


Franco Antonelli and Siro Silvestri: The Architect and the Client in an Italian Diocese (Foligno, Umbria, 1955-75)

Franco Antonelli y Siro Silvestri: el arquitecto y el cliente en una diócesis italiana (Foligno, Umbría, 1955-75)

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Recibido: 15/07/2024

Aceptado: 09/08/2024

 <https://doi.org/10.17979/aarc.2024.11.0.11184>

ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to investigate the peculiar and innovative features of the design activity of architect Franco Antonelli in the Umbrian territory during the period 1955-75. As an architect, Antonelli possessed a sophisticated, innovative, and experimental personality, positively influenced by his enduring collaboration with Bishop Siro Silvestri. Several factors contributed to creating a productive and innovative partnership between them, which lasted nearly 15 years. Silvestri was a Conciliar father who believed in the radical renovation that the Liturgical Constitution could bring. Antonelli, instead, was a Catholic intellectual supporting the new relationship between liturgy and sacred space. The case study of the diocese of Foligno appears as an illuminating land of experimentation. By examining the realized parish centers, this paper reveals a novel Italian context in which the decision-making process was shaped by liturgical pastoral care and urban procedures, combined with innovative architectural practices.

KEYWORDS

Client, Franco Antonelli, Siro Silvestri, Umbria, religious architecture.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es investigar las características peculiares e innovadoras de la actividad de diseño del arquitecto Franco Antonelli en el territorio de Umbría durante el período 1955-75. Como arquitecto, Antonelli poseía una personalidad sofisticada, innovadora y experimental, influenciada positivamente por su duradera colaboración con el obispo Siro Silvestri. Varios factores contribuyeron a crear entre ellos una asociación productiva e innovadora que duró casi quince años. Silvestri era un padre conciliar que creía en la renovación radical que la Constitución Litúrgica podría traer. Antonelli, en cambio, era un intelectual católico que apoyaba la nueva relación entre liturgia y espacio sagrado. El caso de la diócesis de Foligno, tema central de este artículo, aparece como una tierra iluminadora de experimentación. Al examinar los centros parroquiales realizados, este artículo revela un nuevo contexto italiano en el que el proceso de toma de decisiones se configuraba por el cuidado pastoral litúrgico y los procedimientos urbanos, combinados con prácticas arquitectónicas innovadoras.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Comitente, Franco Antonelli, Siro Silvestri, Umbria, arquitectura religiosa.

CÓMO CITAR: Zito, Carla. 2024. «Franco Antonelli and Siro Silvestri: The Architect and the Client in an Italian Diocese (Foligno, Umbria, 1955-75)». *Actas de Arquitectura Religiosa Contemporánea* 11: 22-33. <https://doi.org/10.17979/aarc.2024.11.0.11184>.

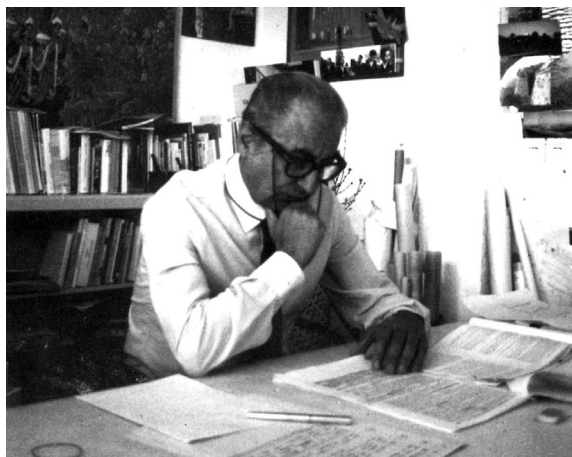


Fig. 01. Franco Antonelli (1929-97).

INTRODUCTION

The influential role of Franco Antonelli in the landscape of the Italian architecture circles has been widely acknowledged and documented in previous studies (e.g., Belardi and Marandola 2022). In this paper, I focus on the design activity that Antonelli exerted in the Umbrian territory during the period 1955-75, which has been somewhat neglected in previous literature. By examining the case study of Foligno, my objective is to show that the implications and the synergic forces brought by the liturgical reform of the Sacrosanctum Concilium, promulgated by Paul VI on December 4, 1963, have been more radical and profound than expected, creating innovative forms of partnerships between architects and dioceses not only in prominent Italian cities, but also in peripheric areas where the outcome of these innovative experiences have been, perhaps, more visible and enduring.

