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The Vatican is helping organize an international conference meant to help dioceses work with their local communities in finding appropriate uses for decommissioned churches.

The Pontifical Council for Culture, together with Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University and the Italian bishops' conference, will sponsor the gathering, titled "Doesn't God Dwell Here Anymore? Decommissioning Places of Worship and Integrated Management of Ecclesiastical Cultural Heritage," Nov. 29-30 in Rome.

In the run-up to the conference, the public is invited to photograph and post on Instagram examples of deconsecrated churches being reused in a positive way, since examples of churches turned into night clubs and gyms garner the bulk of media attention.

The photographs, to be tagged with #NoLongerChurches, #unigre and a hashtag of the name of the church and city, are meant to showcase positive ways the historical, social, artistic and sacred significance of such buildings can be maintained or highlighted.

Photographs must be posted between July 10 and Oct. 15, and selected winners will have their images displayed at the international conference and published on the sponsors' websites and in Italian magazines dedicated to Christian art, the church and architecture.

Researchers and academic institutes also are being invited to submit posters and papers on completed studies or projects underway dealing with the revitalization or repurposing of deconsecrated or underutilized places of worship.

The results of the Instagram contest and call for papers will be used to inform and help bishops as they consider what to do with closed parishes.

Representatives from bishops' conferences in Europe, North America and Oceania are invited to attend the conference to discuss and approve guidelines addressing the reuse of deconsecrated church properties.

Whether or when a church should be deconsecrated or sold will not be the focus of the conference and its resulting guidelines; its purpose is to show the need for a long-term planning process that involves the whole community and aims for reaching an understanding about how such structures should be reutilized or rebuilt.

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Vatican's culture council, told reporters July 10 that former places of worship must retain some spiritual, social or culture value within the community and that every possible effort must be made to safeguard the church's patrimony, for example, by transferring mobile assets to diocesan museums.

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Current criteria for guiding this process, he said, "are too generic."

While European churches built during the Renaissance, Baroque or other periods may have great artistic value, it must not be forgotten that a simple brick or wooden church in North America also carries important "spiritual value," said Richard Rouse, an official at the Pontifical Council for Culture.

"They may not have Michelangelo's frescoes decorating the interior, but so many of these places of worship were built thanks to the donations, support and hard work of

generations of families, and for some members of the local community, they would still have strong emotional significance," he told Catholic News Service July 11.

The conference "will seek to demonstrate that the cultural patrimony of the church, built up with faith and charity over time, is still able to transmit Christian culture if it is properly enhanced and not seen as a burden to maintain," the organizers said in a press release.

Success, the statement said, will depend on involving the church community in appreciating and managing their patrimony and on the formation of skilled architects, builders and planners who are "culturally motivated."