

Il futuro delle chiese parrocchiali nelle Fiandre (Belgio): un dialogo a livello comunale

The future of parish churches in Flanders, Belgium: a dialogue on municipality level

Questo articolo fornisce una panoramica della discussione attuale sul futuro di ca. 1800 chiese parrocchiali nelle Fiandre, la parte settentrionale di lingua olandese del Belgio. La secolarizzazione e la diminuzione di affluenza in chiesa sono simili a tutta l'Europa Nord-Occidentale, ma due fattori caratterizzano differentemente il problema delle chiese sottoutilizzate o abbandonate nelle Fiandre:

- 1. il 99% delle pievi fiamminghe sono romano-cattoliche*
- 2. Il funzionamento delle fabbricerie, amministrazioni pubbliche nominate dal vescovo e finanziariamente sostenute dai Comuni.*

Dopo un'introduzione storica, s'illustra il metodo imposto dal governo fiammingo – l'elaborazione di un "Church Policy Plan" di concertazione, le linee guida e la terminologia episcopale fiamminga ed il funzionamento del "Centre for Religious Art and Culture" (CRKC). Esempi di aree rurali e urbane illustrano la diversità del futuro uso delle chiese di un comune: da status quo, al rifiuto completo.

This paper provides an overview of the actual discussion on the future of circa 1800 parish churches in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Secularisation and dwindling church attendance is similar to the rest of North-Western Europe, but two factors let slightly differ the issue of underused or abandoned churches in Flanders:

- 1. 99% of Flemish parish churches are Roman-Catholic;*
- 2. the functioning of fabric committees, public administrations which are nominated by the bishop and financially supported by the Municipalities. After a historical introduction, the method which is obliged by the Flemish Government – elaborating a "Church Policy Plan" in a local dialogue, the guidelines and terminology of the Flemish bishops and mode of operation of the "Centre for Religious Art and Culture" (CRKC) is explained. Examples from rural and urban areas illustrate the diversity of the future use of churches of a municipality: from status quo to complete rejection.*

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Parole chiave: **Fiandre; Fabbricerie; Municipalità, Dialogo; Banca dati**

Keywords: **Flanders; Fabric Committees; Municipalities; Dialogue; Database**

I. Introduction

The problem of dis- or underused churches and the hereto related key question what will be their future destination, is a European-wide challenge, which in each regional or national context displays slightly different aspects. This paper presents the actual situation in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Fig. 1), where the future of circa 1800 churches is increasingly determined by an intensive dialogue on the local level between the civic and ecclesiastical authorities and the involvement of the local communities.

This paper is based on the daily experience of the “Centre for Religious Art and Culture” (CRKC, *Centrum voor Religieuze Kunst en Cultuur*) with this issue of the future of parish churches in Flanders. After a short introduction of the CRKC (section II), we will respectively present a historical introduction (section III), the method and terminology which is actually used in Flanders to deal with this issue (section IV), and finally, an overview of the preliminary results which have been reached in different parts of the Flemish Region (section V). In the historical introduction we will emphasise three observations which are crucial to understand the actual Flemish situation: (1) the historical Roman-Catholic impact on Belgium, (2) how recently growing secularisation and a general critical attitude towards the Roman-Catholic Church determines the actual debate, and finally, (3) the continuing existence and

functioning of “church or fabric committees”, a legacy from Napoleonic times. In the section on method and terminology we will describe how the obligation of the Flemish Government to elaborate a so-called “Parish Church Plan” or “Church Policy Plan” for all churches on the territory of a municipality fosters dialogue on this issue between the local fabric committees and local Executive. The guidelines and terminology of the Flemish bishops and CRKC’s task in this debate will be discussed in relation to this legislative framework. In the last section Results, we will provide examples from four different parts of Flanders, which demonstrate that, depending on ecclesiastical and political positions, the actual method can lead to decisions that range from the total rejection (nearly all new use) to the complete preservation of churches (all retain liturgical use) in a municipality.

II. Centre for Religious Culture and Art – Flanders

The “Centre for Religious Art and Culture” (CRKC, see www.crkc.be) was founded in 1997 by the Flemish dioceses, the umbrella organisation of religious orders URV, the Flemish Norbertines and the Catholic University of Leuven in order to study and protect the religious movable heritage of abbeys, cloisters and churches. Since 2009 CRKC is recognised by the Flemish government as the centre of expertise for religious heritage

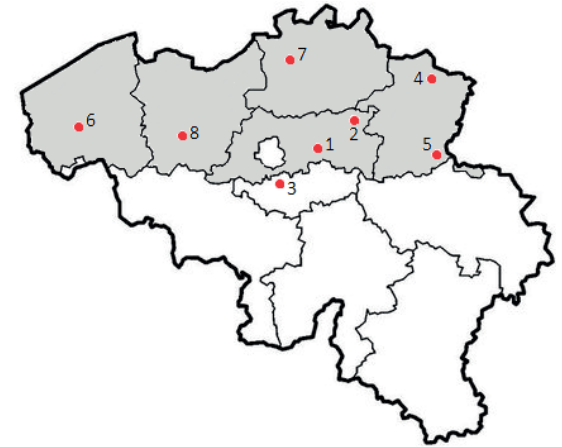


Fig.1 Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, is indicated in grey on this map. Locations mentioned in the text: 1. Abbey of Park, Leuven. 2. Scherpenheuvel. 3. Waterloo. 4. Kaulille. 5. Riemst. 6. Westhoek – Poelkapelle. 7. Antwerp. 8. Zwalm (map by Loes Verschuren, CRKC)

in Flanders and Brussels.

In 2012 the “Department of Immovable Religious Heritage” was founded by minister Bourgeois within the framework of his report “The future of parish churches in Flanders” (see *infra*).¹ Since that time, the already existing operation of CRKC resorts under the “Department of Movable Religious Heritage”.

CRKC collects knowledge and shares expertise about religious material and immaterial culture, supports and advises heritage managers, enthusiastically promotes an interest in this rich heritage, and advocates for the active distribution of this valuable information. CRKC works closely together with religious archives such as KADOC-KU Leuven (Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture and Society), the State Archives and the Flemish Heritage Library.