Antonelli's architectural work features a sophisticated, innovative and experimental personality, whose novel and interesting characteristics were positively, and deeply, influenced by the long-lasting cooperation (nearly 15 years) with his client, Bishop Siro Silvestri. Inspired by the peculiar and synergic collaboration between Antonelli and Silvestri, my study reveals the factors that contributed to make this partnership innovative and successful (Fig. 01),

emphasizing at the same time the implications that Antonelli's work in the Umbrian territory had on the Italian religious architecture during and after his activity.

The figure of Franco Antonelli can be fully casted into the Italian panorama of religious architecture. In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, the combination of his design practice, international contaminations, knowledge of the liturgical theme, innovations in the use of materials, as well as his studies concerning to the use of sacred architecture spaces, provided a corpus of contributions that, even just from a quick reading of his biography and the literature citing his work, went well beyond his notoriety in the local Umbrian context.

To gain useful background, it is convenient to move backward, reconstructing Antonelli's work by first looking at the territory of Foligno, which was one of the many Italian realities of the post-World War II reconstruction. Focusing on such case study, indeed, clarifies how the impact of Antonelli 'professional approach made it possible to compare the Foligno experience with relatively more prominent national networks, operating in the major Italian dioceses, that were inspired by the synergic nexus between the liturgical reform and the urban planning policies (see footnote 1 below).

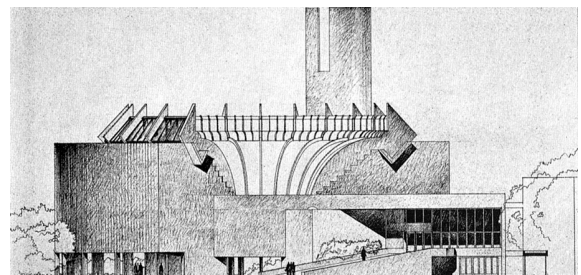
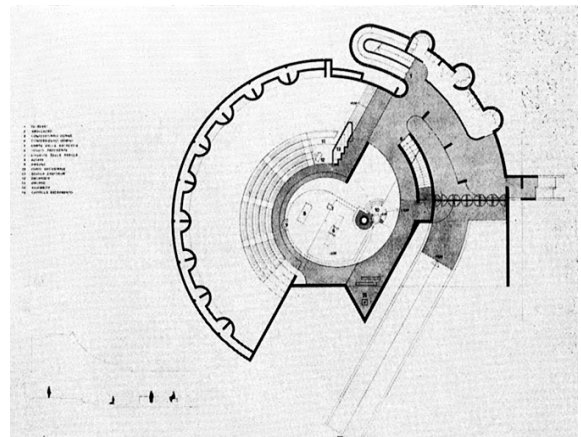
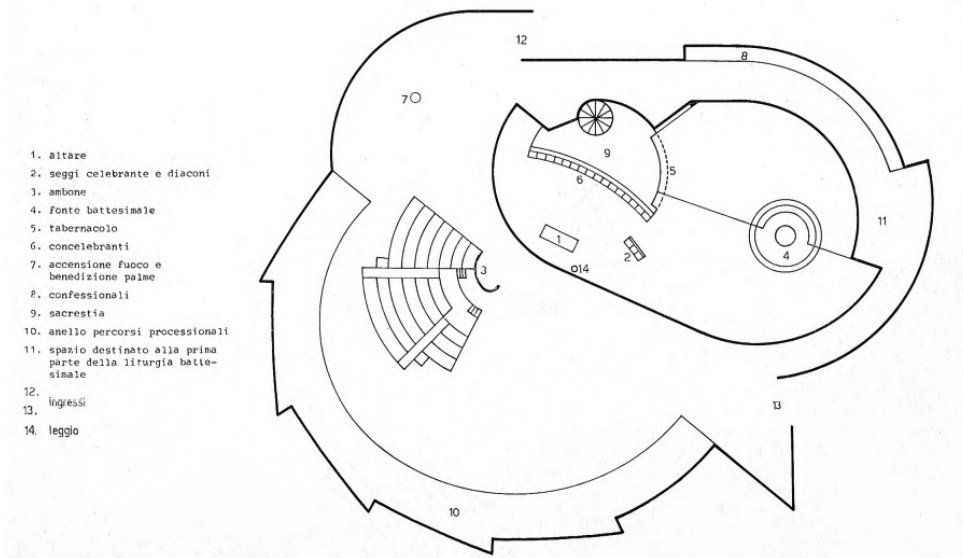


Fig. 02. Franco Antonelli, Competition of Ascoli Piceno (Italy), 1966.

