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A lay association as a client: an unsuccessful architectural competition, between Italian politics and Vatican palace conspiracies (1952-53)

Una asociación laica como cliente: un concurso de arquitectura fallido, entre la política italiana y las conspiraciones palaciegas vaticanas (1952-53)

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ABSTRACT

Research into the Italian Liturgical Movement emphasised the pedagogical commitment of lay associations, rather than architectural innovation they eventually promoted. The case study presented here discusses a little-known case of ambitious architectural patronage promoted in 1952-53 by the main Italian lay association: the Italian Youth of Catholic Action (Gioventù di Azione Cattolica, GiAC). The winning design by architect Enzo Magnani, the first president of the Catholic Union of Italian Artists (UCAI), was rejected directly by Pius XII, probably as an indirect consequence of the worsening of the political fracture between the GiAC and the main branches of the Azione Cattolica, oriented towards explicit support for conservative and clericalist political positions, rather than ecclesial engagement and liturgical afflatus. The archives of Azione Cattolica Italiana (preserved by ISACEM in Rome) and some private archives allow a first reconstruction of the matter, which had been completely erased from the association's *official* history, and probably broke any possible link between associative patronage and liturgical architecture during the decades that followed.

KEYWORDS

Liturgical architecture; architectural competition; lay associations; Italian politics; Azione Cattolica Italiana.

RESUMEN

Las investigaciones sobre el Movimiento Litúrgico italiano hicieron hincapié en el empeño pedagógico de las asociaciones laicas, más que en la innovación arquitectónica que acabaron promoviendo. El estudio que aquí se presenta analiza un caso poco conocido de ambicioso mecenazgo arquitectónico promovido en 1952-53 por la principal asociación laica italiana: la Juventud Italiana de Acción Católica (Gioventù di Azione Cattolica, GiAC). El proyecto ganador, obra del arquitecto Enzo Magnani, primer presidente de la Unión Católica de Artistas Italianos (UCAI), fue rechazado directamente por Pío XII, probablemente como consecuencia indirecta del agravamiento de la fractura política entre la GiAC y las principales ramas de la Azione Cattolica, orientadas hacia el apoyo explícito a posiciones políticas conservadoras y clericalistas, más que al aliento espiritual y litúrgico. Los archivos de la Azione Cattolica Italiana (conservados por el ISACEM de Roma) y algunos archivos privados permiten una primera reconstrucción del asunto, que había sido completamente borrado de la historia oficial de la asociación, y que probablemente rompió cualquier posible vínculo entre mecenazgo asociativo y arquitectura litúrgica en las décadas siguientes.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Arquitectura litúrgica; concurso de arquitectura; asociaciones laicas; política italiana; Azione Cattolica Italiana.

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THE HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE CONTEXT

The historiography of the relationship between Liturgical Movement and the renewal of liturgical architecture only episodically touched upon the role of organised lay patronage. Studies on the subject have concentrated on experiences in Germany from the 1920s onwards, springing from affinities and friendships between a few theologians and designers: the role of lay youth groups is witnessed, for instance, in the liturgical re-ordering at Burg Rothenfels promoted by the Quickborn Association, the outcome of the professional and spiritual relationship between Romano Guardini and Rudolph Schwarz.

For Italy, literature has mainly stressed the role of the diocesan *workshops* promoted in the season of the Second Vatican Council by a few bishops, especially cardinals Giacomo Lercaro in Bologna (1952-68), Giovanni Battista Montini in Milan (1954-63) and Michele Pellegrino in Turin (1965-77); the activities of these episcopates fall within a broader European concern with the role of the religious infrastructure of metropolitan suburbs (Sterken and Weyns 2022). In Italy, lay associations are certainly more involved in pastoral and pedagogical work than in experimenting with innovative liturgical spaces. Nevertheless, the suspicion remains that this void of architectural engagement by lay associations is above all a historiographical void, due to the absence of a specific scientific interest in a history of *lay* ecclesial architecture and in considering architecture as a primary source for the study of the Catholic movement.

Within this historiographical frame, the fortuitous rediscovery of an architectural competition sponsored by the Gioventù di Azione Cattolica (GiAC, Italian Youth of Catholic Action) in August 1952 —entitled *The Community Praying around the Altar*— sheds light on the role of lay patronage and its potential impact on church design. Specifically, the competition policy document —drawn up by the leadership of the association— addresses the problem of accompanying the participatory instance that emerged in the Liturgical Movement with the experimentation of renewed spaces of celebration within centrally-planned churches. Since the 1930s —in years when no one would have envisaged a

new council— some architects had already begun to design modern centralized churches, though without explicitly adhering to any specific ecclesiological or liturgical model. Conversely, liturgical practice had continued to adopt —or partially adapt— traditional longitudinal layouts, with a certain disregard for Modern architecture. Morphological research into the central plan and liturgical research into the wrap-around plan meet along non-obvious paths, thanks to patrons who are particularly sensitive to both themes: our case is an interesting example.

The competition presented here¹ encourages the identification of more unknown documentary sources and experiences which, while fragmentary, bear witness to the possible encounter between research into architectural forms and the social and political impact of the liturgy (Paiano 2000), promoted also by lay organizations.

THE ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION OF THE CATHOLIC ACTION WITHIN THE SCOPE OF POST-WAR CHURCH DESIGN COMPETITIONS

The main church architectural competitions of Italy's post-war reconstruction (Della Longa 2005 and 2007; Santi 2011) concern the *liturgical type* of the urban parish church: i.e., competitions for Milano VIII Triennale-QT8 and San Giovanni al Gatano in Pisa (1947), Francavilla a Mare (1948), Recoaro Terme (1949), Milano INA Casa-Baggio (1952), Montecatini Terme and Roma Cinecittà (1953). The debate surrounding these competitions attracted the attention of architectural journals and opinion leaders but, in ordinary practice, a utilitarian and still backward-looking construction approach continued to prevail, with countless parish churches left to the good will or improvisation of their priest-builders, lacking in up-to-date architectural and liturgical culture, and burdened by practical and economic concerns.

