefits for the restoration, repair, and maintenance of religious buildings, whether in use or redundant, in order to ensure they are not abandoned" [18].

Papers from the ICCROM Forum 2003 on the preservation of living religious buildings [19] deal with the importance and impact of sacred buildings but do not address the necessity of disposing buildings. Christina Carlo Stella, an art expert from the Vatican, highlighted in her publication the significance of church cultural heritage as a meeting point for dialogue about craftsmanship and the inherited inventory. She also focuses on what objects are on site, how they should be preserved, and how intercommunication concerning their embodied religious content can take place. The collection of objects of religious art and criteria for the disposal of buildings by the Catholic Church are also not addressed by her [20]. Her argumentation is in line with those of the already discussed documents.

Led by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the Pontifical Council for Culture of the Roman Curia (this institution is now incorporated into the Dicastery for Culture and Education), released in 2018 guidelines for the decommissioning and secular use of Catholic churches [21].

In this singular document of the Catholic Church, he addresses the concern that churches could be misused outside their primary purpose. He implicitly mentions the possibility of political or unilateral cultural loading without further elaborating on this. He explicitly addresses inappropriate use. In English and French, the term "sordid" is used, a clear and tight interpretation of what inappropriate means.

In another section, he highlights the importance of churches beyond their sacramental use for celebrating the Eucharist: "The termination of the liturgical use of a church space does not automatically reduce it to a meaningless and arbitrarily convertible building; its significance acquired over time and its actual presence in the community are indeed not reducible to technical or financial data." [21]. He thus addresses an important criterion outside the economic considerations: the urban, historical, and identity-building power of such buildings, even when they are profaned. According to Ravasi, the power of some churches as landmarks must always be considered. The Notre-Dame phenomenon is strong proof for that.

In a separate paragraph, Ravasi notes that in some cases, the canonical practice of the Catholic Church is not compatible with the ideas of monument protection. As an example, he mentions the practice of dismantling the altar of celebration [21]. Overall, the Curial Cardinal addresses the conflicting goals, already highlighted in the example of the church at the Schöpfwerk, between religious intention and monument preservation derived from the Venice Charter. Even Ravasi singles out one individual criterion that must be considered when disposing of sacred buildings, he does not present a system of criteria to apply.

The German Bishops' Conference provided Cardinal Ravasi's pronouncements in German as guidelines titled "Closure and Reuse of Churches" to the dioceses and their communities in 2019. However, this did not offer concrete assistance to the dioceses in deciding which churches should continue to be sites of sacramental life and which should be abandoned. The disposal process in the dioceses of Aachen and Essen clearly demonstrates that predominantly buildings from the twentieth century were renovated or demolished. The *Invisibilis* initiative evidently indicates that the problem in question transcends regional boundaries. Up to now there are 3,422 vanished or dramatically changed sacred buildings listed [22] (Figure 5).

In response to this need, individual dioceses have issued guidance for their parishes and internal specialist departments on the topic under discussion. From this perspective, the initial task assigned to the head of the construction department and me as diocesan conservator should also be seen in a new light.

The Archdiocese of Cologne already released a handbook in 2003, that was later adopted by the German Bishops' Conference [23]. In autumn 2025, the German-speaking diocesan conservators were provided with this revised version for evaluation prior to publication. Publication is expected in 2026. This handbook has been under revision for several years. However, the result is still pending. It recommends a graded decision-making process for the repurposing of churches. The first step is to determine whether the church can continue to be used in any form for liturgical purposes. The next option is that in the case of reuse, a small part of the church remains as a sacred space – a so-called "partial reuse". The third step is complete repurposing, which may involve a sale and then its secularisation. The final option is the partial or complete demolition of the church. However, the handbook does not provide support for the question of which church should be abandoned. The overarching view of the total number of buildings to be discussed is missing. The question of which buildings should be retained is not even raised. Thus, this handbook remains within the canon of the Venice Charter, even though it lists demolition as a last resort. A similar attitude can be found in the 2013 published criteria of the Diocese Aachen [24]. They developed criteria, but just as the Cologne handbook the criteria catalogue is used for one single building [25].