The primary focus of CRKC lies with the heritage of the Catholic Church, but the scope of the Centre’s work encompasses all recognised religions in Belgium (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Judaism, Islam, and Orthodox Churches). The Centre’s base of operations is located at the historical Abbey of Park in Leuven (Fig. 1.1 and Fig. 2), alongside the “Museum for Religious Art and Culture” which was established by CRKC in 2003 and opened to the public in 2009. A renewed and enlarged museum will be opened in September 2017 and symbolises the planned further



Fig.2 Abbey of Park, Heverlee – Leuven. Founded in 1129 on hunting grounds of the Duke of Brabant, confiscated during the French period, reopened by the Norbertines in 1836. Photo of the church and locutorium. Location of the offices and Museum of the CRKC (photo by CRKC, see www.parkabdij.be)

integration of the expertise on immovable, movable, intangible and museological aspects of religious culture and art within the CRKC.

III. Historical context: Catholicism and Church – State relationships in Flanders

In order to understand the actual discussion on the future of parish churches in Flanders, it is crucial to emphasise that – in contrast to its northern neighbour The Netherlands – historically this region has been nearly exclusively Catholic.

During the reign of Charles V, born in Ghent in 1500 and crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Bologna in 1530, religious tensions between Protestants and Catholics started to spread over the Low Countries. Already after the death of Charles V (1558) and the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Protestant Reformation led in Fall 1566 to the so-called “*Beeldenstorm*” (literally ‘statue storm’) in this part of North-Western Europe. During this Iconoclast Fury the rich religious heritage of hundreds of churches, abbeys, cloisters and chapels was destroyed or plundered. The Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp was for instance seriously damaged. The severe reaction to these protestant riots of Philip II of Spain, heir of the Habsburg Netherlands and faithful defender of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, marked the start of the Eighty Year’s War (1568-1648) between the Protestant northern

provinces and the Catholic Spanish Habsburgs. Notwithstanding initial successes, the continuing opposition of the protestant North and their leader William the Silent, led in 1581 to the foundation of the Republic of the Seven United Provinces. After some continuing hostilities outside this Protestant heartland – e.g. the Siege of Antwerp in 1585 by Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma, the division between the northern Dutch Republic and the southern Catholic Spanish Netherlands was officialised in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Until today this continues to be the border between The Netherlands and Belgium.²

Under Spanish- and Austrian- Habsburg rule, the Southern Netherlands were fully permeated by the principles of the Counter-Reformation. Archdukes Albert and Isabella, sovereigns of the Habsburg Netherlands between 1595 and 1621, embodied for instance this Catholic revival, which was visually presented in religious Baroque architecture.³ The Basilica of Our Lady of Scherpenheuvel (Fig. 1.2. and Fig. 3), built at the beginning of the 17th century, can be seen as such an example of exalted Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary close to Protestant-Catholic borderland. When at the end of the 18th century, Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II promulgated the Edict of Tolerance (1782) and dissolved a series of contemplative religious houses, serious opposition took place in the Catholic Southern Netherlands. Contrary

to what happened in France at the same time, 1789-1790 was in Flanders a period of conservative disapproval with the Enlightened Absolutism of Joseph II, the so-called “Brabant Revolution”.

The principles of the French Revolution, the confiscation of church properties and the obligation of priests to swear oaths to the Republic, were fully applied in Flanders when in 1795 the entire Austrian Netherlands were annexed by France. Churches, cloisters and abbeys started to be sold by auction: there was a general reticence to buy ecclesiastical properties, but some received a new profane function whereas others were bought by Catholic strawmen who hoped to use it in later times again for religious purposes. The abolished Abbey of Park (Fig. 2) was for instance bought by a strawman who entrusted the entire abbey in 1836 to the Norbertines. In general, this French Republican period was characterised by a problematic relation between Church and State.

When Napoleon Bonaparte became First Consul in 1799 he aimed to normalise the relations between the Church and the French State. The Concordat, which restored the freedom of religion, was signed between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII in 1801. It stipulated that in the areas under French control the housing and salary of clergymen



Fig. 3 Basilica of Our Lady, Scherpenheuvel. Example of parish church and place of pilgrimage (photo by Bea Borgers)

were organised by the State (art. XIV). Cathedrals and parish churches that were not yet alienated, remained property of the State but were put at the disposal of Roman-Catholic bishops, for worship (art. XII and Organic article LXXV). Napoleon officialised so-called “Church or fabric committees” (literally a “church fabric”, in Latin *“fabrica ecclesiae”*, in French *“fabrique d’église”*, in Dutch *“kerkfabriek”*, in Italian *“fabbriceria”*), public administrations (like a Municipality) per parish, composed of five catholic laymen nominated by the bishop, who are responsible for the maintenance of churches and the organisation of offertories (Organic article LXXVII). In exchange for this official statute, the Church refrained from further claims on confiscated ecclesiastical goods (art. XIII). This Concordat was confirmed and further elaborated in an Imperial Decree in 1809.⁴

Until the present, the Napoleonic system of fabric committees has remained in use in Flanders. After Napoleon’s defeat in 1815 at Waterloo, immediately south of Brussels (Fig. 1.3), the actual territory of Belgium and Luxemburg became part of the new United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a buffer state created at the Congress of Vienna. The next 15 years, the Dutch protestant King William I, who continued the system of fabric committees, received growing critique from the French-speaking nobility and Belgian

population. A unique pact between Liberals – who pleaded for more Freedom of Press and Speech – and Catholics – who pleaded for more Freedom of Religion, led in 1830 to the “Belgian Revolution” against the Dutch, and the foundation of Belgium. This principle of Unionism was anchored in the Constitution of the new Belgian Kingdom (1831). Although one of the most liberal of its time, it did not include a complete separation of Church and State: in line with the principles of the Concordat, there is no State Religion; the Church could not interfere with Belgian legislation, but religions were recognised by the State; fabric or church committees, nominated by the bishop, continued to be responsible as official public administrations for the material organisation of worship; priests started to be paid by the Ministry of Justice; and the Church received the freedom to found their own Catholic schools, hospitals and parishes. Potential deficits in the budget of fabric committees had moreover to be paid by the local municipalities or province. All these stipulations were refined in a new Belgian Law on the material organisation of religions in 1870. At the same time also Anglican and Israelite religion were recognised.⁵ The (regained) extensive freedom enabled the Roman-Catholic Church to exert a large influence on Belgian society. During the 19th and 20th century a large amount of new Catholic schools, hospitals and churches were built all over the country. Sociologists have

described Belgian society as characterised by “Pillarisation” – the fact that Liberals, Socialists and Catholics had their own parties, trade unions, newspapers, schools, hospitals, leisure organisations, etc. The impact of Catholicism on Belgian Society was, however, the most massive.

