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Interpreting Sustainability through Co-Evolution: Evidence from Religious Accommodations in Rome

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Abstract: In recent decades, concepts such as sustainability, innovation, and competitiveness have become fundamental for the development of tourist destinations, and thus, particularly, for the generation of value co-creation processes. To understand the role of tourism firms in these processes, more theoretical and empirical research is required. This paper addresses this need by examining the increasing role played by religious accommodations, adopting a co-evolutionary approach to sustainability and the resulting value co-creation processes. The study focuses on the dynamics of the relationship between this new hospitality model, territories, and tourists, through the analysis of six case studies localized in the historic centre of Rome (Italy). Findings show that religious accommodations can be considered as a new sustainability-oriented hospitality model that, by creating effective multi-level co-evolutionary adaptations with its territory and tourists, positively affects sustainable development as well as the generation of value co-creation processes. The paper contributes significantly both to sustainability literature and to the study of new hospitality models. Thus, theoretical and managerial implications emerge, together with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: religious accommodations; sustainability; co-evolution; value co-creation; multiple case studies

1. Introduction

In the current globalized and interconnected context, competition in tourism increasingly focuses on sustainability-oriented factors (such as uniqueness and distinctiveness) that are difficult to replicate or reproduce outside a specific territory. Therefore, tourism development is increasingly based on the virtuous cycle that is being established between sustainability, innovation, and competitiveness, aimed at creating value through co-creation processes between tourism firms and other actors (i.e., local community, tourists, policy makers) operating within their territory and able to produce a unique experience [1–11].

In particular, according to Ritchie & Crouch [12], tourist destinations can maintain a competitive advantage only if they orient themselves towards sustainability [13–18]. This means that the competitive capabilities of a tourist destination need to be designed according to a holistic view of the three sustainability dimensions, namely economic, environmental, and social [19,20]. This means creating and co-creating value (through economic prosperity, well-being of the host community, and satisfaction of tourists' requirements) without damaging the historical, cultural, and natural environment [21,22].

The debate around these topics has been deeply enriched by tourism literature in the last two decades, especially underlining the links between sustainability, local identity, historical and cultural heritage, and their importance for destination development and competitiveness [23–35]. In line with this, 2017 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of

Sustainable Tourism for Development; while, 2018 has been proclaimed by the European Commission as the European Year of Cultural Heritage. In this vein, the General Director of UNESCO in 2017 confirmed that

> "the importance […] of the designation of an international year of sustainable tourism for development, in fostering better understanding among peoples everywhere, in leading to a greater awareness of the rich heritage of various civilizations, and in bringing about a better appreciation of the inherent values of different cultures, thereby contributing to the strengthening of peace in the world".

Thus, the historical and cultural heritage of a territory becomes a source of relationships and interdependencies (local and multi-local) able to promote new business models and generate value for all the involved actors [36,37]. The importance of the role of small tourism firms has clearly been emphasized (e.g., [12,14–16,18,38]).

In Italy there are great opportunities for sustainable development related to the valorisation of territorial identity and based on the enhancement of the enormous cultural and historical real estate heritage spread throughout the country (e.g., palaces, villas, castles, rural farmhouses, villages, monasteries, and convents). In this regard, an increasing role could be played by religious accommodations as a new hospitality model able to enhance the local historical and cultural heritage and meet the sustainability requirements [7,39] according to the evolution of tourists' needs [40,41]. Moreover, this new hospitality model allows value co-creation processes based on effective interactions between tourist firms, tourists, and local communities, determining the value of the tourism experience [10,11,36,42,43] and improving the welfare of individuals and communities, as well as tourist firms' performance [1,2,4,6,44,45].

Based on such assumptions, the purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the role of religious accommodations in the sustainable development of the territories in which they are rooted. The study adopts a co-evolutionary approach to sustainability, focusing on the dynamics of the interactions between religious accommodations, territory, and tourists, in order to determine and explain the main determinants of the creation and development of religious accommodations and their effects on sustainable development and value co-creation processes.

In particular, the analysis has focused on the following research questions (RQ):

RQ (1)—Why and how does the co-evolutionary approach explain the sustainability characteristics of religious accommodations, as well as their creation and development?

RQ (2)—What is the contribution of religious accommodations in terms of sustainable development and, thus, to value co-creation processes generation?

In order to reach its aim, the paper analyzes six case studies of religious accommodations situated in prestigious historical and cultural buildings in Rome's city center, the Pope's city, and Vatican See, which is characterized by a high concentration of religious accommodations.

The paper is structured as follows. First, an in-depth description of the phenomenon of religious accommodations is provided, together with an analysis of the related literature. In the second part, an interpretative framework is presented. In the third section, the proposed framework is tested through the investigation of multiple case studies and findings are gathered. The final part is devoted to discussion and conclusions, with suggestions for future studies.