Fig. 03-04. Franco Antonelli, Competition of Cattolica (Italy), 1967.

Notably, historiography (referred to at the time as the architectural chronicle) reveals the efforts of teams of young professionals tackling an ancient theme. These pioneering competitions broke away from the ‘clientelist and circumscribed’ practices of local technicians, addressing the client’s requests with an innovative spirit. As a result, places of worship became spaces of significant experimentation and freedom.

The importance and influence of Antonelli’s work during this period can be better understood through the words of Bruno Zevi in 1970. In short, Zevi claimed that Franco Antonelli’s work is situated within the years when architectural experimentation in religious architecture was emerging from *a tabula rasa*. This was largely because the norms of the Sacrosanctum Concilium, granted designers significant freedom, thus stimulating their initiative and experimentation.

Nevertheless, after half a century of new churches, it must be acknowledged that very few projects have emerged as true products of experimentation. It is important to remember that the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was the result of at least twenty years of liturgical research, beginning with Pius XII’s *Mediator Dei* in 1947. Many young architects began their experiments due to their sensitivity, critical approach, and alignment with the liturgical movement, driven by the need to involve the Christian community as active participants in the liturgical celebration. Antonelli has been the most prominent of those architects.¹

Building on the above considerations, in this paper I will argue that Antonelli’s architectural language reveals a compositional sensitivity capable of integrating past and contemporary models without merely imitating them. His architecture is essential, plastic, and designed to fulfil the functions of religious buildings. It represents an extreme synthesis of avant-garde architectural models, supported by the region’s tradition. The Foligno experience, and its implications in the whole Umbrian territory, is a shining example, though less known, example of his innovative activity. Examining his Umbrian work, one encounters solutions characterized by new

combinations of structural elements without ever falling into eclecticism.

In sum, these elements underscore the necessity of including Antonelli’s work and the patronage of Bishop Siro Silvestri in the panorama of sacred architecture of the second half of the twentieth century in Italy, highlighting their roles as significant contributors to this intellectual, artistic, and social phenomenon.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I offer a brief overview of Antonelli’s professional figure. In Section 3, I describe the program of Siro Silvestri’s episcopate. Section 4 provides an analytical description of the Umbrian experiment and the related places of worship. Section 5 concludes emphasizing the limitations of my study—i.e., the aspects that I decided to keep outside the scope of this study— and drawing new avenues for future research.

FRANCO ANTONELLI’S VIEW

Antonelli’s national prominence in the field of religious architecture began in 1966 when he won first place in the Ascoli Piceno competition (Fig. 02). The following year, in 1967, he achieved second place *ex-aequo* in the Cattolica competition (CONCERTO K 488) for designing an ecumenical church (Fig. 03-04). The innovations in these projects marked the beginning of using ecclesial buildings as an expression of a new architectural language and embracing liturgical innovations. Although the Ascoli Piceno competition was originally a theoretical exercise and the Cattolica project was never realized, these two experiences were crucial for the early and gradual national debate following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Along with competitions in Rome, Turin, and Ravenna, the Ascoli Piceno and Cattolica competitions were recognized as ‘places of research’ where architects, town planners, and sociologists collaborated with a liturgical consultant for the first time.

«The new liturgical space must have an urban dimension, revitalised and marked by a new organisation of the main elements necessary for liturgical action (altar, choir, baptismal font, altar

