ECO-SUSTAINABLE ROUTES AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT. THE CASE STUDY OF SICILIAN ROUTES

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, tourism has become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world, with an increasing economic, social and environmental role. It has been recognised as a strategic driver, able not only to heighten economic growth, employment, and enhancement of cultural values, diversity and heritage, but also to help countries transition towards more inclusive and resilient economies. In this framework, slow tourism has been playing an important role, compliant with the universal 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its different forms - i.e. ecotourism, rural and village tourism, as well as religious routes - can improve social inclusiveness, poverty reduction, and environmental protection while empowering host communities, generating trade opportunities, and fostering peace and intercultural understanding.

The pilgrimage on religious routes is an ancient practice, largely rooted in many confessions as an expression of a mainly religious experience. Nevertheless, more recently, this kind of religious tourism has gained new values for both people and territories hosting destinations: its target groups of travellers have enlarged to those looking for spiritual holidays (individuals and groups) as well as well-being and integrated experiences combining religious sites, cultural heritage, landscape and nature, traditions and crafts, food, wine,and local events (shared with local people to feel part of the local community). Such experiences respond to the sustainability challenge as an opportunity for local development in depopulated areas but yet rich of history, nature, art and traditions.

On this basis, this paper tries to evaluate the recent experiences of some religious tourist routes in Sicily (South Italy), focusing on: a) their relevance in relation to emerging strategies and policies (i.e. cultural ecclesial parks, regional development plans, etc.); b) and their aptitude to generate sustainable and innovative local development. In particular it addresses the recent experiences in progress on the Itinerarium Rosaliae in Sicily as opportunities for sustainable and local development.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, tourism has become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world, with an increasing economic, social and environmental role (Creaco and Querini, 2003; UNWTO, 2013). As reported by UNWTO (2020), in 2019 the sector represented 30% of the world's exports of services (US$1.5 trillion) and up to 45% of the total export of services in developing countries. Between 2010 and 2018, following the global economic crisis, employment in accommodation and restaurants grew by 35% whereas it grew by 11% in all the economic sectors. In addition, by contributing both directly and indirectly to global job creation and economic recovery, tourism has also proved its capacity to bounce back and drive the recovery of other sectors. On the social side, reports show that tourism has been favouring the employment of more vulnerable groups like women and youth; also, through global mobility, it plays as a facilitator of cultural exchange, mutual understanding and peace. It "embodies development opportunities, promotes solidarity and understanding across borders, while domestic tourism also helps foster cohesion within nations". Furthermore, it has "a key role in leveraging efforts to preserve and promote natural and cultural heritage and has long been at the forefront of environmental protection" (p. 6). Tourism has been recognised as a strategic driver, able not only to heighten economic growth, employment, and enhancement of cultural values, diversity and heritage, but also to help countries transition towards more inclusive and resilient economies (Robinson and Picard, 2006). In this framework, slow tourism has been playing an important role, compliant with the universal 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Gheorghe et al., 2013). Its different forms - i.e. ecotourism (Kiper, 2013), rural and village tourism (Lane, 1993), as well as religious routes (Olsen, 2018) - can improve social inclusiveness, poverty reduction, and environmental protection while empowering host communities, generating trade opportunities, and fostering peace and intercultural understanding (Farrell and Runyan, 2001; Kiper, 2013; UNWTO&UNDP, 2017). It also represents an opportunity for the development of rural areas, in particular after the crisis caused by Covid-19 pandemic, which will require many changes in the sector - with limitations in the use of transport, a more reduced number of visitors in cities of art, museums, as well as customers of restaurants, and users of services. In recent decades, in fact, during the socio-economic crisis, rural areas have been hit by a growing decline: economic strategies and production have privileged the industrial and tertiary sector to the primary one with phenomena of urbanisation and abandonment of countrysides (Macchi Jànica, 2016; Garcia Valdivia, 2018). Therefore, rural areas, which have been affected by depopulation, and the gradual disappearance of economic activities, services and employment opportunities for young people, require new development and sustainable models to be revitalised. In this context, new opportunities come from the growing touristic interest in religious routes: a trend that joins pilgrims, but also travellers looking for an alternative way to live an experience combining multifactorial aspects with a particular care to the environment, natural and cultural heritage, rural communities, and psycho-physical wellness. Hence, following one of the most known

religious path in Europe, the Camino of Santiago de Compostela, many paths have been growing in many European countries (Orsini and Innocenti, 2018).
In Italy the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism has established 2016 as "The Year of Walking", in order to promote cultural itineraries and "slow" tourism, and introduced the digital Atlas of the Paths (Innocenti, 2018): a project to build up a network of the Italian routes - represented on an online national map - and promote the cultural richness of Italian villages and areas far from the most popular touristic circuits (policies aimed at encouraging the sustainable development of rural areas). Sicily island, in the South of Italy, is a region whose rural areas are rich of tangible and intangible cultural resources - an important premise for tourism - but, at the same time, they are affected by population ageing and depopulation. Institutions and private associations have built up many religious routes and local development projects that are very interesting examples.
This paper tries to evaluate some recent experiences among them, focusing on: a) their relevance in relation to emerging strategies and policies (i.e. cultural ecclesial parks, regional development plans, etc.); b) and their aptitude to generate sustainable and innovative local development. In particular, the Itinerarium Rosaliae will be addressed with particular reference to the aspects of potential and criticality analysis.