2. The Phenomenon of Religious Accommodations: Its Origins and Related Literature

The tradition of hosting travellers at religious houses has been on-going since early biblical times [46–48] as reported in the Book of Genesis (18:1–15) and in the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Mt 25:34–40). Later, St. Benedict included hospitality in chapter 53 of his Rule (*De Hospitibus Suscipiendis*) as an important aspect of monastic life: each monastery should have a space specifically devoted to host guests.

Historically, hospitality at religious houses run by priests, monks, and nuns was designed to host pilgrims travelling on foot, horseback, and mule to reach the main destinations of Christianity

(Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela) [49–51]. Indeed, the success of a pilgrim route was largely dependent on the presence on the way—especially in the most arduous places—of these religious houses. In this context, Rome has been a main destination of Christian pilgrimage since the Middle Ages. All those who travelled long roads to reach Rome were hosted at religious houses as a sign of Christian charity.

Grounded on this ancient tradition, the current religious hospitality model is the result of an evolutionary process triggered by a combination of the following key factors: (1) the steep decline in Catholic religious vocations [52,53], which has led to the presence of underused or vacant (when not deteriorating) religious houses, some of which were founded by saints, frequently located in buildings of historic and cultural value; (2) the Italian government funds (approximately 1.7 billion euros) received by Rome, along with the Lazio region, to facilitate the mobility and accommodation needs of 30 million pilgrims expected for the Great Jubilee celebrations of 2000.

As a consequence, Jubilee 2000 represented for most religious houses a unique opportunity to revitalize their underused buildings and to organize well-structured accommodation activities on the basis of their historic traditions. Thus, since 2000, this phenomenon has grown rapidly—especially in Rome—and the National Office for Pastoral Leisure, Tourism and Sport (which is part of the Italian Episcopal Conference) has assumed the role of national coordinator of religious accommodations, thanks to its numerous connections with relevant public and private stakeholders (institutions, policy makers, public administrations, financial institutions, etc.). In addition, other specific associations (e.g., Centro Italiano Turismo Sociale—CITS, Centro Nazionale Economi di Comunità ed Enti Cattolici—CNEC, and Centro Turistico Giovanile—CTG) linked to Catholic organizations have supported the development of religious accommodations through consultancy activities (ranging from revenue management and web communications to administrative law, taxation, and training programs). Moreover, a growing number of organizations now facilitate the connection between religious accommodations and pilgrims, religious and non-religious tourists, through their websites (e.g., www.ospitalitareligiosa.it, www.hospites.it, and www.istituti-religiosi.org).

The academic and non-academic debate around the phenomenon has quickly come to the attention of the international press [54–57], which has highlighted how many underused or vacant Christian religious houses have been renovated and turned into religious accommodations in Italy, as well as worldwide. However, regarding the academic debate, the literature on religious accommodations is quite narrow. In fact, the existing contributions are mostly related to some aspects not specifically devoted to religious accommodations and come from authors belonging to different disciplines (e.g., tourism and hospitality, geography, management). To our knowledge, Shackley [58] is the only scholar of management who has analyzed the process of the creation and management of a specific type of religious accommodations (i.e., retreat houses). The other contributions around the topic mainly address: the religious needs of religious tourists in the hospitality industry (e.g., [51,59–62]); the role played by religious tourism in the development of business activities, including accommodations [50,63–65]; and, the tourist experience at a specific religious settlement turned into a tourism destination [66]. Moreover, only two of these contributions [50,66] highlight the importance of religious tourism and related hospitality activities in fostering the sustainable development of territories.

Consequently, what emerges is the need to increase the understanding of the phenomenon regarding the role and contribution of religious accommodations, and their relationships with tourists and territories, according to sustainable tourism development requirements. This paper aims to specifically address this need.

3. The Relationship between Sustainability, Co-Evolution, and Value Co-Creation

In this section, sustainability is reinterpreted through the co-evolutionary perspective, adopting and adapting a theoretical framework that has already shown its effectiveness in similar research in the tourism industry (e.g., [39,67,68]). In particular, through this reinterpretation, the value co-creation processes are seen as the result of the effective dynamic interaction between religious accommodations, territories, and tourists.

The concept of sustainability became popular in the 20th century and has always been closely connected to the development concept [69]. In fact, according to the triple bottom line proposed by Elkington [19], sustainability is usually decomposed into three interdependent dimensions (economic, social, and environmental) that, by interacting with each other, are able to determine livable, fair, and feasible development conditions. Moreover, the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development have been particularly applied in tourism, with the consequent birth of the concept of sustainable tourism and the need to establish a lasting balance between resource consumption and economic growth (e.g., [23,31,44,70–77]). In this vein, the UNWTO [78] states:

> Sustainable tourism should not be regarded as a separate component of tourism […] but rather as a […] tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.

Therefore, sustainable tourism is able to generate a balanced relationship between the needs of various actors (i.e., tourism firms, tourists, policy makers, local communities, etc.), determining value co-creation processes between them [1,2,4,6,10,21,36,73,79–82].

