

# **The *Rosary of 100 Requiem*: Reviving an Old Ritual (and a Traditional Belief) in the Public Space of a Cemetery**

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**Abstract:** The worship of the dead, and in particular of the holy souls in Purgatory, is a deep-rooted tradition in southern Italy. The related beliefs and rituals concern both the calendric customs (November is the month dedicated to the faithful departed) and the life cycle customs (the surviving connections with the dearly departed). One of the most widespread practices has been the recitation of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, during which participants recite ten sets of ten *Requiem aeternam*, the main Catholic prayer devoted to the faithful departed. This ritual could be individually or collectively performed within domestic/private or sacred/public spaces (churches, chapels, cemeteries). In this paper I discuss a collective ritual which a lay confraternity has recently revived in Castellana Grotte (Apulia). While originally (until the 1960s) it took place in a small room in the cathedral, now it is set within the larger space of a cemetery, in the form of a procession going through the cemeterial buildings. The participants, walking behind a Crucifix, recite one hundred *Requiem aeternam* and read pious texts along a sort of *Via Crucis* in ten stations. Significantly, instead of being bound to a specific period (for example, November), this ritual is performed on the first Sunday of every month. In so doing, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* enables a dynamic reconfiguration of a sacred, urban, liminal space (the cemetery) through a revived and innovated ritual, whose monthly repetition transforms an almost vanished traditional practice into an ordinary community event that creates a deeply felt experience of life/death relationships.

**Keywords:** Purgatory, worship of the dead, cemetery, procession, confraternity, Catholicism, afterlife.

## Introduction

Castellaneta is a town of about 17000 inhabitants in the province of Taranto (Apulia, southern Italy). As Castellaneta has been an episcopal see since the eleventh century, it is not surprising to find here a great number of liturgical and paraliturgical events that deeply characterise the religious and cultural identity of the local community (see Fonseca 1993). Chief among these events are processions, the primary and most crowded rituals taking place in an urban landscape. The most solemn and significant processions are performed during Holy Week (Good Friday and Holy Saturday) and in the month of May for the Patron Saints (Saint Nicholas and Saint Francis of Paola). These processions are highly formalised rituals, carefully organised by clerical and secular agencies (notably the lay confraternities), performed by hundreds of people, and attended by thousands more.

However, the research I present here deals with a quite different kind of city ritual, a less formalised and much less crowded procession<sup>1</sup> taking place not through the urban streets, but within the boundaries of a well-defined area of the town: the cemetery. This is a monthly ritual procession through which the participants basically express their devotion to the dead and their belief in the existence of an otherworldly place, Purgatory, as well as in the efficacy of their prayers for the holy souls in Purgatory (for a historical analysis see Le Goff 1984; perhaps the most significant Christian source on this topic is Caterina da Genova 2000).

Worship of the dead, and especially of the holy souls in Purgatory, is a traditional custom in southern Italy, as perfectly demonstrated by the famous case of Naples, with its cults and rituals devoted to the so called *capuzzelle*, literally 'little heads', referring to the thousands of skulls of unknown dead piled up in the underground of the city and regarded as belonging to as many holy souls in Purgatory (see De Matteis and Niola 1993; Niola 2003). However, this is just one of the numerous features by which one can understand how the piety, attitude and imagination of so many people and communities in southern Italy were – and are, though to a lesser degree – steeped in an intense relationship with their dead, death itself, and the afterlife. Churches and lay confraternities dedicated to Purgatory and to Our Lady of Mount Carmel – traditionally seen as the patron saint of the holy souls in Purgatory – are countless (for Apulia see, for instance, Alemanno 1988; Boaga 1990). Purgatorial iconography is rich and widespread (holy cards and devotional images, votive aedicules or shrines, paintings, statues, etc.), and pious practices for the dead are still common among quite a large number of individuals and families. I personally can confirm this by my direct experience both in Castellaneta, my hometown – I grew up in a family sensitive to the remembrance and the reverence of the dearly departed – and in many other towns in southern Italy. Rituals related to the dead and the afterlife concern both the calendric and the life cycle customs,