2. Sustainability's horizons as an opportunity for tourism and local development

Sustainable tourism is a challenge for local development, which has three main issues (Day, 2012). Tourism is a set of integrated activities, whose coordination involves a sequence of coordination mechanisms at a very detailed territorial level. We are talking, in this sense, about the importance of the enhancement of production chains between activities that are purely touristic and other ones activated by the tourists flows within a territorial system. The tourist product is the result not so much of a sum of goods and services from hospitality to transport sectors, but this mix is often not easily measurable, also due to the overlapping of heterogeneous territorial levels. And it is precisely the local dimension, which is the best observation level for measuring and evaluating these connections, that - despite all the contradictions that this process causes, such as the complex issue of host-guest relationship, particularly at the urban level - constitutes one of the main issues for decision-makers who must develop public policies. It is in the "local" that the implicit trade-off of tourism strongly emerges: on the one hand a strategic activity that favours the coordination between different activities; on the other hand, the extreme exposure of the local economic system to the external flows of people/tourists and capital/investments. Because of this anthropic pressure, the issue of environmental impact becomes important, and is what motivates the opposition of the hosts. Rethinking in terms of sustainability, therefore, the local tourist offer becomes an important challenge both for business and for institutions. Thus a "welding" can take place, bringing together the objectives of local development with those of sustainable tourism. The role of tourism is of strategic importance in a globalised society, especially as the intense connection between the social, economic and

environmental dimensions (Wallström, 2003). An uncontrolled growth in the tourism sectors, primarily aimed at obtaining short-term benefits, risks producing ever greater negative territorial impacts. The result is the progressive destruction of those resources on which tourism feeds. To counter such a trend, it may be necessary to plan a partial "re-localisation" of the economic circuit, which could facilitate the minimisation of the distance between supply and demand in a limited geographical area. A second important aspect plays for territorial rescaling, and that is remembered by the 1995 Charter of Lanzarote concerning the importance of preserving "the activities connected to it for an unlimited time, without altering the natural, social, artistic environment and does not inhibit the development of other social and economic activities on the territory".

Technological innovation is certainly a second important issue that combines the challenge of sustainability with that of digital, becoming an opportunity for all operators (especially companies) who aspire to "green" and innovative growth. Digital is giving a strong innovative push to the tourism sector in general, but is a real opportunity for eco-sustainable tourism, in particular. These new technological resources combine to make the use of the tourist product more and more a real "experience". An experiential good involves all dimensions of the person - i.e. the traveller in our case - towards an overall and global mobilisation of the senses, which solicits memory and produces a sort of "extension" of the trip itself. Digital technologies, even before producing an effect of efficiency on the use of the service (accelerating and improving some phases of its delivery and distribution), predispose to an extension of the range of possible directions of use to which the traveller can be prepared. Digital technology is an opportunity in this sense: its application at the local level promotes a better synergistic use of cultural and natural resources. Reduction of information asymmetries and minimisation of transaction costs are not the only significant effects of this innovation, but there is a real revolution in the technology used to imagine a new frontier of production of the tourist product. In the Sustainable Development perspective of Agenda 2030, tourism plays a key role (UNWTO and UNDP, 2017): the relevant targets are 8 and 12; target 14 is also important for the use of marine and ocean resources. Target 8 pursues the goal of "sustainable and inclusive" growth, but also suitable for generating "full, productive, and dignified" work. Local tourism activities within a territory also have enormous potential in terms of reducing poverty levels (Steiner, 2017; Schéou, 2017): if well managed, the sector can generate quality jobs for durable growth, reduce poverty and offer incentives for environmental conservation – a triple-win to help countries transition towards more inclusive and resilient economies. However, not all tourism activities are compatible with this sustainability perspective: without proper safeguards and investments, expanding the tourism market will increase pressure on biodiversity and the ecosystems, which the livelihoods of so many people and local communities depend on. Seen through the grid of Agenda 2030, sustainable tourism is a challenge both for the tourist Demand for what the tourist Supply. In the case of Demand, the main theme is connected to mobility, to be rethought in a sustainable way, investing above all in the forms of "slow" tourism. Seen from the side of the

Supply, the challenge of sustainability is particularly linked to the enhancement of geographic areas and tourist destinations with a high intensity of natural and cultural heritage that lend themselves to a non-extractive, but rather "inclusive" use. The "host" communities that live in these areas perceive a significant possibility of development in tourism, outside of which there is often a destiny of depopulation. In this sense, two different meanings of sustainability could be distinguished: firstly, "passive sustainability", which concerns the preservation and protection of natural resources through actions and policies that tend to limit anthropogenic pressure. Otherwise, "active sustainability" concerns the activation of both production technologies and organisational models of circular economy. Even after the Covid-19 Pandemic, the challenge of sustainable and eco-compatible tourism will have to be taken up with greater commitment by policymakers at all levels. Particularly in the post-pandemic context, tourism will represent one of the greatest challenges for sustainable development, precisely because of its ability to hold together a plurality of objectives: economic growth, increase in employment, social cohesion and protection of natural resources (UNWTO, 2017). In this sense, eco-tourism emerges as a form of ethical and environmental tourism at the same time. It directly insists on the enhancement of natural resources; its specific motivation is the strong interest in the environment and the ecosystem. The ever more widespread change of lifestyle in society, the development of new technologies that multiply the possibilities of use, the need to "escape" from metropolitan saturation and the consequent search for places "on a human scale" are the main factors that explain the growing attention and a relative increase in eco-tourism flows.

