

Entertainment

Vatican enters Venice Architecture Biennale with 10 chapels

By Nicole Winfield | AP March 20 at 10:18 AM

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican is planting 10 chapels in the woods of one of Venice’s lagoon islands for its first-ever contribution to the Venice Architecture Biennale.

Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the Vatican’s culture minister, unveiled plans for “Vatican Chapels” on Tuesday, saying the project was inspired by the “Woodland Chapel” in Stockholm by Swedish architect Gunnar Asplund.

Ravasi has frequently condemned modern churches as ugly and inhospitable to prayer. But he said he hoped “Vatican Chapels” would help re-establish a dialogue between the sacred and architecture, which over centuries created majestic churches and cathedrals that changed public spaces around the globe.

It’s the Vatican’s second major foray into the world of the Venice Biennale after it staged pavillions for the 2013 and 2015 art biennales.

The Vatican, which spent 400,000 euros (\$490,830) for the project, solicited designs from 10 architects — only two of them women — as well as contributions from construction firms to defray the costs. The biggest name in the group is Norman Foster, the Pritzker Prize-winning British architect.

The architecture biennale, which has “Freespace” as its theme this year, runs May 26-Nov. 25.

Ravasi told reporters that the Vatican didn’t want to offer a traditional pavilion with miniature models and designs for its inaugural contribution. Rather, the Vatican decided to create an itinerary that will take visitors on a pilgrimage around the 10 unconsecrated chapels planted in the forest of San Giorgio island, located in the main basin of Venice’s lagoon opposite St. Mark’s Square.

Ravasi said the significance of the woods was key given the tradition of forests “as a place of silence, meditation, shade and light.”

The curator for the project, Venetian architectural historian Francesco Dal Co, said no common theme unites the chapels, though they all have a pulpit and an altar. They’re made of a host of different materials: wood, steel, iron, cement or ceramic.

The chapels can be taken apart, and there has already been a request for one of them to travel after the biennale ends. But no decision has been made as to what to do with the exhibit.

Dal Co said part of his agenda in curating the Vatican pavilion was to allow Venice to welcome even more visitors.

“I have always thought that the Biennale has done so much in the past to open up my city and provide more opportunities for people to have the right to visit it freely,” he said.

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