

Is Your Church in Danger of Becoming a Bar?

The confessionals that once served as vessels of repentance now stand stacked in a corner of the Sacred Heart Church, silent witnesses to the passage of time and the dwindling purpose of these Roman Catholic houses of worship.

As faith and church attendance have declined over the past half-century, churches, convents and chapels across Europe have been left empty and increasingly dilapidated.

In the heartland of European Christianity, where the faith flourished for centuries, a transformation is underway.

Flanders, in northern Belgium, boasts magnificent cathedrals and exquisite art, yet finds itself grappling with a shortage of devoted followers. A 2018 study from the PEW research group revealed that while 83% of Belgians claimed to have been raised Christian, only 55% still identify as such, with a mere 10% attending church regularly.

Today, it is not uncommon for visiting international choirs to outnumber the local congregations. On average, each of the 300 towns in Flanders possesses about six churches, many of which struggle to gather enough faithful to fill a single pew. Consequently, these once-sacred structures have become eyesores in city centers, burdening communities with the ongoing financial costs of maintenance.

In the town of Mechelen, known as Belgium's Roman Catholic center, Mayor Bart Somers has been working tirelessly to breathe new life into these buildings.

The ambitious project aims to repurpose churches for various uses, ranging from breweries and hotels to cultural centers and libraries. Mechelen's landmark repurposing venture,

Martin's Patershof hotel, stands as a testament to the transformation. The interior of the church was ingeniously redesigned, offering guests rooms adorned with headboards resembling organ pipes and a breakfast room adjacent to the altar, where delicate golden wafers hover above. Hotel manager Emilie De Preter attests that visitors often seek solace and tranquility amidst the remnants of the church's former identity.

While ethical debates may arise about the repurposing of churches for unconventional purposes, Mayor Somers remains focused on preserving their architectural value. He firmly believes that the sacral ambiance within these structures, whether one is religious, agnostic or atheist, continues to evoke a sense of reverence and introspection.

Bishop Johan Bonny of Antwerp echoes this sentiment, emphasizing that churches are places for contemplation, deserving of utmost care and respect. While Roman Catholic religion may be on the decline, Bishop Bonny finds solace in witnessing other Christian communities, such as the Coptic and Eastern European congregations, occupy these sacred spaces.

However, the bishop admits that the parade of potential suitors for empty Roman Catholic buildings can be wearisome. Real estate agents, motivated by financial gain, often appear more devout than nuns when presented with a profitable opportunity. Bishop Bonny acknowledges the winding history of Christianity and takes the long view, recognizing that something new will inevitably emerge, even if the immediate future seems bleak. He muses, "Every 300 years we nearly had to start again. Something new, I'm sure, will happen. But it takes time."

At Martin's Patershof, a provision is in place allowing the church to reclaim the building if the need arises, although the likelihood remains slim. The hotel's structure, supported by steel beams, can be dismantled entirely. As De Preter

explains, “If the church, at a certain point, wants the building back—which holds a very small chance, probably—it is possible.”

As the Christian landscape evolves and churches find new purposes, believers and non-believers alike are reminded of the enduring presence of the sacred. The quest for tranquility, contemplation and a glimpse into the divine continues to shape society, even as traditional religious practices change. In this shifting paradigm, communities across Belgium and Europe grapple with the challenge of preserving the essence of the sacred while adapting to the realities of the modern world. {eoa}

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