Figure 5. Demolished or endangered churches in Germany, *invisibilis*, moderneRegional.

In Austria, only the Diocese of Graz-Seckau has drafted a document dedicated to these processes, which is available to the diocese's specialist departments [26]. Since 2021, it has been offering its parishes and internal departments a written guidance.

In the introduction, it is emphasised that this process should be planned with a broad horizon and that early and open communication between the parties involved is essential to make a joint decision. This preamble highlights an important aspect for the application of criteria because it is essential that the positions and assessments of the individual stakeholders should be examined and reflected. The process at the church at the Schöpfwerk in Vienna has additionally shown that without alignment, tensions and mutual prejudices build up.

The largest part of the guidance, comparable to the Cologne document, focuses on the possibilities of reuse. All aspects that need to be considered and what should be avoided are presented in a very comprehensive manner. The criteria for assessment include the significance of the memorial site, as well as the missionary function of the building for the community.

Unlike all other handbooks, the guidance suggests pure conservation of the building as one possibility for reuse. This interesting and hitherto unique approach does not aim to create a static monument but to create time space so that the reuse process can be well established, and a sustainable reuse can be found. Regarding the complex question of which buildings should continue to be used and which should be handed over or abandoned, this guidance also lacks a concept.

In the Archdiocese of Vienna, a structured process is being developed. Unlike the dioceses of Graz-Seckau and Cologne, it is not intended to serve as guidance for parishes, communities, or even monastery communities considering demolishing a building. The expressed goal is to provide the organisation itself with a secure course of action. This approach fundamentally differs from those presented in other documents here. It involves developing a toolkit for self-structuring and self-reflection for the diocesan leadership.

To my knowledge, this approach is unique and significant. Ultimately, the dioceses must make decisions regarding their buildings and communities collectively. In Vienna, the planning of procedures always starts with individuals. Thus far, two processes have been outlined. One explores what needs to be done if a parish wishes to relinquish a sacred building. The other delineates the procedure to be followed when a request for a specific building is made by someone outside the Archdiocese of Vienna. It is a person-oriented process, focusing on individual buildings to reduce the total number of sacred buildings financed by the Archdiocese of Vienna. The focus is on smooth processes that comply with both canonical and state requirements. The underlying need arises from the experience with the initially described first church disposal in Vienna. In line with the considerations presented so far regarding the decommissioning of sacred spaces, the selection from the broader inventory of listed religious buildings has not yet been integrated into the process. Here, I again observe an implicit, unconscious adoption of the fundamental orientation of the Venice Charter and its successor documents: monuments are to be preserved, but discussions and struggles are necessary regarding how to do so. At the current stage of the Vienna process development, the basic assumption that essentially all objects are to be preserved is evident. Similarly, it is evident that all those responsible are aware that this will not be possible in the future and therefore good and sensible processes must be established. The result can be presented by researchers of the younger generation on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Venice Charter.

### **Finding from the case studies and analysed publications**

It is striking that all decisions about decommissioning a church are made building by building. In autumn 2025, the German-speaking diocesan conservators were provided with this revised version for evaluation prior to publication. Publication is expected in 2026. Similarly all documents on the preservation and reuse of churches always start from an individual building. Here, I perceive an enculturated, implicit effect of the Venice Charter, which is valuable for the conscious and respectful handling of our inherited architectural heritage. However, it requires an expansion to provide a basis for the demands of monument disposal. This expansion does not change the identical intention of responsible action for future generations. In the forthcoming decision on which objects not to preserve, the focus must systematically be widened to include all buildings within one's own area of responsibility. It is essential to reflect on one's own assessment standpoint. It requires a broadening the recurring perspective, which has been enshrined in the Venice Charter and has since solidified and become ingrained in thinking and action. It needs a concept that allows sufficient time, dialogue between stakeholders with different perspectives, and the broadening of the view to encompass multiple buildings. Only then can a selection be oriented towards future generations that corresponds to both the cultural heritage and the intended use.

