

Praying for the Dead in Uncertain Years: *The Rosary of 100 Requiem* in Castellaneta (Puglia, Italy)

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Abstract: The worship of the dead is a deep-rooted Catholic tradition. A significant display of it is a ritual practice known as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, consisting in the recitation for one hundred times of *Requiem aeternam*, a short prayer expressly addressed to the eternal repose of the faithful departed. Usually carried out as an individual practice, at home or in a church, this pious ritual can also be performed in a collective and public form, as demonstrated in this research. Actually, the Rosary of 100 Requiem, organised by a lay confraternity in Castellaneta, a little town in southern Italy, has given this ritual a processional form, with the participants walking through the cemetery while reciting the prescribed prayers. The pandemic, however, dramatically changed the situation, forcing the organisers to find an alternative form for the ritual to survive. Thus, between 2020 and 2021, the Rosary of 100 Requiem was mostly performed at a (safe) distance, by means of a Whatsapp group. In May 2021, the participants were allowed to gather again in the cemetery, but since then the ritual had lost its main peculiarity and has been reshaped as a static prayer performed in a church inside the cemetery.

Keywords: Catholicism, cemetery, dead, pandemic, performance, prayer, Purgatory, rituality

INTRODUCTION

Now more than ever, we are “living uncertainty”. Both the world and our own lives are daily undermined and challenged by a variety of issues, predicaments, threats. It appears more and more difficult to understand – and let alone predict – what happens around us, so that we feel more and more bewildered, frustrated, distressed, frightened, shocked and so on. Tragic and global events like the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the weather disasters due to climate change as well as the countless wars fought all around the world – think of the Ukrainian and Middle Eastern conflicts, just to mention the most mediatised ones – have contributed to make the picture even more sinister and alarming.

Nonetheless, since the dawn of time, humans must face and try to manage an inherent and unavoidable source of uncertainty, probably the primary source of uncertainty and anxiety for any one of us: death. From a secular point of view, death is just the end of life, therefore it could also be seen as the end of the uncertainty itself, simply because an individual stops existing and feeling. However, from a religious point of view, death implies another form of uncertainty regarding the afterlife, a different kind of life after the end of the earthly life. In this sense, religion(s) can be regarded as a major source of certainty, providing the faithful with a quite clear picture of the afterlife¹ together with the necessary beliefs and practices for a righteous life, so as they can attain a good afterlife – in heaven or elsewhere, depending on one’s religion – and, consequently, escape everlasting punishment or suffering. Notably, by means of some specific prayers and rituals, religions, in particular Catholicism, allow the faithful to create and keep a spiritual connection between the living and the dead, which provides a mutual benefit: if you pray for the dead, the dead will intercede for you with God (see De Matteis & Niola 1993).

Recovering and preserving such a spiritual link with the souls of the dead ascended in the afterlife is precisely the main function and purpose of a local ritual carried out for the first time in March 2017 in my hometown, Castellaneta (Puglia, southern Italy), that I started to follow occasionally some months later and that, since August 2018, became the subject of a research still in progress,² conducted until August 2022 in the form of participant observation. Such a ritual, known as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, underwent a variety of incidents and changes in the period covered by this article – from 2018 to 2023 – due in particular to such a global and dramatic event as the Covid-19 pandemic. What I am going to present and discuss are the outcomes of my five-year participant observation and the examination of the different arrangements the ritual took on in order to face the encountered issues and to comply with new contexts and emerging needs and demands.

The Setting

Castellaneta, the place where the ritual here considered is set, has a double relevance for my subject. First, it is the only place, as far as I know, at least in Italy, in which the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* is performed in the peculiar form that will be described in the following paragraph. Second, I was born in Castellaneta and lived there until August 2022, and this is an essential reason to explain why this ritual became my subject of research, also because I would hardly have learned about its existence if my residence had been elsewhere. In other words, both the specificity of the ritual and the way it has been researched are closely related with its setting.