Ecotourism, however, differs from the more generic "nature tourism": as the latter promotes a considerable interest in the ecosystem, but is ideally connected with both rural tourism - as it regards the active methods of the use of leisure time - and cultural tourism - for the interest in human history - and ethnic tourism - for the interest in the communities involved (Simonicca, 2003). These last two characteristics (i.e. the interest in the production of human culture and in communities) give an original character to this form of tourism, revealing its extraordinary aptitude to become a precious ingredient for local development.

3. The perspective of religious tourism and the paths in progress

Religious tourism is considered as a specific form of cultural tourism (Tala and Padurean, 2008). The WTO defines it in this sense as a movement of people who respond to the desire to meet "diversity", although perhaps the most appropriate term would be "otherness".

The anthropological origin of religious tourism is the pilgrimage (Nocifora, 2010): a traditional and ritual experience in every season of humanity, which is found in almost all religious traditions and relevant in monotheistic ones. In recent times, this experience has become highly "secularised", while not losing its ancient religious roots. It is ingrained in the experience of "walking", which, in secularisation, has taken on a value connected with health and body care (fitness). Another important content is, of course, the naturalistic motivation of the "modern pilgrims". This meets the second meaning of religious tourism, and specifically relating to the

"goal" or the Destination: it does play a mystical attractiveness and spiritual, as a highly distinctive intangible item of that kind of experience. Although in the past this type of tourism has been significantly marginalised by the phenomenon of the massification of "large numbers" tourism, the most recent empirical evidence seems to bring out a change in trend: according to statistics produced by UNWTO, IsNaRT and AORI, this phenomenon affected over 330 million people in 2019, i.e. 20% of the world's population. With particular reference to Italy, IsNaRT estimated that 1.5% of national tourist flows are attributable to religious tourism. The identikit of the religious tourist is an adult who prefers to travel in companions and contact a tour operator to organise the own trip. Precisely, because of the personalisation it requires, religious tourism appears as an opportunity for many operators in the sector.

It also emerges a tendency to organise the own trip according to a more socially and environmentally sustainable style. A greater desire to meet with local communities prevails, which suggests a tourism product based on relationality and sociability, starting from the choice of accommodation facilities. This may also be perceived as a very valuable marketing indication for operators: however, it is necessary not to commit some "mistakes of the past" (Cugini, 2019a), i.e. not to involve local communities. An active role of territories, especially marginal areas, immediately translates into a chance for young people in those contexts where the percentage of NEETs is high as is the migration rate particularly at the high school level (brain drain). Religious tourism can, therefore, become an opportunity for the social cohesion of a territory. Network capacity is required to do this, both to facilitate the meeting between different subjects (companies, institutions, associations, religious bodies, etc.) and to enhance them if they are already there. Undoubtedly, that is not easy to manage, as it requires coordination between very different subjects (Cugini, 2019a), who also refer to different legal and regulatory systems (e.g. ecclesiastical and civil subjects). In this sense, we identify as "best practices" what has happened in recent years between the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) and the Italian government, through a series of national and local agreements (MIBAC, 2004; MIBACT et al. 2014). Social commitment is the meeting point between the two "objective-functions": on the one hand, there is the "pastoral" attention of religious subjects, which has a spiritual and educational purpose, and, on the other, there is the objective of social cohesion and the promotion of sustainable and inclusive models of local development. Another significant item is the preservation of cultural heritage and ecclesiastical goods that constitute a central aspect of religious tourism destinations, whose responsibility is distributed between two different subjects. The preservation of cultural heritage allies with the protection of natural resources, constituting a formidable horizon of the alliance between religious tourism and ecotourism (Yoder, 2017); in fact, there are some very interesting contact points between them, such as:

- a marked "ethical" motivation on the part of those who choose this type of tourism;
- sustainability as a frame of meaning within which organisational choices arise both from tourists and operators;

- the opportunity for local communities to plan "bottom-up" and place-based development models, oriented to the enhancement of local assets;
- a mix of tourism product that combines innovation (with particular attention to digital) and relationship;
- generative opportunity for entrepreneurship and youth employment;
- inclusiveness and potential integration of marginal resources.