Parallel to the rest of Western Europe, after World War II, secularisation set through in Belgium as well. Numbers differ from study to study, but a general decrease in churchgoers and priests is overall clear, especially the last two decades. According to the European Value Study (EVS), 72% of the Belgians called themselves Catholic in 1982, whereas 50% defined them as such in 2009.⁶ 32,6% of the Belgian population indicated in that year not having a specific religion or philosophy of life, whereas the other religions represented together 7,9% and atheists 9,2%.⁷ Abts, Dobbelaere and Voyé have recently made a further distinction within the group of Flemish people who call themselves Catholic: 5% of “core practitioners” (who frequent mass at least once a month and are member of a religious organisation and/or volunteer within the Church), 13% of “average practitioners” (who frequent mass at least once a month but do not function as a volunteer within the Church) and circa 38% of “marginal practitioners” (who participate only sporadically or never to religious services).⁸ In 2011 circa 5% of the Flemish population weekly attended mass and

in line with a decreasing trend of the number of baptisms, only 30% of marriages and 70% of funerals were held in Catholic parish churches (report Bourgeois, see *infra*).

With the Fifth State Reform in 2001, the Belgian Regions (Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders) received further responsibilities such as the control on local and provincial authorities and consequently also much of the competence for religious affairs. In 2004 a new Flemish Decree on the material organisation of worship was issued, but again the baseline remained the Concordat of 1801. In 2012 small modifications were added to this “Worship Decree” (“*Eredienstendecreet*” in Dutch⁹): the single fabric committees of a municipality were from then on for instance obliged to elect one Central Fabric Committee (“*Centraal Kerkfabriek*” or CKB in Dutch), which has to collect all single budgets per parish and negotiate one single long-term budget plan with the Municipality.

Starting from the observation that with growing secularisation churches were less frequently used and local authorities continued to be obliged to pay the deficits of their fabric committees (on average less than 1% of the total budget of a Municipality¹⁰) in times of financial crisis, the then Flemish Minister of Internal Affairs – nowadays Minister-President of Flanders – Geert Bourgeois decided to

intervene. In his 2011 letter/report “The future of parish churches in Flanders”¹¹, he invited municipalities, Central Fabric Committees and fabric committees to reflect together on the future of parish churches on their territory. These local authorities were asked to indicate in a so-called “Parish Church Plan”, which churches would retain their use as parish church (e.g. Fig. 2 and 3), which ones would be used by other Christian communities (e.g. Fig. 7), which ones would be used for a combined profane and liturgical use (e.g. Fig. 1.4. and 4, and 6), which churches would receive a completely new profane function (e.g. Fig. 5) and which ones would in extreme cases be demolished. Although the Minister had hoped such plans would have already been elaborated with the new long-term budget plans 2013-2019, it was only when the obligation for a “Parish Church Plan” was included in 2013 in a new Heritage Decree that discussion on this issue gained momentum. Since the 1st of January 2015 a “Church Policy Plan”, as it was now called, is an obligation for municipalities and fabric committees who want to receive financial support from the “Agency for Immovable Heritage” (*Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed*, Flemish Government) for the restoration of churches that are recognised as a monument. As since July 2016 such a strategic plan is also obligatory for subsidies requested before 2015, the lion’s share of Flemish local civic and ecclesiastical

authorities are now very actively discussing the future of their churches.

IV. Method and Terminology

In this section Method we first discuss which elements a “Church Policy Plan” should legally contain. We present subsequently the guidelines which the Flemish bishops issued about the use of churches in 2012 and discuss how CRKC tries to stimulate this Flemish debate by means of a step-by-step plan that can be followed and information that is made available through a website and two databases.

Church Policy Plan:

According to the report Bourgeois 2011 and a precise definition which in July 2016 has been added to the Flemish Heritage Decree (2013)¹², a “Church Policy Plan” – a locally supported long-term plan for all worship buildings of a specific recognised religion on the territory of a municipality or province – should minimally consist of the following elements (art. 2.1.31. and art. 12.3.12.):

- A. Elaborated dossier
 - 0. Identification (name of the church, location, owner, monument status, etc.)
 - 1. Description
 - a) Culture-historical value (history and artistic and monumental value of the church;



Fig. 4 Saint-Monulphus and Saint-Gondulphus church of Kaulille, Limburg. Example of shared use in space (partitioned use). A library is set up in a side aisle of the church (photo by Fabric committee Kaulille)

based on inventories, see for instance <https://inventaris.onroenderfgoed.be>, the private initiative www.kerkeninvlaanderen.be and CRKC databases)

b) Architectural characteristics and possibilities (size, possibility for compartment, presence of bathroom and/or kitchen, monumental furniture, accessibility disabled persons, etc.)

c) Physical condition of the building (necessary renovations or restoration; Monument Watch Flanders' (*Monumentenwacht Vlaanderen vzw*, see www.monumentenwacht.be/en) up-to-date reports can be used for this)

2. Position of the church in its broader spatial context (description of the neighbourhood, position within village or city centre, presence of other buildings, possibilities for mobility, etc.)

3. Actual use or actual function (number of services and sacraments, other non-religious activities in the church such as concerts, exhibitions, lectures, etc.)

4.

a. Solid vision on the future use and function of the church (parish church, enhancement, mutual use, shared use in time and/or space, or repurposing; terminology see *infra*)

b. Elaborated approach how the future function of shared use (combined profane and liturgical use) or complete repurposing (no longer liturgical use) will be elaborated

(meetings with local population, architect teams, consultation of local associations, schools, etc.), including a time-table

B. Approval of the bishop or the representative organ of another recognised religion

C. Approval of the Town or City Council

Minister Bourgeois emphasised in his report that this plan should be elaborated during an intense dialogue between the directly involved partners (fabric committees, Central Fabric Committee, municipalities, the diocese, pastoral teams and local priests), but preferably also with participation of local socio-cultural associations and the consultation of the entire population.

Terminology and guidelines of the Flemish Bishops

Directly after the report Bourgeois (2011), the Flemish bishops elaborated for all Roman-Catholic churches in the Region guidelines for their regular and extended use. They proposed a uniform terminology, which is nowadays generally adopted by all involved partners: enhancement (activities that emphasise the cultural importance of the parish church, e.g. concerts, conferences, etc.), mutual use (Roman-Catholic parish church shared with another Christian community belonging to the World Council of Churches, see www.oikoumene.org/en), shared use (combined

profane and liturgical use in one church) in time (mixed use) and in space (partitioned use), and finally repurposing (withdrawn from worship, completely new profane function) or demolition.