The competition promoted in July 1952 by the male Catholic Action's youth organization (GiAC) had entirely different aims. The youth group's leaders intended to erect a building that could symbolize the association and its supra-diocesan and popular dimension while avoiding a self-celebratory monument. The idea focused on the value of liturgical

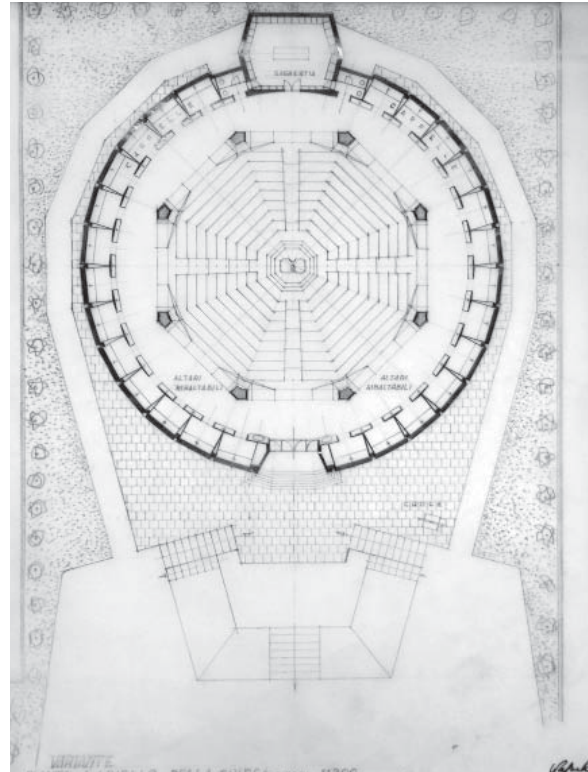
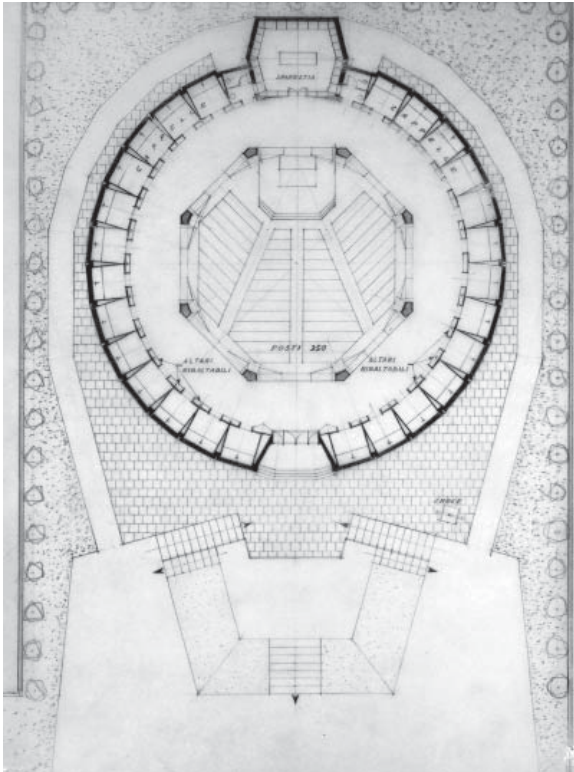
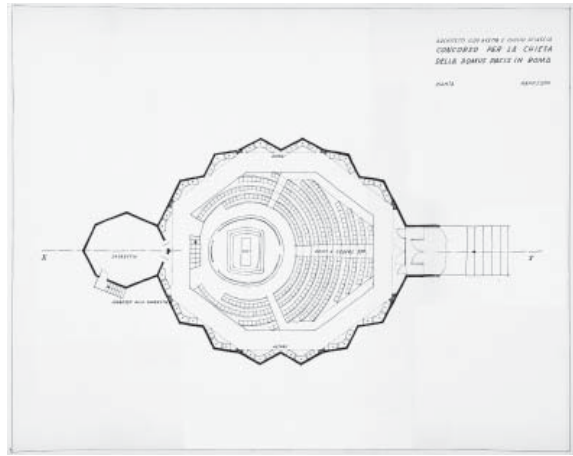
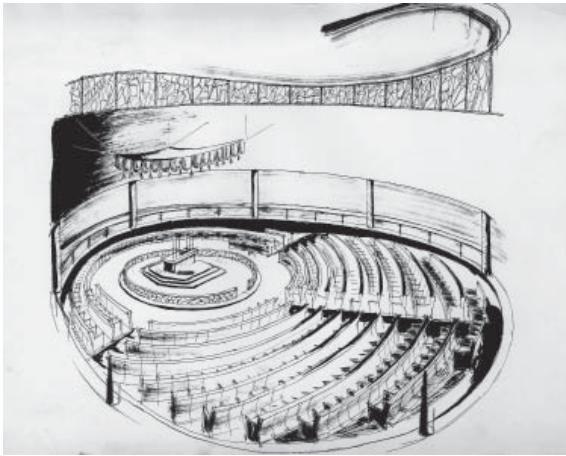


Fig. 01. Ildo Avetta and Giulio Sciascia, competition design for the *Domus Pacis* chapel, Rome; first stage, October 1952 (ISACEM, GIAC, b. 885).

Fig. 02. Second stage, February 1953 (ISACEM, GIAC, b. 885).

Fig. 03. Luigi Vagnetti, competition design for the *Domus Pacis* chapel, Rome; comparison between the first stage (15/10/1952) and the variant of the first stage (30/10/1952) (AV, 4.56, 6 and 15).

participation, freed from parish economical, liturgical and social constrictions (the so-called *parochial package*: Becci, Burchardt and Giorda 2017). The church was to complete the *Domus Pacis* in Rome, a complex consisting of several buildings where the GiAC's national educational meetings were held. The *Domus* was considered the *identifying* place par excellence of Azione Cattolica Italiana, the main lay organization in the post-war Italian Church, numbering three million members, including about 550,000 young men belonging to the GiAC. Azione Cattolica had been deeply involved in the electoral struggle against communism in the 1948 national elections, under the compelling and authoritative guidance of Luigi Gedda (1902-2000), political confidant of Pius XII, former president of the GiAC (1934-46), of the men of Azione Cattolica (1946-49) and then General President of Azione Cattolica (1952-59).

It was no accident that the competition's focus—drafted by the management of the GiAC—chose a line of liturgical and spiritual attention, precisely at a time when the conflict between the hierarchical, highly controlling line taken by Luigi Gedda and a more spiritual sensitivity that was gaining ground in the GiAC was being exacerbated (Piva 2003; Trionfini 2008; Preziosi 1996 and 2013). A few weeks earlier, the Holy Office had taken a strong stance on sacred art with an *Instruction* (Sacra Congregatio 1952) steeped in rigidity and intransigence, almost a rethinking of the openness expressed in the encyclical *Mediator Dei* issued by Pius XII in 1947 (López-Arias 2021).

