

# Open letter to Commissioner Navracsics

## Europe's Religious Heritage

In 2014 the European Commission published a paper entitled 'Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage' which stated that: *Religious heritage is one of the pillars of European culture and identity. It is the largest "museum" in Europe and covers every corner of the continent.*

This paper marked a turning point in Europe's approach to culture. Since then, attitudes have continued to evolve positively. At a political level, the EYCH2018 has been launched; 'Reinforcing Cooperation on Cultural Heritage' has become one of the three focus areas of European foreign policy and the provisional budget for EU Culture Programmes has been substantially increased.

These all reflect the growing awareness at a civil society level of the importance of cultural heritage both in everyday life and as a binding force to the European ideal.

There is also growing awareness that religious buildings - Europe's biggest portfolio of cultural heritage and by far - are under serious threat due to change in patterns of worship, attitudes to religion and reductions in government spending. In some countries such as the Netherlands, churches and monasteries are closing at an unprecedented rate with a consequent loss of local history, social amenity and art.

**The threat to many of these buildings is real and urgent. If measures are not taken quickly, the trickle of closures and destructions already witnessed across Europe risks becoming a flood.**

Europe boasts some 500,000 churches, chapels, synagogues, mosques, cathedrals, monasteries and convents. Their contents: furnishings, monuments, sculptures, paintings, frescos, silver, vestments, libraries are a repository of local and national heritage. The architects, artists and musicians they have inspired over the centuries and their record of national, local and individual history dating back well over a millennium represent a unique and essential part of Europe's cultural identity.

### Future for Religious Heritage

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Religious buildings bind communities together through the worship and non-worship activities that take place within them and the history they enclose. They are often the only public buildings remaining and, as government funding is reduced across Europe, offer an essential focus for sustaining local communities. Religious buildings continue to satisfy citizens' spiritual needs. They attract visitors from afar and from nearby, represent five out of ten of Europe's most visited sites and make a major contribution to tourism GDP. Their physical presence in the cityscape or rural environment enlivens all who pass by.

The increasing numbers of pilgrims and visits to religious heritage sites demonstrates Europeans' appreciation of their religious heritage. This is confirmed by a survey, commissioned by FRH in 2014 across eight different countries, which shows that local communities throughout Europe are firmly attached to their places of worship and would be pleased that greater uses could be found for them.

The sector's sheer size and diversity, the differing objectives of its various stakeholders, its management structures rooted in history and the difficulties of relating to subjects of faith means that the subject is particularly challenging. These factors also perhaps explain the current absence of EU policy and central funding in its support.

Nevertheless, if the sector is to be rendered sustainable, its future needs must be properly examined and the necessary changes implemented to adapt it successfully to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and so hand it down intact to future generations.

The legitimacy of this ambition was confirmed by the European parliament in the resolution it voted by a large majority on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2015 which '*...considers that historical religious heritage must be preserved for its cultural value, regardless of its religious origins*' – an unambiguous statement of political intent.

The Commission is looking to leave a legacy for EYCH 2018 that lasts well beyond the end of the year.

**May we suggest, among the already identified key projects, that this legacy includes a proper study of how best to adapt Europe's remarkable religious heritage to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the sector taking its rightful place within both the New European Agenda for Culture and the relevant EU funding programmes?**

FRH looks forward to contributing in any way it can to working with your services to develop actions that contribute to placing religious heritage in the predominant position it merits.

Some initial suggestions are set out in annex.

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Chairman



## Annexes to FRH's open letter to Commissioner Navracsics

1. Background
2. Religious Heritage and EYCH 2018: Religious heritage examined through the EYCH2018 angles of Engagement, Sustainability, Protection and Innovation.
3. Towards a European policy for religious heritage: Some suggestions as to the contents of a European policy for religious heritage.
4. Proposed sector guidelines
5. Religiana: FRH's on-line information tool for individual religious heritage sites.
6. FRH Inform: FRH's suggestions as to how to obtain a better understanding of the sector, to promote religious heritage regionally and to train future managers
7. Comments and Questions:



## 1. Background

- FRH is an independent, Brussels based, non-faith, not for profit organisation set up in 2011, that promotes the protection and use of European religious buildings and their contents.  
In 2017, the EU granted FRH €1 million over four years to develop its network in support of religious heritage.
- Culture has not, historically, been at the forefront of the EU's preoccupations. This is changing. Culture is perceived as being increasingly important to the creation of a united Europe and benefits, for example, from a proposed 27% funding increase in the EU's new six-year budget.
- However, while the question of the future of Europe's remarkable religious heritage is becoming increasingly urgent, there is, as yet, no European policy in its favour and, other than through some Feder programmes, little EU money has so far found its way into the sector.
- As part of the European Year of Cultural Heritage - EYCH 2018, FRH organised a conference in Paris on 11<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> October 2018 to underline the importance of Europe's religious heritage and to promote a real debate on its future.
- To contribute to this debate, FRH, with the active help of its members, has prepared an open letter to Tibor Navracsics, the EU Commissioner of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport who opened the conference.