### ***Firmitas, utilitas, venustas, historiae: a proposal for criteria***

The previous analysis has shown that criteria must be chosen in a way that the underlying horizon of experience must be present and understandable for others as postulated by Kant [5]. Furthermore, it became clear that the artistic value as well as the historical value is important for a larger part of society, extending beyond the community of believers. Additionally, the visible and reflected faith practice of the specific community is important. Last but not least, the spiritual dimension is a very important aspect for every decision.

The experience of the first three church disposals in Vienna has shown that the individual aspects outlined here need to be integrated into a system. This system must be usable for the responsible bishop, his vicar general, as well as for those responsible for pastoral and economic matters. With the intention of not reinventing the wheel, I have worked through the presented documents here and through the literature of architectural theory. Individual facets were repeatedly found. Finding a system that is not too narrowly defined but also does not drift into arbitrariness was only successful for me in the reading of Vitruvius' Ten Books on Architecture [25]. Vitruvius, through the conceptual clustering of individual criteria oriented towards the result of the construction process, created a clarity that is still applicable today. I was able to present this idea in 2023 in a commemorative publication for the chief architect of the Archdiocese of Cologne, a friend to whom I owe many open, sometimes controversial, professional discussions in mutual respect, to a larger professional audience [26].

Therefore, I present the result here, without going into detail on translation issues and the effects of this document in the twentieth century.

Over 90 % of this 2000-year-old masterpiece deals with buildings as a process. In Chapter Three of the first book, however, Vitruvius does not focus on the process of construction but on the result, the building. His requirement for every building is that it takes into account both firmness (*firmitas*) and utility (*utilitas*), as well as beauty (*venustas*). Vitruvius' demand for built architecture requires the best solution for all three aspects. A building should be durable, sustainable, optimal for its use, and aesthetically pleasing.

For our cultural self-understanding, Vitruvius' criteria lack an aspect that has developed in European society from the end of the Ancien-Régime and the rule of Napoleon. It is about buildings as monuments, about their historical value, about memory, and about identity formation. These terms appear in all the church guidelines for the disposal of sacred spaces [20-21, 23-28]. They are highlighted in the various documents for their effectiveness and significance as individual aspects.

It is therefore necessary to expand Vitruvius' canon with the concept of *historia*. Because systematic historical reflection is a cultural skill that is now a natural part of our assessment and action. Monument conservation is part of this cultural skill. It emerged in the time of Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and led from the beginning of the nineteenth century to a widespread new approach to inherited buildings.

To give the term of *historia* a sufficiently wide field of words that includes not only historical facts but also narratives and constructed historical images about the specific building, it is useful to add two more terms to this concept. Because the historical dimension of a building includes, in addition to the historical facts, all kind of narratives about the building and the building itself as a projection surface for imagined or experienced history. For me the use of the terms *fabula* and *argumentum* as auxiliary or sub terms to *historia* can accomplish this. Because *fabula* is encompassing the realm of imagined narratives and *argumentum* is outlining the substance of possible narratives. So, all kinds of *fabula* and all kinds of *argumentum* must be examined within the term *historia*.

Churches or other sacred buildings that meet all four parameters to the highest degree are considered as outstanding works of architecture and are generally perceived as places of spirituality. The German language provides a special term to classify for those buildings. It is *Baukunst*, which might be translated as “art within architecture”. There is usually a societal

consensus on their preservation. This also explains the phenomenon described at the beginning regarding Notre-Dame in Paris or the parish church of Immerath.