Guidelines of the Flemish Bishops for the Regular and Extended Use of Parish Churches

Introduction

Church buildings from the Catholic worship tradition are multi-layered cultural creations which occupy a prominent place in our society. Above all, these are sacred spaces intended for prayer, reflection, and worship. Their architecture, furnishings, and accoutrements are expressions of the praise and reverence of the faithful for God; a God who for them is truly materially present in this place of worship. Churches are also cultural centres of abundant immovable, movable, and intangible heritage. They are connected to and supported by a community, and a prominent visual aspect of a neighbourhood, village, city, or landscape. The Flemish Catholic community is contemplating the future of the church buildings owned by or entrusted to them. The central topic of this discussion is the question of which churches are necessary for the performance of the pastoral mission.

In addition, we must consider the questions from the government and society at large as to how the church buildings can be deployed for social and cultural functions, whilst respecting the unique character and history of the building.

To address these questions from the Flemish government and wider community, church administrations and parishes are entering into discussion with the local municipal authorities about the use of the parish church buildings. In order for these various discussions to proceed in a similar manner, the Flemish bishops have issued the following guidelines, preceded by the definitions of some relevant terms.

Some definitions

1. Parish Church

a. The parish church is the home of a local faith community which forms part of the Catholic Church. The parish church is available to this community first and foremost for prayer, reflection, liturgy, and sacramental celebrations. The local faith community can also use the parish church for other pastoral activities, such as for purposes of catechesis or the diaconate.

2. Categories of Extended Use of Parish Churches

a. Enhancement

Under the category of Enhancement we propose initiatives that, with respect for the

normal use of the parish church, can strengthen and enrich the significance of the church's various aspects for the community (religious and cultural, historical and art historical, architectural and aesthetic). Some possibilities include an occasional and appropriate use of the church building for art historical tours, concerts, lectures, conferences, or temporary exhibitions.

b. Mutual Use

By this we mean the provision of the church building for liturgical or pastoral activities of other catholic or Christian faith communities.

c. Shared Use

When a parish church is still used for religious activities but is too big for the local faith community, one may consider a shared use. Within this category a distinction is made between mixed use and partitioned use.

1. Mixed use

Is a shared use in terms of time. By this we mean that, outside the hours of religious activities, the church building can occasionally be used for other purposes or by other entities.

2. Partitioned use

Is a shared use in space. This means that the church building will be architecturally restructured to create a new smaller liturgical space, and one or more other spaces which will be available for other use on a permanent basis. A partitioned use thus presupposes that the liturgical space and new distinct spaces are completely separated spatially to

remove any risk of these activities interfering with each other.

d. Repurposing

When a parish church is no longer suitable for religious activities all worship services may be permanently withdrawn from the building, after which it will then be designated for a completely new function. In order to do this, the prescribed canonical procedures must be followed. Only the bishop can decide to definitively remove the functions of worship from a parish church.

3. Guidelines

a. Because prayer, reflection, liturgy, and sacramental celebrations are the core activities of a local faith community, the people have a need of and a right to an adequate space equipped for this purpose (cf. CIC, can. 1214). The first eligible place for this use is the local parish church.

b. Parishes in a single Federation or pastoral unit can decide amongst themselves which liturgical services (i.e. baptism, marriage, funerals, weekday mass services) can best continue in which parish churches. These decisions should always take into account the nature of the building, the celebration, and the demographics of the present community.

c. In certain cases, a parish church can become eligible for mutual use. This is when other catholic or Christian faith communities can use a church building for their liturgical or pastoral activities.

d. Catholic communities of the Eastern Church 'sui iuris' or catholic communities of foreign origin without their own liturgical space will be the first eligible for a mutual use of the parish church. They belong fully to the catholic faith community.

e. Other Christian churches or ecclesial communities can be eligible for a mutual use of the parish church under the conditions defined in §§ 137-142 of the Ecumenical Directory of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. These should be churches or ecclesial communities affiliated with the World Council of Churches. This requires the prior written authorisation of the bishop.

f. Parish churches will not be made available for non-christian rituals or celebrations (such as civil burial services, civil marriages, or rites of a non-christian religion). An exception for individual cases may be granted in extraordinary conditions, but this requires the prior written authorisation of the bishop.

g. A mixed shared use may also be considered. These activities must be in line with the identity and character of a place of Christian prayer. This means that they are not of private, commercial, or party-political interest, but instead have social objectives which are not contrary to the Christian faith or in opposition to the Church (e.g. exhibitions, social services, classrooms). This mixed use should be limited in time. If it takes on a

permanent character, a partitioned use is designated and a physical restructuring of the church building must take place.

h. A partitioned use requires a reorganisation of the parish church into various areas and therefore a structural renovation. This endeavour requires prior consultation with many actors, and the church administration must also receive prior written authorisation from the bishop.

i. In cases of mutual use or shared use (mixed or partitioned) of the parish church, the church administration must draw up a fixed-term user agreement with the external party. These terms of use should include: (1) a description of the space being made available for mutual use or shared use; (2) agreements concerning the use of the space, furniture, cleaning, security, hours of use; (3) agreements to ensure peace and tranquillity during liturgical services; (4) specifications for sharing the costs of the church building; (5) regulations for insurance and liability in case of damages; (6) designation of the body that will mediate or adjudicate if disputes should arise. In order to be valid, this user agreement must be signed by the pastor and the bishop (cf. CIC, can. 1257).

j. In principal, there will be no modifications to the structure of the central liturgical space (including the altar, baptismal font, lectern, pastor's seat). A request for an exceptional change shall be discussed with

the pastor and the church administration, and included in the terms of use. If an initiative makes it difficult to properly greet the Blessed Sacrament, the Blessed Sacrament shall be taken temporarily to a chapel or transferred to the sacristy.

k. In the case of mutual use or shared use (mixed or partitioned), the pastor's canonical and civil authority over the parish remains valid, taking into account what has been established in the terms of use.

l. For the repurposing of a parish church, there must be a formal discontinuation of worship. Therefore, the civil norms and canonical procedure must be followed (cf. CIC, can. 1222 §1 and §2). From the ecclesiastical side, the written approval of the bishop is required. The bishop can only grant his approval for repurposing when a clear and acceptable plan has been made available. The repurposing of the church building must have sufficient legal guarantees to be able to accordingly support the proper implementation of the plan.

m. Our religious heritage is exceptionally valuable, and we therefore encourage the multi-faceted enrichment of the church building and all its aspects for the preservation and appreciation of this heritage. We are extremely grateful to everyone involved for helping to unlock the priceless historic, artistic, and cultural value of our parish churches.