both the social-public and the individual-private fields of the people's lives (see Bronzini 1974: 119–125). On one hand, there is a yearly period expressly dedicated by the Catholic Church to *all* the faithful departed, namely the month of November, especially the first and second days of the month – All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day. On the other hand, individuals and families may commemorate *their own* dead whenever they like, by visiting them in the cemeteries (usually bringing flowers and/or lighting votive candles), by praying for them at home (in many houses, including that of my parents, there is a space reserved for pictures and other items memorialising dead relatives), and by offering them requiem Masses in churches (traditionally, there are Masses celebrated eight days, thirty days, and one year after a relative's death, followed by Masses celebrated on each yearly anniversary).

Faith in the afterlife – and more precisely in Purgatory – as well as in the efficacy of the living's prayers for the dead, which are at the heart of the city ritual I discuss here, are firmly grounded in Catholic doctrine. The following are perhaps the most authoritative sources, which explain the dogmatic core of beliefs and practices concerning the relationships and the interconnectedness between the living and the dead, the mundane and the otherworldly dimensions of human existence:

Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has, from the sacred writings and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, taught, in sacred councils, and very recently in this oecumenical Synod, *that there is a Purgatory, and that the souls there detained are helped by the suffrages of the faithful*, but principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar [...]. *But let the bishops take care, that the suffrages of the faithful who are living*, to wit the sacrifices of masses, prayers, alms, and other works of piety, which have been wont to be performed by the faithful for the other faithful departed, *be piously and devoutly performed*, in accordance with the institutes of the church [...] (The Council of Trent: The Twenty-Fifth Session 1848(1563): 232–233; my emphasis).

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. [...] This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture [...]. *From the beginning the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.* The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead [...] (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1999: 235; my emphasis).

Though separated by more than four centuries, both the Council of Trent (sixteenth century) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (twentieth century) officially and solemnly establish and confirm two basic concepts: 1) the reality of a transcendent place and of an ontological condition called ‘Purgatory’, whose function is patently expressed by the name itself (there the ‘still imperfectly purified’ souls undergo a veritable process of ‘purgation’); and 2) the effectiveness of those pious practices that the living faithful are allowed to perform – and, as good Catholics, are invited to do so – to help the dead “to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven”.

## The Fieldwork

For this project I attended the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* as an observing participant fourteen times to date, from August 2018 until May 2019, and from August until December, 2019. Outside of the ritual itself, I conducted an extensive and semi-structured oral interview (September 3, 2018) with three significant members of the organising lay confraternity: Egidio (75, graduated, former journalist and theatrical director), the oldest Brother and the only living witness of the previous form of the ritual; Roberto (57, high school diploma, typographer), the most active and engaged Brother in organising and disseminating the ritual; and Antonella (43, graduated, former accountant, now unemployed), at the time of the interview, the last person to have joined the confraternity. The interview took place in the house of Egidio. Curiously, Roberto and Antonella – as well as all the other Brothers – ignored the existence of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* before joining the Confraternity, a practice, as I will show, essentially revived by Egidio. In addition, before and after performing the ritual I talked with a number of common participants (that is, not belonging to the confraternity). As a rule, however, it has been difficult to obtain clear answers from them: they could not (and sometimes did not want to) explain the reasons for their participation, apart from a general devotion for and commemoration of their dearly departed, thus associating these souls, more or less consciously, with the holy souls in Purgatory. With the help of my wife, I took many photographs portraying different moments, places and actors in the ritual (see Figures 1 and 2) and filmed the performance in its entirety.



Fig. 1: The Brothers leading the ritual procession. Photo: Elettra Carrassi, October 7, 2018.

## The Mediatiation of the Ritual

To advertise the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, and to encourage townspeople's participation, posters are displayed each month in the cemetery, in the churches and, initially, along some streets (it is from one of these early posters that I discovered the launch of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*). The ritual has been also advertised via the Facebook profile of the confraternity and reported by a local online news channel. Interestingly, WhatsApp messages (each time including a different prayer and pious text concerning the belief in Purgatory) are sent one day before each event, as a reminder, from the aforementioned Roberto, to the group of customary participants (including myself, who have been soon considered as one of them).