The aims of the two stages of the competition (developed between July 1952 and June 1953) are the expression of the cultural profile of two presidents of the GiAC, both emblematic figures of lay spirituality in the association's renewal: Carlo Carretto (1910-88), who resigned in October 1952, and Mario V. Rossi (1925-76), who resigned in April 1954. The resignation of the two presidents—and the consequent failure of architectural competition, as we will see—was due to ecclesial disagreements with the Gedda leadership, but also to the implications between politics and ecclesial life in Rome municipal elections of May 1952 (the failure of the so-called

operazione Sturzo) and the parliamentary elections of June 1953, in which the Vatican and pope Pius XII—involed as *defensor civitatis*—had deployed pressing interferences for a direct political support of Azione Cattolica to the Christian Democrats party, at a very delicate time for the social identity of the capital of Catholicism (Riccardi 2007 and 2020) and for the debate on the legitimacy of Catholic Action's interference directly in politics (Casella 1992). In the background, there was a major divide in theological views on the role of the *catholic* action and the *political* action of lay organisations, which lacerated the Catholic communities in the middle decades of the century, which historiography has questioned in depth (Margotti 2021).

In the epilogue to this season of ecclesial youth openness not only did the project fail to be executed, but all memory of it was erased, re-emerging only recently from the archives of Rome's Paolo VI Institute for the History of Catholic Action and the Catholic Movement in Italy (ISACEM) and from two private archives.

THE PATRON'S CONCERN AND THE DESIGNERS INVITED

To contribute to the spiritual renewal of the association's life, which many felt to be too directly politicized, the theme proposed for the competition by the GiAC presidency was «the community praying around the altar»² or «the community gathered around the celebrant» [underlined in the document], fostering «a fuller investigation of the theme that we would like to see translated into the design of the church»³.

The theme of the *gathering* clearly resumes a line of thought that began in the 1920s with the Christ-centred theology of Johannes van Acken, which envisaged the faithful as *circumstantes*, positioned around the altar of the Eucharistic sacrifice. In the initiative of the GIAC, nevertheless, the Christocentric liturgical sense is beginning to be accompanied by the appearance in theological thought of the *ecclesiology of communion*—not only Christocentric, but also pneumatological—which will be recognized in the later conciliar climate.

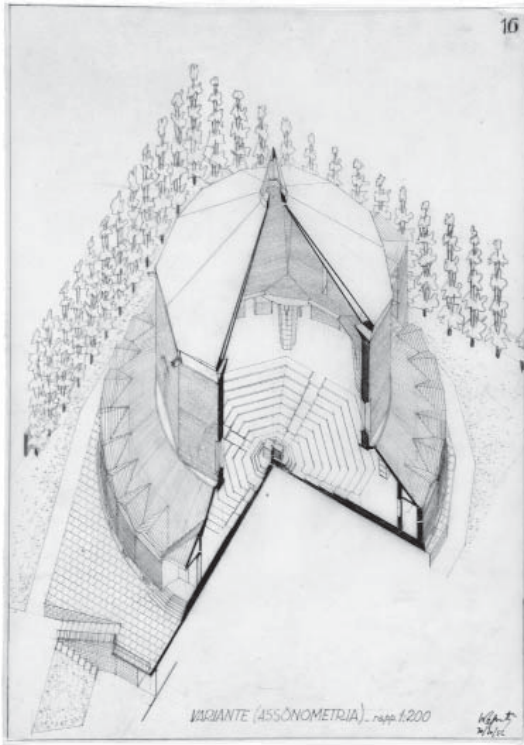
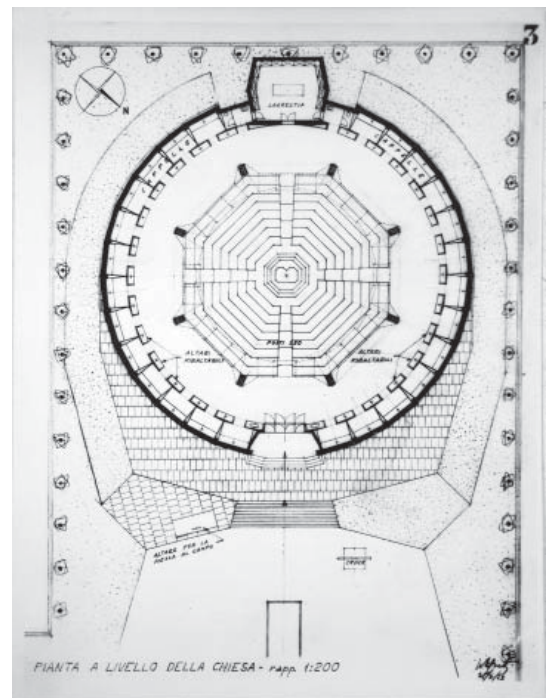
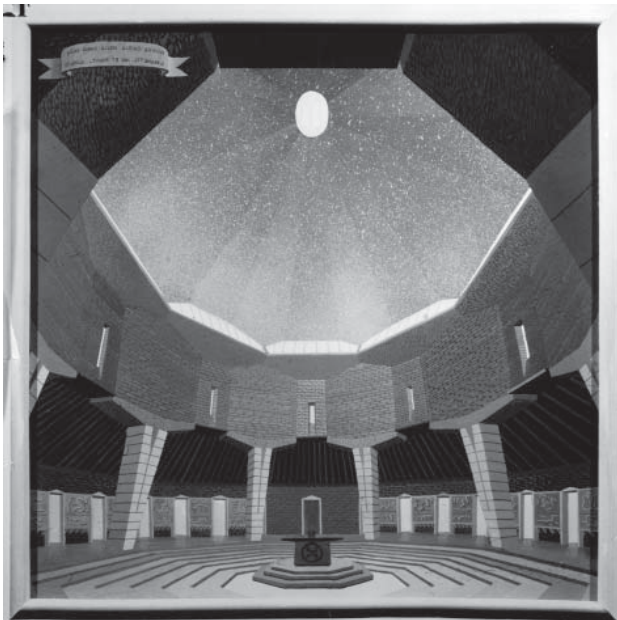


Fig. 04. Luigi Vagnetti, competition design for the *Domus Pacis* chapel, Rome; axonometric cross-section of variant of the first stage design (30/10/1952) (AV, 4.56, 16).

Fig. 05. Luigi Vagnetti, competition design for the *Domus Pacis* chapel, Rome; internal perspective and plan of the second stage (28/02/1953) (AV, 3.78 and AV, 4.57, 2).