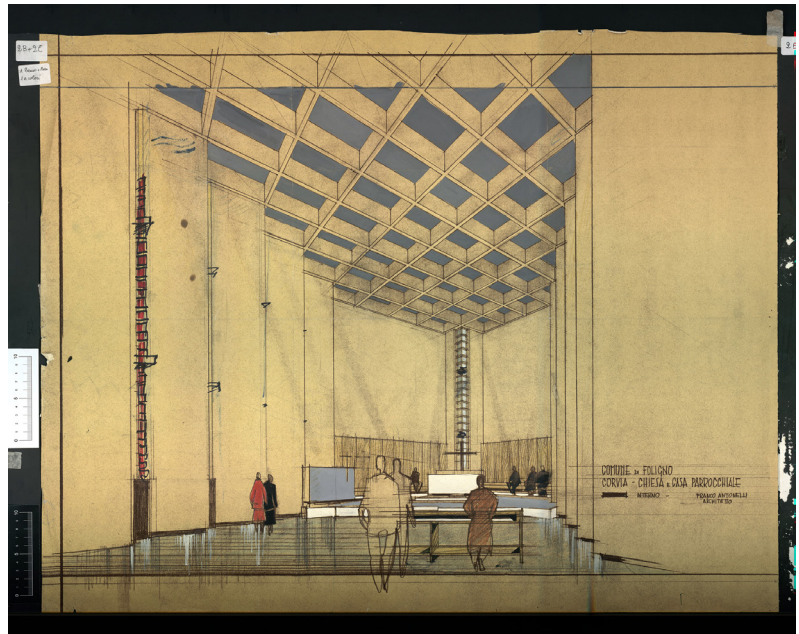
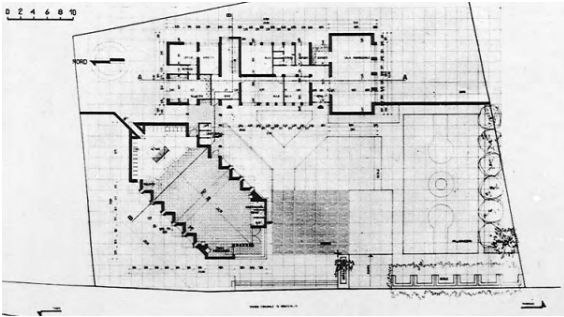


Fig. 05-08. Franco Antonelli,
S. Pietro Apostolo, Foligno (Italy),
1959-66.



of the Sacrament...»). Franco Antonelli began his descriptive presentation for the *Concorso di Idee: Spazio Architettonico per l'assemblea liturgica* (Competition of Ideas: Architectural Space for the Liturgical Assembly) with these words. Announced in May 1966 by the diocese of Ascoli Piceno, the competition sought designs for «a place of worship for an assembly of 700-800 people in a city with strong industrial development and a heterogeneous sociological structure». Additionally, it called for a focus on «the features of the interior architectural space».

SIRO SILVESTRI'S EPISCOPAL PROGRAMM

Siro Silvestri, Bishop of Foligno from 1955 to 1975, participated in the Second Vatican Council from its opening session on 11 October 1962 to its conclusion on 8 December 1965. His activities as a conciliar father can be reconstructed through the 'Diario del Vescovo' (Bishop's Diary), which documents the key commitments of his episcopate from 1959 to 1969. Silvestri, as a conciliar father, strongly believed in the radical renovation that the Liturgical Constitution would bring (Sensi 2005).

Since 1956, the bishop had recognized the urgency of defining new parish areas and scheduling the related service centres to create new gathering spaces. He initiated his building programme with the construction of the parish complexes of Maria Santissima Immacolata, Santissimo Nome di Gesù, and San Giuseppe Artigiano. His programme emphasized practicality and functionality for the parish complex and strong, modern artistic expression for the Church, facilitated through the collaboration of Franco Antonelli, a Catholic intellectual and advocate of the new relationship between liturgy and sacred space. They had been working together since the end of 1959, recognizing each other's roles in this mission.

Their partnership established two primary guidelines:

a. Urgency in defining new parish areas and designing the related service centers to create gathering spaces.

b. Practicality and functionality for parish centers, combined with a strong, modern artistic expression for the Church.

Starting from initial experiments, Antonelli explored new aspects of sacred spaces, proposing innovative planimetric solutions, single-section studies, and testing technological advancements. He rejected the traditional model of sacred space, opting for welcoming spatial designs without defining a rigid typological model.

The diocese of Foligno emerged as a land of experimentation and dialogue between these two actors, adapting new projects despite economic difficulties caused by insufficient state funding. Observing the parish centers built reveals the Umbrian context as another Italian region where the decision-making process integrated liturgical pastoral care, urban planning procedures, and innovative architectural practices.

From the mid-1950s to the 1990s, seven parish churches were built in the diocese of Foligno, most during the episcopate of Monsignor Siro Silvestri. In Italy, starting in the second half of the twentieth century, the construction of new places of worship and pastoral centers became necessary in newly developed districts. This was facilitated by state contributions allocated by law no. 2522 of 1952, later integrated and replaced by law no. 168 of 1962. This process also took place in the Foligno area and was integrated with the post-war reconstruction plan of the city of Foligno, launched in March 1945 and completed in September 1955.

