

August 2023

## From Food to Religion: Two Case Studies in the South of Italy

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### Recommended Citation

Ivona, Antonietta and Privitera, Donatella (2023) "From Food to Religion: Two Case Studies in the South of Italy," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*: Vol. 11: Iss. 4, Article 7.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/N6DX-PS44>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijrtp/vol11/iss4/7>

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### Cover Page Footnote

This paper is the result of joint work. However, sections 1, 4.2 and 5 are attributed to Antonietta Ivona; sections 2, 3, 4.1 are attributed to Donatella Privitera.

# From Food to Religion: Two Case Studies in the South of Italy

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This research aims to understand the connection between food and religious events and how they have become a focus of new tourist routes in the ‘year of the restart’, a time period marked by the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The combination of religion and food seems to be successful in attracting tourists in the new scenarios created by the pandemic. The research aims to examine the potential for combining religious tourism with local food to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of destinations, using two case studies from Saint Aghata in Catania and Saint Nicholas in Bari, Italy. The findings of the study suggest that food is an important aspect of religious events, it plays a role in the expression of cultural identity, and the support of local economies. This study adds to the existing literature on food and religious events, and it offers insights into the complex relationship between food, faith, and tourism.

**Key Words:** religious tourism, Italy, qualitative analysis, gastronomic heritage

## Introduction

Religious tourism is a type of cultural tourism, widely practiced not only for spiritual urges and art-historical and architectural values of places, but also for the desire of an intimate experiential enrichment (Griffin & Raj, 2017). As defined by Alex Norman, spiritual tourists are individuals who seek spiritual progression and engage in spiritual practices during their travels (Norman, 2011).

Participating in a religious events is not all about faith. It is a journey of interior discovery and is also an opportunity to learn about authentic local food and other components of the destination. Religious events are also a scenario where ‘locals’ play a significant role in introducing new tastes, shaping, and creating great experiences and showcasing the unique ‘food identity’ of an area to participants (Sahoo, 2020).

The relationship between food and religion has received a great deal of attention in the narratives of politics and in

the media, whereby various actors produce and mobilise discourses on food – in particular related to civil society and food movements. The relationship is also of interest to scholars, within areas such as religious studies and the social sciences, including geography (Michopoulou & Jauniškis, 2020).

Itineraries of faith, could represent a possible response to development needs since, as established by the Council of Europe, they constitute a useful tool for increasing the competitiveness and development of the areas crossed. They are also important for strengthening local and regional identities (Sgroi, 2021).

*Religious tourism has become a new tourism product that transcends purely religious motivations ... such tourists practice a religious faith, but [also] they are motivated by knowledge of the culture or religion of a particular place (González-González & Fernández-Álvarez, 2022:1)*

Like all other forms of tourism, religious events are undertaken and lived as a multisensory experience; the religious faith of the tourist can enhance the experience and the different senses and a key component among these

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there is certainly taste. Religious feasts are an excellent disseminator of knowledge of local products and culture (Cavicchi & Ciampi Stancova, 2016). According to Hwang *et al.*, culinary heritage is strongly linked to identity and multiple imaginary symbols are attributed to the style of eating (Hwang *et al.*, 2005:229). In recent years, for example, the so-called street food, present during religious rites in the Asian world, has frequently populated Western religious holidays.

Given the scarcity of research on food as a religious tourism attraction, this study explores and deepens the theme of the union between food and religious events, particularly evident during devotional feasts linked to the identity of a territory. An analysis of the attractive elements that transform a religious celebration into a tourist event allows us to identify and evaluate the significant economic benefits for the host local community; food is universally recognised as one of those ideal experiential vectors that encourage participation in both sensory pleasure and tourism activities.