Castellaneta is a little Apulian town of about 16.000 inhabitants approximately located halfway between the two main regional cities, Taranto and Bari. The built-up area is situated on the top of the hill Archinto at an altitude of almost 250 metres, while its territory extends from the southern end of the Murge upland to the Ionian Sea. The most distinctive geographic feature is its several ravines, similar to canyons, known as *gravine*, with a maximum depth of 145 metres. The old town centre has a medieval framework, yet its main religious and civic buildings, in their current appearance, date back to the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. As an episcopal see since 1087, Castellaneta houses a number of significant churches, first of all the cathedral devoted to Santa Maria Assunta (Our Lady of the Assumption), which, along with the adjacent bishop's residence and baronial palace, constitute the historical and cultural centre of the community. Also noteworthy are the parochial churches of San Domenico and San Michele, as well as the Franciscan convent of San Francesco and the little medieval church of Santa Maria del Pesco.

The local economy is chiefly based upon agriculture and the related industrial and commercial activities, with tourism greatly developing in the last decades, especially thanks to the growing number of visitors hosted in the seaside resort of Castellaneta Marina. A contribution to the town's renown is given by its being the birthplace of Rodolfo Valentino, an icon of the silent movies, to whom a museum and some cultural initiatives are devoted. As the seat of a great and well-equipped hospital, Castellaneta fulfils a crucial function in the province as a healthcare centre.

Following a previous decade of economic increase and social and cultural vibrancy, in the last twenty years, also due to political and administrative troubles, Castellaneta underwent a certain stagnation, as reflected by a slow but relentless demographic decline and by the loss of leadership compared to the neighbouring towns of the district as a place of social and cultural activities. Nonetheless, more recently, thanks to a mobilization from below and to an evolution of the political context, the town's community is offering signs of recovery, especially based, as nearly everywhere nowadays (see, for instance, Panzera 2022), on the rediscovery of the local identity and the promotion and exploitation of the local cultural heritage.

In this light, a prominent role has always been carried out in Castellaneta by the religious component, which can be properly seen as the cornerstone of the local identity. Despite the flowering of secular events and associations in the last years, the Catholic³ traditions and sodalities are still regarded and lived by people as the essence of their being *Castellanetani*. Cults of saints and the related ritual practices mark nearly every month of the year, with a participation of the faithful that usually is not limited to the parishioners of the church where the saint's simulacrum is enshrined. Clearly, the greatest and most attended festivity is that devoted to the two patron saints, Saint Nicholas and Saint Francis of Paola, whose simulacra, enshrined in the cathedral, are carried in procession in the first half of May. However, it is in the rituality of the Holy Week that people recognize, in effect, their common identity and rediscover their belonging to the community, regardless of the individual degree of faith or devotion. The solemn processions of Good Friday and Holy Saturday can therefore be considered the core of the town's ritual year, as well as the moment of maximum commitment and involvement by its inhabitants. The organisation and realisation of these processions is mostly committed to four secular confraternities, each of them gathering women and men around a common object of worship – the Holy Sacrament, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Francis of Paola (see Ladiana & Fumarola 2004) – so as to create a group of people united by a faith resulting in concrete acts and initiatives. Secular confraternities are further evidence of how religion still shapes the local identity, but they are also a key factor of aggregation and social cohesiveness, as significantly illustrated by the growing participation of young people. A fifth confraternity, dedicated to the Holy Crucifix (see Miccoli 2025), re-established in 2016 after disappearing in the 1960s, stands out instead for giving rise to a very different kind of ritual, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, exactly the subject of the following paragraphs.

A Renovated Traditional Ritual

The *Rosary of 100 Requiem* or *Resurrecturis*⁴ can be basically regarded as a ritual practice turning a usually individual and private prayer – just like the common Rosary, based on the individual recitation of five sets of ten *Ave Maria*, one *Pater Noster* and one *Gloria* each, at home or in a church – into a collective and public ritual,⁵ aimed at commemorating and strengthening a shared religious belief concerning our destiny after we die. More particularly, this ritual is conceived to remind the Catholic faithful of the existence of an intermediate and hybrid otherworldly realm, Purgatory – the “third place” of the afterlife geography (Le Goff 1981) – as well as of the painful condition of its inhabitants. In other words, by attending the ritual of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, the participants are called both to solemnly confirm the existence of Purgatory, and to (re)connect themselves with their parents, relatives and friends departed, as well as – if not above all – with the abandoned souls, namely the unknown

crowd of dead lacking people to pray for them (Niola 2022: 36–51). This latter purpose is closely related to the organising confraternity and its mission. By recovering the worship of Jesus Christ crucified, the Brothers of the Holy Crucifix wanted at the same time to highlight the Christian virtue of mercy and the related duty to accomplish merciful deeds, in particular to pray for the faithful departed with no people praying for them.