Thus, full realization of the sustainability objective can be achieved only by taking into account all three sustainability dimensions. However, academic studies have addressed only one of these dimensions, generating the lack of a holistic and systemic view of the phenomenon [83]. Moreover, tourism literature has emphasized the need for a perspective capable of jointly considering sustainability and the relationships within and across micro (tourism firms), meso (territories), and macro (destinations) levels, together with the corresponding actors, in order to determine their potential in terms of strategic development and the competitive capabilities of a tourism destination [84–96].

This issue can be properly addressed by reinterpreting sustainability through a co-evolutionary perspective, which holistically considers both interdependencies and mutual relationships between tourism firms, territories, and tourists, their variations over time, and the resulting capability to generate value co-creation processes between all the actors involved.

The co-evolution concept—relying mostly on Darwin's biological assumptions [97]—has been widely used in economic literature (e.g., [98–100]), management studies (e.g., [101–103]), and by economic geographers (e.g., [104]) in order to explain the relationship between firms and their environment. In the tourism industry, the adoption of these co-evolutionary ideas, fertilized by the evolutionary economic geography (EEG) literature, helps to understand and explain the evolution of regional and local economies [67,105–108]. As a result, the role played by new sustainability-oriented business models in enabling novel modes of value co-creation between firms, tourists, and territories, through new effective forms of behaviours between firms and individuals characterized by participation and collaboration [1,4,6,10,36,43,109] is emphasized. These increasing levels of contact enhance the value of the tourists' experience, with positive effects for firms in terms of tourists' loyalty and satisfaction. Good examples of this are: the Qbic Design Hotels, which offer their guests the opportunity to change the color of their room depending on their mood; and "Like a local", a Dutch organization that facilitates tourists stepping into the daily life of inhabitants, to better experience the local culture [2].

Moreover, the co-evolutionary perspective allows joint consideration of the interdependencies and dynamics of interactions at micro, meso, and macro levels, in their separate value as well as in their mutual relationships. In fact, co-evolution is multilevel: it occurs not only within firms, but also among them, their territories and society as a whole [98]; therefore, it helps to understand how to encourage synergies between firms and territories in order to pursue a common sustainable development, preserving its benefits over time. In this regard, the importance of organizational adaptation emerges. All actors are required to effectively adapt to each other. In co-evolutionary terms, the firm-environment relationship is the result of the dynamics of the relationship between firm's strategic intentionality and environmental pressures [110]. The central aspect is that neither of these two forces (i.e., firm and environment) is sufficient by itself to define the organizational adaptation, but both are necessary. Therefore, the firm is not only an object, but also subject to evolutionary change [103], and adapting means proactively researching solutions to common problems [111].

According to this approach, two aspects are of particular importance: (1) the territory (meso level) becomes a key agent for linking tourism firm (micro level) with destination (macro level), extending interdependencies and positive externalities [99,104,112]; (2) the systemic approach of both firms and territories is assumed as a basic condition to adapt, mutually and effectively [113].

Therefore, only tourism firms and territories that have a systemic organization will be able to develop competitive capacities and effectively adapt to environmental changes, generating sustainable development and, consequently, value co-creation processes. These will positively affect the local and national systems and, according to the circular relationship, the firms and territories as well.

Figure 1 graphically shows the interpretive framework that is proposed and adopted in this work.

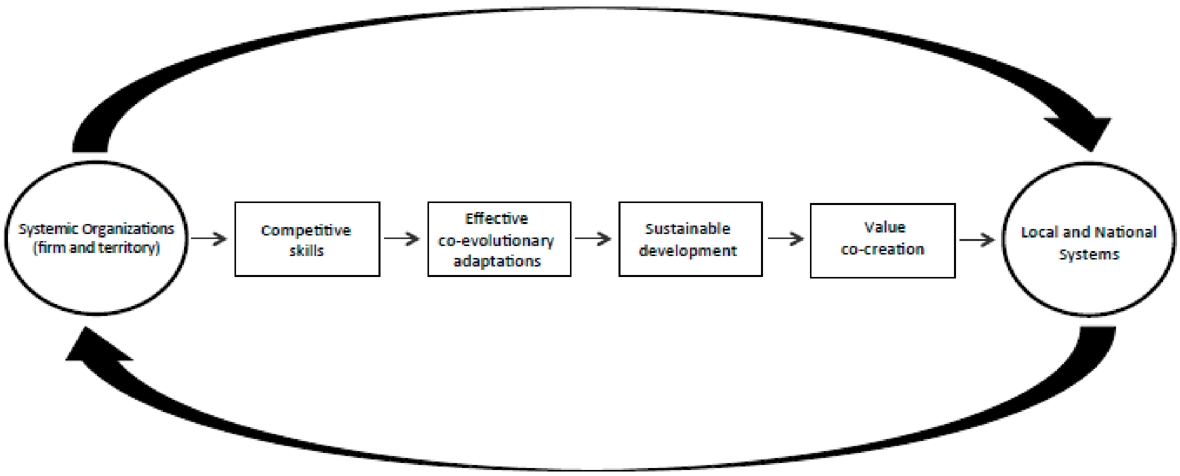

Figure 1. Interpretive theoretical framework.