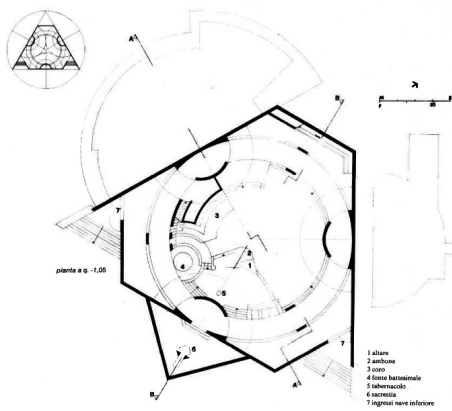
PLACES OF WORSHIP

The Umbrian territory served as Antonelli's experimental ground, with new parish centers established in the peripheral areas. His studies on sacred parish spaces ran parallel to his work on the construction of the Augustinian Monastery of Santa Maria di Betlem.

The parish center of San Pietro Apostolo (1959-66) includes a church, parish house, and facilities for pastoral ministry (Fig. 05-08). The church features a nave of approximately 300 square meters with a longitudinal layout, its axis inclined at 45° to the



Fig. 09-11. Franco Antonelli, Santa Croce in Limiti, Spello (Italy), 1961-69.
Fig. 12-13. Franco Antonelli, Buon Pastore, Foligno (Italy), 1970-82.



main road. The Brutalist architecture is characterized by an outer perimeter with parallelepiped and perpendicular faces, punctuated by thin slits that allow light to penetrate. Corner windows connect to the roof, extending a lacunar ceiling with a hollow surface beyond the building's perimeter. Inside, a processional way leads to the presbyterial area, raised by about 40 cm, where the altar and stone ambo are located, and a triangular apse at the back.

In 1960, Antonelli began designing the parish complex of Santa Croce in Limiti (1961-69) (Fig. 9-11). The fan-shaped layout of the liturgical hall was a pioneering solution for that period, prioritizing community and social dimensions over architectural form. The assembly is arranged around the altar, creating a space that relates to the individual, the community, and the local reality. Antonelli emphasized collaboration between the ecclesial and social communities, laying the foundations for a new pastoral approach characterized by pathways and open and closed spaces on a single floor. The absence of monumentality and the rejection of church pre-eminence dominate the design, with space perception driven by volumes interacting with light sources. A contemplative way of the cross leads to the hall, mirroring the simple, crude plastered masonry and light-tinted exterior.

Antonelli's significant commission regarding liturgical space involved the interior of San Giuseppe Artigiano, designed by architect Francesco Zanetti and engineer Giuseppe Tosti. In 1965, Antonelli redesigned the entrance and liturgical hall layout, initially on a longitudinal axis, to create an interacting space between the nave and the presbytery. The altar and ambo project into the hall, representing the first experimentation with conciliar features to enhance the assembly's role and facilitate the renewed liturgy in line with *actuosa participatio*. Glauco Gresleri describes this 'interacting' space concept as an area where relations develop in a mesh pattern rather than tree-like, fostering a continuous exchange between liturgical actions and their enjoyment.

The church of Buon Pastore (1970-84) features a circular, wrap-around hall, utilizing competition schemes from Ascoli and Cattolica. The design

integrates interior volumetric envelopes, with floor plans reminiscent of central-plan buildings like Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome or San Vitale in Ravenna and echoes the geometries of Roman Baroque floor plans. The volumetric development draws inspiration from Wright and Michelucci's contemporary church in Longarone (1966-78) (Fig. 12-13). Antonelli's design also references Adolf Loos' Raumplan or 'volume plan' concept, utilizing materials like concrete to their full potential. The equilateral triangle geometry of the church hall positions the main liturgical poles in the central area, protected by an ambulatory that creates multiple raised levels from a partly underground central space.

The church of San Ferdinando (1971-83) is among the first post-conciliar designs in Perugia. The church, with its Brutalist character, features a volume composed of pure solids. Like Santa Croce, the interior space is shaped by light interacting with the exposed structural system. The design's meticulous attention to detail emphasizes the project's conceptual purity, moving from the general to the particular (Fig. 14-15).