## The Actors

The main actors of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* are the members of the confraternity of the Holy Crucifix, who play simultaneously the roles of organisers, coordinators, and performers of the ritual. Their total number is 16. However, not all the Brothers attend the ritual; some of them never did. During my observations, their number has fluctuated from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 8 participants. Only Roberto has always been present.

The ritual is also attended by common faithful. Their number has varied. I have recorded a minimum of 10 (August 2018) and a maximum of 26 participants

(December 2019). Almost half of the participants are regular attendees. They represent the core of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. The other half or so consists of more occasional participants<sup>2</sup>. The common faithful are mainly middle-aged and elderly women. I have often been one of the only two men participating, apart from the Brothers.

Worth noting is also the category of spectators. According to my observations, virtually all the cemetery's visitors (usually not so numerous) paid attention to the people performing the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*; quite often they took a break to look at them, to follow their procession, or even to join them in the recitation of some *Requiem aeternam*. When interviewed, Egidio declared that he was impressed by the reaction of these people: 'Often interested, sometimes enchanted and even touched' (interview, September 3, 2018).

The following chart summarises the attendance data concerning the monthly events I have observed first-hand:

Date	Brothers	Common faithful	Total
August 5, 2018	3	10	13
September 2, 2018	3	11	14
October 7, 2018	6	14	20
November 4, 2018	6	24	30
December 2, 2018	3	16	19
January 13, 2019 <sup>3</sup>	8	13	21
February 3, 2019	6	17	23
March 3, 2019	6	16	22
April 7, 2019	4	21	25
May 5, 2019	4	13	17
August 4, 2019	2	13	15
September 1, 2019	5	19	24
October 6, 2019	5	15	20
December 1, 2019	5	26	31

As the chart shows, except for three months, the attendance of common faithful did not fall under 10 and did not exceed 20, resulting in an average attendance of 16.28. After one year and four months of observation, the trend appears to be constant, without substantial drops or peaks in participation. Among other things, these data show that the ritual is still a marginal and comparatively unsuccessful initiative, whose strength and appeal seems, so far, unable to increase the number of its participants. However, it seems to have gained sufficient stability and regularity to make it a vital, almost routine practice for a certain number of people, especially



for those most committed to the worship of the dead, either for personal motives (such as a mother whose young son died ten years ago or a woman who recently lost her parents) or for more general religious reasons connected to a spiritual mission (the Brothers).

The confraternity of the Holy Crucifix has a two-part history. It was originally established in Castellaneta in 1648 but disappeared in the 1960s for lack of members. It was later re-established, on 21 November 2016, after some years of surveys and attempts among people more or less related to the cult of the Crucifix or to the heritage of the former confraternity. In the town there were already four confraternities – Blessed Sacrament, Our Lady of Sorrows, Rosary and Saint Francis of Paola (see Bertoldi Lenoci 1990) – therefore, it was important for this fifth sodality to differentiate itself from the others, to give sense and value to its rebirth. Indeed, it has recovered the worship of Jesus Christ crucified, which is especially embodied, in Castellaneta, by a miraculous Crucifix enshrined in a cathedral's chapel. Furthermore, the re-founders of this confraternity have assumed the virtue of mercy and the carrying out of merciful deeds as their specific mission, among which the prayers for the faithful departed – and in particular for the faithful departed with no parents or friends praying for them – have a major role.



Fig. 2: The common faithful walking in procession. Photo: Elettra Carrassi, October 7, 2018.

## Space-time Framework and Ritual Structure

Unlike the large and heterogeneous space of the traditional urban processions, the cemetery of Castellaneta, where the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* is performed, is an open yet delimited space. The path of the procession was approved following a number of inspections in situ by the Brothers, whose intention was to trace a route encompassing the widest area as possible – in other words a perimeter route surrounding all the cemeterial area or so and, consequently, virtually including all its *guests*.<sup>4</sup> Given the public and municipal nature of the space in question, an official authorisation was approved by the town council. To obtain the necessary ecclesiastical approval, the Brothers had also consulted the parish priest of the Castellaneta's cathedral and the cemetery chaplain.