In accordance with the purpose of this paper, the proposed framework is applied to analyze the dynamics of the interactions between religious accommodations, their territories, and tourists. In doing so, the main determinants of the creation and development of religious accommodations, and their effects on sustainable development and value co-creation processes are determined and explained.

In their evolution, religious accommodations and territories co-evolve in that they are interdependent, with mutual influences, and each supports the other [14,104,112]. Moreover, religious accommodations and territories co-evolve with the social supra-systems, adapting constantly according to a circular relationship. The effects of this relationship are largely influenced by the ability to change and the path-dependence of these entities [114,115]. In other words, the environment generates dependence (through the dynamics of tourism demand, regulation, technological progress, etc.) and the firms tend to be independent by strengthening their technical core over time [116,117]. This mutual dependence has important effects on competitiveness, on the possibility for religious accommodations and territories to regenerate themselves, and on social well-being.

The relationship between religious accommodations, their territories, and tourists is circular and particularly tight within a destination. In fact, in this case, the territory is not external to the religious accommodations and tourists are not external to the territory. In particular, tourists live temporarily in the territories that they have chosen to visit, interacting with the local communities and religious accommodations that host them, producing and enjoying many different experiences [2,10,41,43,118]. This allows the sharing of beliefs, values, knowledge, and culture among all the actors involved, who become co-protagonists of the value co-creation processes of the service offered [1,2,4–6,10,36,119–121].

Therefore, the creation and development of religious accommodations are possible if all the actors involved at multiple levels synergistically cooperate on the basis of common interests and values. This cooperation is fundamental to generate effective adaptations, promoting the sustainable development of the territory [122] with beneficial effects in terms of value co-creation. Three main determinants can promote these effective adaptations between religious accommodations, territories and tourists: (1) tourist experience; (2) systemic approach; and (3) social responsibility. The tourist experience [123] is the ability to interpret the changing environment and to have a holistic view of the relationships between tourists and inhabitants. The systemic approach [104,113,124] refers to the ability to organize and manage religious accommodations, territories, and the system of relationships between them in an integrated way, as basic conditions for effective multi-level co-evolutionary adaptations able to generate positive externalities. Finally, social responsibility refers to: the attention devoted to emerging values from contexts in evolution [125]; the general principles of sustainable development, also through appropriate regulations [126]; and, the community economic development [31,127]. Thus, the management of these determinants is a fundamental condition for the creation and development of religious accommodations.

In conclusion, there is a relationship of mutual functionality between religious accommodations, territories, and tourists. This relationship is variable over time, necessarily co-evolutionary and sometimes contradictory (i.e., dialectic). This suggests that to ensure the long-lasting benefits of new sustainability-oriented business models—such as religious accommodations—effective, on-going, and co-evolutionary adaptations between multiple actors at different levels are needed.

4. Methodology

This research relies on case study analysis following a qualitative approach and a collective multiple-cases perspective [128,129]. This methodology is appropriate for investigating new and complex business models that have a strong relationship with their environment according to a co-evolutionary approach [101,105,112,127,130–133].

The unit of analysis is the individual organization. The research started in 2010 in collaboration with the Tourism Department of Rome and the Vatican (through the religious organization of Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi). Preliminary results of the research have been presented at a Conference held at the University LUISS Guido Carli. From 2010 until September 2017, the research was carried out in three main steps: firstly, religious accommodations and selection criteria for the case studies were identified; secondly, data were gathered and analyzed; thirdly, information was interpreted.

Religious accommodations identified in the first step of the research were revealed to be highly diversified in the types of buildings used (e.g., convents, monasteries, houses of religious orders, Vatican historic residences, and villas) but less fragmented regarding ownership (around 85% of total religious accommodations in Rome is owned by religious organizations, while the remaining 15% is owned by secular organizations). Moreover, star ratings were found to be inapplicable to evaluate religious accommodations as their distinctive features are not at the level of standardization of service quality but, first and foremost, in their religious origins. Lastly, the complexity of the phenomenon is also a result of the fragmented customer-base [49–51]. In fact, the demand for religious accommodations comes from individuals, families, and groups who make a journey to Rome for strictly religious reasons (i.e., pilgrims) or for spiritual, social, and cultural interests (i.e., religious tourists), or even from individuals, families, and groups without any religious affiliation.

Owing to a lack of national official data on religious accommodations, in order to identify the total population of religious accommodations in Rome, the following documentation has been taken into consideration: (1) the official list of religious holiday houses provided by the Cultural Tourist Information Office of the city of Rome; (2) the database of the "Ospitalità Religiosa" Association; (3) direct observations; (4) web pages of religious accommodations (where available).