## 2. Religious Heritage and EYCH 2018

**EYCH 2018 sets out to analyse Cultural Heritage through the angles of:**

- Engagement
- Sustainability
- Protection
- Innovation

The religious heritage sector is so important that it is difficult to generalise - each site is different and subject to its own constraints. Nevertheless, certain conclusions can be drawn:

### Engagement

Stimulating the interest of the **non-worshipping public** is essential.

- Active promotion by national governments and the EU
- Concerted efforts by stakeholders of individual sites
- Fostering of volunteer support groups
- Education on religious heritage in schools
- The development of specialised chairs in universities
- Transmission of understanding of the cultures on which religious art is based

### Sustainability

**Greater use** is the key to sustainability.

- Religious tourism should be professionally promoted across Europe.
- If buildings are underused for worship, compatible activities such as culture, community business or social outreach should be sought.
- Maintaining part of the building open for public access is preferable to closure

### Protection

Buildings, which were often built by communities, should, wherever possible, be **preserved and kept open for public benefit**.

Future generations will be surprised at the current lack of maintenance and protection from vandalism and theft of some of Europe's major religious edifices.

### Innovation

Innovation, particularly in **adapting management to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**, is the key to the future.



### 3. Towards a European policy for religious heritage

A first objective, if the EU is to develop a coherent policy towards religious heritage, is to obtain a better understanding of the sector. Hence the importance of **FRH Inform** one of whose outputs would be the analysis of the different initiatives being taken, thus permitting cross-border comparison despite the wide variety in the ways in which the sector is organised in different countries and in different faiths.

#### A European policy for religious heritage should include:

- A statement of the importance of the sector – by far the largest historic element within Europe’s cultural heritage and one with enormous potential as symbol of European identity, focus for local culture and community outreach and source of tourism revenues.
- Promotion of sector guidelines. Some suggestions are set out in §4.
- **Agreement that the sector merits as much EU, state and regional support as other categories of cultural heritage.**
- Recommendations of best practice that harmonise the often-conflicting objectives of the sector’s multiple stakeholders, encourage the greater use and understanding of buildings and their contents and combine the structured involvement of volunteers with modern professional management.
- Targeted support for **Religiana, FRH Inform** and other cross-border projects such as the global promotion of European religious tourism, the development of historic pilgrimage routes, the better recovery of stolen artefacts or cross border tax deductibility for donations.
- Case studies on good practice with detailed technical briefs and templates to encourage replication.



#### 4. Suggested sector guidelines

- Places of worship should be kept open and welcoming
- Interesting content, history, art and architecture both tangible and intangible should be catalogued, secured and actively promoted to all sectors of the population
- Opening hours should be publicised
- Local secular tourist organisations should be encouraged to promote religious heritage and visitors encouraged to search out the less well-known buildings
- Managers of religious heritage sites should promote their spiritual and community value
- Visitor comments should be publicised
- Complementary compatible uses should be sought for buildings that are insufficiently used
- Buildings and contents should be properly maintained and adapted to current use without harming their atmosphere.
- Artefacts should, where possible, be kept in situ
- Financial needs should be articulated
- Financial sustainability should be sought through the encouragement of on-line tax efficient donations and commercial use of buildings where appropriate
- Local volunteer support should be sought, structured and trained with particular emphasis on management of buildings taken over by volunteer groups
- Formalisation of the roles of managers of religious buildings and provision of resource to prepare development plans, statements of cultural significance, maintenance schedules, inventories, records of work on the building and its contents....
- School curricula should include education about religious heritage
- Closure should only be envisaged after full consultation of all stakeholders
- Future public use and not financial gain should be the criterion for deciding the fate of buildings no longer required.