### **About *firmitas***

It encompasses the structural condition of the building in all its facets. Here, the examination focuses on what needs to be invested to keep a building usable. This question can be divided into the measures currently needed and those that must be set in the long term or on a recurring basis. Similarly, the question of financial expenditure to avoid depreciation of the building is thematically related to *firmitas*. Likewise, the expenses for preserving artworks or artistic features are placed here. However, the assessment of the artworks themselves in their aesthetic value is not a part of *firmitas*. Considerations for adaptation to adjust to the usability requirements of the respective time and its needs are not part of the examination of *firmitas*. However, the definition of what is needed for adequate use is a subset of *utilitas* and must be examined there. Examples include setting up a children's area in the church, altering an altar, or installing a confession room. These examples involve the usage requirements that adaptations to the building demand.

### **About *utilitas***

The *utilitas* of sacred spaces, which is to be examined, is divided into two areas. Firstly, it is the *utilitas* of current use. Secondly, it is the *utilitas* for potential reuses. Fundamentally, in Catholic sacred buildings, it is primarily shaped by the doctrine, by the religious requirements. For the Catholic Church, spaces primarily serve to enable the experience of the spiritual dimension of concrete actions, especially in their liturgical use with all its aspects.

*Utilitas* also encompasses concrete questions about social and ecological uses (church café, solar panels). The easily testable questions about *utilitas* include the ratio between the size of the church and the number of Mass attendees, or the alignment between the architectural features and the demands from the parish. In this example, it should be noted that the demands for a better use of the building are part of the *utilitas*. But the feasibility assessment of the demands belongs to the *firmitas*. *utilitas* can be evaluated very differently by different groups. Regarding *utilitas*, it should not be overlooked that this sphere also includes big, difficult-to-answer questions. As an example, the following questions illustrate this: "Does the preaching of the Word of God and/or the celebration of the Eucharist, the prayers of the congregation, need this church space? If so, why is this space valued more than another?" Here, the necessity of deep theological self-reflection becomes apparent. This also sheds light on why the process of decommissioning of churches is so difficult within the Catholic Church. The examination of potential reuses, whether sacred or secular, is also a question of *utilitas*. Through this question, the conflict of objectives, described in the example of the church at the Schöpfwerk, between state monument preservation and church leadership becomes evident. This evidence in turn, creates space for a hands-on dialogue and for joint deliberation. The outlined questions highlight that the greatest challenges and conflicts are expected in the realm of *utilitas*. Recognising and accepting conflict lines is the first step toward resolution.

### **About *venustas***

For the assessment of the sphere of design, form-finding, artistic strength, and expression of a structure, Vitruvius chose the term *venustas*. This encompasses all aspects of artistic form-finding, aesthetics, and art. Concerning the evaluation of church buildings, this area exclusively pertains to the assessment of the aesthetic strength and expression of the building. Assessing *venustas* is both the simplest and most challenging area. It's simple because it solely concerns form-finding, making the delineation clear, yet challenging because the boundary between taste and aesthetic judgment is based on a specialized education in argumentation. The assessment of all artistic aspects of a building is heavily influenced by one's own cultural-historical background and narrow imprint. Without reflection on one's own standpoint,

achieving consensus in this area can be distant, and fronts can harden. The Roman Catholic Church has acknowledged this issue and therefore included in its law. When changes are to be made to churches or their furnishings, the designated art expert of the diocese must be consulted [29]. Any change in use inevitably has a significant impact on the building and its furnishings, so Canon 1216 applies, even if the actual practices in individual dioceses vary greatly. However, it is undisputed that the solidarity in Paris illustrates that buildings have an artistic effect, that they possess the power of an identity formation, and the power for deep spiritual experience. To recognise and make use of it and to interrupt the described vicious circle, judgment must be made on this aspect of a building in conversation with experts. The dialogue must be based on the knowledge about the various philosophical concepts of art.