Such a purpose seems quite clear in the minds of some participants whom I have interviewed during my fieldwork. The most significant answer came from Roberto (60), head of the confraternity and veritable cornerstone of the ritual (personal communication, July 9, 2021): “Personally I’m sure that the prayer for the dead must be always kept alive, also because we release, through our prayers, many souls from Purgatory to Heaven, where they will pray and intercede for us.”⁶ Isa (59), one of the most regular participants, believes as well that the goal of the ritual is “to pray for our dearly departed in order to let them go to Heaven” (personal communication, August 1, 2021), while Maria Luigia (61), another regular participant, simply expressed a hope that her prayers would contribute “to reduce the number of the souls in the Purgatory” (personal communication, August 1, 2021). Nonetheless, other participants justified their attendance by more personal reasons, first of all the need to commemorate their own dead, especially if recently or prematurely passed away.

The *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, introduced by the secular confraternity of the Holy Crucifix since March 2017, takes place on the first Sunday of each month in the cemetery of Castellaneta – lying at the northern edge of the town, overlooking a deep ravine. In so doing, the worship of the dead is extended to the whole year, instead of being limited to only the month of November, traditionally devoted to the faithful departed. It starts at 9:30 am, so as to facilitate, in the intention of the confraternity, the attendance of the common faithful: it is a non-working day, and the time allows the participants to attend the Sunday Mass afterwards. The average duration is approximately thirty minutes.

The ritual was structured, until March 2020, in the form of *Via Crucis*, that is, as a walking itinerary consisting of ten stations (ten *Requiem aeternam* for each station), which started and finished in front of the cemetery church, thus covering the cemetery in most of its extension (see Figure 1). However, owing to the unfavourable weather conditions – rainy or cold days in winter and sultry days in summer – the ritual was sometimes performed in a static form within a more recent chapel inside the cemetery, or in a mixed form (i.e. two stations – the first and the last – performed in processional form, the remaining eight with people standing within the cemetery church).⁷ Little leaflets of four pages, containing the texts to be read during the procession, were handed out every time by the Brothers of the Holy Crucifix to the participants before the procession.

When the procession stopped in front of the stations, one of the common faithful would read from their leaflet a pious commentary associating a moment

of the *Passio Christi* with the deliverance of the holy souls in Purgatory. Along the path separating one station from another, all the participants – walking in line at a normal pace – prompted by the reader of the current station, said ten *Requiem aeternam*. The Brothers of the Holy Crucifix, wearing their traditional clothing of a white surplice and a red *mozzetta* – a sort of cloak – walked ahead of the procession, one of them carrying a huge Cross. At the beginning and at the end of the ritual the canonical Catholic prayers were recited: *Pater*, *Ave* and *Gloria*.



Figure 1. The ritual procession. Brothers and common faithful walking through the cemetery. October 7, 2018.

Photograph by Elettra Carrassi.

The following table provides an overview of the period when the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* was carried out as a ritual procession in the cemetery of Castellaneta. Actually, the data refer to the timespan of my participant observation, that is from August 2018 to March 2020. I have indicated the date of the event, the number of participants (by distinguishing between Brothers and common faithful) for each monthly event, how the ritual has been carried out, and the average attendance of the period.

Table 1

Pre-pandemic period (August 2018–March 2020)	
August 5, 2018:	13 (3 Brothers + 10 common faithful, the minimum attendance of the period), procession
September 2, 2018:	14 (3 + 11), procession
October 7, 2018:	20 (6 + 14), procession
November 4, 2018:	30 (6 + 24), procession
December 2, 2018:	19 (3 + 16), inside the cemetery chapel
January 13, 2019 (second Sunday of the month because the first one fell on Epiphany):	21 (8 + 13), mixed form (stations 1 and 10 in procession, from 2 to 9 inside the chapel)
February 3, 2019:	23 (6 + 17); inside the chapel
March 3, 2019:	22 (6 + 16); mixed form (as above)
April 7, 2019:	25 (4 + 21), procession
May 5, 2019:	17 (4 + 13), procession
August 4, 2019:	15 (2 + 13); inside the chapel
September 1, 2019:	24 (5 + 19); inside the chapel
October 6, 2019:	20 (5 + 15), procession
December 1, 2019:	31 (5 + 26), procession
February 2, 2020:	27 (7 + 20), procession
March 1, 2020:	33 (9 + 24, the maximum attendance of the period), procession
Average attendance:	22.12