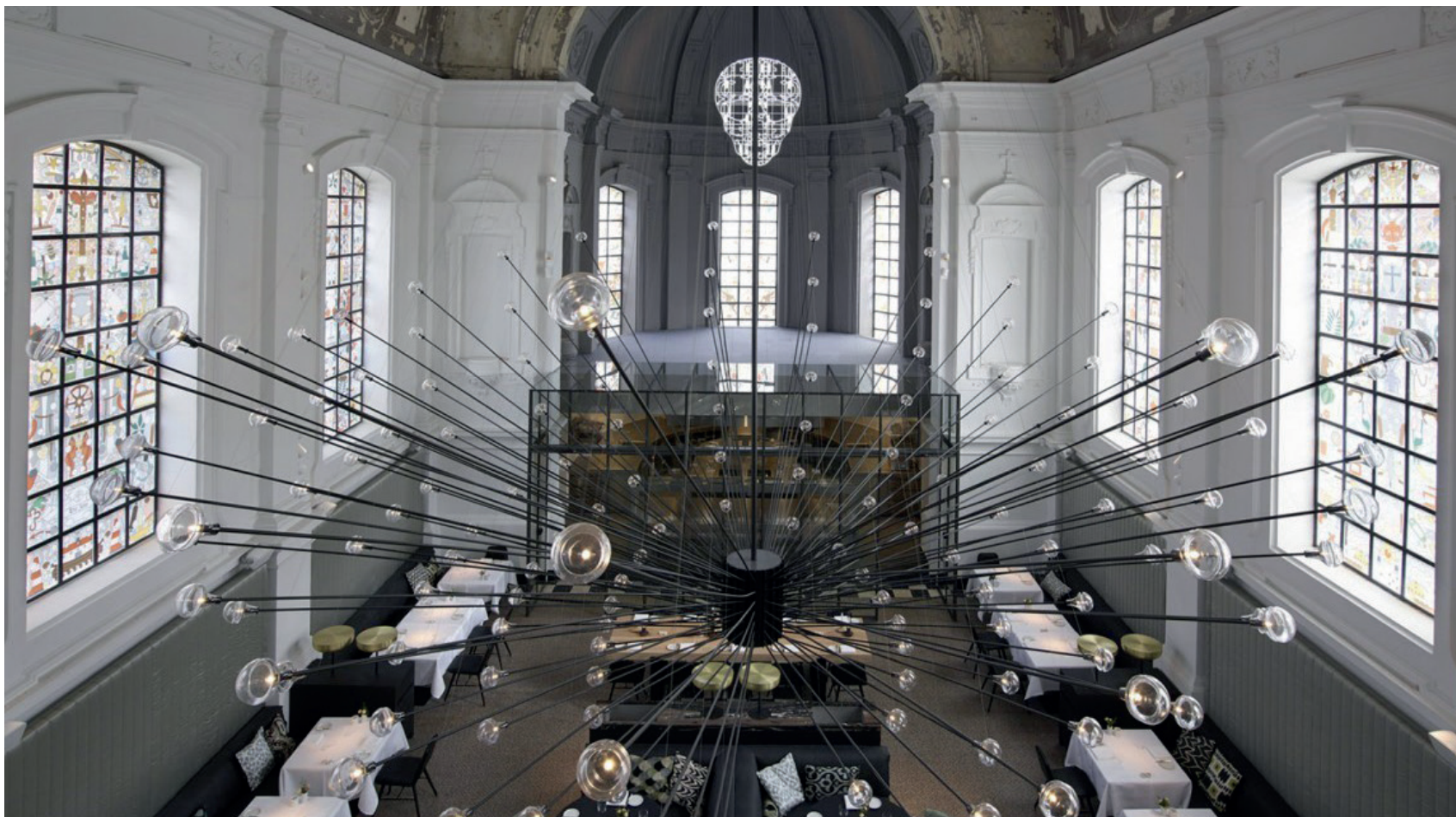


Fig. 5 Restaurant "The Jane" in the former chapel of the Military Hospital, Antwerp. Example of repurposing (photo by Piet Boon, see www.thejaneantwerp.be).

These guidelines apply for all Parish churches, chapels, and recognised annex churches. They are in effect as of 8 november 2012.

The Flemish Bishops
Mechelen, 8 november, 2012

Translation by Caitlin Spangler-Bickell

CRKC step-by-step plan

Already in the report Bourgeois, the “Centre for Religious Art and Culture” (CRKC) was indicated as the Flemish centre of expertise which would further assist municipalities and fabric committees with the elaboration of “Church Policy Plans” and all kind of questions about added or completely new use of their churches. On the basis of experiences on the field and some pilot-projects (e.g. Ghent, Zwalm, Westhoek), the in 2012 founded “Department of Immoveable Religious Heritage” of the CRKC, produced a step-by-step plan which local authorities can use to elaborate their “Church Policy Plan”. Broadly speaking, this step-by-step plan consists of five phases:

1. Pastoral plan: the pastoral teams and priest(s) of the actual parishes of the municipality determine, after careful consideration with their local community, dean and diocese, how pastoral activities on the territory of the municipality will be organised in the future. The Flemish dioceses are currently

going through a general scaling-up of the territorial organisation of their parishes. This pastoral plan should thus indicate how current churches will function within the future much larger parishes: in which churches mass will be celebrated every weekend, in which ones only sacraments, sporadic services or prayer meetings will be organised, which ones will rather function as chapel, and which churches can potentially be withdrawn from worship.

2. Church inventory: the municipality and/or fabric committees or an external specialised partner¹³ collect(s) all available information about the churches of the municipality and gathers it in an extensive inventory (all elements asked in a “Church Policy Plan”, see *supra*). A systematic list of all characteristics (history, monumental status, architecture, physical condition, broader socio-economic environment, actual use, interested partners for future use, etc.) allows to elaborate a SWOT-analysis of all discussed churches.