## 5. Religiana

The Internet contains an ever-increasing wealth of information about individual buildings and their contents. Religiana sets out to link this into a simplified standardised format that will allow travellers to see at a glance the religious heritage present within a locality, to help search by specific interest, to learn when buildings are open and to obtain feedback from other visitors.

This platform has been developed by FRH in association with its member the National Churches Trust in the UK and currently contains around 1,000 entries.

As it develops, it will allow building managers to reach wider audiences for raising crowd-funding or promoting events and to obtain standard management modules for use by local volunteer associations.

An initial emphasis will be on adding the more important buildings and those lying on the traditional pilgrimage routes that have criss-crossed Europe for over a millennium. Of particular importance is good linking allowing the user to surf seamlessly across subjects of interest.

### **More ambitious is the addition of portals for:**

- visitors to make voluntary donations to churches they visit. The transfer of tax credits between European member states is not yet possible, but finding ways of achieving such transfers between selected countries is one of FRH's objectives.
- tourists to book holidays with recommended itineraries featuring religious and secular heritage sites, travel and accommodation via links to local tourism boards or destination management organisations.
- the sale of tickets to events such as concerts, tours, exhibitions taking place in religious buildings.

Critical mass is estimated to be, at least, 100,000 entries.



## 6. FRH Inform

Information on the management and use of religious buildings is sparse and reliable statistics on the economic and social contribution of religious heritage are largely inexistent.

Religious buildings attract large numbers of visitors, but other than the leading cathedrals, no statistics are collected and no effort made to calculate the contribution to the local or national economy. Similarly places of worship provide social glue and support for local communities. Again, the value of this is rarely quantified.

More important is a proper understanding of how to unlock the enormous potential of these buildings to attract further visitors and to further develop their social outreach and community activities. As some of the examples in §7 show, where the right human structures exist, religious buildings can increase substantially their contribution to the economic and social wellbeing of communities.

Economic viability and effective management are also essential.

Publicity needs to be given to well-conceived initiatives to adapt buildings to current needs, whether it is by increasing use or by sharing it with others. Training, especially of volunteers is key particularly in the case of the increasing number of places of worship in the ownership of local associations.

Finally, ways need to be devised of establishing public accountability to provide comparison of success in subjects such as adapting buildings to modern needs, ensuring proper maintenance, extending use or preparing development plans....

The development of 'Religious Heritage' chairs at regional universities is, therefore, to be welcomed, as sources both of information about local religious buildings and of suggestion as to how these can be adapted to modern needs. The courses provided will also serve to train students for future careers in the sector either as salaried collaborators or as volunteers.

Such chairs should be federated at a European level to permit exchanges of good practice, publicity for successful initiatives and the development to common standards of reliable sector information. The database as it develops will provide, not only a means of comparing and publicising successful innovation in the sector but also the aggregation of the underlying statistics necessary to build a convincing 'Case for Religious Heritage'.



## 7. Comments and Questions

### ENGAGEMENT

#### **How to make better use of places of worship for social outreach.**

Church buildings provide valuable but often underutilised social resource.

McKinsey calculates that in the UK, 1.6 million individuals already use faith buildings for non-worship work. In the inner cities this often takes the form of work with needy groups such as immigrants, the unemployed, the young, and the sick. The Cinnamon network estimates the value of this social outreach to be €3,5 billion in the UK alone.

In the country, these are often the last public building left and provide a centre for local events.

#### **How to involve educational establishments in conservation projects**

Churches hold much of Europe's art, but this is often little known and many artefacts are in a poor state of repair. A pilot 'Le Plus Grande Musée' has been developed in France by La Sauvegarde de l'Art Français in association with Sciences Po and l'Ecole du Louvre to involve schools in the identification, repair and promotion of selected work of art. It is part financed by la Fondation Michelin.

#### **How to develop a culture of greater public use.**

Eglises Ouvertes federates 400 churches in Belgium, Luxembourg and Northern France, provides training in keeping churches open, welcoming and informative to visitors and organises an annual 'Open Day'.

Simple marketing techniques increased annual visitor numbers to 153 faith sites in a depressed region of North Britain from 25,000 to 95,000 over four years.

#### **How to federate volunteer effort**

All over Europe, associations are being set up usually in support of single buildings. Such associations often benefit from the unpaid enthusiasm of determined individuals, not always worshippers, for whom their religious building represents an important repository of local or family history and a centre of community value.

If the sector is to build on volunteer effort, it must find ways to provide training and funding for local associations so that each does not have to 'reinvent the wheel'.