This is the picture of what I have directly observed for one year and a half, but that can also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the earlier 17-month period from March 2017 to July 2018). Overall, we have exactly three years during which this relatively new form of rituality⁸ has become an ordinary, even routinized event in the religious and social life of a small group of Catholic faithful. It was composed of a minimum of 13 to a maximum of 33 participants, with an average attendance of about 22 people. They have made the cemetery of Castellaneta

something more than a place to go just to pray for the dead and remember our own mortality, or else “a way to confirm the link between life and death [...] the living and the dead” (Colombo & Vlach 2021: 218).

The Ritual during and after the Pandemic

However, as for any of us and everywhere in the world, the outbreak of Covid-19, at the dawn of 2020, with all the measures and restrictions it imposed, strongly affected the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* and the people related to it. Due to the strict confinement imposed during the first lockdown by the Italian government on March 11, 2020, any kind of gathering – just like a religious procession – was forbidden, social proximity was banned and attendance at public places – such as a cemetery – was severely limited. In other words, the organisers and the participants of our ritual were deprived of two basic elements: meeting each other to gather and pray together, and the physical space where to perform their monthly collective prayer; without them it became impossible to carry out the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. Exactly three years after its inception, this local ritual was running the risk of vanishing or at least breaking its continuity. All of us remember the prevalent feelings of that period: shock, distress, anguish, fear, grief, but also disappointment, frustration, helplessness for the huge restrictions it was imposing on our lives, in particular on our sociability. In addition, we were uncertain about our future itself.

Nevertheless, we also know that, as human beings, we are able to respond to any kind of critical or traumatic events; thanks to our resilience we are able to absorb the shocks, then to seek and, usually, find the way and the means to adapt to the new state of things generated by the crisis. We can rely on our creativity, too, in order to arrange something different but functional to go on and fulfil our needs (see, for instance, Fedele & Magliocco 2014). This is precisely what happened for a myriad of religious rituals all around the world, above all by means of technological devices and of the virtual spaces or realities provided by social networks (Imber-Black 2020; Cherblanc et al. 2022). Original and more or less unexpected ritual forms have thus emerged, allowing millions of people to preserve and keep alive their religious and social identities.

As for the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, just one month before the first lockdown a member of the confraternity had created a Whatsapp group comprehending all the participants in the ritual, myself included. Conceived as a channel of mutual information and organisation – it is still used, for instance, by Roberto to invite, one day earlier, the members to attend the monthly event – one month later it suddenly turned into an invaluable resource, because it enabled about thirty people, who till then used to meet each other one day a month, to stay connected and continue to share their worship for the holy souls in Purgatory. The pandemic had forced a return to an individual and private form of prayer, but this was made virtually collective by the interplay granted by a social network.

In fact, it was an extremely virtual form of the ritual. On Saturday Roberto, as earlier, invited the group members to unite in a common prayer for the dead the next day; on Sunday the Brothers would publish at 9:30 a written message with an opening prayer and, at about 10:00, two vocal messages with the closing prayers of the ritual. In other words, the time framework of the *real* performance was virtually reproduced, as well as a sort of “emotional synchrony” (Zlobina & Dávila 2022: 1334), with all the group members supposed to recite, each on their own but simultaneously, one hundred *Requiem aeternam* and the ten prayers related to the ten stations of the Rosary. During and after this virtual performance some participants would post messages, usually consisting of an emoji (mostly joint hands), so as to make their participation more concrete and to express their feelings.

Generally speaking, this form of rituality can be considered a “continuity ritual”, because it must keep “the connection between past and present and ensure a link with the future” (Gugg 2020: 4–5). Specifically, it was a “virtual ritual”, or else a continuity ritual “made possible by the current technological devices” (Gugg 2020: 5). Furthermore, this was the outcome of a compromise and a negotiation between a local tradition emerging from below – no matter how recently – and the limits imposed from above due to a critical or traumatic event; consequently, these “tampered rituals” are carried out according to substitutive ways, or they remain the same but in reduced and impoverished form (Mennella 2021: 264). Still, according to Mennella (2021: 265, translation mine):

Subjective and intersubjective priorities, deficiencies and necessities are precisely the reasons that have pushed the faithful [...] during the pandemic, to elaborate different solutions, useful to preserve a liturgical, theological, devotional continuity, to partially satisfy these needs and thus to provide compensatory patterns avoiding communication breaking down between the social, the individual and the divine.