The increasing complexity of the concept of experience calls for more comprehensive approaches to understanding the gastronomic experience. These approaches should consider the various actors and structures involved in creating experiences and highlight the connections between different experience touchpoints, both within and outside of the tourist event itself (Richards, 2021). Every traveller, regardless of their religious beliefs, can feel the spirituality of a place during an event, but they also appreciate the other dimensions of the event (e.g. food, atmosphere, leisure activities, sounds and music). Son and Xu (2013) confirm that food is relevant in the religious travel experience having major roles such as a means of novelty-seeking - to have a more adventurous dining behaviour; a means of sensory pleasure that gratifies all of the five human senses; a peak tourist experience role as an intangible souvenir; a symbol of a unique and authentic experience; a symbol of an individual's social status and prestige and; a medium for cultural exploration because culinary experience in a foreign country means a way of tasting new and different cultures.

Most religious tourism research has taken a qualitative, essentially ethnographic approach to collecting empirical

data. This study is no exception. There are various ways to document activities and interactions during events, and the empirical work of this study combines visual multi-sensory observations, and interviews to understand the experiences of religious tourists and the local population during events.

Pandemic restrictions and the necessary social distancing have generated questions about the 'day after' for the religious tourism (Tsironis, 2022), especially in relation to the values attributed to proximity, sharing and community worship in the tradition of faiths - in this instance in the Catholic Church. Building on these questions, this analysis aims to explore the key factors that may shape future trends and plans for religious tourism intertwined with heritage culture, while considering two main elements - the modern quest for authenticity and the tourist experience.

The study approach is qualitative; focusing on undertaking an analysis on some effects of religious and gastronomic tourism on a given community. After an initial review of the existing literature on the union between religion and food and religious tourism, the research aims to understand the significance of faith in religious tourism and to explain the phenomena associated with the connection between food and religious traditions. The study also aims to examine whether combining religious events and typical food can be used as a tourist resource and thereby contribute to the economic development of the host community, including increasing recognition of the location and promoting the dissemination of cultural knowledge and resources. The study employs an exploratory and descriptive approach, as described in the existing literature on the topic, according to the principles outlined by Yin (2017). Two case studies are analysed, the feast of the Patron Saint Aghata in Catania and of Saint Nicholas in Bari (both in the South of Italy).

### **Religion and Food: a Link to Religious Tourism**

Food is, for most religions, an item of value as well as a substance or product: yesterday as today, the faithful recognise eating and drinking as actions charged with strong religious significance. Religions consider food as a gift from the divine and / or nature, which should call

everyone to an awareness of nourishment, not to take the availability of food for granted, and not to reduce meals to a succession of automatic gestures. In addition, food plays a key role in the economic development of local communities; it attracts the curious and enthusiastic who, at the same time, discover places and spread their knowledge. Since 2003, UNESCO has recognised food as playing a leading role in the identification and protection of intangible cultural heritage. Food is considered the result of interaction between different dimensions of sensory experience, operating at the same time on the individual and within human communities for individual holistic well-being (Lee & Wall, 2020).

Following a religious path, the cultivation of spirit, the landscape of nature, and local gastronomy are all the result of ancient knowledge. An example of this historical food is street food, which can serve as a tourist attraction because it offers an experience that allows tourists to gain a sense of the place where it is being offered. This is just as important in place-identity as a church, sanctuary, or other peaceful place which can also serve as a tourist attraction. When local food is experienced, it helps to strengthen the connection between the core religious values of these sites and those of the local community, supporting not only religious values but also broader cultural and heritage traditions (Clarke & Raffay, 2015).

Events of all types have become important factors in the attractiveness of destinations and countries, and religious festivals and pilgrimages can be seen as events that include cultural elements and a sense of place (Getz & Page, 2016). It is important to consider the multifaceted aspects of the religious festival experience, such as education, aesthetics, escapism, community, spirituality, and authenticity (Piramanayagam & Seal, 2021). A religious feast day is often the focus of extended festivities, which may include religious rituals such as attending church and fasting, as well as feasting, or indulging in excessive eating or drinking. Food, therefore, is a component of religious feasts. Food and gastronomy are indelibly connected with religion, and religion is one of the clearest manifestations of culture (Aram & Honggang, 2013; Bellia *et al.*, 2021).

Food is inseparably connected to religious rituals and practices, whether it is the prohibition or praise of food,

different religions use food for ritual and communal purposes, as well as food being a wider cultural and heritage attraction (Aulet *et al.*, 2021). Often, food is part of a ritualised exchange and most traditional holiday and celebratory occasions, including religious and ethnic events such as Hanukkah, or Passover, are marked with special foods xxx name more examples.