The ritual takes place on the first Sunday of every month and starts at 9:30 am, so as to facilitate the attendance of the common faithful: it is a non-working day (unlike Friday, which, after all, would be the most advisable day from a strictly religious point of view, given its link with the passion and death of Jesus Christ). The hour is not too early, but also not too late, to allow the participants, if they like, to attend Sunday Mass afterwards. The average duration is approximately thirty minutes.

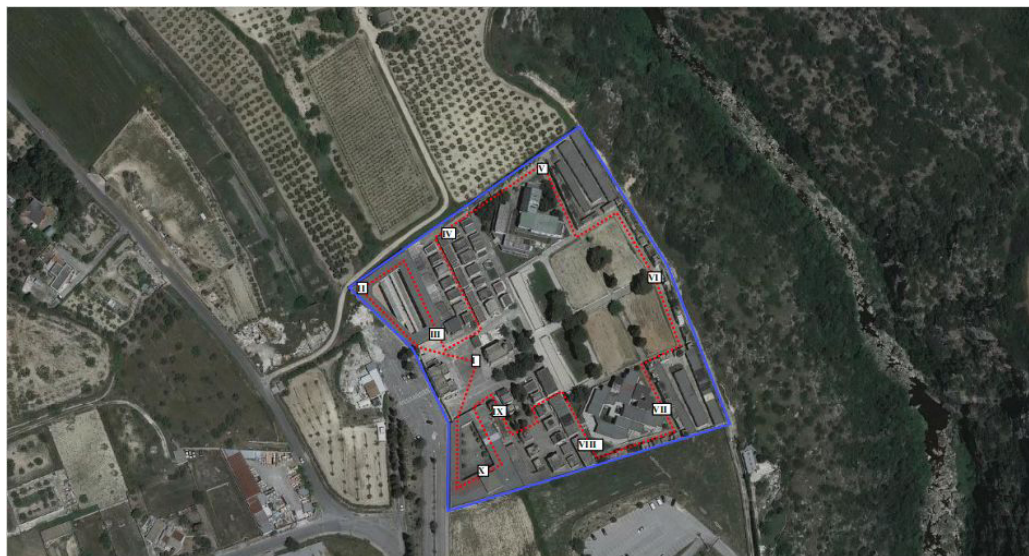


Fig. 3: The path of the procession inside the cemetery of Castellaneta.

The *Rosary of 100 Requiem* is structured in form of *Via Crucis*, namely as a walking itinerary consisting of ten stations, starting and finishing in front of the cemeterial church, thus covering the cemetery and most of its extension (see Fig. 3). However, owing to bad weather in winter and to extreme heat in summer (and in considera-



tion of the average age of the participants), the ritual has been performed four times in a static form within the cemeterial church and twice in a mixed form (that is, two walking stations – the first and the last – and eight with people standing within the cemeterial church)<sup>5</sup>. Four-page leaflets containing the texts to be read during the procession are handed out by the Brothers to the participants. About half of the participants used chaplets to keep count in reciting the prescribed *Requiem aeternam* (see Figure 4). This is the most traditional and widespread Catholic prayer devoted to the dearly departed (see Righetti 2005: II, 377, 628–629). It is recited, in its Italian version, a hundred times overall during the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, that is, ten times at each station. The text, in its original Latin version and in Italian and English translations, is the following:

*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis. Requiescant in pace. Amen.*

*L'eterno riposo dona loro, o Signore, e splenda ad essi la luce perpetua. Riposino in pace. Amen.*

*Eternal rest grant unto them, o Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.*

When the procession stops at one of the established stations (sometimes marked by a stone or metal cross placed in the ground), one of the participants who is not a Brother reads from her/his leaflet a pious commentary associating a moment of *Passio Christi* with the deliverance of the holy souls in Purgatory. Along the path in between two stations, all the participants, walking in line without a specified order and at a normal pace, and prompted by the reader of the current station, recite ten *Requiem aeternam*. The Brothers of the Holy Crucifix, wearing their traditional clothing (a white surplice and a red *mozzetta* – a sort of cloak), walk 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 are recited: *Pater*, *Ave*, and *Gloria*.