The competition announcement stated that «the interior lines of the building as well as the location of the altar and the arrangement of the spaces provided for the congregation shall be such as to draw worshippers together and encourage intimate participation in celebrating the Holy Sacrifice». ⁴ Although the notice focuses on a single altar, it must nevertheless be considered that a number of side altars were still needed, as the practice of concelebration before the II Vatican Council had not yet been revived. The client does not specify stylistic or formal indications, other than harmonisation with the existing complex.

Despite Carretto's resignation in December 1952, the new president Rossi opened the second stage of the competition, enlisting the aid of mons. Giovanni Battista Montini, then Pro-Secretary of State (he would be elected archbishop of Milan in December 1954), and the art critic Mino Borghi, secretary of the Pontifical Central Commission for Sacred Art in Italy (PCCASI) and of the Vatican magazine *Fede e arte*. It was agreed that «neither a room nor a cathedral» was required and that the construction should maintain «an air of freshness, given the youthful environment of which it will be a part, though the interior in particular must achieve a balance with the sense of the sacred and of togetherness that the church must naturally have»; from a formal point of view, only the request for a «cool and intimate» church is specified. ⁵

The competition was open to «a few friends», ⁶ the list of whom is not known. Archival documentation regarding three designers engaged in the first stage of the competition has been found: Enzo Magnani (1910-93) —first president of the Catholic Union of Italian Artists (UCAI) (Apa 1996), close to the Azione Cattolica intellectual movements—, Ildo Avetta (1916-2011; with Giulio Sciascia), trusted architect to Luigi Gedda in his various patronage activities (Moro 2005; Longhi 2013b; Valentini 2023), and Luigi Vagnetti (1915-80), university professor and an architect who was already well known in the field of religious construction thanks to a number of projects and his active participation in previous competitions (Cataldi and Rossi 2000; Carapelli 2008).

As regards the second stage, the submissions by the competitors indicated above have been preserved, along with a design bearing the initials CPMG, the author of which has not yet been identified.

The commission of the second stage was made up of the leaders of the GiAC, ⁷ joined by mons. Montini and President Luigi Gedda, but sources indicate that other experts were recommended by Montini himself, such as Giuseppe Della Torre (director of *Osservatore Romano*) and mons. Giovanni Costantini (president of PCCASI).

Though minutes of the jury's assessment were not identified, the association's official papers indicate that the winner of the competition was Enzo Magnani, followed by Luigi Vagnetti and a certain Canino, whose name is not mentioned, probably Marcello (1895-70), an established professional and academic, who was also active in church building (Coppo 2005; Serraglio 2022).

THE ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNS

The fragmentary documentation available presents a type of patronage concerned entirely with liturgical issues, without laying down preliminary formal guidelines for the designers, at least in the written announcement. ⁸ The need to gather the congregation around the altar translates into spatial layouts that share the physical —though not necessarily geometrical— centrality of one main altar.

Avetta and Sciascia, although personally bound to Gedda's cultural and political positions, do not hesitate to boldly place the free-standing altar in one of the focal points of the elliptically arranged assembly (Fig. 01-02). They did not return to this layout in their subsequent churches, leading us to suppose that the association's requests played a decisive role and also suggesting that Gedda was not hostile to the use of innovative forms, if placed within an ecclesiastically and politically conservative framework (Longhi 2013b).

The most drastic solution was proposed by Luigi Vagnetti in a variant on his first design (end of October 1952) (Fig. 03), in which he explicitly states that his approach reflected «the desires expressed by the association involved». ⁹ The altar has the form of

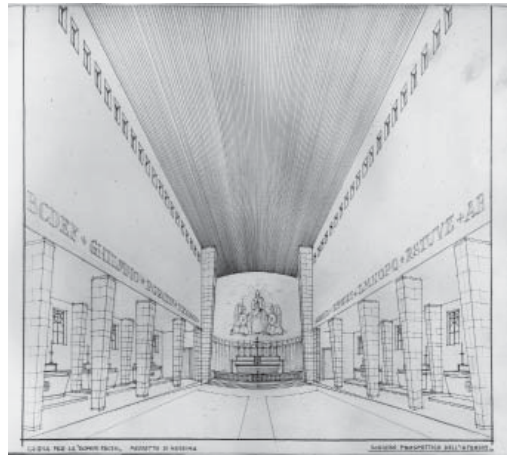
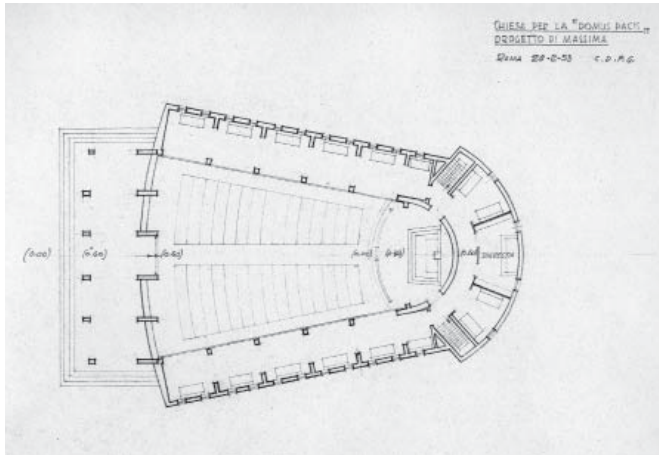


Fig. 06. C.P.F.G., competition design for the *Domus Pacis* chapel, Rome; second stage, 28/02/1953 (ISACEM, GIAC, b. 855).

Fig. 07. Enzo Magnani, competition design for the *Domus Pacis* chapel, Rome, external perspective of the first stage-design (October 1952) (ISACEM, GIAC, *Disegni Domus*, album *Progetto 1065 DOMUS PACIS*).

an early Christian *mensa*, with no altarpiece behind it, raised on an octagonal dais at the geometric centre of the church and surrounded by pews for the faithful radiating outwards from the centre (Fig. 04-05).

This centralized design was awarded second place; a similar design was re-submitted three years later for the chapel of the Unione Donne di Azione Cattolica (UDACI-Catholic Action Women's Union), now the headquarters of the Italian Conference of Bishops (Bonelli 1959; Longhi 2010; Valentini 2023). During construction, however, the altar was placed in one of the side niches. Therefore, also in this case, the completely centralized plan submitted for the competition was to remain the only one of its kind in Vagnetti's career. The main design suggestion—in the designer's own words—would not,¹⁰ therefore, have been a research into the architectural or ecclesiological avant-garde of the mid-20th century, but in the rediscovery of the early Christian and specifically Roman forms of the central plan, in accordance also with the teaching of Saverio Muratori (Pigafetta 1990). This personal research into the early Christian era matched well with the demands of the GIAC's commission: all of his previous nine church designs featured longitudinal assemblies, and in his later churches the altar was likewise located at the head of the nave.