Can churches learn from the National Trust in the UK, which now has 2.4 million members, 25 million recorded visits and income of €700 million.



## 7. Comments and Questions

### SUSTAINABILITY

#### Tourism

Tourism is one of Europe's biggest economic sectors accounting for some 15 million jobs.

**Religious tourism shows good growth, particularly to the larger monuments - five out of ten of Europe's most visited sites are religious - and pilgrimages.**

#### How to resolve the 'economics' of religious tourism?

Other than at the larger sites, visitors do not pay, so there is no economic incentive to promote visits.

The Religiana 'virtuous circle' business model would make a small charge on donations and use this for sector promotion.

#### How to adapt to 'excessive' tourism at major religious heritage sites?

What can be learnt from comparing the business strategies of the more popular sites such as: Notre Dame (13 million visitors with free entry), Westminster Abbey (2 million fee paying visitors), Mont St Michel and Montserrat (both 2,5 million visitors).

#### How to encourage pan-European pilgrimages?

A comparison of the marketing approaches of the different routes such as Via Francigena and the Caminos de Compostelle and the religious UNESCO world heritage sites along these routes.

#### Should pilgrims sleep in churches?

The Churches Conversation Trust in the UK proposes that pilgrims 'camp' in certain of its redundant churches. This has recently been copied in a number of churches in the Netherlands.

In mediaeval times pilgrims regularly slept in churches – see for example the South transept of St Sernin, Toulouse.

#### Extended Use

Throughout Europe religious buildings are being used increasingly for non-worship activities such as concerts and exhibitions. In countries such as the UK and the Netherlands where financial restrictions are greatest, some churches are separating the sacred space in the choir from the rest of the building which is then being used for shops, cafés, post-offices, doctor's consulting rooms, garden museums.... or even separated off and sold for residential or office use. **In this way public space is retained which would be lost if the building were closed and sold.**



## 7. Comments and Questions

### Adapting buildings to individual uses

If buildings are to attract tourists or be used for social outreach or indeed worshippers they need to be suitably adapted with provision of wheelchair access, heating, speaking loops, family facilities etc...

60% of British churches now have WCs.

### The Case for Religious Heritage

FRH was a contributor to '*Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe* – an EU project to raise greater awareness of the benefits of cultural heritage and to recommend ways of tapping its full potential. While this report provides useful methodology, considerably more work is required to adapt its findings to the particular needs of religious heritage.

Religious heritage, as well as its underlying **Spiritual Value** is of enormous:

**Cultural Value** – Christianity is the source of Europe's identity and its buildings, artefacts, music and literature have shaped the continent for well over 1,000 years.

**Social Value** – Religious Heritage has much unrealised potential to provide community value and social glue.

**Economic Value** – through the spending of visitors attracted by the continent's remarkable religious heritage.

**Landscape Value** – The skyline of Europe's cities and countryside has been shaped by its churches. Europe would be unrecognisable without its religious heritage.

While these values have traditionally been taken for granted, methodology now needs to be developed to measure each and so provide a firm quantitative basis for a '**Case for Religious Heritage**'.



## 7. Comments and Questions

### PROTECTION

Religious heritage is particularly vulnerable to:

**Benign neglect**

**Insufficient maintenance**

**Vandalism**

**Theft or loss of artefacts**

**Unmerited closure and sale**

**Inadequate re-use**

Even the best buildings are often in need of investment; maintenance programmes are either inexistent or not followed resulting in costly future repairs; there is little forward planning of repair work; protection of isolated sites is difficult leaving them open to theft and to abuse and the multiplicity of stakeholders means that buildings may be closed without full consultation of all interested parties.

#### **How to ensure proper maintenance**

Future repair bills are substantially reduced with proper maintenance, but even the finest buildings are often poorly maintained.

Resource is also lacking in the provision of regular architectural surveys, forward planning of repair work, certification of qualified regional suppliers and the establishment of group purchasing.

La Sauvegarde has arranged as a trial with les Yvelines - a Departement near Paris – who have set up a € 4 million fund to finance 80% of the maintenance spending of the individual municipalities that manage local churches.

Maintenance Booker is an on-line service developed by the National Churches Trust that provides churches in England and Wales with qualified artisans, pre-negotiated prices and an automated maintenance log-book.

Two full-time diocesan ‘maintenance officers’ have been created as a trial in England following recommendations of the Taylor report.