Fig. 4: Detail of a woman with a chaplet during the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. Photo: Elettra Carrassi, October 7, 2018.

## Liminal Places and People

From a ritual and performative point of view, it is particularly significant that the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* features and refers to places and people characterised by their liminality. The cemetery is immanent; Purgatory is transcendent; the lay confraternity (usually replacing the clergy in the paraliturgical rituals) is immanent; the holy souls in Purgatory are transcendent. As explained by Victor Turner (1988: 25): “The dominant genres of performance in societies at all levels of scale and complexity tend to be liminal phenomena. They are performed in privileged spaces and times, set off from the periods and the areas reserved for work, food and sleep”.

Accordingly, these liminal places and people symbolise and embody an intermediate condition, which enables, just through a ritual performance, a temporary yet crucial connection between life and death, secular and sacred, material and spiritual, human and divine, visible and invisible, past and present (and future). The liminality, indeed, “is often the scene and time for the emergence of a society’s deepest values” (*ibid.*: 102).

Let me develop on this issue. First, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* is a form of prayer. The prayer, from a religious point of view, functions as a bridge between the human and the divine, as a channel connecting us with God through the mediation of the

saints, the Virgin Mary and above all Jesus Christ, whose double nature is inherently liminal, bringing together the human and the divine. In particular, the one performed during the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* is a kind of “prayer of intercession”, defined by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as follows (1999: 561):

*Intercession is a prayer of petition which leads us to pray as Jesus did. He is the one intercessor with the Father on behalf of men, especially sinners. He is 'able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them'.*

Purgatory, as an afterlife space-time, identifies an intermediate place between Paradise (the kingdom of the blessed souls) and Hell (the kingdom of the damned souls), or else between heaven and earth. The dead holy souls, as inhabitants of the Purgatory, live in an intrinsically liminal condition; moreover, when prayed to, they can act as mediators between (living) humans and God, and between the mundane and the otherworldly dimensions of human condition. The lay confraternity consists of laymen characterised by a faith, a diligence and an activism higher, at least in principle, than those of the average faithful; as such, they can be seen as a liminal category of humans who place themselves between the secular and the sacred, the ‘laity’ and the ‘holy orders’.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the cemetery, as a physical and symbolic urban space hosting the dead of a city/town, and receiving parents and friends wishing to visit and commemorate their dearly departed, functions as a liminal space-time connecting the living and the dead of a certain city/town, its present and its recent or distant past. On the other hand, cemeteries are usually located at the periphery of the cities or towns, on the border between the inhabited area and the countryside, something that emphasises their spatial liminality. Roberto suggestively summed up the dual nature of the ritual: ‘By walking and praying through the alleys of the cemetery, we perform a route that is both spiritual and physical. Passing by the tombs and looking at the pictures displaying the departed we meditate about the sense of life and death’ (interview, September 3, 2018).

What arises from this ritual performance is an exchange of intercessions between the holy souls in Purgatory and the living people praying for them, passing through the redemptive mediation granted by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In fact, the participants offer to Lord God, on behalf of the holy souls in Purgatory, the pains suffered – and then the merits earned – by Jesus Christ on earth and, consequently, ask the dead holy souls to intercede with God on behalf of themselves. This is what clearly emerges from the introductory and concluding formulae framing each station of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. The introductory formula reads as follows: ‘I offer to You, my beloved Jesus, in support of the dead holy souls...’; such is the concluding formula: ‘Holy souls, souls of Purgatory, pray God for me, because I shall pray for you, so that He gives you the glory of Heaven.’ This is also the core

meaning that the interviewed Brothers have claimed to ascribe to this ritual, as well as the main reason pushing them to perform it:

*We pray for the holy souls in Purgatory who, in their turn, will pray for us, so as we all gain the resurrection into the glory of Heaven. Through our ritual – beside the individual prayers and the requiem Masses – we are glad to create a stronger connection between us, the living, and the dead people (Roberto, interview, September 3, 2018).*

In the last sentence one can arguably find the most distinguishing feature of a religious performance, which William O. Beeman (2015: 38) describes as a “kind of social ritual involv[ing] the joining of parts of the spiritual world”; consequently, this kind of performance “usually involve[s] the uniting of secular and spiritual universes”. And, as showed, all the elements implied in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* are fundamentally liminal, thus functioning as privileged ways – at least from a religious and Catholic point of view – for connecting different levels of reality, that is what is *down here* and what is *up there*. Particularly significant, in my view, is the fact that this ritual connection takes place within the cemetery, namely in the space physically (and not only spiritually, as it would be in a church or at home), occupied – though in an increasingly decayed form – by the recipients of the ritual performance, whose presence is objectified – and whose absence is “culturally mastered” (de Martino 1975: 3–11) – by the gravestones and especially by the related pictures.

## Ritual Year and Public Space-time

Being set in a cemetery, this ritual performance provides an interesting case of use or re-use of a public urban space. Its goal is to revive a traditional belief and reinvigorate an ancient practice almost disappeared and largely ignored even by most of its organisers. According to the direct testimony of my oldest informant Egidio, between the 1950s and 1960s, the Brothers of the Holy Crucifix gathered once a month (first or second Friday of the month<sup>7</sup>) in a room located inside the cathedral of Castellaneta to carry out the so called *Coronella* (literally ‘little crown’, more commonly known as *Corona* or *Coroncina*, referring to the Rosary Crown)<sup>8</sup>, a ritual prayer devoted to the holy souls in Purgatory. Basically it was a blending of two important Catholic practices: the Rosary, with *Requiem aeternam* replacing the canonical *Pater*, *Ave*, and *Gloria*, and the *Via Crucis*, though in a static form, since the participants were sitting. The current ritual renamed *Rosary of 100 Requiem for the holy souls in Purgatory*, launched in March 2017, may therefore be considered

as the recovery of this earlier practice, also in consideration of the leading and inspirational role assumed by Egidio, the only first-hand witness of the *Coronella*.

A quite innovative recovery, indeed, inasmuch as a static practice, set within the closed and (semi)private space of a cathedral's room, has been reinvented as a dynamic and processional one, to be performed within the (semi)open and public space of a cemetery. In so doing, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* has given a ritual and a more solemn form to the informal tradition of walking through the cemetery for visiting and praying our own dearly departed<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, it re-evaluates and revitalises – at least, this is one of the goals pursued by the organisers – the cemetery as a place of meeting and socialisation, as a living part of the urban landscape (see, for instance, Faeta 2011).

On the other hand, while the worship of the dead and the related rituality are traditionally associated with a limited period of the year – the first two days of November, framed between the *Novena* (24 October–1 November) and the *Ottavario* (2–9 November) – they are extended to the whole year by the monthly recurrence of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. Therefore, at least for those who attend it and, to a lesser degree, for those who know it, this city ritual makes it quite *ordinary*, just because of its iteration and regularity, a set of beliefs and practices commonly and increasingly perceived as something *extra-ordinary*, not by chance institutionally enclosed in a specific period of the year. In other words, there is a noticeable effort to use the public and culturally significant space of the cemetery as a means to transform into a *routine* what is today generally lived as an *exception*.