The design bearing the initials CPGF features a parabolic ground plan with the altar at the focal point (Fig. 06). This setting is related to several coeval German churches by the protagonists of post-war liturgical renewal, i.e. longitudinal settings of St. Elisabeth in Coblenz by Gottfried Böhm (1952) and Heilig Kreuz in Bottrop, by Rudolph Schwarz (1953-57). The documentation submitted with the plan, almost as if to *justify* the adoption of a traditional longitudinal plan, the presentation emphasises how closely the design adheres to the competition's premises, as it provides «small average distances from the celebrant, excellent visibility for all standing or seated worshippers, and prevents disturbance among the congregation because of the face-to-face position», a theme that was to recur over and over again in the post-Vatican II debate.¹¹

THE WINNING DESIGN BY ENZO MAGNANI

The documentation covering the three designs submitted by Enzo Magnani (first stage, second stage, and final design submitted to the Pope) is sufficiently complete to enable us to assess the relationships between the liturgical invariants dictated by the competition and formal adaptations negotiated by the designer.

All three designs share the star-shaped ground plan (29 metres in diameter) (Fig. 08) and its verticalized space (height of 40.90 metres!):

The floor of the church is inclined in a parabolic profile and all the pews are arranged in a circle centred on the high altar. The inclination and position of the pews should link the worshippers and the priest with an invisible thread, aided by the strong contrasts between light and shade, which will accentuate the spire and the shape of the walls.¹²

Nevertheless, the altar is not located at the geometrical centre of the star, but at the end of a virtual longitudinal axis. The space for the assembly is arranged in a fan, rather than wrapping around the altar, which does not appear to be designed for mass to be celebrated with the priest facing the congregation: a concept that features a circular spatial paradigm, albeit with a longitudinal layout.

Magnani's German training (he qualified first as an engineer in Munich in 1935, then architect in Rome in 1936) is evident in the layout and in the abstraction of the parabolic profile (Fig. 07). Possible sources include the vaults of St. Johann in Neu-Ulm, of St. Apollinaris in Frielingsdorf, and of St. Engelbert in Köln-Riehl by Dominikus Böhm (built *circa* 1921-30), or those of the church by Fritz Höger in Berlin's Hohenzollernplatz (1933). The star plan inevitably evokes the well-known star plan proposed by Otto Bartning already in 1922.

In the second and third versions of the design (Fig. 09-10), however, the expressionistic exterior was progressively covered over with neo-medieval trappings, almost as if to hide the unchanging liturgical layout in a veil of neo-Ottonian historicism. From the first option of a church without a façade and with two lateral *slits* as the entrances, the variants move on to propose a prothyrum with column-bearing lions and a marble portal sculpted with saints and prophets, whose roots are also clearly recognisable as an expression of

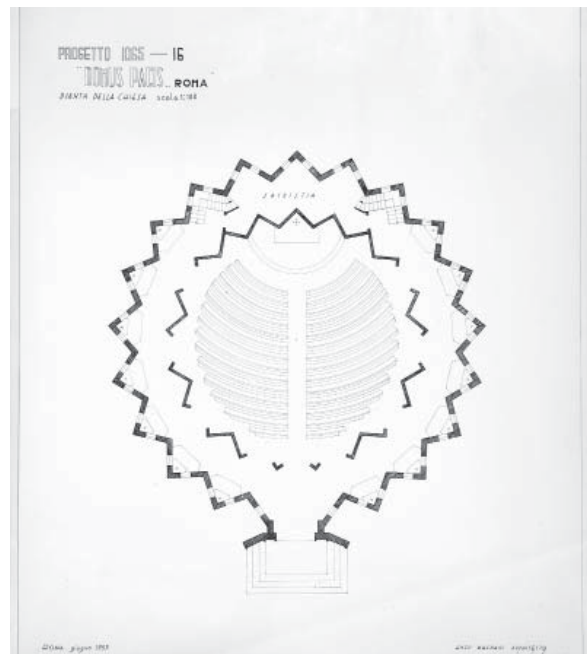
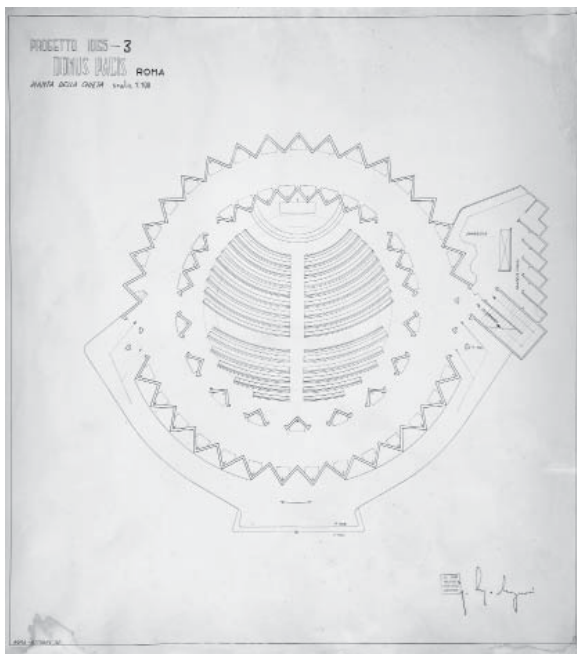
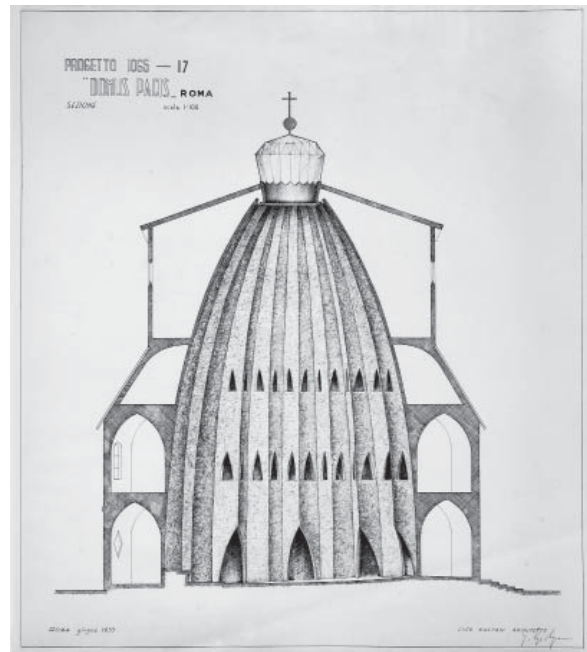
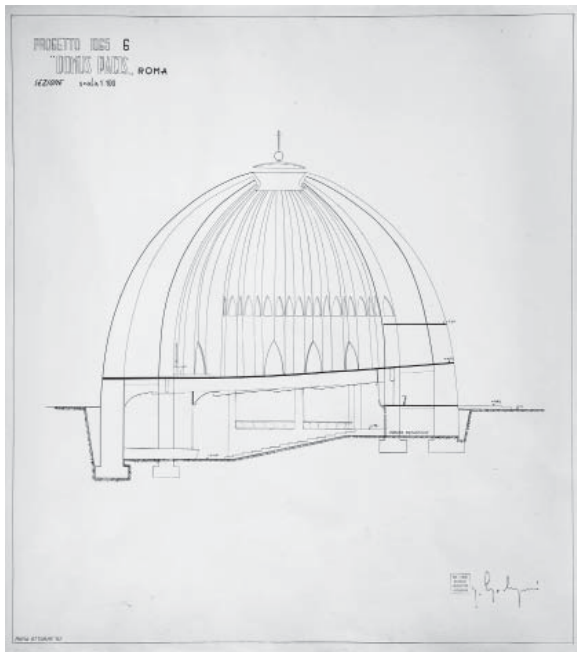