Certain trends in consumption habits, in addition to increased awareness of wellness are driving a shift towards a more sustainable consumption. Consumers are more and more attentive to product labels, to be aware of the origin of ingredients. Cafés and bars, street food vendors and full services restaurants are all cognisant of these trends and are utilising them to drive the growth in consumption in the coming years (Deloitte, 2022).

Street food is a popular and integral part of many religious events around the world. It is often a way for local communities to come together and celebrate their faith through food, and it can also be an important source of income for small vendors. Street food at religious events can range from traditional dishes that are specific to a particular religion or culture, to more diverse and eclectic offerings that reflect the cultural influences of the territory. In addition to providing a sense of community and cultural identity, street food at religious events can also be a way for tourists to experience local flavours and traditions, and can help to support the local economy. Overall, street food is an important and vibrant aspect of religious events, and is a valuable part of the overall experience for both locals and visitors alike (Jones, 2019).

### Conceptual Approach

From a theoretical point of view, religious tourism is often an important support for tourist attractions; in fact, we examine the union between religion and food which during religious events can become a factor of success and an opportunity for economic development for the host community. Exploring the factors that contribute to the success of religious festivals is thus, of paramount importance.

While the related literature and the content of websites have been thoroughly explored, this study focuses on

participant observation and reflects also on the personal experiences of the authors. This research has a qualitative approach, to understand a specific phenomenon in a specific context / setting (Golafshani, 2003) and acknowledges the limitations due to the constraint of limited generalisability (Creswell, 2003). Employing a case-study approach, this paper discusses two religious festivals: that of Saint Aghata in Catania (Sicily) and of Saint Nicholas in Bari (Apulia).

Several tourism scholars have discussed the concept of using attractions as an analytical category, as was first proposed by Leiper (1990). Specially in case of festivals (McKercher *et al.*, 2006), Leiper's conceptual approach has been fruitfully applied but it has also been employed in studying other tourism processes such as cultural behaviour (Richards, 2002). Leiper's original conceptualisation of tourism attractions concerns

*a system comprising three elements: a tourist or human element, a nucleus or central element, and a marker or informative element (Leiper, 1990:371).*

Shinde (2021) explores and confirms Leiper's concept, highlighting that the religious need to travel goes beyond the concept of leisure, whereby the 'tourist' must be able to identify the nuclear element and its markers. Nucleus refers to

*[the] feature or characteristic of a place that a traveler contemplates visiting or actually visits (Leiper, 1990:372).*

Here, the religious need expressed by the tourist determines the type of nucleus, but tourists also have numerous needs to be met (in addition to the nucleus) while attending an event or otherwise visiting a destination. That is the case of religious tourism that offers a mix of religious and cultural heritage.

Markers, as the third element of the concept, are

*items of information, about any phenomenon that is a potential nuclear element in a tourist attraction (Leiper, 1990:377).*

A tourism attraction comes into existence when all three of these elements are connected (Leiper, 1990:371). Using Leiper's framing of a tourist attraction, can food provide adequate opportunities for the satisfaction of tourists during religious events?

The findings of this article are based on research conducted in Catania and Bari in 2022, the year when religious festivals restarted after a two-year ban due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Investigation took place through semi-structured interviews and observations of participants. The aim was to observe and explore the feelings of tourists who have returned to celebrate their saints after the pandemic had prohibited all public events for two years. Typically, the interviews took about 45 minutes and they were conducted by the authors in the local language (Italian). While using quotes from the interviews, anonymity of interviewees is maintained.

The method is highly participative which facilitated spontaneous narration of participants about their feelings and perceptions during the religious events, which can be difficult to capture by other methods (Pernecky & Rakić, 2019). Five women and five men (aged 23–50) responded to a cooperation request in religious communities in Bari and Catania (Italy). Most of the respondents were active religious Christian participants who have been practicing the doctrine for 10–20 years, except for 2 participants who are not practicing and one non-believer. The majority of the participants have either a university or high school education, and they are predominantly single or not married.