3. Dialogue Municipality – Church Representatives: starting from the inventory and an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the church buildings on their territory, a civic and ecclesiastical working group discusses internally the future of the churches. The civic working group consists usually of the local Executive and some specialised civil servants, possibly supplemented with representatives of all groups on the Council and local

associations. The ecclesiastical working group consists usually of representatives of all fabric committees, the Central Fabric Committee, the priests and dean, a representative of the diocese, possibly supplemented by people from the pastoral team(s). Once these two working groups have determined their position, they gather in a smaller committee in which they aim reaching consensus about what will be the future function of the local churches. During this process, both working groups continue to consult their stakeholders.

4. Communication larger public: once consensus has been reached between the two working groups, a draft of the “Church Policy Plan” can be presented to the larger public. After good communication, the local population can give feedback during an evening where the preliminary version is presented. This feedback can then be included in the final version of the “Church Policy Plan”.

5. Approval by bishop and local Council: after a principal agreement of the local Executive, the “Church Policy Plan” can be sent to the diocese for final approval by the bishop. In the last step the local Town or City Council confirms the Plan and converts it into an official Order.

CRKC website and databases:

During the last years the “Department of Immoveable Religious Heritage” of the CRKC elaborated an extensive website in Dutch, with all possible information about the future

of parish churches in Flanders (see <http://crkc.be/immovable-religious-heritage>). Besides the possibility of personal advice by telephone, email or a visit on location, the CRKC developed also two databases which can be very useful for local authorities for the writing-up and implementation of their “Church Policy Plan”. A first database contains the basic information about all circa 1800 parish churches of Flanders: <http://crkc.be/databank-parochiekerken> At its start in 2012, the “Department of Immoveable Religious Heritage” systematically enquired all fabric committees in Flanders about their parish churches in order to get a good understanding of the state of the art and to be able to monitor future changes. CRKC collected and validated data on the history, architecture and environment of all Flemish parish churches, as well as data on their physical state and actual use. The results of the analysis were published in the “Atlas of the religious heritage in Flanders” (2014)¹⁴, but were also publicly made available through the ODIS database, an instrument of intermediary structures in Europe¹⁵: www.odis.be This multi-contextual web database has seven big entities, among which the entity ‘buildings’, based on the international DOCOMOMO standards. So-called ‘input groups’ – such as CRKC, KADOC-KU Leuven and the Centre for Flemish Architectural Archive (see www.cvaa.be) – can publish autonomously new data to ODIS and validate them. Non-validated

data can be stored as ‘working notes’, a free text field. Functioning as a bridge between academic and heritage communities, all validated data can be accessed through the online public access catalogue (OPAC). Data can be linked to other databases or GIS-platforms and exported in different formats. Being part of an international project, the Flemish data can moreover be seen in an international perspective. CRKC uses the database as a managing tool: municipalities and fabric committees who ask information about their churches, can quickly be provided with a data overview that can serve as a base for the “Church Policy Plan” inventory. Modifications in ecclesiastical structures (e.g. when two or more parishes merge) can be inserted in the ‘Organisation’ entity of the ODIS-database. In the future, it will be possible to exchange data with other databases.

A second database gathers circa 150 examples from different kind of uses of church buildings in Flanders and some other areas of North-Western Europe: <http://crkc.be/praktijkvoorbeelden> This database on practices of enhancement, mutual use, shared use and repurposing of parish churches has the intention to feed the dialogue between municipalities and fabric committees with more objective information. The frequent consultation of this instrument proves the need for inspirational examples and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices. Nevertheless, CRKC doesn’t give a

value judgement in the extensive descriptions of these examples. The central goal is providing a realistic view on the differentiation of use. Each fiche contains an ID with name, address, diocese, category of extended use, monumental status and whether or not it was or still is a parish church. The corpus contains a brief history of the building, a series of photos and information on the alteration to extended use.

CRKC has the intention to strengthen during the next years this combination of gathering information (publications, databases) and advising local authorities and heritage players about the complex issue of the future of religious heritage in Flanders, in official collaboration with the Flemish Government, Flemish dioceses and other representative organs of the officially recognised religions.

V. Results

The elaboration of “Church Policy Plans” all over Flanders takes place at different rates. Some dioceses are actively linking these plans with the scaling-up of the territorial organisation of their parishes, whereas other dioceses follow rather a ‘wait and see’ bottom-up approach. Many factors influence the decisions that are actually taken: the political constellation of local Executives, the historical presence of anti-clerical tendencies in the area, the particular financial situation of municipalities and fabric committees, the monumental status and/

or physical condition of church buildings, the pastoral view on the use of churches which are not used (anymore) for weekly masses, the number of available priests in the area, the liveliness of local parish communities and their involvedness within the local village life, the available number of volunteers for pastoral teams and fabric committees, the number of churches in a municipality, and so on. The first results of this method, obliged by the Flemish Government, are consequently very different and depending from context to context, ranging from municipalities who decide to withdraw nearly all churches from worship to municipalities who rather chose to retain the status quo and emphasise enhancement. We will shortly present some already finished “Church Policy Plans” of a series of rural and urban areas in Flanders to illustrate this diversity.

Riemst: emphasising enhancement

The “Church Policy Plan” of the rural municipality of Riemst in the easternmost Flemish province of Limburg was finished in June 2015. Riemst is a municipality on the countryside with no less than 12 parish churches in the diocese of Hasselt (Fig. 1.5). Although parish communities are gradually ageing and shrinking in this rural area, the fabric committees and Executive have jointly decided to keep all churches open as parish churches during the next years. There are still enough

priests available in the area to celebrate at least one mass every weekend in each church (with the agreement that one weekend a month in each church there is no mass on Sunday). Baptisms, Solemn Communion, funerals and marriages can still take place in every church, whereas Confirmation will be centralised in the churches of Vlijtingen, Zichen-Bolder and Zussen, and Millen. The civic and ecclesiastical working groups agreed however that more attention should be dedicated to the enhancement of the cultural values of Riemst’s churches. The fabric committees have engaged themselves to stimulate actively cultural activities in their churches such as concerts and presentations. The Plan keeps thus all churches open for liturgical use, but more attention will be dedicated to religious heritage, the use of organs for broader musical activities and making these churches more easily accessible for visitors – for instance with the organisation “Open Kerken”: <http://openchurches.be/>

Westhoek: gradually towards more shared use
“Church Policy Plans” for the 18 municipalities of the Westhoek (literally “Western corner”), the westernmost part of the province of West Flanders (Fig. 1.6), were already elaborated in 2012-2014 as a pilot project stimulated by Minister Bourgeois. The intercommunal organisation WVI and CRKC assisted the local municipalities and Central Fabric Committees

to come to a complete “Church Policy Plan” for their territories. The very rural Westhoek counts 113 churches, of which one third is located in villages with less than 700 inhabitants. As this area was seriously damaged during WWI, for instance near Ypres, many of these churches are huge buildings constructed during the interbellum (e.g. Fig. 6 a). Their immense size makes them often determinant landmarks in the mostly open landscape of fields and pastures. Until today the link between Catholic parish communities, village identity and local social organisations remains strong in this part of West Flanders, which makes complete repurposing a very sensitive issue.