3.1 Religious routes and paths as an integrated experience

As mentioned above, the pilgrimage on religious routes is an ancient practice, largely rooted in many confessions as an expression of a mainly religious experience (Nillson and Tesfahuney, 2016; Bravi, 2019). Nevertheless, as Cugini (2019b) and Cavuta and Di Matteo (2019) pointed out, more recently, this kind of religious tourism has gained new values for both people and territories hosting destinations: the experiential aspect (Cohen, 1979) as well as the emotional (Ahmed, 2004) and dynamic one (Olsen, 2010) - within tourist travels in general - are a new form of an intrinsic religiosity that people have been increasingly looking for (MacCannell, 1976). Hence, target groups of travellers on religious routes have enlarged from pilgrims *stricto sensu* to those (individuals and groups) looking for spiritual holidays as well as well-being and integrated experiences combining religious sites, cultural heritage, landscape and nature, traditions and crafts, food, wine, and local events (shared with local people to feel part of the local community) (Cavuta and Di Matteo, 2019; Cugini, 2019b).
In this framework, religious itineraries have been responding properly to this need as they represent a tourist experience that combines the enjoyment of nature, culture, religious or spiritual experiences; knowledge of unknown places, rich in history, art, and traditions; the well-being deriving from contact with natural landscapes, rich in biodiversity, and rural people living in ancient villages far from the most popular tourist circuits. Morazzoni and Boiocchi (2013) describe cultural-religious routes and paths in tourism as the result of three different components: religion, culture (in the broadest sense of the term) and the territory. Such experiences respond to the challenge of sustainability as opportunities for local development in depopulated areas that are still fascinating deposits of tangible and intangible heritage to be preserved and transferred to future generations. With this regard, as underlined by Bozzato (2018), the process of tracing a religious path certainly starts from the rediscovery of the spiritual value of a community; however, it becomes also a participatory process of territorial and landscape protection and enhancement. In this perspective, paths are unifying factors for the territories as they force local stakeholders, including the economic ones, to fight territorial de-fragmentation. In addition, they represent an opportunity for the development of territories that goes far beyond the economic aspect to generate social growth factors, such as: “favouring the meeting between different cultures, stimulating the decorum of landscapes and contexts, restoring centrality to internal areas and places considered "minor", encouraging the recovery of

abandoned rites and traditions, activating awareness of the protection and enhancement of common heritage, promoting the culture of hospitality, supporting qualified services to the person, working on the use and accessibility to reduce the social divide and encourage inclusion, and to combat abusiveness and the various forms of hardship and crime" (p. 25) (Bozzato et al., 2017).

3.2 Religious routes and paths and Italian policies

In Italy this awareness has been encouraged precise incentive policies for the establishment, improvement and effective practicability of Italian paths, orienting the national policies on Cultural Heritage and Tourism towards the implementation of an Italian national network of slow mobility. The Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism (MiBACT) proclaimed 2016 "Year of the Walking" and inaugurated the project of the Atlas of the Paths in Italy (Fig.1): a digital atlas in progress of the Italian paths (Innocenti, 2018). The purpose was to create a slow mobility network equipping the country system with a real intermodal infrastructure of green routes, able to allow people to move around Italy on foot, and to promote a new tourist dimension, attentive to the personalisation of the trip that the paths or the places crossed can offer. In this way, it was intended to enhance the extraordinary heritage composed of the network of historical, naturalistic, cultural and religious paths crossing the whole country and that are mostly unknown, but essential in the offer of slow Italian tourism.

Fig. 1 - The Atlas of Path in Italy. Source: MIBACT website

On the basis of the ministerial directive, the first selection of about forty Italian paths included "cultural itineraries of particular European and/or national importance, which can be travelled on foot or with other forms of sustainable sustainable mobility, and which represent a way of use of the widespread natural and cultural heritage, as well as an opportunity to enhance the natural, cultural and interested territories" (p. 4) (MIBACT, 2016). Also, the paths included in the Atlas have to meet 11 criteria, defined by the Paths Committee - the inter-institutional body composed of MiBACT, Regions and Autonomous Provinces - and establishing their effective tourist usability:

1. Linear and usable physical paths;
2. Presence of horizontal and/or vertical signs for each stage;
3. Path usable in safety;
4. Percentage of asphalted roads not exceeding 40%;
5. Stages with all walker support services;
6. Online description on the reference site of each stage;
7. Accommodation and restaurant services within 5 km of the way;
8. Presence of a "governing body" of the way;
9. Guarantee of supervision and maintenance of the route;

10. Georeferencing of the route;
11. Website of the path constantly updated.

Currently, the Atlas of Italian Paths includes 46 routes, while more than seventy ways are still in stand by.

3.3. The Sicilian case

Sicily is an incredible deposit of historical, cultural, naturalistic and religious paths. It currently includes:

- 2 official ways included into the national Atlas of Paths: the "Magna Via Francigena from Palermo to Agrigento" in the West, and the "Trekking of the Saint" (or "St.Nicolò Politi's Way") in the East of Sicily;
- 4 ways pending the acquisition of the last of the 11 Atlas of the Paths' requirements (2 are in the Western Sicily - the "Itinerarium Rosaliae" and the "Via Francigena Mazarense" - and 2 in the Eastern Sicily - the "Via Francigena Messina per le Montagne" and the "Via Francigena Fabaria");
- 1 mainly archaeological route crossing Sicily from the West to the East: the "Antica Trasversale Sicula";
- about forty smaller paths/trekking routes, which cover the regional territory widely.

