



# 1st International Conference of the Lazarite Academy of Saint Louis IX, King of France ECUMENISM: MEANING AND PROSPECTS Pontifical Sicilian Theological Faculty - January 23, 2026



## 1. Introduction: Religiosity in Comparative Perspective

I do not possess detailed empirical data concerning the current state of religiosity in Sicily. Nevertheless, based on information available from public statistical and sociological sources, it may be stated with reasonable confidence that the majority of the Sicilian population continues to identify with Christianity, predominantly with the Roman Catholic Church (approximately 90%). Participation in Sunday worship remains a relatively common and socially embedded practice, particularly in regions characterised by strong traditions and a dense network of parish life.

In contrast, the religious situation in the Czech Republic differs fundamentally. While regional differences undoubtedly exist, overall data from the most recent population census indicate that nearly 50% of the population of the Czech Republic does not identify with any religious denomination, and almost 70% does not affiliate with any Christian church. Only about 9% of inhabitants declare membership in the Roman Catholic Church, the numerically largest Christian denomination, while all non-Catholic churches combined account for approximately 2.5% of the population. At the same time, an intriguing phenomenon can be observed: the number of individuals who do not identify with any church or denomination, yet describe themselves as believers or spiritually oriented, is gradually increasing.

This constellation situates the Czech Republic among the most secularised societies in the world and provides a distinctive framework for reflecting on the contemporary role and mission of Christian churches.

## **2. The Czech Borderlands as a Historically Disrupted Region**

Within the Czech Republic, one encounters a particularly specific and historically burdened region: the Czech borderlands. Until 1945, this area was predominantly inhabited by a German-speaking population. Although the borderlands had always formed part of the Czech state, they remained sparsely populated for centuries. From the High Middle Ages onwards, rulers therefore encouraged colonisation by settlers from German-speaking territories, who were invited to cultivate the land, establish towns, and contribute to its economic and cultural development. In this context, the Czech population constituted a minority, alongside another significant minority: Jewish communities that played an important role in local economic, cultural, and religious life.

The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic after the First World War fundamentally altered the balance of power in the region. Germans lost their previously privileged position, and the rise of nationalism and later Nazism intensified ethnic tensions. These conflicts were further exacerbated by economic hardship and the consequences of the global economic crisis of the 1930s.

Following the Munich Agreement, the Czech borderlands - referred to as the Sudetenland - were annexed by Nazi Germany. The Czech population fled or was expelled to the interior of the country, while Jewish inhabitants were subjected to persecution, later deported to concentration camps, and largely annihilated. Synagogues throughout the borderlands were destroyed, and Jewish communal life ceased to exist.

## **3. Post-War Displacement and Communist Devastation**

After the Second World War, the German-speaking population was forcibly expelled from the Czech borderlands. As a result, centuries of cultural, religious, and social continuity were abruptly interrupted. The region was resettled by new inhabitants from various parts of the country, many of whom lacked any historical, emotional, or cultural connection to the place. This radical rupture created a landscape deprived of roots - socially, culturally, and spiritually.

The subsequent forty-year dictatorship of the Communist Party deepened this devastation. The regime promoted an explicitly atheistic worldview and systematically restricted the activities of churches. Religious institutions were marginalised, property was confiscated, and public expressions of faith were discouraged or penalised. In addition to spiritual suppression, the region suffered significant ecological damage due to heavy industry, mining, and environmentally irresponsible economic policies.

The long-term consequences of these developments are still evident today.

#### **4. Contemporary Social and Religious Landscape**

The Czech borderlands remain a region situated at the margins of political and economic interest. Unemployment rates tend to be higher than the national average, levels of educational attainment lower, and social life is affected by various pathological phenomena, including social exclusion and intergenerational poverty. At the same time, the region possesses a distinctive aesthetic and symbolic character: a dramatic landscape shaped by the tension between spa culture and extractive industries, nostalgia for a vanished past, and the tragic imprint of historical upheavals.

From a religious perspective, the borderlands resemble a spiritual desert. Christian churches form a numerically negligible minority and are dispersed across small, often fragile parish communities. Institutional religion has limited visibility and influence in public life.

#### **5. Theological Interpretation of the “Spiritual Desert”**

Yet the metaphor of the desert carries not only negative connotations. In Christian tradition, the desert has also been understood as a space of spiritual purification, struggle, and renewal. The history of the early Church reminds us that Christians withdrew into the deserts of Egypt and Syria in order to confront inner demons, seek God, and rediscover the essence of faith.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ possesses a healing and transformative power that enables human beings to accept themselves, others, and the world more fully. In this sense, even the spiritual desert of the Czech borderlands can become a place of renewal. Christian communities, though small in number, create oases where culture, dialogue, care for the vulnerable, and diverse forms of spirituality can flourish.

## 6. Ecumenical and Social Engagement in Practice

A key characteristic of church life in the borderlands is the close interconnection between spiritual, social, and charitable activities, often realised through ecumenical cooperation. During my two decades of service as a parish priest in two borderland towns, I worked closely with colleagues from other Christian traditions on a variety of initiatives.

One important area of engagement concerned the education and social inclusion of the Roma minority, which has long been exposed to discrimination. Alongside Roma communities, other socially disadvantaged groups in the region face serious difficulties in accessing employment and housing. In response, we founded a civic association entitled *Střecha nad hlavou* ("A Roof Over One's Head") and cooperated with state institutions and non-governmental organisations. These activities were understood not merely as civic engagement, but as a concrete embodiment of the Gospel's call to love one's neighbour.

Another crucial field is ecumenical chaplaincy in prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, and care facilities. During the communist era, people with mental and physical disabilities were often placed in remote institutions in the borderlands and isolated from mainstream society. Churches continue to provide pastoral care to these individuals. From personal experience, I can attest that encounters with people with disabilities often reveal extraordinary authenticity, sincerity, and spiritual depth.

## 7. Healing Memory and Rediscovering Roots

A particularly significant task of churches in the Czech borderlands is the healing of historical memory. This involves reconnecting broken relationships, acknowledging past injustices, and rediscovering lost roots. Such efforts take concrete form in initiatives like the Noah Community (*Komunita Noe*), located in a former Baroque Catholic rectory in a remote border village. Networking meetings held there bring together people from diverse backgrounds to reflect on contemporary societal challenges and deepen their spiritual lives. Similar initiatives occur in Evangelical parishes, where meditation retreats are organised, combining silence, prayer, evening worship, and communal sharing. Retreats focused on contemplation and attentiveness to the present moment often have a deeper impact than might initially be assumed. They contribute to a subtle but meaningful transformation of the spiritual atmosphere of the region.

At the same time, these activities breathe new life into church buildings that can no longer serve traditional functions. In larger towns, parish buildings are being transformed into cultural and community centres without losing their Christian identity. While such transformations are not universally successful, every place that radiates hope represents a vital source of encouragement for churches operating under challenging conditions.

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper has sought to demonstrate the significance of the ministry of churches in the Czech borderlands - a region deprived of roots by historical displacement, ideological repression, and social fragmentation. Drawing on personal experience as a parish priest, chaplain, educator, and volunteer, it highlights both the enduring challenges and the emerging opportunities for creative and ecumenical cooperation.

Despite persistent social and religious marginalisation, churches in the borderlands continue to play an active role in fostering dialogue, healing memory, supporting the vulnerable, and nurturing spiritual life. In doing so, they offer not only pastoral care, but also a quiet yet resilient witness to hope in a landscape marked by loss and discontinuity.