In fact, by shifting the ritual prayer for the holy souls in Purgatory from the church to the cemetery, Egidio – who, incidentally, has been a theatrical director and is an expert in the opera – has given a “second life” (see Honko 2013; Hovi 2014; Carrassi 2017) to this religious tradition, making it both more pertinent to its meaning (being set in a cemetery, the ritual, literally, gets closer to its recipients) and more suitable for a broader participation.<sup>10</sup> This kind of ritual prayer is performed in many other towns in southern Italy, but generally within the churches and not in processional form.<sup>11</sup> And yet, the cemetery appears to be an ideal place, able to create the appropriate “cognitive frame” (Beeman 2015: 36) for performing this pious practice, above all because it emphasises, physically and symbolically, the universal dimension of prayers devoted to *all* the holy souls in Purgatory, especially those without living relatives or friends praying for them.

Nevertheless, most of the participants, when asked, have justified their attendance by citing personal and individual purposes, above all the remembrance of one or more relatives (sons and parents primarily); they see in this ritual a means to make themselves closer to their dearly departed. In this regard, I find particularly significant an incident that happened during the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* of April 2019. A woman – incidentally, the most regular participant – whose son died at



an early age, had been given the reading of the seventh station; this is a station commemorating the “violent separation” of the Virgin Mary from her son. After the first few words, the woman burst into tears, incapable of finishing the reading of the station. She later admitted identifying herself with the Virgin Mary and her distress. One month later, the same woman was again requested to read the seventh station by a Sister of the Holy Crucifix, who did not witness the previous incident. She refused, taking the Sister aback. Roberto, who saw what happened, explained to her the misfortune of the request. Since then, the Brothers have been careful not to assign the seventh station to that woman. However, except this incident, I observed very few cases of visible poignancy; the participants generally displayed a plain and restrained attitude during the ritual.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the interviewed Brothers complain and blame the increasing suppression and concealment of sorrow and death in modern society, something that explains, in their view, the fact that so few people nowadays frequent the cemeteries. In the South of Italy, as argued by two important Italian scholars, “the violent severing of cultural roots coincided with the ejection of the death from the horizon of cultural awareness of the urban-industrial society” (Lombardi Satriani and Meligrana 1982: 7); more generally, it is a widespread idea that, in the contemporary age, death is dead, “and, with it, a manifold set of rituals and ceremonies, which have been cut to the bone in order to remove this event and resume the route of a commodified and homogenised everyday life” (Faeta 2011: 223). On the contrary, my informants have claimed and demonstrated a genuine care and respect for the mystery of death, as well as a firm belief in the existence of Purgatory and in the effectiveness of their prayers for the dead holy souls. As argued by Antonella: ‘It is crucial what a person learns and experiences within her/his family in order to become sensitive to the worship of the dead and the afterlife’ (interview, September 3, 2018). To join the confraternity and to give rise to the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* may be seen as a sort of natural *upgrade* for individuals sincerely and intensely attached to the Catholic faith and to the Catholic value of mercy, felt as a means to provide human life with a higher and deeper sense.

## Conclusion

Retrieved from the past and changed into a more visible and engaging form by the faith, the will, and the imagination of an old Brother with aesthetic and theatrical flair, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* has quickly gained the firm approval of a recently revived confraternity. Here is a tangible example of how the traditional culture constructs itself by means of a dialectic between individual creativity and community acceptance (see Bogatyrev and Jakobson 1980). It can be regarded as an indicative and intriguing case of post-modern rituality built on a pre-modern

heritage of beliefs and practices, fostered, among other things, by the ongoing re-enchantment and re-sacralisation of our societies. As pointed out by Frog (2012: 134): “Any tradition is characterised by tensions between inherited models and their adaptation to current valuations, interests and ideologies”.

It is too early to understand whether this ritual procession will take root in the local tradition and become a durable part of cultural heritage just like other, older and more spectacular city rituals: almost three years are not sufficient for a proper assessment. The attendance reached so far and the resonance in the town life are still quite limited; nonetheless, the members of the organising confraternity seem extremely confident in what they do and plan to do, both on the religious and the secular side. In particular, they seem frankly convinced about the spiritual value and the social usefulness of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, and eager to make it even more visible and engaging (taking care not to distort its religious meaning). At any rate, by virtue of its peculiarity – perhaps its apparent uniqueness – in the current landscape of Italian city rituals, I recognise in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* a significant case study. I plan to continue my participant observation in the future, in order to observe and evaluate the persistence and vitality of some traditional beliefs and practices, whose changing forms act as new means for handing down their ancient contents.

