

Churches and Religious Heritage in Transformation. The Potential of Sacred Spaces as “Third” and “Fourth” Places

International Symposium in Brussels, 22–23 September 2026

Address: COMECE, Square de Meeûs, 19/1, B–1050 Brussels, Conference Room

In November 2025 the New European Bauhaus (NEB) Lab “Renovation, transformation, and renewal of church buildings and religious heritage in the EU” was officially established, headed by COMECE - Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union, KU Linz - Catholic Private University of Linz, Austria and FRH - Future for Religious Heritage. This conference builds on this initiative and on the travelling exhibition “Kirchen als Vierte Orte – Perspektiven des Wandels”, organized by the Museum der Baukultur NRW, Germany.

At its core is the question of what potential churches and other sacred spaces can offer in a changing society—as places of encounter, exchange and community, but also as distinctive forms of cultural heritage. The conference aims to bring together different perspectives and interests, to connect existing initiatives, to critically reflect on challenges, and to foster dialogue across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. It encourages a broader reflection on the particular status of churches as cultural heritage and on the implications this status has for their transformation and future use. Situated between religious memory, architectural and cultural significance, and new forms of social use, churches can be understood as “fourth places”: spaces that extend beyond the familiar categories of home, work and public space, and that have the potential to create new forms of community, participation and belonging.

Tue. 22 September 2026

Welcome address

4 pm Fr. Manuel Barrios Prieto, General Secretary of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)

4.15 – 6.15 pm Part I Framing the Subject: Focal Areas and Key Perspectives

Moderation: Stefan Lunte, COMECE

4.30 pm *Sacred Space as “Fourth Place”. Introductory Reflections on Concepts, Theories, and the Challenges of Respectfully Transforming Religious Heritage*

Anna Minta, Catholic Private University Linz and founding member of the NEB-Lab Renovation, transformation, and renewal of church buildings and religious heritage in the EU

4.50 pm *Beyond conservation: rethinking policies for rural religious heritage as a territorial asset*

Chiara L. M. Occelli and Irene Ruiz Bazán, Politecnico di Torino and member of the Interreg Europe projects RELiHE (Religious Heritage in Rural Areas)

5.10 pm *Parish, Circuit, Node – Churches and Mosques: Challenging religious “Fourth Places” in Sheffield*

Krzysztof Nawrotek, University of Sheffield

5.30 pm Discussion

6.15 pm Break

7.00 pm Part II Towards New Approaches – Religious Heritage as “Fourth” Places
Moderation: Anna Minta, KU Linz

Churches as 'Fourth Places' – Opportunities and Potential for Church Buildings
Felix Hemmers, Project Manager Zukunft – Kirchen – Räume, Stiftung Baukultur NRW

8.00 pm Round Table Discussion including

Sven Sterken, KU Leuven

Mariateresa Giammetti, University of Naples Federico II, Naples (UNINA)

Thierry Bettler, national Director of the French Bishops Conference for Sacred Art

9 pm Reception

Wed. 23 September 2026

8.30 am Part III Transforming Religious Heritage – Initiatives and Approaches
Moderation: Stefan Lunte, COMECE

8.45 am *Church transformation in two major denominations – the adaption of church buildings in East and West Germany*

Manuela Klauser, Bonn University and member of the DFG-Research Project TRANSARA - Transformation of Sacred Space

9.15 am *Supporting the transformation of churches in the European French-speaking world. Between resignation and innovation through a missionary project approach*

Arnaud J. Lambert / Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) and co-founding director of EcclesiaLab

9.45 am *Transdisciplinary dialogue and instruments: the five roles of the Flemish Future of Parish Churches Platform.*

Roel de Ridder, Coordinator Platform Toekomst Parochiekerken Belgium

10.15 am Discussion

10.45 am Break

11.15 am Part IV Churches as “Forth Places” – Activities, Necessities, and Challenges
Moderation: Manuela Klauser, Bonn University

11.30 am Jan Jaspers, Expert for religious heritage and transformation

11.45 am Martine Van den Bergen, President Eglises ouvertes

12.00 am Vanessa Fraga-Prol, Advocacy and Partnerships Manager, Europa Nostra

12.15 am Discussion and Feedback Session

Farewell-Reception

The symposium is open to the public. Registration is recommended:

here: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSezp8utuD1Ei4ezcgKP3AqJKfHowvPO2QgfeuMrxKW2iN6bVw/viewform>

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