The following table provides an overview of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* during the pandemic, a period marked by two different lockdowns separated by a four-month limited return to normality.

Table 2

First lockdown (March 2020–September 2020)	
March 29, 2020 (not the first Sunday of April because Palm Sunday):	in a virtual form via Whatsapp
May 3, 2020:	idem
June 2, 2020:	idem
July 5, 2020:	idem
August 2, 2020:	none, but the day earlier Roberto invited the group via Whatsapp to stay united and pray for all the departed
September 6, 2020:	none at all (for the first and only time the continuity of the ritual was broken)
Between lockdowns (October 2020–January 2021)	
October 4, 2020:	25 (6 Brothers + 19 common faithful; the maximum attendance of the period), in a static form inside the cemetery chapel (processions were forbidden by the anti-Covid norms) with social distancing and sanitary measures (see Figure 2)
November 1, 2020:	22 (7 + 15), idem
December 6, 2020:	21 (6 + 15), idem
January 10, 2021:	20 (6 + 14; the minimum attendance of the period), idem
Average attendance:	22
Second lockdown (February 2021–April 2021)	
February 7, 2021:	in a virtual form as above
March 3, 2021:	idem
April 11, 2021 (second Sunday because the first one was Easter):	idem

Following the attenuation of the second wave of Covid-19, in May 2021 the ritual recovered its real, physical space – the cemetery – and its human, social proximity – the gathering of Brothers and common faithful – but not its dynamic, moving nature as a procession throughout the cemetery.⁹ Actually, for many months civil and ecclesiastical authorities forbade religious processions as implying a dangerous gathering of people. In all public spaces, indeed, there were strict health norms to observe, such as a minimum distance between individuals, the use of face masks and an accurate cleaning of hands.

Figure 2. Pandemic restrictions. A bench in the cemetery chapel with stickers warning “You can sit here,” so as to keep the social distancing between the participants in the ritual.

October 4, 2020.

Photograph by Vito Carrassi.



Once these restrictions were dismissed, in April 2022, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* had the possibility to recover its original and ordinary form of ritual procession performed through the streets of the cemetery. And yet, the procession carried out in March 2020 has been, thus far (June 2023), the last one. In other words, the ritual emerged from the pandemic as a different event compared to what it was before the pandemic. Though keeping its original location, the ritual radically reduced its outreach, limiting itself to a single place inside the cemetery: a chapel and its adjacent space.

In the following table the data concerning the period from May 2021 to June 2023 are reported. Based on the weather, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* has been performed either inside or outside the cemetery chapel.

Table 3

Post-pandemic period (May 2021–June 2023)	
May 9, 2021:	20 (4 Brothers + 16 common faithful), in static form outside the chapel
June 6, 2021:	32 (5 + 27), in static form outside the cemetery church because of a coffin in the chapel
July 4, 2021:	12 (1 + 11; the minimum attendance of the period), in static form outside the chapel
August 1, 2021:	16 (3 + 13), idem
September 5, 2021:	17 (1 + 16), in static form inside the chapel
October 3, 2021:	32 (6 + 26), in static form, outside the chapel
November 7, 2021:	33 (8 + 25; the maximum attendance of the period), idem
December 5, 2021:	21 (6 + 15), idem
January 2, 2022:	22 (6 + 16), idem
February 6, 2022:	31 (6 + 25), idem
March 6, 2022:	24 (5 + 19), in static form, in the centre of a cemetery atrium, placed around a wooden crucifix, in order to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the ritual; Roberto announces the possible return to the processional form the next month, but at the same time is worried about one of the faithful with walking problems (see Figure 3)
April 3, 2022:	24 (7 + 17), in static form, outside the chapel; Roberto announces again the possible return to the processional form, but now there is the reluctance of some women fearing the risk of falls along the route
May 1, 2022:	26 (3 + 23), in static form, outside the cemetery church, around a temporary altar arranged by Roberto
June 5, 2022:	22 (2 + 20), in static form, outside the chapel
July 2, 2022:	18 (2 + 16), idem
August 7, 2022:	20 (2 + 18), idem
September 4, 2022:	14 (2 + 12), idem
October 2, 2022:	20 (5 + 15), in static form, inside the chapel
November 6, 2022:	24 (5 + 19), idem; rain has impeded the return to the processional form previously announced by Roberto via Whatsapp; November being the month specifically devoted to the cult of the dead, the confraternity has decided on the reiteration of the ritual in all the November Sundays