The “Church Policy Plans”, which are now officially approved by the bishop of Bruges, contain however already some projects of shared use, in time as well as in space. Especially for the immense post-war reconstruction churches in very small villages, parts of churches can be easily used for profane functions. Such projects can moreover be a stimulus for the social cohesion of these local communities. In the municipality of Langemark-Poelkapelle, for instance, the project “New Life @ Church” involved the entire community in the search for a concrete shared use for the church of Our Lady of Poelkapelle (Fig. 1.6 and 6 a-c).¹⁶ A series of consultations – from a Facebook page (see www.facebook.com/nieuwlevenatkerk) to a meeting in which the spatial impact of



Fig. 6a Church of Our Lady, Poelkapelle. Project “New Life @ Church” on partitioned use. Example of a typical large interbellum church of the Westhoek, Poelkapelle (photo <https://inventaris.onroerendergoed.be>)



Fig. 6b Church of Our Lady, Poelkapelle. Project “New Life @ Church” on partitioned use. Meeting for the larger public in which the potential new function of a nursery is visualised (photo www.facebook.com/nieuwlevenatkerk)

potential new functions was indicated with toys and chairs (Fig. 6 b) – led to the decision to combine a liturgical function in the choir with a nursery in the nave and side aisles. The architectural plan foresees moreover a division in two floors.¹⁷ This combined religious and profane function is visible in the logo of the new project (Fig. 6 c). As partitioned use projects start to be elaborated more frequently, often in collaboration with specialised teams of architects, the traditional Catholic idea of a church as the sacral “House of God”, gradually starts to move towards a more protestant point of view.¹⁸

Antwerp: emphasising mutual use in an urban context

The extensive “Church Policy Plan” for the 69 parish churches of the multi-religious and multicultural harbour city of Antwerp (Fig. 1.7) was approved by the bishop of Antwerp and the City Council in October 2016.¹⁹ This was the result of prolific negotiations between a civic and ecclesiastic working group. The latter – a representation of the diocese of Antwerp, deaneries, federations, the 10 Central Fabric Committees and 69 individual fabric committees and parishes, linked the scaling-up process of parishes to the request of the City Executive of Antwerp for a better distribution of funding and for safer and higher-quality church buildings. The city administration of Antwerp had a key role in data collection and

analysis and facilitated the local dialogue. Besides wide consultation within the 69 parishes, also different technical groups and horizontal consultation within the city administration made part of the elaboration of the Plan. CRKC advised all partners about the necessary steps, supported a series of meetings and provided input for an internal document of the City of Antwerp on mutual and shared use and repurposing. Already at the beginning of this process, the bishop of Antwerp, Johan Bonny, made clear that no churches in the city centre needed to be closed as the frequency of church attendance and the conservation cost of these building remained stable in this ‘inner circle’ during the last years. Bishop Bonny however also explicitly chooses not to close too many churches in the city’s periphery.²⁰ He considers it important to stay in touch with the people of these areas by physically remaining present there, supporting these local communities and creating ‘cores of faith’. The bishop wants to take care of six specific groups of faith communities: the traditional Flemish natives, the Catholics from other countries and continents, the Catholics belonging to Eastern Rite, (new) religious congregations, non-Catholic Christian communities and a more complex group of Evangelicals who does not have a link to a specific Church. At this moment already, many Roman-Catholic churches are open for mutual use (e.g. Fig. 7), but the plan



Fig. 6c Church of Our Lady, Poelkapelle. Project “New Life @ Church” on partitioned use. Logo which indicates the combined future function of a nursery (little girl) and a liturgical space (acolyte)

foresees thus more mutual use in the future. Doing so, the Roman-Catholic community of Antwerp fully wants to play a positive role in the multicultural dialogue of the city. In general, the Antwerp “Church Policy Plan” consists of a pragmatic dual approach based on a provisional long-term vision. A first scenario is based on an inventory of the characteristics and opportunities of each church building, which will be refined during the following years. It’s a base for further dialogue between the City and 10 Central Fabric Committees. It will be equally important to have the support of all possible stakeholders for the further analysis of the objective data, but also to understand the intrinsically local sentiment of each place. A second scenario consists of five “feasibility studies” for churches where a local dynamic has already proposed advanced ideas about shared use or repurposing. A team of specialised architects will look together with the local community how feasible the proposed projects are in these specific churches. The learning process and outcome of these five studies will provide all partners building blocks for a positive implementation of the entire major Antwerp “Church Policy Plan”.

Zwalm: mainly repurposing

The “Church Policy Plan” of the municipality of Zwalm, in the southernmost part of the Province of East Flanders (Fig. 1.8 and Fig. 8



Fig. 7 Sacred Heart Church, Antwerp. Mutual use implies also some practical issues, such as the (removable) altars of the Orthodox and Roman-Catholic communities which are placed in front of each other (photo by CRKC)

a-b), was approved by the bishop of Ghent and the local Council in September-October 2016.²¹ Very rural Zwalm has a population of 8070, but consists of 12 rather small villages, which have each their own Roman-Catholic parish and a parish church (to get a good impression, see Fig. 8 a). In total, Zwalm has 12 parish churches and one smaller chapel. The number of priests for these communities was reduced from seven in 2005 to one in 2015. This priest must also serve in seven other parishes, apart from Zwalm. Therefore the local pastoral team developed in 2013 a vision about the future of the ecclesiastical work in the municipality of Zwalm and decided to reduce the number of churches in use to two. The twelve parishes should merge to one. This vision was confirmed by the bishop of Ghent, Luc Van Looy. A procedure was started to negotiate a “Church Policy Plan” for the municipality of Zwalm in order to execute the pastoral vision that was developed in 2013. A so-called “think tank” started working in September 2014. This committee was composed of representatives from the pastoral team, the Central Fabric Committee, the Municipality administration, the diocese of Ghent, CRKC and the Province of East Flanders. After the elaboration of a detailed inventory of the churches of Zwalm, followed a SWOT-analyses of each of the churches in order to make suggestions for new uses for the redundant churches. The

conclusions of this “think tank” – that two churches will remain parish church and 10 others will be repurposed – were presented in an open meeting for the entire population in June 2015. A small working group prepared the final version of the “Church Policy Plan”, which was first approved by the bishop in September 2016 and finally by the local Council in October 2016. The large number of redundant churches in Zwalm requires special measures in order to preserve this important heritage. A central management for the churches that are no longer in use for worship, to prevent the downfall of these buildings, is included in the Plan. The search for new uses will be followed up by a working group in which different partners are represented. Part of the procedure is the care for the religious objects from the redundant churches, but also for the intangible religious heritage from the different former parishes (processions etc.). The implementation of the “Church Policy Plan” has started immediately after the approval of the plan by the local Council.