The study task given to participants was to take 10 photographs of moments and places (e.g. in churches, on the roads etc.) where they regularly engage in activities during this religious event. The participants were asked to include foods and places where they feel good, where they do not feel good, and which have a spiritual meaning for them. They used their own mobile phones and then sent the photographs to the authors. During subsequent one-to-one meetings, the participants were asked to use their photographs to narrate what they show, why food is important to them during the feast and to comment on their feelings and emotions.

Our analysis revealed several similarities in behaviour, perception, motives, and opinions of the participants. Participants' narrations therefore showed medium levels of saturation, which can be partially explained by the fact that they belong to a very homogeneous group, despite not being from the same city but are primarily of the same Christian religion.



## Food and Religion: Reflections on Two Case Studies

### *Catania and Saint Aghata's Feast*

Catania is a medium-sized city (about 300,000 inhabitants and an area of 180 km<sup>2</sup>), considered among the smaller historic centers, where tourism is among the potential options for economic and social development. However, the city is not drawing particular benefits from tourism, despite the fact that, for the city and other municipalities in the metropolitan area, it one of the most important socio-economic activities in terms of income support for the local population. This may be due to the increasingly strong competition between territories and recent economic stagnation and economic crises (Di Bella *et al.*, 2012).

The urban and peri-urban structure of the city, in terms of cultural heritage, presents an endowment with high potential due to both the presence of poles of interest and for the widespread heritage which is extremely varied in its composition. However this heritage is too often not adequately surveyed, protected, enhanced, and promoted in line with the dynamics of the island territory or the

region. As far as tourist mobility is concerned, it should be pointed out that the city of Catania has the characteristics of a hub. It is a medium to small port which has docking for cruise ships, an international airport and railway all within the municipal territory. While connections with the inland areas are reasonable, there is a varied though not well-organised offer of transport, both public and private. In addition to the road network, the *Circumetnea* railway operates as a link with the municipalities along the route to Mount Etna.

In reference to cultural attractions, for the purpose of synthesis, we will refer to the proposition offered by the city of Catania through its website ([www.comune.catania.it/la-citta/santagata/](http://www.comune.catania.it/la-citta/santagata/)). In the section on 'Tourism' the city council highlights a number of 'Sightseeing Walks' which explore the history of the city. One such route is dedicated to the places of Saint Aghata. To quote from the website:

*... in Catania the most engaging religious festival is the one dedicated to the patron saint, the young martyr Aghata.*

This is confirmed by Maria a 21 year old student who narrates:

**Figure 1: The Cathedral in Catania, waiting Saint Aghata**



Photo: Privitera, 2022

*in the first days of February, the city is transformed and becomes a theatre full of decorations, lights, votive fires, sounds and colours. In fact, as early as the end of January, the streets of the city are filled with illuminations and joy transpires with the 'procession of candelore' during the day.*

The feast of Saint Aghata is inseparable from the traditional parade of *candelore* or huge candles, covered with handcrafted decorations, gilded wooden cherubs, saints and scenes of martyrdom, flowers and flags. The *candelore* go before the *ferculum* (a 'litter' or 'bier' for carrying important objects in a procession) in the procession, because at one time, when there was a lack of electric lighting, they had the function of lighting the way for the procession participants; today they are an example of craftsmanship and represent the various associations of workers.

The places in the city linked to the history and tradition of Saint Aghata are numerous and heterogeneous; virtual groups exist (many are created on social networks) while physical entities such as museums organise workshops and temporary religious-themed exhibitions for the occasion.

Saint Aghata is a Christian virgin martyr, who was tortured for her unwavering faith in Christianity. The feast dedicated to her is at once an act of faith and of folklore, in which tradition and love for the city is revived and rekindled. The festival celebrates not only the religious and cultural components but also the musical and enjoyment components are exalted. Actually, from ancient times, solemn thanks are owed to the saint both for escaping the numerous eruptions of the volcano Etna (those of 1444 and 1669) and in 1799 the Bourbon victories over the French (Bonincontro, 2001).