Post-pandemic period (May 2021–June 2023)	
November 13, 2022:	16 (6 + 10), idem, again because of the rain
November 20, 2022:	25 (7 + 18), idem, because of the night rain which has made the cemetery paths impassable
November 27, 2022:	21 (7 + 14), idem, because of the cold weather
December 4, 2022:	20 (6 + 14), idem, this time without providing a reason not to return to the processional form
January 8, 2023 (second Sunday because the first was New Year's Day):	23 (5 + 18), idem
February 5, 2023:	22 (3 + 19), idem
March 5, 2023:	21 (5 + 16), idem (see Figure 4)
March 26, 2023 (instead of April 2 because Palm Sunday):	29 (6 + 23), idem; Roberto tells me that he has not been able yet to plan a suitable itinerary for the procession, above all because of a number of obstacles that make it difficult to cover
May 7, 2023:	22 (4 + 18); idem
June 4, 2023:	23 (3 + 20); idem
Average attendance:	22.40

It is remarkable to note that the average attendance of this last period, with a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 33 participants, has remained nearly the same as in the pre-pandemic period. After more than six years since its inception, therefore, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* seems to have reached the status of an established ritual with a small but regular number of participants. Nonetheless, it underwent, like so many other social and cultural practices in the last years, significant accidents that have modified part of its original features. As noted in the table above, a possible return to the processional form has been announced more than once since March 2022; however, after fifteen months nothing has changed and it seems quite probable that the fixed, static form of the ritual could succeed and become permanent. In fact, from a strictly religious and devotional point of view, what really matters has been preserved: the collective prayer, the sacred location, the monthly recurrence, the piety for the holy souls in Purgatory. Everything else, indeed, has a limited or minor importance:¹⁰ perhaps the ritual performance becomes less interesting and attractive, but it keeps its religious and deepest meaning.



Figure 3. Celebrating the fifth anniversary. Faithful wearing face masks perform the ritual outdoors around a wooden Crucifix. March 4, 2022.

Photograph by Vito Carrassi.



Figure 4. The current form of the ritual. Brothers and common faithful praying for the Purgatory souls in the cemetery chapel. March 26, 2023.

Photograph by Vito Carrassi.

On the other hand, though making the ritual less fascinating, especially for an external observer – and, as a consequence, also in terms of heritagisation of a local religious practice (Isnart 2020) – and rather distant from its deep and functional relationship with the cemetery as a whole, the fixed, static form makes the ritual easier to organise and manage, less demanding for older people (the majority of participants), and safer, given the length and the roughness of the route to cover. Worth considering, in my view, is also the death of the originator of the ritual procession in the cemetery, Egidio (not by chance a former theatre director and opera enthusiast). After all, he was the only witness of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* carried out until the 1960s in the cathedral – hence the only link between the past and the present of the ritual – and he was also the only member of the confraternity who was acquainted with the existence and meaning of that kind of ritual. Above all, he has been the reinventor of this tradition, which has become more visible and engaging thanks to his idea of turning it into a procession through the cemetery, conceived at the same time as a tribute to the dead and an imitation of *Via Crucis*.

CONCLUSION

With its relatively short but eventful history, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* performed in the cemetery of Castellaneta can undoubtedly be regarded as a paradigmatic case of a rituality affected by the uncertainty brought about by such a traumatic event as the Covid-19 pandemic. Born as an original rearrangement of an obsolete pious practice, this collective form of prayer for the dead has been able – and forced – to change and reinvent itself, in order to survive in a threatening global context. As a consequence, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, willingly or not, turned out to be a metamorphic ritual, passing through three different main forms – dynamic, virtual, static – which, in case of need, have also been mixed, as we have seen.