A particular concern across Europe is the adequate supply of artisans and architects sufficiently qualified to carry out repairs and maintenance to proper standards



## 7. Comments and Questions

### **How to protect against loss of contents**

Comparison with inventories introduced by André Malraux after the war show that around 40% of the contents of French churches have since been lost.

Good inventories are essential to recovering stolen goods. Publicising these helps build local appreciation of content, the best defence against inadvertent loss, but one that also provides a thief's shopping list.

Insurance companies note that claims rates are generally lower in buildings that are kept open.

In some Portuguese dioceses, 'safe churches' are designated to hold e.g. silver, which is then returned when needed for use in services.

The EU has an important role to play here in developing, with the help of Interpol, an effective Religious Art recovery service and thus contributing to the fight against terrorism that such theft partly finances.

### **If churches are not used should they be closed?**

A large number of Dutch churches are expected to close within 10 years. For example, the Catholic diocese of Utrecht aims to reduce the 200 churches in the diocese to 15.

FRH maintains that full consultation with all stakeholders should take place before closure is envisaged and that, wherever possible, places of worship should be kept open for future public benefit.

The Scottish Redundant Churches Trust has prepared a comprehensive checklist to guide individual churches contemplating closure.

### **How to preserve monasteries and convents?**

In 10 years the number of monasteries and convents in the Netherlands is expected to be reduced from 150 to around five.

The 900-year-old Parkabdij (Park Abbey) at Leuven in Belgium has been successfully transformed into a public space, a museum, a music centre, and a research centre for biological agriculture, while at the same time retaining its fine church and accommodation for its congregation of monks.

### **What should be done with works of art when churches and monasteries are closed?**

The Catherijneconvent Museum in Utrecht possesses 100,000 religious artefacts, but of these only some 2,000 are on display.



## 7. Comments and Questions

### INNOVATION

Interesting examples of innovation in the religious heritage sector are to be found throughout Europe. Unfortunately many are not widely known nor introduced with the energy they merit due to the modest resources that most of the innovative actors possess and the huge scale of the sector.

**Of particular interest are innovations in management as current stakeholders are not always in a position to develop the new skills required to adapt to new needs.**

The Internet contains an ever-increasing wealth of information about individual churches and their contents. What is lacking is a 'Tripadvisor' that allows users to see at a glance the character of a particular edifice, its contents, opening times and comments from other visitors. Such a site would enrich those following pilgrimage routes across Europe and allow them to develop their own itineraries. It could publicise events in religious buildings and allows managers of local associations to maintain a virtual database of members. More ambitiously, it could provide a payment portal for visitors making donations to churches they visit and help managers to raise crowd funding for specific needs.

Religiana, developed by FRH is a pilot for such a website. By charging a small fee, Religiana could develop the virtuous circle necessary for its further promotion.

#### **Are individual development plans useful?**

The Centrum voor Religieuze Kunst en Cultuur (CRKC) has already obtained business plans for over 1,000 Flemish churches.

Partners for Sacred Places provide expert external professional advice to churches in the USA.

Vereniging van Beheerders van Monumentale Kerkgebouwen (VBMK) federates and provides management advice to 600 of the more important Dutch churches

Cinnamon offers an audit and report-writing service to religious buildings in the UK

The UK Heritage Lottery Fund provides 'Resilient Heritage grants' to strengthen organisations and improve long-term management.

#### **Does privatisation improve management?**

The Church of Sweden was denationalised in 2000 and of Norway in 2017



## 7. Comments and Questions

### **What are the best models for managing Europe's pilgrimage destinations?**

Professor Scafi of the Warburg Institute concludes, following detailed interviews of visitors to the Sacro Speco, south of Rome, that sacred spaces cannot be managed as ordinary tourism sites.

### **Are there advantages of grouping underused religious buildings in distinct management structures?**

The Churches Conservation Trust owns 347 redundant Anglican churches, the Friends of Friendless Churches owns 44 churches and chapels and the Historic Chapels Trust owns 20 non-Anglican chapels. In the Northern Netherlands, Oude Groninger Kerken owns 95 churches and two synagogues and Alde Fryske Tsjerken, 49 churches and six graveyards.

### **How to adapt buildings that are no longer representative of local populations?**

Hungary's remaining Synagogues serve an almost non-existent Jewish community (Pre-war Budapest was 25% Jewish).

Romania has 14,574 Orthodox churches but the growing Catholic population is served by only 378.