The connection between the city and its patron saint is so strong that it even changes the road system during the festival (Cannizzaro *et al.*, 2017). During the celebratory days the *ferculum* of the saint follows a specific, precise and unchanging urban route; to change the route would be destabilising and almost sacrilegious for the devotees.

The feast runs for three days. The first day is dedicated to the wax offering. This is a small journey from the

cathedral to *Sant'Agata la Vetere – Stesicoro Place* and ends with the return to the cathedral of Saint Aghata, the hub of the city where the city hall is also located. The afternoon fires at the cathedral turn into a festival of light along with a musical component that draws the faithful and tourists alike (Figure 1).

The second day is devoted to the outer round: the procession follows a route that contains the oldest city, along what must have been the medieval walls. On the third day, the inner lap or penitential walk takes place, that is, the main street of the historic centre (*Etna* road) focusing on the sites of the martyrdom: the *Fornace* where Aghata was burned alive; the small church *Sant'Agata al Carcere* where she was locked up and; *Sant'Agata la Vetere* where Agatha's sepulchre is located):

*It is a memory tour that can be meant as an allegorical way of the cross, the saint's relics retracing the stages of her martyrdom with great shouting and confusion from the faithful and numerous smartphones to film the crucial moments (Carmela, 47 years old).*

The festival takes over the city in February with extensions to other times of the year. In August there is a return of many emigrant citizens, and throughout the various events that are organised, there are parallel cultural, musical and recreational events. During the festivity week about one million visitors crowd the city, attending the events and processions of the feast, both within the centre and peripheral districts of the city. All of these activities provide cultural / religious value but also an interesting economic return.

The devotees wear a white tunic that covers the entire body and is tied at the waist. They gather in procession in the middle of the night and drag the very heavy *ferculum* (*vara* in Italian) with the saint's remains through the streets of the city. Accompanying them all the way are the eleven *candelore* representing the city's artisan guilds - these are also manually dragged around the city.

We do not have the original Acts of Aghata's Martyrdom from the year 251, which were destroyed during Diocletian's persecution in the year 303, but only narratives written long afterwards. The story of Aghata survived among the people, and the tradition as fixed in



Figure 2: The Minnuzze and the Olivette



Photo: Privitera, 2020

writing around the end of the 4th century, this is the source from where accounts of the Passions of Saint Aghata are drawn, which have been handed down to the present time. Thus accounts date from the 5th-6th centuries (Tempio, 2003) and tell us that Aghata (from the Greek ‘a good person’) was born in Catania around the year 236 to a noble family. At the beginning of the year 251, Aghata was arrested in Catania, during the governorship of the Proconsul Quinziano, by Roman soldiers because the young woman resolutely refused to deny Christ.

Attempts to bend Aghata by persuasion having failed, Quinziano, proceeded by inflicting prison and torture on her. What remains today, of the prison where Aghata began her passion is incorporated into the Church named ‘Saint Aghata at the Prison’. Among the various tortures included the cutting off of her breasts. Aghata, was condemned to die by being burned alive on February 5, and all the while she remaining faithful to her religious beliefs, thus becoming a martyr.

Notwithstanding the serious nature of Athata’s persecution, the feast has its gastronomic and particularly sweet side.

*Excellent, sugary and juicy, the minnuzze of Saint Aghata, small cassatas with an unmistakable hemispherical shape, and the olivette, a soft almond-paste dough flavoured with liqueur and flavourings. Every year, I eat them only during the first few days of February. Really, they are produced in many patisseries all year (Agata 38 years old; see Figure 2)*

The unmistakable shape of the *minnuzze* recalls the incredible martyrdom to which the saint whose breasts

were torn off was subjected. The iconography of this martyrdom is recurrent throughout the history of Italian art and beyond, and often shows the saint with a sort of tray on which the torn *minnuzze* are laid. Trays of *minnuzze*, white with icing and topped with a small red cherry, take up this tradition and renew it between faith and paganism every year.