#### **About *historia* (also *argumentum* and *fabula*)**

This criterion encompasses, on the one hand, the overarching historical dimension of buildings with all their facets, and on the other hand, the personal memories of the community and individual people. The overarching historical dimension includes the significance of the building in its era, the oeuvre of the architect itself or its role as a memorial site for a specific event. Additionally, the significance of the building for a particular technological development/achievement may be considered. When placing buildings in historical context, the role of buildings as projection surfaces for certain views or as instruments of certain worldviews must be considered and examined. The value of churches as sites of personal life memories (baptisms, communions, weddings, funerals) is sensitively addressed in Cardinal Ravasi's document [21] and particularly in the orientation guide of the Diocese of Graz Seckau [26].

### **Learn from an ancient expert: how the process of Church decommissioning gains quality with the help of Vitruvius**

The Vitruvian clustering, expanded by *historia*, is a tool that supports the decision-making process for the decommissioning or surrender of sacred spaces in several ways. Firstly, it is simple and clear, making it applicable. Furthermore, it clearly assigns individual arguments to specific thematic areas, enabling discussions that can be concise. Arguments for or against a building can be clearly attributed to a specific theme, thus avoiding discussions that lead nowhere. Moreover, the clustering is not so narrow that it is only applicable to individual cases or for a specific profession. Issues of inapplicability of criteria and rejection, such as those triggered by the criteria catalogue for post-war buildings in Vienna and Brno, can thus be avoided. Finally, the Vitruvian systematic approach, expanded by *historia*, allows all stakeholders to examine all aspects of a building and at the same time clearly identify their own areas of expertise. This examination forms the basis for comparison in the committee when deciding on buildings and optimally prepares church authorities like the bishop, who bear the final responsibility. It is evident, that this self-examination could be applied to any building, site, or object but here the focus is on church buildings, hence the emphasis. It would thus be equally applicable to the increasingly frequent listing procedures of the Federal Monuments Office in Austria. The benefit lies in mediating between owners and government agencies and ultimately in creating an accurate and meaningful list of monuments.

Undoubtedly, this examination can only be carried out in the form of a self-commitment. Because the living preservation of cultural heritage ultimately is a cultural skill that oscillates between preservation and renewal. Cultural skills can only be acquired and applied through self-commitment. The methodology must be continuously reassessed. The aim is understanding different opinions of others, and the juxtaposition of other life experiences with one's own.

## Conclusion: the Venice Charter should be expanded

There is no doubt that a globally applicable document should not be overloaded with assessment criteria. However, the criteria will be assessed differently within different communities. Therefore, when it comes to the commitment to systematically assess the decommissioning of buildings – whether or not they are included in a canon of monuments - a more detailed set of criteria becomes necessary. The willingness to develop criteria and apply them systematically is required. Vitruvian thinking enables the expansion of the Charter to have validity for all countries. The discussions of the Nara Document, the Vienna Memorandum, and any other additions to the Venice Charter could thus be incorporated into the assessment of individual buildings, as well as ensembles and urban extensions. Therefore, I recommend the expansion of the Venice Charta. This expansion could read as follows.

### Decommissioning of buildings, ensembles, or other materialised cultural heritage – article 17

When it is necessary to abandon a building, ensemble, or other materialised cultural artifacts, the decision to abandon is preceded by an assessment by the owners, users, and experts. All stakeholders commit to assessing the object to be abandoned for its durability, utility, artistic, and historical significance. This assessment takes place dialogically, in comparison with the assessment results of all stakeholders.

I present this proposal for discussion. Two things are clear to me: The terminology must be carefully chosen in every language so that it corresponds to the intention and the language usage. The research of Alex Langini has shown the distortions of intentions in translations [13]. Therefore, I recommend using Latin terms as the source language and translating them from there into one's own language. No paragraph of the Venice Charter can contribute successfully to the sustainable transmission of cultural heritage if it is not supported by the self-commitment of the users. Carrying this into society is a task for us experts. Our task is to bring the dialogue into society and strengthen awareness. The discussion within our own community only has a limited impact.

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