With regard to the Sicilian main religious paths:

- **Magna Via Francigena** is a 8-stage pilgrimage itinerary from Palermo to Agrigento, founded on the restoration of the ancient Norman routes, plowed for millennia by pilgrims and travellers in the Byzantine, Islamic and early medieval ages. Promoted by the Municipality of Castronovo di Sicilia in partnership with 13 Municipalities, from the Diocese of Agrigento and with the support of the Friends of the Francigeni Paths of Sicily Association, the project enjoys the support of MIBACT and the Tourism, Sport and Entertainment Department of the Sicily Region;
- **The Trekking of the Saint** is a 4-days itinerary retracing the pilgrimage of the Holy Hermit, Nicolò Politi, from Adrano, his place of birth, to the Nebroid village of Alcara Li Fusi: it crosses the historical places where San Nicolò led part of his life, from the Etna Park to Nebrodi Park, among natural scenarios of extraordinary beauty;
- The **Itinerarium Rosaliae**, devoted to Rosalia Sinibaldi, the Saint Patron of Palermo, connects the Hermitage of Santo Stefano Quisquina (Agrigento) with the Sanctuary of Palermo (Fig. 2), crossing the territories of 14 Municipalities among parks, reserves, and rural villages;

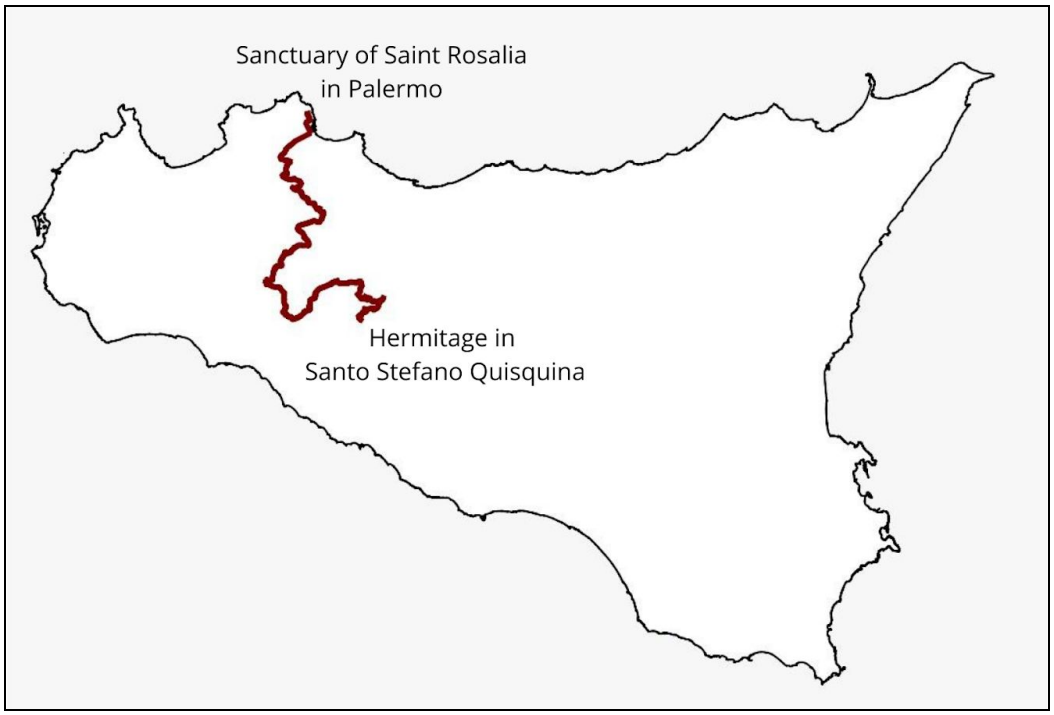

Fig. 2 - The Itinerarium Rosaliae, crossing territories from Palermo to Santo Stefano Quisquina (image courtesy of Kòrai - Territorio, Sviluppo e Cultura)

- The **Via Francigena Mazarense** incorporates a part of the via Selinuntina, from Agrigento to Marsala, the ancient Lilybeum in the Greek section, and a Norman part, from Marsala to Palermo, in the footsteps of the late imperial Roman road and the historical transhumance routes of western Sicily.
- The **Via Francigena Messina per le Montagne** crosses the entire arc of the Sicilian Apennines, following the path of its coastal ancestor, the Palermo-Messina for the marines, an ancient Roman consular way;
- The **Via Francigena Fabaria** incorporates a part of the oldest via Selinuntina, from Agrigento to Gela, which thus becomes the Greek part of the route. From Gela onwards, up to Lentini and then along the Simeto up to Randazzo, it follows the Norman part of the path.

The following table compares the main characteristics of the main paths in Sicily (Tab.1):

TAB. 1 - COMPARISON AMONG THE MAIN SICILIAN RELIGIOUS PATHS

	Magna Via Francigena from Palermo to Agrigento	**Trekking of the Saint /St.Nicolò Politi's Way**	**Itinerarium Rosaliae**	**Via Francigena Mazarense**	**Via Francigena Messina per le Montagne**	**Via Francigena Fabaria**
Inclusion	Included	Included	In stand by	In stand by	In stand by	In stand by

