

Inaugural Lecture of the XVIII International Congress of Christian  
Archaeology in Belgrade, 2nd September 2024

**Early Christianity between Liturgical Practice and Everyday Life –  
Thematic Insights<sup>1</sup>**

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I. Introductory Remarks

To date, all previous congresses concerning the Christian-archaeological field have published the lectures provided by their participants. All these files represent a huge wealth of knowledge (over 20.000 pages) and adding them to a database would represent a huge step forward. These files would conceal millions of significant insights. However, even without such a database, it can be said that the history of the congresses proves how archaeological science has constantly accepted and overcome new challenges. It is not only today that the archaeological science is changing rapidly as a result of technical innovations and has to reinvent itself in many ways. These congresses should therefore also represent a fair for ideas and innovations and should make this field attractive and sustainable. The topics chosen for the conference should also have the function of giving new impulses to this field and of developing approaches to new questions which will drive our work in the following years.

Material objects represent the primary focus of research for Christian Archaeology. Archaeology, as a science, asks itself: what have we uncovered and removed from the dust of time? What have we excavated? What is the actual shape of these objects? What kind of context do they belong to?

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It was always the task of archaeology to produce catalogues and *corpora* of the various objects, in order to gather things together, to compare, to analyse and finally to interpret them. Unfortunately, many objects don't present the original context of the discoveries, which leads them to remain without a history. On the other hand, the portion of objects whose origin and context are known is constantly increasing. Actually, one of the resolutions of the very first congress in Split in 1894 was to produce such *corpora*. Joseph Wilpert alone collected three such *corpora* printing them in folio format. This tradition continues today, even though it is now done through important databases, for instance within the fields of architecture (CARE), of epigraphy (EAGLE) and in the fields of numismatics and ceramics.

All these *corpora* and databases teach us: Archaeology is a sustainable science and teaches students to appreciate sustainability. For the archaeologist, even the smallest detail is significant because it contains the message of a lost era, whose memory must be preserved. The modern behaviour of consuming and throwing things away is absolutely alien to archaeological ethics. For us, the resources of memory are not inexhaustible, they must be recovered and carefully preserved so that they can be available to future generations as well. This care for things of the past is the true quality of the archaeologist, and it should also be noted that through modern technology more and more information can be obtained from our findings. What was once considered worthless may now contribute significant notions.

Anyway, databases and catalogues must be brought to life. No matter how extensive the information on the objects is, if the "life context" of these objects is not properly addressed, it remains sterile and ultimately buried in a USB flash drive, failing to engage the public and a cultural audience. We should not leave it to historians alone to set free the stories contained in the objects. We should not limit ourselves to merely collecting materials, thus reducing archaeology to an

auxiliary science. Otherwise we deprive ourselves of the impact and fascination of archaeological research. The questions that arise, when considering the findings are: What do the objects tell us about people from different regions and times? What kind of significance and what impact did these items have on people's lives? And on the other hand, how does daily life change, what goes through people's mind when they surround themselves with such objects and things, when they use these objects or when they merely see and perceive them?

During the 12<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Christian Archaeology, held in Bonn in 1991, my predecessor Monsignor Victor Saxer stated that the goal of Christian Archaeology is to gain "a concrete image of Christian life, far from theories and speculations". He deliberately spoke about a concrete image of *Christian* life, fully aware that this Christian life does not exist as an isolated object but only as an interactive dimension of late antique society.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that the expression "Christian Archaeology" not only represents a chronological definition, but defines the content as well, namely the history of Christianity. Dealing with early Christianity will make this discipline a science of the future. We live indeed in an era of increasing interest towards religion and towards Christianity in particular. At the same time, however, Christian practice as well as knowledge disappear. Therefore, there is a real, ever-growing need for experts who can save us from the voracious Chronos. Such experts are precisely trained in Christian Archaeology.