In September 2017, a total of 376 religious accommodations were identified in Rome and classified into two main categories (see Table 1). The first one refers to "Holiday Homes" (HH), which are mainly involved in hospitality activities. These are structured organizations that comply with rules and regulations for tourist accommodations and are required to communicate arrivals and attendances of tourists to the competent administrative authorities. The second group refers to "Non-Holiday Homes" (NHH), which are mainly engaged in spiritual activities (e.g., spiritual exercises, meditation, retreats, and contemplation) and residually on hospitality. As such, NHH are first and foremost spiritual centers. Consequently, their accommodation activities are not subject to the rules and regulations imposed by tourist administrative authorities.

Table 1. Classification of religious accommodations

Classification of Religious Accommodations by Type	Number of Structures	Total Number of Rooms	Total Number of Beds
Holiday Homes (HH)	256	7571	12,964
Non-Holiday Homes (NHH)	120	2704	6209
Total	376	10,275	19,173

Within each category, three cases were selected (see Table 2 for details) according to the following selection criteria: (1) relevance to and consistency with the study aim; (2) availability and completeness of information; (3) temporal phases homogeneity (all the analyzed cases have passed through two phases: the first related to renovation and start-up and the second to development); (4) buildings of historical, architectural, and cultural value; and (5) religious ownership.

Table 2. Selected religious accommodations

Category	Name	Historic Origin (Century)	Location	Average Price (Double Room per Night)	Nr. of Rooms	Nr. of Beds
HH	Casa San Sofia	XVIII	Piazza della Madonna dei Monti (City Centre)	€85	54	61
HH	Casa Santa Brigida	XV	Piazza Farnese (City Centre)	€150	20	40
HH	Domus Carmelitana	XIX	Castel Sant'Angelo (City Centre)	€150	54	99
NHH	Casa Bonus Pastor	XX	Via Aurelia (City Centre)	€100	89	200
NHH	Casa Nostra Signora di Fatima	XX	Via del Gianicolo (City Centre)	€40	45	60
NHH	Casa di accoglienza S. Spirito	XIX	Borgo Santo Spirito (City Centre)	€96	13	38

Data collection has been mostly obtained by interviewing key informants who belong to the selected religious accommodations (religious entrepreneurs), associations and cooperatives operating in the field (e.g., Ospitalità religiosa, Istituti religiosi), and guests. In particular, semi-structured interviews have been conducted, based on the following main themes:

1. Dimension and characteristics of religious accommodations;
2. Services offered and types of guests;
3. Key business processes;
4. Sustainability approach;
5. Relationships with other actors and value co-creation processes.

Moreover, courtroom questioning and event tracking techniques have been adopted [134]; the first is a technique that emphasizes facts and events, avoiding questions that yield inaccurate answers, while the second puts the informant back in the time frame of the events in order to produce a chronology of those events.

In the last step, through a cross-interview analysis [134], four main aspects emerged: (1) the changes, over time, in the relationship between religious accommodations, their territories, and tourists; (2) the effects of this relationship on the co-evolution dynamics; (3) the consequences in terms of sustainability; and (4) the corresponding generation of value co-creation processes. These results were triangulated with data collected from other sources (i.e., direct examination, firms' and associations' websites, national and regional regulations, publications in economic and political newspapers, and scientific articles), in order to develop more robust causal relationships and to reinforce the confidence in, as well as the validity of, the case studies' findings [135,136].

Findings are reported through the use of quotes derived from the interviews, according to the two phases of the phenomenon being observed: (1) renovation and start-up of religious accommodations; and (2) development of religious accommodations. Moreover, each quote is marked with different letters for different informants (i.e., "RE" as "Religious Entrepreneur"; "A" as "Associations" and "G" as "Guests").

5. Findings

The six case studies analyzed highlight the synergies between religious accommodations, tourists, and territories and how these synergies create value according to sustainability requirements.

5.1. Phase 1: Renovation and Start-Up of Religious Accommodations

The first aspect that emerges from the interviews is the presence of vacant, underused or deteriorating historic religious houses in Rome, that are well located with respect both to the Christian and cultural heritage sites. Traditionally, these religious houses used to host pilgrims travelling to Rome.

> "Our house is on the left side of St. Peter's Square and as such you can have a wonderful view of St. Peter's basilica, with the great awesome dome by Michelangelo and the beautiful Colonnades of Bernini. You can have the privilege of participating in the solemn celebrations and audiences with the Pope that take place in St. Peter's Square." (RE)
> "We are located between the Colosseum and the Vatican." (RE)
> "Thanks to the hosting of tourists, now all the spaces of our house are used and this has brought new lifeblood." (RE)
> "The location is very central: walking distance to the Vatican, Spanish Steps and Trevi Fountain." (G)
> "As far as their location in the city is concerned, 49% of the 350 religious accommodations in our website are in the city centre, 36% in semi-central areas, and the remaining 15% in suburbs areas." (A).