The final building is the church and parish complex of Sacro Cuore (1982-94) in the Flaminio district. In a low-density residential area, the church opens with a reception area and an early Christian 'quadriporticus', giving it a monumental appearance that contrasts with the surrounding architecture and reflects the sociological intentions of the territory. The geometry of the external forms and the interior's strong symmetries (a rectangular hall with four quadrilobed pillars supporting the roof) and brick detailing down to the window frames highlight the meticulous construction details, avoiding pure ornamentation.

Lastly, the Augustinian Monastery of Santa Maria di Betlem (1968-97) encompasses all of Antonelli's themes (Fig. 16-18):

- Emphasis on the *genius loci*, harmonizing with the landscape.
- Design influenced by Le Corbusier's La Tourette Monastery.
- Concept of a bastion of faith marked by a bell tower.



- Plasticity and lightness of design, reminiscent of Baroque perspective artifice.
- Use of concrete as both an exposed load-bearing element and support for surfaces clad in split stone.
- Seriality of prefabricated window modules, enhancing volumetric articulation and plastic intent.
- Integration of wood, stone, and exposed concrete, demonstrating their harmonious coexistence in a single framework.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The necessity to include Antonelli's work and the patronage of Bishop Siro Silvestri in the panorama of sacred architecture of the second half of the twentieth century in Italy arises from recognizing a diocesan reality that produced architecture aligned with liturgical pastoral practice, urban planning procedures, and activated experimental and courageous architectural practices. To outline the prerequisites for advancing study proposals for potential new realities, we could define them as follows:

- Theoretical thinking in the practice of experimental competitions
- Originality of architectural experimentation
- Architecture planned for new communities in line with the directives of the Second Vatican Council
- Consistent and collaborative episcopal clients during the economic boom years

Taken together, these propositions show that Antonelli's architectural language managed to integrate in an innovative manner old and new models. His style and evolution have introduced the canons of essentiality, plasticity and immediacy in sacred architecture, embracing at the same time local traditions.

Examining his work, one encounters solutions characterized by new combinations of structural

elements without ever falling into eclecticism. This approach echoes Adolf Loos' sentiment in *Ornament und Verbrechen* (1908), where he states: «The artist's task would be to find a new formal language for the new material. Everything else is imitation».

The analysis conducted suggests that Franco Antonelli embodied the power and intellectual honesty in modern design choices, aligning with the Austrian master's admonition to architects to risk a few commissions to preserve their authenticity.

It is worthwhile concluding with few references to the limitations of my analysis and with a look forward towards new research avenues. Although the scope of my analysis was purposefully to show that local experience of Umbria mirrored the case of more prominent dioceses, it would be interesting to examine how the facts documented in this paper have impacted later generations of architects both at local and national levels. Moreover, although the analysis/comparison of the corpus of Antonelli's works in the field of sacred architecture has made it possible to give a complete picture of his professional activity (by bringing together the theoretical, far-sighted and acute activity, applied to the experiences of competitions and the implementation in the realization of projects involved in the urban context) it would be also interesting to investigate whether and to what extent this experience can be considered minor or more general and widespread than expected. Last, but not least, beyond purely architectural aspects, this additional Italian story allows us to further support the importance of the client in projects. If a relationship of constructive confrontation is established between the parties, the well-being of the local communities is very often guaranteed even through a feeling of belonging to the place, with obvious positive effects on social capital. Are there other architects that as Antonelli were able to bring theoretical aspects at work within the Italian territories for what concerns religious architecture? If so, is there a common ground between them? What are the divergence points, if any? I plan to investigate these interesting questions in my future research.

Fig. 14-15. Franco Antonelli, San Ferdinando, Perugia (Italy), 1972-82.



Fig. 16-18. Franco Antonelli, Augustinian Monastery of Santa Maria of Betlem, Foligno (Italy), 1969-94.



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SOURCE OF IMAGES

Fig. 01, 06. Belardi and Marandola 2022.

Fig. 02. Gresleri 1967.

Fig. 03-04. Gresleri 1968.

Fig. 05, 07-18. Carla Zito Archive.

NOTES

1. The historical-architectural literature tells us how an inspired client of a bishop-builder generated a flourishing exchange with certain planners. The conciliar era of the second half of the 20th century is certainly linked to the entourage of the magazine *Chiesa e Quartiere* around Cardinal Lercaro, archbishop of Bologna from 1952 to 1968; to the architects who worked under the commission of Cardinal Montini in Milan from 1954 to 1963; to the architects in the diocese of Turin during the episcopate of Cardinal Pellegrino from 1967 to 1977 and architect Berarducci for the diocese of Rome.