Christian Archaeology is a science encompassing life, society, and culture. It is not limited to the study of Christian monuments or artifacts that were presumably used by Christians and non-Christians, nor is it confined to the touchable objects or to everything which can be measured and photographed. It is also interested in "life" itself, primarily in Christians' lives which is then to be contextualized within the late antique and the early medieval society in its entirety. How should we imagine life in a fortress (Naissus), in an episcopal city

(Justiniana Prima), in an imperial city, in a harbour city, in a pilgrimage city (Resafa, Cimitile) or finally in a religiously or confessionally mixed one? What was daily life in rural areas, in woods and deserts, on mountains and islands, in times of war and peace, as sedentary or as wanderer people, in theaters and in baths, in archives and libraries, across any kind of profession and not least during festivities, in churches and monasteries? These are all fascinating questions that arouse our curiosity and require meticulous research to approach the totality of life as closely as possible.

## II. The Theme of the Congress CIAC XVIII

Since the Pontifical Institute is responsible, the congresses have thematic accents, but only since the 9th congress in Rome, in 1975, they have an overarching topic that appears explicitly in the title of the proceedings. These topics can be divided into three groups: congresses with a topographical focus (oriental Illyricum, city, territory, periphery), ones with an chronological approach (pre-Constantinian period, Constantine era, Justinian era) and those with a special interest (pilgrimage, relationship between Rome and Constantinople). Today's congress belongs to the third group, drawing attention to liturgical practice and everyday life in early Christian times.

This brings us to the theme of this year's congress: "Early Christianity between Liturgical Practice and Everyday Life". It is a typical between-theme, which has the advantage of being adaptable: on the one hand, it allows for openness, on the other hand it requires constant focus. It concerns the life of early Christians in its totality, breathing between liturgy and daily life. Liturgy and daily life describe the poles of the ellipse around which Christian life revolves, with the hope that both, liturgy and daily life, are not separate worlds and ultimately form a dynamic and tension-filled unity within the lives of Christians.

This congress will therefore address liturgy and daily life, but it will also

examine how both poles are interconnected. Forty years ago, the aforementioned Victor Saxer published his Ph.D. thesis titled “Vie liturgique et quotidienne à Carthage vers le milieu du IIIe siècle” – which is almost a programmatic statement for this congress: Vie liturgique et quotidienne - liturgical and daily life.

Any theory that perceives the essence of Christianity as being merely rooted in ethics or in worship is not grasping its reality. It was only the secularization and idealism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that led to a dichotomy between everyday life and worship, between society and liturgy. In contrast, from the very beginning, Christianity has claimed that baptism entails a complete transformation of one’s way of life, thus naturally triggering a dynamic that leads to a new culture of life and society. This is already evident in the Two Ways doctrine of the Didache. Even more clearly, the church order of the Apostolic Tradition from the early 3rd century reveals how deeply intertwined everyday life and worship were in Syria, how the ecclesiastical regulations penetrated the daily life of Christians, and to what extent family and communal life were ritualized. Consider, for instance, the prescriptions about bringing the lamp inside during evening prayer or the communal evening meal, the Agape.

The theme of our congress can be described as the mechanism behind the inculturation of Christianity: Christianity establishes itself within the existing culture and, from a certain point, significantly shapes it, allowing one to speak of a Christian culture. Charles Pietri already addressed this at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Christian Archaeology in Lyon in 1986, referring to “la christianisation de la vie quotidienne”. It concerns the emergence of Christian culture. It spans from the zero point – the Christ event and the beginning of Christian preaching – to the moment when religious practice becomes simply daily life. At some point, Christian codes and codices become a cultural factor, permeating the entire society to such an extent that even non-Christians are affected. This is evident, for example, when the Christian calendar and liturgical

times determine the temporal division of days and years, thereby also shaping the rhythm of life and the economy.