## Afterword

Almost four years after writing this article, I can confirm both the continuity of the ritual and the persistence of my commitment to it as a researcher; I have discussed these topics at the last SIEF Conference in Brno (June, 7–10, 2023). Nonetheless, I consider it worthwhile to provide a brief update to give a more comprehensive and substantial picture of the subject. The *Rosary of 100 Requiem* has continued to be performed as a walking procession until March 2020. Thereafter, between 2020 and 2021, the pandemic outburst and the related restrictions have forbidden for many months the participants to carry out the ritual in the cemetery; anyway, the ritual continuity has been preserved in a virtual form, by means of a Whatsapp group. Once finished the Covid emergence, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* has come back to the cemetery, but its original processional form – more engaging but also more demanding for the majority of the participants – has been replaced by a static recitation of the same prayers in the cemeterial church. Despite the claims of Roberto and of some participants (including myself), it seems that the ritual has definitively changed its form, though keeping its cemeterial setting. Perhaps, the sudden death of Egidio (November, 18, 2020), that is the *re-inventor* of the ritual, as well as the traumatic break produced by the pandemic, have contributed

to weaken the original idea of a collective prayer for the dead carried out as an itinerant *Via Crucis*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This ritual has so far been scantily documented. I have been the first (and so far the only) person to photograph and film it, something that over time has become a common and almost a mandatory practice among those who attend the traditional processions, especially during the Holy Week. It might be said, indeed, that my observation has caught this ritual in a still 'spontaneous', 'informal', 'hidden' stage of its 'life' (its "first life": see Honko 2013), since it is not yet involved in the increasing processes of "reflexivity" and "heritagisation" affecting our intangible traditions (see Bendix 2018; Hafstein 2018). Given its nature and scope, however, it is also possible and plausible that the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* might remain foreign to these processes.

<sup>2</sup> The interviewed Brothers did not expect a massive attendance, although Roberto hoped for a little more. Their relationship with the participants is generally limited to the performative moment of the ritual. Nonetheless, over time I have observed a growing sense of togetherness and even of friendship between the participants. Personally, I have established a friendly relationship with Egidio and Roberto.

<sup>3</sup> An exception to the schedule, this event was carried out on the second Sunday of the month, because the first fell on the Epiphany.

<sup>4</sup> Faithful to such an approach, Roberto suggested modifying and enlarging the ritual path once an expansion of the cemetery is completed.

<sup>5</sup> Egidio, despite his advanced age, disagrees with these alternative ways of performing the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. In his view, only in processional form it does it keep all its sense and value.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1999: 209; my emphasis): "Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or *grouped in associations*, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth. [...] Their activity in ecclesial communities is so necessary that, for the most part, the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it".

<sup>7</sup> I found a similar practice only in the Lucanian town of Pignola, where the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* is currently celebrated the third Friday of every month and, what is more, not in a church but in the cemetery.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, in a testimony collected by de Martino in Lucania (1975: 107), a person able to do *coronelle* (plural of *coronella*) is one who can create a connection between the living and the dead.

<sup>9</sup> More specifically, it formalises the common practice of accomplishing an overall tour of the cemetery in the first two days of November, a practice I regularly fulfilled during my childhood and adolescence.

<sup>10</sup> There are no rules to be admitted into the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*; anybody is welcome by the organizers. It has also happened that someone joined it *in medias res*.

<sup>11</sup> In Castellaneta itself, however, between the evening and the night of the First of November, the confraternity of the Rosary performs a traditional procession devoted to the holy souls in Purgatory. Starting from and finishing at the church of San Domenico, this procession goes through some streets of the old town, with the participants reciting the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. Moreover, in Manfredonia, in the province of Foggia, on the eve of the August 15, a ritual procession devoted to the holy souls in Purgatory is performed through the urban streets up to the cemetery's entrance.

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