*Olivette*, on the other hand, are linked to another important event in the saint’s life. According to one legend, as she was being brought to trial before the cruel Proconsul of Catania, she stopped to tie her sandal. As soon as her foot touched the ground, an olive tree began to grow, bearing its fruits. After her martyrdom, the citizens adopted the habit of collecting the olives produced by the tree to preserve or offer them. According to another version, Aghata came across a barren olive tree by chance. When she touched it, the tree miraculously began to produce olives. Despite the many tales surrounding these events, one fact is certain: both the *minnuzze* and the *olivette* are foods linked to the ancestral rituals of fertility and the regeneration of nature, especially in February, when Sicily’s blooming almond trees signal the arrival of spring (Spatafora, 2020).

Street food, typical of feast days, is also characteristic of other non-religious festivals: dried fruits, *calia* (roasted chickpeas), *simenza* (dried pumpkin seeds) or peanuts are available to munch on while waiting for the procession to pass by. Street vendors also sell sweetened almonds, fried rice (*crispelle*) sweetened with honey and powdered sugar in addition to savory pancakes made of bread dough, filled with fresh *ricotta* or anchovies. In the many stores and stalls found in the streets of the city,

open day and night for the feast, it is possible to buy sandwiches stuffed with steak or horse meatballs (typical of the city of Catania) or with *cipollate* (fresh onions wrapped in bacon), all cooked over embers, and other gastronomic products such as *arancino* (Italian rice balls that are stuffed, coated with breadcrumbs and deep fried), the undisputed king of the Sicilian table, small *pizza*, etc. (Privitera, 2020).

Carmela a 47 year old housewife, recalled the importance of a tradition of artisanal produce made at home:

*The most important is nougat: almond, pistachio or sesame, freshly prepared on a marble slab. A penetrating and inviting scent wafts through the air. There is no feast without nougat and its characteristic smell and flavour.*

In this case, tasting food has been identified as a key area in the religious feast of Saint Aghata, and the search for authentic and traditional food is also an important motivation which creates a great religious spirit, as well as a feeling of belonging to / engagement with the local community.

### ***Bari and Saint Nicholas's Feast***

The feast of Saint Nicholas takes place in Bari (Apulia) from 7 to 9 May; in these three days the city of Bari celebrates its patron saint by recalling the transfer on 9 May 1087 of the relics of the saint from Myra, in Turkey, to Bari by 62 sailors.

This event is recalled through various shows that take place along the city streets; on the first day, a company of actors stages the life of the patron saint. On the second day, the celebrations proceed with an event at sea, to commemorate the arrival of the bones in the city. The last day of the feast is dedicated to celebration of the solemn Eucharistic and the 'Miracle of the *Manna*' which exudes from the bones of Saint Nicholas.

The *manna* of Saint Nicholas is the water collected in the saint's tomb - this was already formed in the Basilica of Myra. Over the centuries, different terms have been used, such as *oleum* or *unguentum* (the Russians say *myro*, and the Greeks *myron*). In reality it is a water of particular purity, the origin of which is explained differently. For some it is a real Miracle and, as is emphasised in some

liturgies, it flows from the bones of the saint; other liturgies say it comes from the marble of the tomb. For others, however, it is considered to be a natural chemical phenomenon similar to that of vaporous condensation.

Saint Nicholas is not the only saint to whom the devotion of manna is connected. However, it is undeniable that for this aspect of popular religiosity he is the saint par excellence. The term *manna*, which has long been in use in the Western church and has been applied specifically to Saint Nicholas, is somewhat misleading. In fact, the term comes from a light food which rained from heaven to save the Israelites from starvation when they were fleeing from Egypt and heading to the Promised Land. The more correct, original Greek term - *myron* also does not capture the reality, as this term suggests an oily substance, while in reality the Manna of Saint Nicholas is a water, which in chemical terms is defined as 'almost pure' due its chemical composition (Cioffari, 1987).

All of the above illustrates the religious evidence for a celebratory event with strong popular connotations that is equally attractive to promote pilgrimage by both local and very distant populations. However, the feast of Saint Nicholas also has a range of playful and convivial aspect linked to food.