We arrive at a crucial point that distinguishes Christianity from the older religions. Christian Gnülka refers to “cultural transformation as a distinguishing mark of Christianity.” Neither ancient philosophy nor polytheistic worship aimed at a cultural conversion: philosophy addressed only an elite, and polytheistic worship lacked an ethical framework. However, for Christianity, both the Old and New Testament function as a “law,” as ethics, a doctrine of virtue that does not remain within the purely religious sphere but encompasses and transforms the entire culture. This transformation emanates from Christian worship itself, as Augustine notes, stating that the law of Christ is proclaimed from the elevated place within the church building, that is, from the ambo: *sancta scriptura iustitiaeque doctrina de superiore loco in conspectu omnium personante*.

The cultural-historical approach of Christian archaeology leaves apologetics behind. The focus is not on presenting an idealized version of the Christian mission but on verifying and specifying what actually occurred. In this context, the complementarity of literal and material sources plays a crucial role. Material sources can provide a form of counterevidence to literal testimonies, which often have the tendency for glorification. Archaeological evidence stands as a source in its own right, frequently revealing aspects of history that are otherwise unknown. However, it would be naive to believe that archaeological findings are so unequivocal that they can supersede written sources. Archaeological discoveries often raise more questions than the written sources have already addressed.

A cultural-historical approach is essential for Christian Archaeology. I believe that the field of Christian Archaeology remains relevant only if it discovers its historiographical dimension and learns how to narrate the lives of early Christians, between religion and everyday life, more effectively. This is

essentially a commonplace observation. Every museologist knows that nowadays objects are no longer displayed in neat rows behind glass cases but must be used to tell stories through selected items. The immense reconstructive work involved in this is the task of Christian archaeologists. Ultimately, it must result in a narrative. The most successful promotional campaign for Christian Archaeology was the narrative of the Catacomb Church. Never was there such interest in Christian Archaeology as during Giovanni Battista de Rossi's time during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because at that time they succeeded in creating a narrative starting from the catacombs. By framing this congress around the theme of "between liturgy and everyday life," we are providing material for a new narrative which will be hopefully as attractive as the old one.

#### IV. Five "transitions" between Everyday Life and Liturgy

Ultimately, Christian Archaeology must concern itself with the totality of Christian life, and that is precisely the focus of this congress: Christian life between everyday existence and liturgy. I would like to mention a few keywords regarding these "transitions" between everyday life and liturgy in late antique society, which are apt to trigger further chains of association. In all these "transitions," archaeology plays a crucial role.

*A primary transition* existed between the temporal and the eternal. Nothing is simultaneously as mundane and as religious as death. Through the act of dying, the trivial and the spiritual converge. Thousands of burial sites turn into thousands of centres for remembrance and for the ritualization of memory. Graves act as reservoirs of memory. Here, transformations in social and religious self-understanding can be discerned through the epigraphic or iconographic representation of the deceased. Consider the titles, professional designations and attributes, as well as the entire visual art, through which philosophers, fishermen, and shepherds convey specific messages. Even seemingly banal details like

hairstyles provide a link to fashion-driven everyday life. The transformation of burial culture is an example case of how the everyday reality of the dead crystallizes into the worship of the living. Iconography in funerary contexts changed fundamentally; members of the upper class began to appear more frequently in epitaphs and employ Christian imagery. The Christian inversion of values corresponds to a shift of worship from the city of the living to cemeteries. Cemeteries thus become sites of celebration and resurrection. Who, if not archaeology, can so clearly demonstrate this inversion of values described by Peter Brown?

*A second transition* existed between the sacred and the secular spheres. These two domains can only be understood through their distinction on the one hand side and relation on the other hand side. Early Christian church architecture cannot be understood without acknowledging this invisible threshold. It is, in my view, incorrect to assume that Christians regarded their gathering spaces as secular until the time of Constantine. Rather, these spaces were special, designated for worshiping. However, the faithful also appropriated these spaces, using them for their own purposes. There are churches with fountains, healing baths, incubation rooms, tombs, graffiti walls, and votive tablets – all archaeological evidence of the, so to speak, everyday appropriation of church space by the faithful. Later, there was also the appropriation of church space by rulers; consider the imperial images in San Vitale in Ravenna, where Justinian and Theodora were depicted in the liturgical act of the offertory and, through these images, situated themselves as laypeople within the presbytery. However, they seemingly could do this only with the authorization of Bishop Maximian, who did not want to be overlooked and seized this opportunity to assert himself prominently (as evidenced by his name inscription).