Moreover, another two factors have been fundamental in this first phase: (1) the need to accommodate almost 30 million pilgrims expected to visit Rome for the Great Jubilee of 2000; and (2) the resulting need to allocate public funds to execute infrastructural works aimed at hosting pilgrims and facilitating their mobility. The resulting restructuring works were carried out respecting the religious needs and value of people living in the historic religious houses. In fact, there was a need to enhance these houses appropriately by respecting their typical features, as well as a need for a good governance of the territory as a result of the collaboration among public, private, and religious actors. In this respect, spaces dedicated to the residence and activities of the religious community—when still present—were kept separate from those intended to host pilgrims and tourists: churches and chapels were kept for the daily celebration of religious services; rooms for guests were left in their original size and shape, and as a consequence they remained small, simply furnished, sometimes without a private bathroom (replaced by a shared one), and mostly with facilities (such as TV, telephone, fridge, iron) placed in common rooms in order to facilitate social interactions.

> "Also thanks to the funds received for the Jubilee of 2000, the restoration works preserved original spaces to allow hosted tourists to experience the familiarity and fraternal life of the religious community." (RE)
> "This is not a hotel, or a luxury property, and you should not expect that level of service. We have numerous rooms, each of which has a table, a chair, a wardrobe cupboard, a table lamp, a bedside table." (RE)
> "Overall, our simply furnished and sober rooms are placed in a context of profound spirituality that enriches the stay in a religious context and in a relationship of respect, brotherhood, prayer, and cordiality with everyone, in addition to the beautiful historic and cultural skyline of Rome." (RE)

> "Our house has common rooms for guests, with TV, fridge, microwave, iron and ironing board and also common living room with chairs, TV and bathroom." (RE)
> "The Great Jubilee of 2000 was a turning point for religious houses located in Rome who could benefit from public financial resources to revitalize their structures and accommodate pilgrims." (A)

Findings show that there is a strong awareness from entrepreneurs of the beneficial effects of the renovation of historic religious houses for tourism purposes, which positively affect the three sustainability dimensions.

Regarding environmental sustainability, this is achieved by religious accommodations through the re-use of existing historical buildings and spaces. In fact, nothing new is being built and urban areas have been revitalized.

> "Our building has been deeply restructured while preserving its historic and architectural and cultural values as well as its religious intent." (RE)
> "Thanks to the renovation we had the possibility to re-qualify not only our religious house but also to enhance the urban area around our house." (RE)

Regarding social sustainability, religious accommodations do not act in isolation but interact with tourists, local communities, and all the actors of the territory on an on-going basis, over time, and in a strong circular interdependent relationship. This shows how virtuous co-evolutionary processes take place between religious accommodations, their territories and tourists. According to the interviews, the same refurbishing processes of empty or under-utilized buildings have a positive impact on the local community. Moreover, the social aspects are emphasized by the offering of person-centred accommodation services and the attention paid to tourists' well-being, combined with their spiritual needs.

> "We have always taken into great consideration all the persons that work within our house and all the persons with which we interact, whether they were public, private or religious."
> "Besides the hospitality services, guests are offered a context where they have the chance to take part in the daily celebration of religious services—such as the Eucharist, the recital of the Angelus as well as of the Rosary and Vespers." (RE)
> "There are convivial moments where we have the possibility to establish a dialogue with our guests." (RE)
> "I came here because this religious lodging offers a unique possibility to know more about the local culture." (G)
> "We like unusual places to stay. The people we encountered were some of the most interesting people we'd ever met." (G)
> "The neighborhood is pleasant and we felt safe walking there in the evening." (G)

Lastly, referring to economic sustainability, religious accommodations' distinctive features are: (1) the attention paid to the pilgrims' and tourists' spending capacity (level of prices is, on average, 20–30% lower than those applied by other similar accommodations); (2) the use of the end-of-year results to fund charity and solidarity projects. In this vein, the religious accommodation hospitality model shows its economic effectiveness through its ability to achieve economic returns as well as to generate prosperity for the community while pursuing its statutory purpose. Moreover, the creation of this new hospitality model generates positive trickle-down effects on local commercial activities.

> "Our guests particularly appreciate the good value for money also in the light of our central position in respect to the main tourist sites." (RE)
> "We use the revenues generated from tourist accommodations to care for those in need, especially the poor and the sick but also for the enhancement of the service offered as well as the maintenance of our historic building." (RE)
> "I used to travel alone and a convent often offers a very good price for a single room." (G)

During this first phase, interviews show that there are value co-creation processes between religious accommodations, their territories, and tourists. In fact, on the one hand, religious accommodations benefit from strong local Christian traditions that come from the territory in which they are rooted; on the other hand, they offer hospitality consistent with underlying religious and ethical values, transferring to their territory and tourists their knowledge, culture, and practices.