VI. Conclusion

The situation of secularisation and declining church attendance is nowadays not very different in Flanders than in other parts of North-Western Europe. Two factors make the actual issue of underused or abandoned churches in this northern part of Belgium



Fig. 8a Zwalm. Signpost in the village centre of Munkzwalm to the 11 other villages of the Municipality of Zwalm (photo www.zwalm.be)



Fig. 8b Zwalm. One of the 10 churches of Zwalm that will be repurposed, church of Saint-Martin, Meilegem, in its rural context (photo Eric Plovty)

however slightly different than in nearby areas: (1) 99% of Flemish parish churches are Roman-Catholic – a legacy of a massive impact of Catholicism on Belgian society, and (2) the ongoing functioning of fabric committees, public administrations nominated by the bishop, which are controlled and financially supported by the Municipality. The discussion on the future of Flanders' churches is thus not only an issue of the Church, but directly also one of the Municipality, of parishioners as well as the entire population.

The obligation of the Flemish Government to elaborate "Church Policy Plans" has started an intensive dialogue on the local level. Systematic inventory making and the involvement of entire local communities (not only churchgoers), increasingly indicate the many possibilities that church buildings have to fulfil other than strictly religious needs (broader cultural activities, local infrastructural needs, crucial role for social cohesion, places for interreligious dialogue, etc.). Although the method adopted in Flanders has some extreme consequences (status quo in some municipalities, extreme rejection of churches in some others), in general it has the positive result that more attention is given to this multi-layered religious heritage by ever larger groups of society. It is hoped that in the years to come many more municipalities and fabric churches will continue their intensive local dialogue and search for compromise and respect for all

parties in the best Belgian tradition.

Notes:

1. See http://crkc.be/sites/default/files/conceptnota_toekomst_parochiekerk.pdf (all websites of this paper are last consulted on the 2nd of January 2017)
2. Bart de Groof, "Alexander Farnese and the Origins of Modern Belgium", in *Bulletin de l'Institut Historique Belge de Rome*, 1993, 63, pp. 195–219
3. Luc Duerloo and Werner Thomas (eds.), *Albert & Isabella. The Promise of a Golden Age. Essays*, Brepols, Turnhout, 1998
4. Bart Van Dooren (ed.), *Fabric committees in Flanders. A legacy from Napoleon for the future, [Kerkfabrieken in Vlaanderen. Een erfenis van Napoleon voor de toekomst]*, Vanden Broele, Bruges, 2015
5. Recognitions for the Islamic and Orthodox religion followed respectively in 1974 and 1985, that for Liberalism as ideology in 2002
6. See <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>
7. Koen Abts, Karel Dobbelaere and Liliane Voyé (eds.), *New times new people: Belgians about labour, family, ethics, religion and politics, [Nieuwe tijden nieuwe mensen: Belgen over arbeid, gezin, ethiek, religie en politiek]*, Lannoo, Leuven, 2011, pp. 143–145
8. Idem and see also : Liliane Voyé, Karel Dobbelaere and Koen Abts, "Belgians and their values", in *Outre-terre*, 2014, 40 (3), pp. 191–2015
9. For the integral text, see <https://codex.vlaanderen.be/Zoeken/Document.aspx?DID=1013380¶m=inhoud>
10. For a recent study by Belfius Bank on the finances of Belgian municipalities, see <https://www.belfius.be/publicsocial/NL/Expertise/Studies/LokaleFinancien/LocalFinance/index.aspx?firstWA=no>
11. For the integral text, see http://crkc.be/sites/default/files/conceptnota_toekomst_parochiekerk.pdf
12. See <https://www.onroenderfgoed.be/nl/beleid-en-regelgeving/decreten>
13. Some Municipalities and Central Fabric Committees explicitly chose to base their "Church Policy Plan" on a detailed study of all possible aspects. See the example of the "Church Policy Plan" of Leuven, Dominique Vanneste, this volume
14. Julie Aerts, Jan Jaspers, Jan Klinckaert, Dimitri Stevens and Annemie Van Dyck, *Atlas of the religious heritage in Flanders*,

[*Atlas van het religieus erfgoed in Vlaanderen*], CRKC, Heverlee, 2014. More information and a digital version on <http://crkc.be/atlas-van-het-religieus-erfgoed-vlaanderen-1>

15. See http://www.odis.be/hercules/_en_overODIS.php#databank
16. For images of the destruction of the former church of Poelkapelle during WWI, see <http://poelcapelle14-18.be/EhrenteilAnDerKirche>
17. For more information and the complete feasibility study (to download at the bottom of the page), see <http://www.langemark-poelkapelle.be/website/2912-www>
18. For more reflections about sacred places, see: Thomas Coomans, Herman De Dijn, Jan De Maeyer, Rajesh Heynicks and Bart Verschaffel (eds.), *Loci Sacri. Understanding Sacred Places*, KADOC-Studies on Religion, Culture and Society 9, Leuven University Press, Leuven
19. For a digital version see https://www.kerknet.be/sites/default/files/20161005_PKP_definitief_digitale_versie_LOW_RES.pdf
20. For more information about the presentation of the Plan, see <https://www.kerknet.be/bisdome-antwerpen/nieuws/parochiekerkenplan-voor-antwerpen-voorgesteld-door-bisdome-en-stad>
21. For a digital version, see <http://www.zwalm.be/WWW/default/4962-www/version/default/part/AttachmentData/data/kerkenbeleidspan%20Zwalm%20def.%20goedgekeurd%20GR%20en%20bisschop.pdf> (last accessed, as all other websites consulted for this paper, on the 2nd of January 2017)