From the first years following the transfer of Saint Nicholas from Myra to Bari (1087), on the anniversary of this event, celebrations were organised in honour of the Saint. All kinds of decorations, fairs, pilgrimages, solemn masses, processions, bands, land and sea parades, and later fireworks, must have delighted adults and children. The city celebrated the most characteristic event in its history, which thus became the city's festival.

A parchment dated 1254 attests to the procession of the archbishop with all the canons of the Cathedral to the Basilica to celebrate divine office on the feast of Saint Nicholas. At the end, everyone was warmly welcomed into a chapter room and could share a fraternal feast, which could be a dinner or something like a refreshment. Documents relating to the festival and the fair become more and more numerous in the following centuries, even if the focus is on the liturgical practices - no one talks about the way in which the popular festival took place. What is certain is the double celebration of the Saint through religious activities and popular ones,



with stalls and the sale of food and various goods in the square in front of the Basilica. Ever since that remote era, the party has always reached its peak with fireworks (Cioffari, 1987).

From the early years of the twentieth century, the civil festival has been enlivened by the sound of musical bands, which create a festive atmosphere in the city, while in the evening the sky is illuminated by fireworks. Today, albeit with certain obvious differences, the characteristics of the feast of Saint Nicholas appear unchanged.

Interest and pleasure of participating in the feast of Saint Nicholas have continued to grow over the years until 2019 (Ivona & Privitera, 2020). This May feast of Saint Nicholas in Bari has always generated an interesting multiplier effect on the city economy and beyond (Rizzello & Trono, 2013). The number of pilgrims in 2019 was calculated on the basis of historical data, the number of buses that arrived, and the data provided by the associations that organise pilgrimages in honour of Saint Nicholas, in addition to the number of persons officially detected in the accommodation facilities for the days of the festival. The total revenue was about two million euros from the multiplicity and heterogeneity of economic activities directly and indirectly connected

to the event (2019 statistics from the Department of Productive Activities of the Municipality of Bari).

For more than a decade, the Saint Nicholas market has been set up, where many street vendors display goods of various kinds (from clothing to objects and food) in the days before and after the feast. In 2019, there were 50 micro-enterprises with a total of 304 street vendors from all over Italy; these small businesses were joined by 70 carousel attractions with another 300 employees. The market was visited by at least 30,000 people. To these numbers must be added the volume of business connected with bars, restaurants, shops and hotels in the city, as well as the numerous boats that ferry the devotees towards the fishing boat which carries the statue of the saint.

The persistence of the Covid-19 pandemic imposed a two-year suspension of all events that, in order to protect public health. Religious events were no exception. The economic sectors in particular suffered a total interruption of their activities related to events. For example, the enterprises who supply the lights for the feast were seriously impacted. The tour bands, which are particularly active in Apulia and have a strong cultural and religious identity in each city, had to wait until 2022 to start working and performing again.

**Figure 3: The setting up of a street food stall during the feast of Saint Nicholas**



Photo: Ivona, 2022



**Figure 4: One of the major stalls present for the sale of roast meat, Bari**

Photo: Ivona, 2022

The feast of Saint Nicholas took place again in its traditional form in May 2022. 150 micro-enterprises were registered at the market with about 300 street vendors from all over Italy; to these small businesses are then added the various other attractions mentioned above (Figures 3 and 4). The products were very heterogeneous with a prevalence of those related to food. Moreover, a

‘Saint Nicholas Food Village’ was inaugurated in 2022 with thousands of tourists attending, who, moved from one stall to another throughout the day.

The 2022 edition of the feast, once again, gave voice to the musical bands, the lights (Figure 5) and the fireworks, recreating again that widespread and joyful atmosphere

**Figure 5: The scenery of the illuminations of the Feast of Saint Nicholas**

Photo: Ivona, 2022

of veneration for the patron saint of the city. The reaction of Saverio and Mario (58 and 61 years), fruit peddlers in the alleys of the Old Town, give voice to this widespread sentiment among the citizens:

*Finally, the saint is back and with him many tourists who look curiously at the religious rites but also buy many of our culinary products and handicrafts. Saint Nicholas is Bari and Bari is Saint Nicholas.*