Fig. 08. Enzo Magnani, competition design for the *Domus Pacis* chapel, Rome, comparison between the first-step design (October 1952; left) and the final version (winning design prepared for the presentation to pope Pius XII, June 1953, right) (ISACEM, GIAC, *Disegni Domus*, album *Progetto 1065 DOMUS PACIS*, 3 and 6, 16 and 17).

German training, and not of the Roman environment and academic milieu.

THE ROLE OF THE PATRONAGE

As the written minutes of the jury were not kept in the archives, we can only assess the role of the client from the comparison of the different projects and their variants.

We can assume that the association wished to reward experimentation, both in the liturgical layout (cautiously enveloping, but not centralised) and in the forms (abstract and bold). The quality of the interior liturgical environment suggested by Magnani helps the almost traditional plan to enhance participation.

By contrast, two other projects expressly adopt a free-standing altar, designed for celebrating mass with the priest surrounded by the congregation: this, as should be noted, occurred at a time when no one could have possibly predicted the guidelines that were to emerge from Vatican II, 15 years later, or even the course that liturgical reforms were to take. These options came before the debate concerning the circular or centripetal forms of the assembly, which began only with the first Congress of Sacred Architecture and exhibition held in Bologna two years later, in 1955 (Centro di Studio 1956), not without critical reactions also from exponents close to the Liturgical Renewal, such as Valerio Vigorelli (Vigorelli 1955).¹³ Vagnetti's central altar and radial assembly is a *unicum* which would re-emerge in its most radical form only in the 1957 design by the Architects' and Engineers' Cooperative of Reggio Emilia for the complex in the INA-Casa San Donato neighbourhood, or in the Beata Vergine Immacolata by Glauco Gresleri in Bologna (1956-61) (Gresleri 2004).

The patronage of Catholic Youth could have been an excellent opportunity for giving liturgical and ecclesiological meaning to previous morphological experiments on central plans, whose inspiration had been purely formal, avant-gardist or archaeological. Examples include significant earlier instances of *metaphysical* circular ground plans submitted for the Messina competitions in 1932: Paniconi-Pediconi, Montuori-Petrucci, Sottsass and Ridolfi (Barucci 2002), but above all the winning design by Vico

Magistretti and Mario Tedeschi for the Milan competition about VIII Triennale-QT8 in San Siro in 1947 (built as Santa Maria Nascente, the first church consecrated by Giovanni Battista Montini as archbishop of Milan in 1955) and Vittorio Gandolfi's design for Sant'Ildefonso in Milan, submitted for the 1954 competition (Centro di Studi 1956; De Carli 1994 and 2005), without reaching as far as the cathedral of La Spezia by Adalberto Libera (from 1960).

The *Domus Pacis* competition could have represented a possible path of cultural mediation, between the history of forms and the history of ecclesial life, which nevertheless came to a dramatic halt.

THE DRAMATIC EPILOGUE AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE COMPETITION FAILURE

The church of the *Domus Pacis* was to have been the centrepiece of the association's 85th anniversary celebrations on December 8, 1953. After the third version of the project was completed in April 1953, a formal presentation to Pius XII was planned, to take place on the same occasion as the laying of the foundation stone.

Before this could go ahead, however, the association's equilibrium was disrupted by two events: first, the Christian Democrats party lost ground in the June 1953 national elections and the GiAC was accused of being tepidly involved in electoral support for the catholic party second, the GiAC was reorganised by *milieus* (social settings) dangerously close to Marxist *classes*, in an open break with President Gedda, abandoning its original parish-based, and therefore inter-class, organisational structure.¹⁴

No official document remains to bear witness to the presentation of the project to the Pope on June 29, 1953, recorded only by a photograph (Fig. 11) and a few notes in the designer's private archives. These architect's personal notes reveal that the design was flatly rejected by Pius XII, who «raised objections of a stylistic nature».¹⁵ Nevertheless, it seems that we cannot rule out certain non-architectural factors: according to Magnani, the Pope's judgment «was negatively influenced by my enemies»¹⁶, or, more in

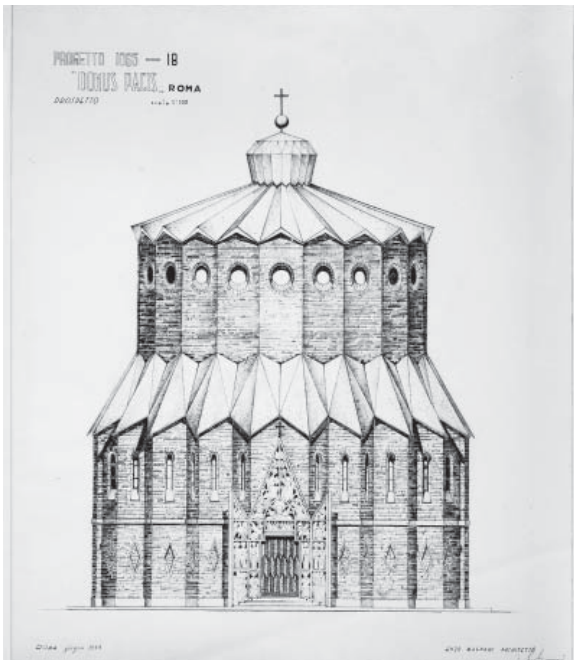
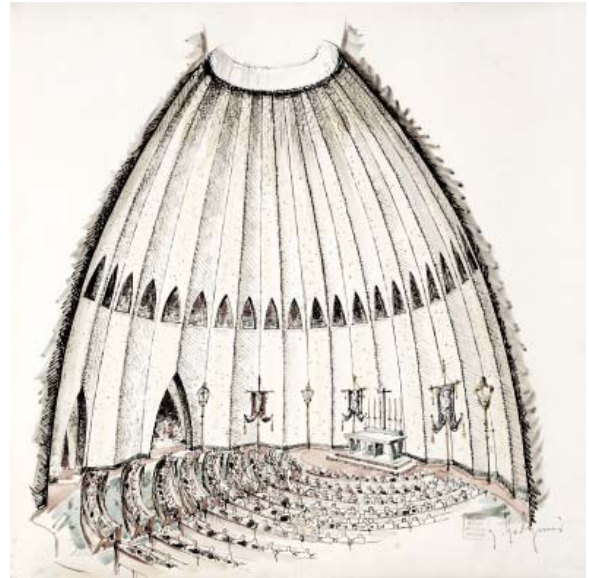