Nonetheless, the question is: what kind of ritual has arisen from the pandemic? Once recovered and reactivated in its essential features, the ritual has undergone a process of reduction, both in a spatial and dynamic sense, thus losing its original configuration, which made it something special in the field of the rituals for the souls in Purgatory. As we can experience in many other areas, this is probably a long-lasting consequence of the pandemic trauma, a sort of necessary rearrangement, in an age of uncertainty and precariousness, meant to safeguard single traditions and, in general, a cultural heritage. On the other hand, innovations, adaptations and losses, too, have always been inherent in cultural and ritual practices; as argued by Frog (2012: 134): “Any tradition is characterized by tensions between inherited models and their adaptation to current valuations, interests and ideologies.” In addition, Mennella (2021: 274), echoing somehow the concept of the “preventive censorship of the community” theorised by Bogatyrev and Jakobson (1980: 1–21), points out that the innovations introduced in rituals during an extraordinary period – such as the pandemic one – can become permanent, if considered more suitable or advantageous than the previous features.

Therefore, both as a researcher and as part of the entire study, the questions I am posing about the current, innovative and reduced form of the ritual are: will the loss of the dynamic, moving ingredient turn out to be a temporary adjustment or a permanent change? Has this been totally caused by the pandemic or was it physiologically latent among the participants, as suggested by the occasional resort to the fixed form during the *processional era*? Finally, have we to consider this simplified way of performing the ritual instrumental in making it more resilient and adaptable to changing situations? Or must it rather be seen as a detriment to the safeguarding of its deeper and most authentic meaning? This is all the more so if we take into account that the procession in the form of *Via Crucis* supplies a theological and devotional bond between the worship of the dead and the sacrifice of Jesus crucified, which is the specific subject of devotion of the organising confraternity. These are open questions, indeed, which need time and further observation to be answered. After all, while a ritual

tradition can modify its forms, locations, participants, functions and purposes, what we firstly need to observe and examine, in an uncertain age like this, is the continuity of that tradition itself and its ability to keep significance and value for those who perpetuate it. And I think this is *a fortiori* valid for a tradition that has arisen not before but in the midst of this same uncertain age.

NOTES

- 1 As argued by Linda Dégh (2001: 399): “Humans project their immortality in diverse religious contexts, imagining diverse deities, hierarchies, and structures that their own cultural experience can fill with meaning to make their future in ‘life after life’ palpable.”
- 2 This research was presented for the first time during the “Ritual Year Working Group 13th Biennial Conference” held in Bucharest in November 2018. The results of five years of research, here discussed, were the subject of a paper I presented in June 2023 at the 16th SIEF Congress “Living Uncertainty” held in Brno.
- 3 Beside the Catholic churches, the only other places of worship are those devoted to the religious minorities of Jehovah’s witnesses and the Evangelical Church.
- 4 The Latin word *Resurrecturis*, meaning “to those who will resurrect”, often placed at the entrance of the Catholic cemeteries, was used by the organisers as a heading in the posters advertising the ritual, undoubtedly in order to highlight the close connection between the ritual itself and the Catholic doctrine of the soul’s resurrection after the earthly death.
- 5 According to Roberto, head of the organising confraternity and my main informant, “we know well that the collective prayer is stronger than the individual one, therefore I expected more participation” (personal communication, July 9, 2021).
- 6 Significantly, at the end of each set of 10 *Requiem aeternam* the participants recite the following prayer: “Holy souls, Purgatory souls, pray God for us, since I will pray for you so that [God] gives you the glory of Heaven.”
- 7 Egidio (75), the oldest Brother and the main advocate of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* as a ritual procession in the cemetery, disagreed with these alternative ways of performance. In his view, it keeps all its sense and value only in the processional form (personal communication, September 3, 2018).
- 8 As testified by Egidio, the original form of the ritual, carried out until the 1960s, was already a collective prayer, but it took place on the first or second Friday of the month in the closed space of a cathedral room.
- 9 According to Roberto (personal communication, July 9, 2021): “The ritual is more fascinating if performed as a procession through the cemetery. The prayer efficacy is the same, but the processional form gives us more visibility, as well as the confraternity dressing and the itinerant Crucifix. [...] Many visitors in the cemetery were attracted by that and stopped to look at us.” Andrea (67), one of the most regular participants, told me (personal communication, August 1, 2021): “We should come back to the procession, however, because we began with the procession, it is very beautiful, the procession through the cemetery.” I have been myself part of this debate, trying every time to support a return to the procession which, as a researcher but also as a member of the performing group, is the most interesting and significant feature of the ritual.
- 10 In fact, there has been another loss compared to the original ritual: the Brothers stopped wearing their confraternal surplice, thus undermining, at least visually, the distinction between them and the common faithful.

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