This also involves the question of the social implications of liturgy. In the same church space, people from the city, of all ethnic and social strata, came



together. Unity and differentiation converged here, which must have had significant impacts on daily life and social structures. Church spaces reflected the social order, as they were not unstructured but assigned specific places to different groups: the clergy, widows, virgins, nobility, men and women, catechums, and penitents. In this context, social boundaries were sometimes adjusted in favour of Christian freedom. For instance, Bishop Callixtus of Rome allowed marriages between Christian aristocratic women and Christian men of lower status. At the same time, there was a levelling effect: sin is found in all social ranks. Penitents had to wait outside the church, where aristocrats and slaves would likely find themselves together in the atrium. Society was being restructured, and this became particularly visible in the liturgy. One should not overlook the significance of the baptistery as a symbol of urban unity. Since the Middle Ages, we know the importance of baptism in the process of nation-building.

The interplay between the sacred and the secular also encompasses the residential context of sacred buildings. Churches do not exist in isolation; they have a staff who requires living and working spaces, sometimes even within the church buildings. The description of a standard church in the *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* from the 5<sup>th</sup> century is paradigmatic in this regard, as it includes not only the basilica and baptistery but also a number of additional utility and residential rooms. Libraries and sacristies often become associated with churches, evolving into centres of church administration. Additionally, treasuries are established to store not only liturgical vessels but also to manage the church's wealth. Around cathedrals, episcopal courts develop, and communities of clergy settle there as well.

When liturgical assemblies occur multiple times a day, there is a tendency for residences to be located close to the church. This phenomenon can also be observed in monastic context. Similar cases include palace churches. For instance, in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, a large mosaic within the church originally

depicted Theodoric and his court (later replaced with processions of saints during the 6<sup>th</sup> century), establishing a visual connection to the palace. The episcopal administration expanded as bishops took on more civil and military responsibilities. Bishops required audience halls, which were used for jurisdiction and simultaneously for the administration of sacraments.

Additionally, episcopal ethics included providing free lodging to guests and pilgrims, leading to the development of ‘hotel services’ (*xenodochia*) near churches, ensuring that pilgrims could participate in liturgy. Large festivals or synods stimulated significant economic activity, as they also attracted the rural population. Paulinus of Nola installed images in the church to engage the rural people when it came for the feast day of Saint Felix, ensuring that they would forget their hunger and thirst while viewing the images, in line with the saying: “less drinking (*pocula*), more miracles (*miracula*)!”

Both Augustine and John Chrysostom deplored secular excesses during feasts, during which Christians satisfied desires that went beyond mere hunger and thirst - may be that such festivals are particularly well-suited for exploring the interplay between liturgy and everyday life.

*A third transition* led from worship to charity. Individual and social distress create imbalances in every society, and state welfare was almost non-existent, being barely developed even during the imperial period. Christianity fostered a strong sense of social responsibility. This Christian collectivism originated notably in worship, specifically in the collection of alms. The common worship of all Christian inhabitants of a city led to the accumulation of funds, which could then be used to aid the poor. The common worship across all social and economic strata fostered a solidarity that was religiously motivated. While there were certainly poor individuals that needed aid, they weren’t so many that funds could not also be used for church-buildings and art. Furthermore, storage rooms for the offerings of the faithful were found inside or near churches, along with offertory

boxes, wells, and other facilities for supplies and hygiene. There were also hospices for the homeless and pilgrims. The link between worship and charity becomes particularly evident at pilgrimage sites, which developed into substantial healthcare and welfare institutions.