Fig. 09. Enzo Magnani, competition design for the *Domus Pacis* chapel, Rome; model and internal perspective of the second-stage design (28/02/1953) (February 1953) (ISACEM, GIAC, *Disegni Domus* and album *Progetto 1065 DOMUS PACIS*).

Fig. 10. Elevation of the final design and model (June 1953) (ISACEM, GIAC, *Disegni Domus*, album *Progetto 1065 DOMUS PACIS*, 18).

general, by the climate of hostility towards the GiAC, which had become something of a palace plot.

The episode is referred to (despite an apparent anachronism in some details of the broader context) in recently investigated oral testimony of Cesare Graziani, member of the Presidenza Centrale GiAC:

As soon as he saw this project [...] Pius XII expressed himself in no uncertain terms ... I mean, he really lashed out, with the architect right there, listening to him, he wouldn't budge an inch. Because he wanted something baroque, something in the Renaissance style, like Sant'Eugenio today. Now, aesthetic tastes aside, I think that this had a lot to do with a certain... because if he, the Pope, had wanted to have the positive relationship that he had before with Carretto, he wouldn't have done something like that, he would have organised things so that the architect wasn't there, he would have spoken to him directly. But no, with a brutality that left me surprised: 'But look how bad he is!' I began to think for the first time that the Pope is also a man and that he can be a bad man. Before, for me, the Pope was only divine (Piva 2003, 189).¹⁷

Another testimony concerning the same papal audience (Gianni Zanini) emphasises how the pope's anxiety in the face of the communist threat to Rome mortified the youthful enthusiasm of those present, leading them «into an attitude of saying: 'Mamma mia, he's frightened and arteriosclerotic who feels nothing but fear, and how can you build on fear!」» (Piva 2003, 373), and the metaphor of the impossibility of building is perhaps not accidental.

Deeply hurt by this harshened climate Rossi, to the great shock of ecclesial public opinion (Giuntella 1984), resigned few months later, on Good Friday 1954 (Rossi 1975, 83-87 about his personal memories); on the contrary, see Gedda's personal memoirs (1998).

No trace of the project was found in the association's later records. Rossi's successor, recruited from the ranks of the more orthodox followers of Gedda's hierarchical and authoritarian line, did not even agree to receive the architect in audience.

The bitter outcome of this encounter between lay spirituality, liturgical experimentation, and professional practice was a design that was unfortunately never translated into built reality. Carretto, Rossi

and their spiritual father, don Arturo Paoli, remained emblems of spirituality and missionary spirit for later generations of young lay Christians, but the architectural and artistic theme has since definitively dropped out of Catholic Action's educational agenda.

Nevertheless, the idea of a surrounding assembly suggested by GiAC in 1952-53 was to return as one of the crucial themes of post-Vatican II, a period when fruitful opportunities for the encounter of liturgical thinking, lay organizations and professional experimentations became much rarer.

The lack of an intellectual contribution by Catholic lay organisations and élites in Italy was even more serious, as it occurred at a particularly propitious moment in the rest of Europe. Liturgical architecture in the mid-1950s is a theme in which a wide plurality of potentialities, clients and consultants are displayed (Longhi 2020), and which probably —according to the authoritative interpretation of Frédéric Debuyst (1922-2017)— reached its creative peak precisely in 1955-56, when «a range of splendid variety» appeared (Debuyst 2003, 53), at a time which «marks a sort of climax» (Debuyst 2018, 84), with the completion of Ronchamp (Le Corbusier), Otaniemi (Siren), Salzburg-Parsch (Holzbauer), Munich-Gern (Steffann) and Baranzate (Mangiarotti and Morassutti), all architectures marked by a lively dialogue between church stakeholders, intellectuals and professionals.

During the Council years, the initiative remained anchored to the dioceses and territorial ecclesiastical structures —and not those of an associative nature—, although there was a lively involvement of lay personalities from the professional world, albeit convened and gathered by structures of an ecclesiastical institutional nature, or linked by personal trust with the bishops.

Once the excitement surrounding the Bologna workshop had faded in 1968, once the major journals had closed down (*Fede e arte*, 1967; *Chiesa e Quartiere*, 1968; *Nuove chiese di Milano*, 1969), and once the first flurry of post-conciliar architectural competitions had come and gone (Ascoli Piceno in 1966; Rome and Turin in 1967, Cattolica and Ravenna in 1968), what prevailed were spontaneous and local approaches, or the ingenuous illusion that



Fig. 11. Presentation of the winning design to Pius XII, June 29, 1953, by the architect Enzo Magnani and the President of the Gioventù di Azione Cattolica, Mario V. Rossi (AM, 1065).

all it takes to ensure fuller participation by the assembly is a geometrically centralised ground plan. The plurality of stakeholders in dialogue unfortunately often remains only a wish (Longhi 2013a).

In the 1960s and 1970s, an intellectual and practical contribution from Catholic organisations was no longer possible: associations entered into crisis during the post-conciliar and 1968 protest period, showing concern for matters of social justice and human promotion rather than prioritising artistic research and liturgical care. Moreover, the historiography of the role of lay organisations in architectural patronage remains circumscribed (Fрати 2017), and architecture and art are still not considered among the *sources* for the study of the Catholic movement, specific field of investigation in which the *spatial turn* of religious sciences (Obadia 2015) is slow to emerge.