> "Regardless of their own religious persuasion, our guests might dine with Catholics staying for devotional purposes and atheists curious about the life of people who stay in religious houses." (RE)
>
> "Here I got an interesting cultural exchange. Despite there being plenty of rules, like 'arrive for meals promptly' and 'be back in your room by curfew', at the same time we loved our stay because basically we share the same values." (G)

5.2. Phase 2: Development of Religious Accommodations

Evidence shows that, religious accommodations in Rome satisfy a non-negligible portion of tourist demand coming from believers and non-believers. According to the last available data [137] plus data from our direct observations, religious accommodations are estimated to account for 4% of the total accommodation offering (excluding hotels), to contribute nearly 17% of total bed spaces of similar accommodation establishments, and to accommodate around 1 million tourists, staying for an average of 3.1 nights.

> "Nowadays we represent a low cost alternative to the most traditional forms of accommodation that offers to guests of all faiths—and also to non-believers—the chance to experience a tradition largely unchanged for centuries." (RE)
>
> "Three decades ago, no one used to go religious accommodations unless they were pilgrims, while now our guests are both pilgrims and tourists not interested in religion because they love the pace and feeling of our house." (RE)

This confirms the proactive role played by religious accommodations in the local development as well as their ability to generate value co-creation processes thanks to the sharing of core values able to produce authentic tourist experiences. In fact, according to management principles, all the guests at religious accommodations are required to respect some rules of conduct and to keep behaviors and clothing consistent with the religious origin of the structures. Moreover, religious accommodations also offer social and cultural initiatives (such as church retreats, training sessions, school trips, meetings, support to families of relatives hospitalized), as approaches to evangelization. Thus, the process of production-delivery of the tourist experience is both creatively and simultaneously created by the interactions of religious accommodations, their territories, and tourists.

> "We accommodate individuals, families and groups from all over the world that share our faith and spiritual path. In addition to the hospitality services, guests are offered a context where they have the chance to rediscover the human values of Christians in a relationship of respect, brotherhood and cordiality." (RE)
>
> "Our home is a religious retreat house that seeks to advance the human and Christian values for the highest good of the people, therefore beds are mostly narrow twins, and when available we do not give a double room with boyfriends but two singles. Prints of Jesus, the Virgin or some Saints, and a crucifix are hung up on the wall above the beds." (RE)
>
> "They provide a cultural experience that is unique. Here is the only place where you can wake up to a chorus of nuns softly chanting." (G)

However, especially in this phase, the circular interdependent relationship between religious accommodations, their territory, and tourists could be characterized by contradictions and discontinuity that can—if not properly managed—adversely affect this relationship. For example, some of those interviewed state that, especially in the past, problems could be generated by the fiscal benefits provided to religious accommodations due to their religious origin. These contradictions have been partly solved thanks to the involvement of religious stakeholders (notably the Vatican City State) and national public institutions. The resolution of these contradictions is a good example of value co-creation processes between public, private, and religious stakeholders aimed at developing cooperative relationships among all the stakeholders.

> "Our activity is regulated in a consistent manner according to the main purpose of the same, and thanks to this we are able to offer our services with a reasonable price ratio for the guests." (RE)
>
> "We use the benefits for the common good, which allows our religious community to fulfil the needs both of our guests and the territory." (RE)

In this circular dynamic, co-evolutionary adaptations are the result of the need for religious accommodations to keep up with changes that take place in the environment, such as the emerging of multiple forms of tourism experiences as well as the increasing role played by the web in holiday choices. On the one hand, religious accommodations are expected to treat tourists as co-creators of their experience, by involving them in different activities. On the other hand, internet platforms (e.g., Facebook) allow tourists to share their experience, contributing to the value co-creation processes coming from this new sustainability-oriented hospitality model.

> "Our website has been designed to be functional and offer a general overview of our house in a few seconds. We also have a profile page on Facebook where our guests can add their comments." (RE)
>
> "We dedicate our days to praying encouraging guests to do the same." (RE)
>
> "The sisters taught us the Our Father in Italian but we had also the opportunity to teach them the same prayer in English." (G)

Moreover, it is acknowledged that there cannot exist a production with economic, social, and environmental values, without effective co-evolutionary adaptations at multiple levels between, but also within, systems. In this regard, evidence shows that religious accommodations are not completely managed in a fully-integrated and systematic way yet. In particular, this new hospitality model faces problems related both to managerial aspects and maintenance costs. Concerning the former, there is no adequate support in terms of generational replacements of the religious entrepreneurs. These replacements could be done through the involvement of secular people able to implement governance and management principles within these religious accommodations consistent with their religious origins. Concerning the latter, the religious accommodations—due to the historic, architectural, and cultural value of their buildings—are subject to high maintenance and repair costs to avoid their deterioration.

> "Religious accommodations do not follow common guidelines for development and their offering is fragmented, uneven, and communicated to the public without referring to common features." (A)
>
> "The support and the help of secular people is—for us—not only desirable but also indispensable to overcome the succession problems." (RE)
>
> "One of the main problems is related to the maintenance costs of our house whose origins go back to the 15th century." (RE)

In this vein, there is a need for a greater involvement of all stakeholders in coordinating resources and activities of religious accommodations, which would certainly support their development, favoring the local community, tourists, and territories in which they are rooted.

