

QUEBEC'S CHURCHES: CONVERTING FROM THE FAITH

Across the *Belle Province*, churches are standing empty. And they are weighing heavy on debt-ridden dioceses forced to sell to avoid bankruptcy. But there's a problem: new heritage laws make these grandiose buildings, important symbols of identity for the Quebecois, practically unsaleable. What should be done?

The rumour has spread throughout the West: "they're closing churches in Quebec". Although there are an increasing number of disaffected churches in many other parts of the world, the French-speaking province is nevertheless emblematic of the process. Back in the 1960s, church-goers were still very assiduous, but since then figures have declined dramatically, with only 4% of Quebecois now going to Sunday mass. But, unlike in France, churches in Quebec are privately owned by the parishes. These last, which have either merged, formed groups or been closed by episcopal decree, were left with a surfeit of churches, and, consequently, were forced to sell a substantial number of them.

Often, the process begins when, due to a lack of parishioners, the bishop recuperates the buildings. Since a closed church no longer benefits from an exemption from municipal taxes, and the harsh local winters send heating bills through the roof, it becomes urgent to find a new owner who knows how to put these imposing volumes and the costly cubic metres they contain to good use. For the dioceses, whose budgets are already under enormous strain, there is often little choice: they have to sell to avoid bankruptcy.

An old tradition: in Quebec, churches have been converted since 1925. That was the year in which the Canadian Parliament voted through a law which founded the United Church of Canada, a body encompassing the Methodist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian faiths. The surplus of churches created by the new law meant that a number of them had to be closed and converted. Since then, many of these small Protestant churches have been leading a new life as residential buildings, restaurants, offices and workshops.

But since the early 1970s, the Roman Catholic Church, Quebec's de facto "official" Church since the 17th century, has been a focus of debate. The vast edifices are emptying, resources are becoming scarcer and, above all, the clergy is aging and few younger priests are joining the ranks. Forty years ago, the diocese of Montreal had already closed a number of parishes in the centre of the city. A dozen monumental churches, sold to the public authorities, were demolished to make way for highways, schools and public parks. The scandal caused by the sales accelerated the decline in the number of church-goers to such an extent that, in the late 1980s, the religious authorities decreed that at all costs, such demolitions must be avoided. At the same time, an increasing awareness of the importance of heritage meant that these great monuments entered the collective imagination. A slogan suddenly appeared all over the province, proclaiming: "Our churches are our castles!"

Municipal administrations now refuse to issue demolition permits to those interested in buying the sites but keen to get rid of the churches and the costs associated with them. Above all, to make buying a church worthwhile,

the promoter of a project must obtain, after considerable bureaucratic wrangling and after gaining a substantial degree of public support, a new ground plan changing the use from public to private. In this context, developing the site for community or cultural purposes seems to represent a viable way forward. This responsible attitude on the part of politicians was forged by a number of particularly scandalous cases, notable among which was the transformation of the Church of Saint-Jean-de-la-Croix into an apartment building. Furthermore, a number of buildings sold by the diocese of Chicoutimi to private individuals incapable of paying the upkeep, as was the case with the unique Church of Notre-Dame-de-Fatima, a masterpiece of modern Quebecois architecture, also serve as a reminder that it is not the role of private enterprise to safeguard the built heritage.

Consequently, churches in Quebec are no longer saleable on the real estate market. All new owners are obliged to find an appropriate use for them, both from the viewpoint of the functionality and capacity of the buildings, and from that of a relatively sensitive symbolic point of view. In Quebec, disaffected churches cannot be converted into bars or discotheques, which is commonly the case in Ontario and the rest of North America. In fact, Quebecois have only very recently accepted the idea of converting churches into sports facilities. Even 10 years ago, the idea of young people, girls and boys, playing ball or climbing the walls of the nave before taking a shower in the basement, would have made most local people blanch. Today, such projects are seen as affording the opportunity to boost the potential for new uses: concerts in the numerous community centres (changing rooms for the homeless, soup kitchens, reception centres for the elderly, etc.) or cultural bodies (museums, acting schools, theatres, etc.). In any case, heritage is being used by public opinion as a rallying cry to save churches. However, there is a willingness to negotiate heritage immunity vis-à-vis the needs of a community or cultural project. It is as if the new use entirely effaced all vestiges of an ecclesiastical past. In this regard, the silence of the Church, the initial owner, finds an echo in the total absence of any recognition of the buildings' sacred character, considered of little consequence compared to its role as a servant of community interests.

If the speculators have been effectively warned off ecclesiastical heritage, which is now the purview of those interested in furthering cultural and community issues, the subject is also of interest to politicians, who are invested with a responsibility for ensuring the continued existence of these great monuments, which are so closely associated with Quebec's identity. With less than 200 of the province's 2,750 historical Christian churches effectively protected, there is no guarantee that all, or even a small number of them can be saved. An arduous task will have to be undertaken and a series of cruel questions answered. In the next 10 years, over a thousand churches will be up for conversion: do we need all these spaces and do we have the resources necessary to carry out so many projects? And what should be done with churches listed as historical monuments, for which new uses are even more difficult to find? Who would want to purchase (and become responsible for) churches which would be merely objects to visit, things strictly to be seen? For, and this should be underlined, the time when responsibility for safeguarding such a heritage could be handed over to a paternalist State is as distant as the era in which the Church was able to look after such monuments by itself. Thus, when in Quebec or elsewhere churches need to be shut, potential solutions should be discussed. ●

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