The recent attention to the role of participation in the design and in the reordering of liturgical spaces (Benedetti 2021) can be an opportunity for finding *common ground* (Vosko 2019), in which theological culture interacts with a plurality of stakeholders and

ecclesial clients (also an expression of lay organisations) and with designers, who bring a wealth of experience and sensitivity, in order to go beyond both clerical approaches –deresponsibilising for communities– and hackneyed or over-facilitated architecture.

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NOTES

- Materials submitted for the competition (drawings, reports, models) are preserved in the following archives:
 - Istituto per la storia dell'Azione Cattolica e del movimento cattolico in Italia Paolo VI, Rome (ISACEM): Archivio della Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica [shortened to ISACEM, GIAC], s. XIII, bb. 497, 499, 885 and b. *Disegni Domus Pacis*; archives of Luigi Gedda, serie 'Azione Cattolica Italiana'.
 - Private archive of Enzo Magnani, Rome, 1065 [shortened to AM].
 - Università di Firenze, Biblioteca di Scienze Tecnologiche-Architettura, private archive of Luigi Vagnetti, 3.78, 4.56, 4.57 [shortened to AV].
- A first analysis of the documentary sources was provided by Longhi 2010, 144-158.
- I would like to thank all those who facilitated the research, in particular archivist of ISACEM Ubaldo Sulis and Simona Ferrantin (who first alerted me to the presence of the architectural documentation) and the Magnani and Avetta families for consulting their private family archives.
- «Comunità che prega attorno all'altare»: ISACEM, GIAC, s. XIII, b. 497, minute of the Consiglio di Presidenza, 25/07/1952; or «Comunità raccolta intorno al celebrante»: letter from Vice-president Ernesto Talentino inviting architect Luigi Vagnetti to the competition, 27/08/1952 (AV, 3.78).
- «Al fine soprattutto di poter avere un più ricco studio del tema che vorremmo vedere tradotto nella progettazione della Chiesa, abbiamo deciso di indire un concorso di idee tra alcuni amici architetti, tra cui abbiamo annoverato anche Lei» (Ibidem).
- «[...] tanto la linea interna della costruzione quanto la sistemazione dell'Altare e infine la disposizione dei posti riservati ai fedeli, favoriscono il massimo raccoglimento e un'intima partecipazione alla celebrazione del Santo Sacrificio» (Ibidem).
- ISACEM, GIAC, s. XIII, b. 499, minutes of the Consiglio di Presidenza 07/12/1953, 8 and 20/01/1954; second invitation letter (concerning the second stage of the competition) to Luigi Vagnetti, 29/01/1953 (AV 3.78).
- ISACEM, GIAC, s. XIII, b. 497, minutes of the Consiglio di Presidenza, 25/07/1952.
- President Mario Rossi, Ecclesiastical assistant mons. Federico Sargolini, Vice-president Ernesto Tolentino, Secretary Gianni Zanini, Treasurer Fortunato Vannini.
- After the awarding of the competition, it is reported that Magnani in April 1953 was summoned to the

Presidency to agree on variants in view of the official presentation of the project, which we will return to (ISACEM, GIAC, s. XIII, b. 886; AM, prog. 1065, draft of letter from Magnani to card. Giuseppe Pizzardo, secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, 09/07/1955).

9. AV, 4.56.14, 30/10/1952 (the design is in AV, 4.57).

10. Vagnetti writes, about the final proposition, he was looking for a «espressione formale meno aulica e severa, anche se strettamente collegata con la illustre tradizione romana degli edifici a pianta centrale (Chiesa di Santa Costanza, Chiesa di Santo Stefano Rotondo). A tali monumenti caratteristici della pura religiosità esistente nei tempi primitivi del Cristianesimo ho molto pensato, come ad esempi illustri da seguire, per la loro espressività fortissima anche se mantenuta in linee semplici»: draft for the revision of the design, 27/02/1953 (AV 3.78).

11. «[...] piccola distanza media dal celebrante, ottima visibilità da ogni punto a sedere e in piedi, evitato il disturbo tra i fedeli per la posizione faccia a faccia, facile e rapido sffollamento, posizione appartata per gli altari sussidiari»: explanatory report of the design signed by C.P.F.G., 28/02/1953 (ISACEM, GIAC, b. 885).

12. «Il piano della Chiesa è inclinato a profilo parabolico e tutti i banchi sono disposti a cerchio con centro sull'altare maggiore; l'inclinazione e la posizione dei banchi dovrebbe legare con un filo invisibile il fedele al sacerdote celebrante aiutato dalla luce che, con forti chiaroscuri, accentuerà la cuspide e la sagomatura delle pareti»: ISACEM, GIAC, b. *Disegni Dumus*, explanatory report of the design of E. Magnani, Rome, October [15], 1952.

13. Mons. Valerio Vigorelli (1924-) was one of the driving forces behind the drafting of the section on sacred

art of the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (López-Arias 2023).

14. Minutes of the Consiglio di Presidenza 28-29.6.1953 (ISACEM, GIAC, b. 500); see Piva 2003, 352-373.

15. Handwritten notes in AM, prog. 1065: drafts of a letter to card. Pizzardo, 09/07/1955.

16. AM, prog. 1065: drafts of a letter to the Vatican Secretary of State [card. Domenico Tardini, 1959].

17. «Pio XII [...] appena ha visto questo progetto, gliene ha proprio dette... eh, ma in modo brutto, con l'architetto lì davanti che lo ascoltava, non ha proprio mollato di un millimetro. Perché lui voleva lo stile barocco, lo stile rinascimentale, come il Sant'Eugenio adesso. Ora, indipendentemente dai gusti estetici, secondo me influiva molto già una... perché se lui, il Papa, avesse voluto il rapporto positivo che aveva prima con Carretto, non avrebbe fatto una cosa del genere; avrebbe fatto organizzare la cosa in modo che non ci fosse l'architetto, gli avrebbe parlato direttamente; invece no, con una brutalità che mi ha lasciato sorpreso: 'Ma guarda quant'è cattivo!'. Ho cominciato a pensare per la prima volta che anche il Papa è un uomo e che può essere un uomo cattivo. Prima, per me, il Papa era invece soltanto divino».

SOURCE OF IMAGES

Fig. 01-02, 06-10. Istituto per la storia dell'Azione Cattolica e del movimento cattolico in Italia Paolo VI, Roma - ISACEM (photos by Alfredo Cacciani)

Fig. 03-05. Università di Firenze, Biblioteca di Scienze Tecnologiche-Architettura (photos by the author)

Fig. 11. Private archive of Enzo Magnani, Rome (photo by the author).