within the Atlas of Path						
Lenght	About 183 km	About 100 km	About 187 km	About	About 370 km	About 320 km
Territories crossed	19	5	14	18	37	13
Metropolitan cities involved	3 (Palermo, Caltanissetta, Agrigento)	2 (Messina, Catania)	2 (Palermo, Agrigento)	3 (Palermo, Trapani, Agrigento)	3 (Palermo, Enna, Messina)	4 (Agrigento, Caltanissetta, Catania, Siracusa)
Dioceses involved	5 (Palermo, Monreale, Piana degli Albanesi, Caltanissetta, Agrigento)	2 (Patti, Catania)	4 (Palermo, Monreale, Piana degli Albanesi, Agrigento)	5 (Palermo, Monreale, Trapani, Mazara del Vallo, Agrigento)	7 (Palermo, Messina-Lipari-Santa Lucia del Mela, Cefalù, Nicosia, Patti, Catania, Acireale)	5 (Agrigento, Piazza Armerina, Caltagirone, Siracusa, Catania)
Voluntary territorial committees	6	---	---	---	---	---
Services	Road signs; Cycling routes; pilgrim hospitality in parishes and associations, houses in countries, hotel at discounted prices, hostels, B&B, farmhouses, vehicle rental company with driver and a travel and tourism company as a partners.	Road signs; Sleeping in sleeping bags and widespread hospitality in exchange for a donation	Road signs (updating in accordance with the European road signs). Pilgrim hospitality in parishes and associations, houses in countries, hotel at discounted prices, hostels, B&B, farmhouses have still to be coordinated within a network).	B&B, farmhouse, and hotels	Road signs; pilgrim hospitality in parishes and associations, houses in countries, hotel at discounted prices, hostels, B&B, farmhouses, vehicle rental company with driver and a travel and tourism company as a partners.	Road signs (in progress); B&B, farmhouses and hotels.
Paper travel guide	✔	✘	✔	✘	✔	✘
App	✔	✘	✔	✘	✘	✘
Web Site	✔	✘*	✔**	✘	✘	✘***
Social media	FB official page, FB group (Amici della Magna Via Francigena), Instagram, YouTube		FB pages (Diocese of Palermo, and others by private groups of trekking), Instagram and You Tube (Diocese of Palermo)	FB group (Amici della Magna Via Francigena), Instagram)	FB group (Amici della Magna Via Francigena), Instagram)	FB group (Amici della Magna Via Francigena), Instagram)

*Promoted on: viesacredisicilia.it

**Promoted on the official website of the Sicilian Region. The Officina Territoriale of the Diocese of Palermo is working on the website “itinerariumrosaliae.it”

***Promoted on the "Amici della Magna Via Francigena" official site: camminifrancigenidisicilia.wordpress.com/magna-via-francigena/

The implementation of these religious routes is an example of emerging sustainable initiatives of enhancement of rural areas, often rising bottom-up by private associations or informal networks of local stakeholders (showing aggregations among local operators as a new trend). The ones mostly known in Sicily are:

1. The "Paths' Network ® in Sicily": a "second level" Social Promotion Association (i.e. open not to individuals, but to other non-profit Associations or Bodies), legally constituted in 2009;
2. "Sacred Ways of Sicily": a network of subjects, created in 2014, engaged in paths throughout Sicily combining a religious theme and a hiking practice. The Sicilian Episcopal Conference is part of the project;
3. The "Monti Sicani Operator Network": an association including about 41 tourism and cultural companies and operators, cooperating with local associations, bodies and individuals, to promote, through targeted and coordinated initiatives, local traditions and activities within the Sicani Mountains' territory.

In Sicily, alongside religious routes, also ecclesial cultural parks (e.g. "Terre dell'Etna e dell'Alcantara") begin to appear, promoted by the Italian Episcopal Conference: the term defines an area linked not only to the geographical territory, but also to culture, traditions, lifestyles, religious experiences as a response to the need for protection, enhancement of its historical, cultural, environmental, economic, spiritual peculiarities; a territorial system that promotes, recovers and enhances, through a coordinated and integrated strategy, the liturgical, historical, artistic, architectural, museum, hospitality and recreational heritage of one or more Particular Churches (De Marco, 2018). Such strategies are also compliant with the PSR Sicilia 2014-2020 Rural Development Program (EC Decision C (2015) 8403 of November 24, 2015): the financing and implementation instrument of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) of the Island that has three long-term strategic objectives for the 2014-2020 period: Competitiveness of the agricultural sector; Sustainable management of natural resources; Balanced development of rural areas (Regione Siciliana, 2015).

4. A case study in Sicily: the *Itinerarium Rosaliae*

With regard to the Sicilian religious routes mentioned above, the Itinerarium Rosaliae and the actions currently underway on it represent an interesting case study. The route is a naturalistic-religious path, connecting the places testifying to the passage of Saint Rosalia from the Hermitage of Santo Stefano Quisquina (Agrigento) to the Sanctuary of Monte Pellegrino (Palermo). It crosses uncontaminated environments of great value and very suggestive cultural areas belonging to the territories of 14 Municipalities of the Metropolitan Cities of Palermo and

Agrigento (S. Stefano Quisquina, Castronovo di Sicilia, Prizzi, Palazzo Adriano, Burgio, Chiusa Sclafani, Contessa Entellina, Bisacquino, Campofiorito, Corleone, Piana degli Albanesi, Altofonte, Monreale, and Palermo), and of the Dioceses of Palermo, Monreale, Agrigento and the Eparchy of Piana degli Albanesi (Fig. 3). The route winds along a network of paths, royal traces, mule tracks and abandoned railways; meets numerous parks and nature reserves (Monte Cammarata; Monte Carcaci; Monti di Palazzo Adriano and Valle del Sosio; Monte Genoardo and Santa Maria del Bosco; Bosco della Ficuzza, Rocca Busambra, Bosco del Cappelliere, Gorgo del Drago; Serre della Pizzuta; Monte Pellegrino), and crosses municipal territories with marked cultural peculiarities: among these, we can mention Piana degli Albanesi, Contessa Entellina and Palazzo Adriano, characterised by cultural peculiarities and ethnic-religious of the Arbëreshë (Italian-Albanian) communities in Sicily, such as the spoken dialect and the celebrations in the Greek Orthodox rite.