The 2022 feast has given an economic boost to the entire commercial sector of the city centre. In the three days of the feast and obviously in the previous days of preparation, the shops recorded a marked increase in revenue due to the huge and difficult to quantify number of people, employees and visitors, who poured into the streets of the centre filling shops, bars and restaurants. Vito (42 years) who is a bar manager said:

*Finally, after two years the patrons are back and everything is going well. It is the Miracle of Saint Nicholas!*

From a purely culinary point of view, the feast is not characterised by the tasting and sale of typical products linked to the figure of the saint but, by a variety of products of the Italian regional tradition. This therefore entails, for a tourist, the possibility of getting to know, by walking a few meters, various regional foods. Sonia (34 years old) who is a seller, tells in her interview:

*I am a tourist who arrived in the city not for gastronomic but for religious reasons; but the desire to visit the Food Village is strong ... the smells and variety of typical products of this city and region attract me like a bee on a flower.*

## Conclusions

The positive socio-economic impact of religious tourism and food observed in this study agrees with the findings of previous authors on the impact of religious events on socio-economic development of host communities (Terzidou *et al.*, 2008; Cassar, 2020). Leiper's conceptual approach offers a framework for understanding the different phases of the tourist experience and how they may be shaped by participation in religious events (Leiper, 1990). In fact, from point of view of the tourists, when they participate in a religious event, this can involve a range of activities such as attending religious

services, participating in rituals, and visiting cultural sites. Tourists may reflect on their experiences, and they may also engage in activities such as shopping or dining. The post-travel stage involves returning home and potentially sharing also their food experiences with others. Finally, their memories of the trip can influence future travel decisions.

The two case studies analysed, namely the feast of Saint Aghata in Catania on February 5<sup>th</sup> and that of Saint Nicholas in Bari on May 8<sup>th</sup>, protectors of their respective cities, are examples of events with repercussions coming from the geo-economic alliance between food and religion. At the same time, the union of religious experience can give importance to local food. Religious holidays are an opportunity to remember that humans live in a space and time in which they relate to the divinity they believe which can be connected the place where they live their daily lives. In fact, living a feast allows the survival of ancient traditions, which apparently seem to link very closely to the religious dimension.

*After all, it becomes impossible to clearly separate sacred time from profane time. The first is grafted into the second (there is no party alone), which in turn welcomes it by setting the experience of the divine into history. So, there is never an opposition; rather, sacred time presents itself as a crucial moment where man is immersed in a new atmosphere, which happens particularly in religious holidays (Marchisio, 2005:61)*

During religious and other events, there is often a distinct and specific focus on food, which sets the festive menu apart from everyday meals. The foods consumed often have religious significance and may be mentioned in sacred texts. As such, the food consumed during these festivals can be seen as an expression of faith and cultural tradition.

The analysis of the two case studies shows that the imagination of the inhabitants of the two cities idealises and fuses in a single representation, the religious value of food with the playful value of the festival, accentuating its spiritual dimension. Tourists, on the other hand, try to live a multisensorial and spiritual experience that also includes culinary aspects.



This is particularly evident in the case study of Catania, and less so in that of Bari. In Bari, during the religious experience, the food marketed and / or consumed is still linked to the destination of Bari and Apulia and to the notoriety of local agricultural products (Nocco, 2021), but not specifically related to religious tradition. However, the devotional motivation of locals and visitors is not necessarily separated from the ludic-gastronomic one.

Based on the findings in this paper, it appears that the combination of religious events and typical food can be successful as a tourist resource. One is closely related to the other with the consequence that food is an attractive product linked with the religious destination. Both elements can be levers for economic development of the host community even after the event has taken place, increasing the recognition of a place and its cultural resources.

Moreover, the interviews gave an unequivocal answer; both tourists and residents join in the event, sharing their dual interest in the religious event and the food but above all in a post-COVID-19 period, they recognise the idea that finally we can celebrate together again.

This study tries to make a range of insights but still, there are limitations to this study, that can become the research gap for future studies upon this topic. This can help to shed light on the ways in which different aspects of a religious / pilgrim experience are interconnected.

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