To sum up, evidence shows that religious accommodations are particularly appreciated by tourists as new contexts of experience able to generate value co-creation processes. In fact, sharing core values (ethical, religious and moral) and knowledge between all stakeholders involved is a prerequisite of tourism development. The development of this new hospitality model requires synergic actions aimed at developing cooperative relationships among all the stakeholders involved, enhancing effective co-evolutionary adaptations at multiple levels, thus positively affecting sustainability and the resulting value co-creation processes.

6. Discussion

Findings of the case studies allow the definition of religious accommodations as a new sustainability-oriented hospitality model aimed at satisfying the needs of individuals, families, and groups of any or no religious affiliation. This new model is characterized by original structures as contexts of experiential authenticity, rooted in territories rich in religious, cultural, and historic traditions while involving different stakeholders in value co-creation processes. This definition is one of the main outcomes of this research, which is able to offer an important contribution to the development of the future literature on the topic.

Moreover, the results of the multiple case studies presented are consistent with the proposed theoretical framework. They confirm that the creation and development of religious accommodations are possible through continuous, effective, and mutual adaptations between these new hospitality models, their territories, and tourists, favored by three main determinants (i.e., tourist experience, systemic approach, and social responsibility). This new hospitality model is able to respond to the sustainability requirements and—consequently—to guarantee the generation of value co-creation processes between all the different actors involved.

Relevant theoretical and managerial implications emerge.

Regarding theoretical implications, this study significantly contributes to the management studies on religious accommodations. In fact, currently, there is only one other academic management study on the topic i.e., [58], but it is focused on the analysis of internal business processes and refers to a specific type of religious accommodation (i.e., retreat houses). Moreover, the results of this investigation confirm that religious accommodations can contribute incisively to the sustainable development and competitiveness of a tourism destination [15,44,67,79,81,105,126,131,138,139]—such as the city of Rome—because they are able to establish dynamic relationships over time with their territories and tourists, generating effective co-evolutionary adaptations. These synergies positively affect all the three sustainability dimensions [19,20,31]. In fact, religious accommodations allow the renovation of historic buildings for tourism purposes, providing hospitality in fascinating experiential contexts, positively affecting territories, local communities, and tourists and their capacity to create (and co-create) a shared tourist experience and value [1,2,4–6,10,21,25,28,30,34,36,41,121,123,140]. Indeed, this new sustainability-oriented model is largely dependent on territory-specific factors and competitive skills cultivated by entrepreneurs and policy makers (especially public and religious), and is anchored to the sharing of knowledge, culture, and beliefs between all the actors involved in the relationship. This sharing implies slow and gradual processes of mutual adaptations [67,111,141] at multiple levels. In this vein, the territory (meso) becomes a key factor in both the creation and development of religious accommodations, because it allows connecting firms (micro) with destinations (macro), and with the supra-system of economy and society, to realize a tourist offering able to respond to a tourism demand that requires ever more cultural variety [38,137,138,142–145].

Regarding the managerial implications and taking into account the three determinants of religious accommodations' creation and development (i.e., tourist experience, systemic approach and social responsibility), it is fundamental to consider the following aspects:

1. The need for a critical and holistic vision of environmental trends and their possible effects on the development of territories where the religious accommodations are rooted;
2. The awareness that tourists are the real protagonists of the value co-creation processes between demanded and offered hospitality models, with positive effects on the territories' competitiveness;
3. The organization and management of systemic and multiple relationships of mutual functionality among all the actors involved, at different interconnected levels, as a prerequisite for the generation of effective co-evolutionary adaptations;

4. The need to apply management principles consistent with the religious origins of this new hospitality model, especially related to succession problems and the involvement of secular people in the governance and management activities;
5. The attention given to a new culture of hospitality, based on mutual functionality principles, sustainability objectives, social cohesion, and rigorous application of ethical and moral values.

These aspects should be taken into account by decision makers and policy makers (public, private, and religious) to orient incentives and subsidies, as well as to resolve contradictions.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study represents the first attempt to investigate the role played by religious accommodations in enhancing sustainable tourism development and the subsequent generation of value co-creation processes, through the adoption of a co-evolutionary perspective.

The limits of this study are two-fold. Firstly, it addresses the religious accommodations localized in a single specific territory (i.e., the historic centre of Rome) chosen for its religious relevance. Consequently, more interesting investigations may be concerned with the application of the religious accommodation hospitality model in different contexts at both national and international levels, by assessing possible evolutions and their positive effects in those contexts. In doing so, future research can benefit from statistical and quantitative analysis (e.g., historical data on tourist flows). Secondly, future researches will have the opportunity to be supported by interviews with other actors, such as inhabitants, in order to verify their perception of this hospitality model.

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