Fig.3 - The Itinerarium Rosaliae crossing the rural territories of 14 Sicilian Municipalities in detail (image courtesy of Kòrai - Territorio, Sviluppo e Cultura)

The path has been designed and implemented by the Office of Rural and Territorial Development of the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Mediterranean Fisheries of the Sicily Region, by using funds from the Sicily Rural Development Program 2007-2013: "Investments for the improvement, enhancement and recovery of forest ecosystems and investments for the

construction of structures and infrastructures aimed at increasing the tourist-recreational and educational use of the forest", for a total amount of € 670,715.81; the interventions concerned the signage, the cleaning, the safety, the construction of walkways and bridges, the apposition of sheds with cartography of the route. The Office also published a guide - in Italian and English - and a Web application to walk on the path following the GPS data provided. However, unlike the path of the Magna Via Francigena in Sicily, whose implementation and governance are due to the "Amici della Magna Via Francigena" association, the Itinerarium Rosaliae, implemented by a regional public institution, has had a very long and slow development process without real continuity. Currently, the route needs modifications in some points due to problems of practicability; the signage must be adapted to the European legislation; the path does not have a real governance, and a network of local stakeholders to constitute a tourist-cultural chain providing services to support the pilgrim/walker would be needed. Furthermore, until the present year, this naturalistic path had not yet received any official recognition from religious institutions. Importantly, the villages in the area of reference of the Itinerarium show a high tourist-cultural potential: as provided with nature reserves, parks, woods, lakes, churches, monuments, sanctuaries, religious and popular traditions, landscapes, and genuine foods, they can meet the needs of a very differentiated target of visitors (tourists, hikers, trekking lovers, pilgrims, lovers of nature and outdoor activities, but also of art, history, food and wine). Nevertheless, in recent decades, these rural areas have been suffering from rising unemployment, depopulation and population ageing, with a reduction of their vitality and economic development and an increasing risk of loss of cultural identity, memory, and traditions.

4.1 The Policoro Project and the Officina Territoriale Itinerarium Rosaliae

Policoro Project is a pastoral project of the Italian Church, carried out throughout the national territory by the Italian Bishop's Conference for promoting corporate culture in particular among young people, giving them a new perspective and hope for the future, in the light of the Gospel (Casile, 2009). In 2017, the Policoro Project of the Archdiocese of Palermo established the "Officina Territoriale Itinerarium Rosaliae": a territorial laboratory, whose purpose is the territorial animation of the area surrounding the entire path, in order to activate processes of cultural, social and human regeneration in it. The Officina Territoriale is a structural and methodological tool that the Tourism and Culture Team of Policoro Project-Palermo has chosen to: identify and enhance the resources of the territories crossed by the Itinerarium Rosaliae; build relationships and systemic networks to define a cultural-tourist relational offer of the territorial "community" (promoting the experience of the authenticity of places, the warmth and genuineness of human relationships, and the value of history, culture and traditions); plan and promote initiatives and events, capable of creating job opportunities in the territories (Progetto Policoro dell'Arcidiocesi di Palermo, 2020). The Officina Territoriale Itinerarium Rosaliae has been entrusted to a social enterprise, Kòrai - Territorio, Sviluppo e Cultura: a female cultural

cooperative company, composed of experts in the enhancement of Cultural Heritage, territorial marketing, tourism and business networks. Its task is implementing projects to enhance the Itinerarium, encouraging along the way the creation and strengthening of a tourist-cultural chain allowing the local development of the territory and stimulating youth entrepreneurship as a concrete sign of a social and pastoral action. The work of the Officina includes therefore the identification, analysis and systemisation of the historical, artistic, architectural, archaeological, environmental, landscape, demo-ethno-anthropological and food&wine cultural resources of the area, as well as the implementation of integrated projects of cultural innovation and social inclusion: that in order to favour the improvement of the territory and its local economic and social development by tourism. The Officina operates with the involvement of the associative and entrepreneurial territorial stakeholders, educational institutions, and parishes; it cooperates with municipal administrations, the university, consortia, professional orders and all the profit and non-profit, public and private stakeholders, interested to collaborate on the project.

4.2 The project of the Officina Territoriale Itinerarium Rosaliae for a local and sustainable development on the route

In order to improve the cultural, landscape and environmental heritage along the Itinerarium Rosaliae and to promote the economic, social and environmental sustainable development of its territories, since 2017 the Officina Territoriale has been designing and progressively implementing a strategic plan, currently in progress. It is based on: innovative integrated systems for the enhancement and use of territories; creative initiatives of territorial animation and social inclusion for local development in a tourist-cultural key; the engagement of visitors as protagonists of unique experiences within local communities; the creation of networks of local operators. With this regard, the Officina has started a collaboration with AssoretiPMI - a national association promoting the culture of business networks in Italy - and contacted some cooperatives, small businesses and individuals in the area, to implement a tourism-cultural chain on the path as a corporate network.