*A fourth transition* led from the church to the streets. This concerns the topography of the city, as the liturgy was brought to the streets in various forms of station liturgy, as seen in Jerusalem, Constantinople or Rome. The multitude of churches both within and outside the city transformed and restructured the urban and suburban areas. The public space became christianized. In archaeological research, church complexes are initially examined in isolation, but historically, they were not isolated. They were likely interconnected administratively, personnel-wise, and liturgically. For instance, in Justiniana Prima, one might question the purpose of the numerous churches within the city. It seems inconceivable that these churches operated entirely independently. Thus, it is almost certain that there was a coordinated and integrated liturgical practice among them.

Episcopal churches have their satellite churches, resulting in a network that extends inside the public space. Here, the everyday life and worship intersected directly. In Rome, for instance, the Pope received on his way to the station church petitions and complaints, presenting himself as a judge “of the people”. His role as a judge was inseparable from the liturgy, which he was about to celebrate and which can also be viewed as a manifestation of the divine judge, Christ. The connection between episcopal jurisdiction and liturgy, seen as an encounter with the divine judge, requires further investigation.

In any case, liturgy pushed its way into the public space. Urban planning had to accommodate this. Church spaces communicated with the city and served as a backdrop. The most prominent locations, the highest elevations within a city or landscape, were dedicated to sacred buildings. Cities acquired an increasingly

recognizable religious profile. This included monuments, domes, towers, crosses, inscriptions, public squares, and covered processional routes. New pathways and sightlines were established.

*A fifth transition* led, in a sense, outside of the world. Monasticism established a wholly distinct daily life that cannot be compared with ordinary social life. This type of life was permeated in a unique manner by liturgy. The ways in which ascetics lived according to various rules and interacted with people in both urban and rural settings are subjects that archaeology is well-suited to investigate. Archaeology alone can capture the dispersion of monastic settlements and their management of daily life under specific regional conditions. For example, it is important to distinguish between rural and urban monasteries. Rural communities operated economic enterprises and produced goods, such as wine, that weren't limited to liturgical use.

Let me conclude with a few more aspects of our congress theme! There are everyday practices that migrated to liturgy included handwashing, sign of peace, the mixing of wine with water, as well as seemingly trivial matters such as filtering wine and driving away flies using a flabellum. Various forms of drinking containers and bowls were required by the liturgy, and it did not take long for preferred shapes to emerge. There has been considerable debate over the possible use of sigma shaped tables as altars. Objects used in both everyday and sacred contexts also include oil lamps and incense burners. A classic example of the intersection between worship and daily life is the clothing of clerics, which is the subject of ongoing debate regarding when specific or even exclusive liturgical garments emerged.

Another topic is the agape, or commun meal, held by a bishop. Although these were not liturgies per se, they were ritualized acts of interaction. There existed a genuine grey area between liturgy and everyday life during these events.

From Roman liturgy we know that in the Middle Ages the Pope invited during mass certain individuals to dinner that took place afterwards in his palace. Another case is that of funeral banquets, and indeed such banquets were associated with rites, which transformed in a certain way everyday practices into liturgy of the dead.

Finally, the matter of Christian sacrifice is of enormous relevance for the topic of everyday life and liturgy: bread and wine – natural offerings as opposed to animal sacrifices. The persistent protest by preachers, from Paul to Augustine, against the meat of idol sacrifices branded meat as forbidden, leading to the establishment of a vegetarian diet within Christianity, with notable consequences for animal farming and agriculture. Monasteries, in particular, insisted on a radical abstention from meat. Vegetable products, rather than animals, were brought by the faithful to the services. These offerings were sanctified through the priest's blessing. The offering procession (offertory) of the faithful was a key interface between everyday life and worship. The faithful desired to carry and retain the sacred within their everyday life. They transported the Eucharist to their homes in pyxes and preserved it there. They took holy water from the baptistery to sprinkle on their homes and fields. They also acquired relics and holy souvenirs and equipped chapels in their honour.

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