The Officina project foresees the creation of a network of "SMART Community Villages" along the Itinerarium, where values of Sustainability, Memory, Art, Regeneration, Territory (SMART acronym) will be described by the SMART Community through the Itinerarium website: it will also include an application and an e-commerce to promote and sell the offer of touristic services provided by the local operators of the network (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. - Scheme of the website aimed at promoting the touristic offer relating to the Itinerarium Rosaliae's network (image courtesy of Kòrai - Territorio, Sviluppo e Cultura)

The plan includes the following stages:

- Partnership with Regional Institutions and solicitation of an agreement between civil and religious institutions;
- Territorial analysis, study surveys, mapping and cataloguing of cultural, natural, artistic resources; census of operators, associations and companies in the area;
- Creation of the network of local operators;
- Creation of an integrated touristic offer;
- Creation of the digital infrastructure;
- Event and initiatives management in the area;
- Communication and promotion of the Itinerarium;
- Social impact monitoring.

It also includes education initiatives to create operators of high profile in the tourist and culture sector, able to work properly on a religious cultural and ecotourism path as the Itinerarium Rosaliae is.

The sustainable approach of the Officina project can be clearly found in its methodological and operational framework: the Officina operates on the territories by involving public and private territorial institutions, activating participatory processes, creating new networks on the territory

in the tourist-cultural field, strengthening the existing synergies around enhancement projects to requalify rural areas and to generate new job opportunities and entrepreneurial processes in tourism and culture. It also uses digital systems to promote cultural, social and environmental values of rural territories and communities.
Through the project here illustrated, the Officina Territoriale Itinerarium Rosaliae intends to help stop the progressive depopulation of villages, safeguard their deep identity and community dimension and promote tourist-cultural incoming and repopulation in favour of local development. The project aims also at encouraging: widespread hospitality, based on relational, experiential and inspirational tourism; cultural residences in the villages to increase cultural exchanges and innovation; the integration between agriculture and artisanal production, food experiences, trekking and nature initiatives; and the enhancement and promotion of the territory through digital techniques to generate added value for residents, travellers and new inhabitants.

5. Final remarks

Tourism on cultural-religious routes and paths is becoming a growing trend as the result of an integrated experience highly sought after by contemporary travellers. The new holiday models recently determined favour the return to nature, the rediscovery of spirituality, the demasification of consumption, the search for psycho-physical well-being, the transition to experiential holidays (Cicalò et al., 2015). A very interesting form of religious tourism is associated with "routes" and refers to the tradition of pilgrimages; those who choose this type of tourism generally show a strong ecological motivation, combining ethical-spiritual and naturalistic-environmental reasons. The growth of both types of tourism is an opportunity especially for marginal areas, mainly rural. Their decline indeed requires rethinking new opportunities for those territories affected by abandonment and demographic, social, economic, cultural and productive crisis. We should ask ourselves what are the prospects of these territories to be reinvented today, identifying the potential they can offer to the urban life models that characterise the condition of contemporary society. The main resource, which these territories can and must invest on, is represented by their historical, cultural, environmental and landscape assets. In this framework, some sustainable initiatives related to ecotourism and religious routes concern a new paradigm operating an ecological transition: it is able to grasp together the overcoming of the environmental and social crisis, but also the promotion of a new circular and technologically "green" economic model, taking care of the relationship between the environment and the communities. They include both "active" initiatives - taken on by companies, organisations and institutions whose specific functions and objectives are compliant with the United Nations SDGs - and "passive". This is crucial as the implementation and development of new models of sustainable use and management will ensure and encourage environmental-landscape integration with agriculture, craft and tourism-cultural activities of the country system as indicated in the 2017-2022 Strategic Tourism National Plan. In the last few years, the Italian policies related to tourism and culture

have shown a great attention for slow tourism, considered as a powerful tool capable of stimulating local development in rural areas. In particular, the creation of “engines” of sustainable development in the territories - by networks of stakeholders, cooperations between public and private sectors, and creative systems (also digital) to enhance tangible and intangible resources - can help rural areas to live a new life. In Sicily, where there are about fifty routes (although six are the main ones), some interesting experiences are arising. In particular, the example of the Itinerarium Rosaliae and its Officina Territoriale, managed by a skilled social cultural cooperative company, has been illustrated here: it represents an interesting case study of a territorial bottom-up laboratory, cooperating with both civil and religious institutions and private stakeholders for the sustainable local development of those rural areas crossed by the religious-naturalistic route. It encourages a synergic action among the different institutional Bodies involved to ensure practicability and services, and help local stakeholders to propose an integrated touristic offer along the way. It operates by:

1. censoring, enhancing and promoting the resources of the territory and the entrepreneurial or associative bodies that already work there to encourage cultural and tourist projects;
2. enhancing the skills of businesses and the offer of tourism and cultural services in the area, stimulating innovation, to help grow entrepreneurial skills in the tourism-culture sector;
3. cooperating with all operators for creating an integrated system of tourist and cultural offer on the Itinerarium, also assisting young people who intend to implement business start-up and start-up projects.

The model proposed and applied to religious routes is based on: innovative integrated systems for the enhancement and use of territories (in particular internal areas and paths) by digital technologies; creative initiatives of territorial animation and social inclusion of disadvantaged subjects; the creation and engagement of networks of local operators, and the engagement of visitors in the rural communities’ life for the local development of the area in a tourist-cultural key.

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