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WHEN CANCEL CULTURE ENTERS THE CHURCH: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO THE RUPNIK AND CENTRO ALETTI CASE

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Abstract: *This article examines how discourses of cancel culture emerged and developed around the case of Marko Rupnik, a Jesuit priest and artist against whom multiple women have filed allegations of abuse spanning several decades, and how calls for the removal or preservation of his artworks extended cancel culture logic beyond the individual to the symbolic objects and spaces associated with him, with particular attention to Centro Aletti, the Catholic artistic centre he founded in Rome in 1991. Drawing on a document analysis of selected media reports and ecclesial documents, the study addresses the following research question: in what ways does the Rupnik affair illustrate how cancel culture operates at both individual and institutional levels within a religious context? The analysis yields three principal findings. First, the cancel culture framing was a discursive strategy introduced by Centro Aletti itself as a defensive communicative response to mounting public pressure. Second, cancel culture logic produced a ripple effect of accountability demands that extended from the individual to the symbolic objects associated with him, generating a spectrum of institutional responses. Third, religious institutional contexts generate specific forms of resistance to cancellation dynamics, grounded in canonical procedure, theological authority, and the spiritual function of sacred art, that distinguish them from secular corporate contexts. The article contributes to the emerging literature on cancel culture by extending its analytical scope to religious institutional communication.*

Keywords: *Cancel Culture, Marko Ivan Rupnik, Centro Aletti, reputational sanctioning, media discourse*

JEL classification: D83, L82, Z12

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary media environment, public figures, brands, and institutions operate within dense reputational economies in which their perceived credibility and moral acceptability directly shape access to attention, resources, and support (Bromley, 1993; Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997). Practices such as cancel culture intervene in these reputational economies by mobilizing publics to withdraw symbolic and economic support from targeted individuals and institutions, thereby reshaping who is seen as legitimate in the marketplace and public sphere (Dias et al., 2022; Norris, 2023). In some cases, such dynamics do not remain confined to primary targets: when a transgressor is embedded within an institutional network, cancel culture logic extends to affiliated organisations, cultural spaces, and bodies perceived as complicit in, or insufficiently distanced from, the original transgression. Religious organizations are not exempt from these dynamics, as their authority likewise depends on public perceptions of moral integrity and institutional trustworthiness (Casanova, 1994; Demerath & Williams, 1992). The Catholic Church's reputation has been significantly compromised by intensifying media coverage of sexual abuse scandals, resulting in disillusionment among its adherents and diminished conversion rates (Navas, 2026). The scandal surrounding abuse allegations against Jesuit priest and artist Marko Rupnik has raised questions not only about individual responsibility, but also about the credibility of the Catholic Church and affiliated institutions that protected him or continued to display his work, making it a paradigmatic case for analysing how cancel culture operates across both individual and institutional levels in a religious field. Building on this, the aim of the article is to examine how discourses of cancel culture emerge and develop around the Rupnik case, and how calls for the removal, preservation, or reinterpretation of his artworks extend cancel culture logic beyond the individual to the symbolic objects and spaces associated with him, with particular attention to Centro Aletti, a Catholic cultural and artistic centre he founded in Rome in 1991 (Drozdziak, 2024).

The research problem addressed in this paper can be formulated as follows: in what ways does the Rupnik affair illustrate how cancel culture operates at both individual and institutional levels within a religious context? To investigate this, the study conducts a document analysis of selected media reports and ecclesial documents related to the Rupnik and Centro Aletti controversy. In doing so, the article contributes to the emerging literature on cancel culture by extending its analytical scope to religious institutional contexts.

The article is organised into four sections and a conclusion. The first section reviews relevant literature on cancel culture, tracing its individual, corporate, and institutional dimensions. The second section offers a chronological case study of the Rupnik affair and Centro Aletti, covering the canonical and institutional proceedings against Rupnik, the history and responses of Centro Aletti, and the debate over the fate of his artworks. The third section analyses how cancel culture discourses and their institutional extensions are articulated in selected media reports and official Church documents. The conclusion discusses the implications of these findings for understanding cancel culture in religious contexts and suggests directions for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cancel culture: definitions and dynamics

Cancel culture is a relatively recent and contested term for practices where publics collectively withdraw support from individuals or institutions perceived to have violated social norms (Scalcău, 2023). According to Merriam Webster, the first known use of “cancel culture” dates to 2017, but public debate intensified in 2020 with the publication of “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate” in Harper’s Magazine, in which 153 public intellectuals warned that rising intolerance of opposing views and public shaming threaten open debate and democratic participation (Harper’s Magazine, 2020). Scholars offer multiple, partly competing definitions. Many describe “canceling” as the public withdrawal of support for artists, celebrities or public figures, typically through boycotts and reputational sanctions (Eaves, 2021; Scalcău, 2023). Others conceptualise cancel culture more broadly as a collective strategy of cultural ostracism and public shunning directed at individuals or institutions accused of objectionable behaviour, enacted through social and institutional channels (Dudenhoefer, 2020; Mujtaba & Cavico, 2020; Norris, 2023; Berghel, 2021).

The positive dimension of cancel culture lies in its capacity to function as a mechanism of social transformation. Empirical and discourse-analytic studies show that cancellation episodes can validate the grievances of marginalised communities, draw symbolic boundaries, shape collective identities and mobilise pressure on institutions to sanction powerful offenders (Altungy et al., 2025; Traversa et al., 2023; Butyrina et al., 2024). From this perspective, cancellation appears as a grassroots tool for exposing systemic inequalities and holding influential individuals and institutions morally accountable where formal politics and legal mechanisms fall short (Hudlay in Romano, 2020; Velasco, 2020). Despite these emancipatory potentials, cancel culture also presents serious risks. Critics argue that social media have intensified dynamics of public shaming and “speech privilege”, creating hierarchies of visibility that marginalise dissenting viewpoints and conflict with norms of pluralism and open dialogue (Coleman, 2022; Custer, 2024). Emotional amplification and outrage can transform legitimate accountability into moral panics or “witch hunts”, undermining due process and enabling mob mentality (Janssens & Spreeuwenberg, 2022; Paliy, 2024). Fear of becoming a target encourages self-censorship that may stifle free speech and critical debate (Adeyemi, 2025).

Corporate and institutional cancel culture

In corporate contexts, cancel culture is commonly defined as the collective withdrawal of consumer support from individuals or brands in positions of power, enacted through public pressure and reputational sanctions in order to influence corporate policies and practices (Saldanha et al., 2023; Scheinbaum & Poehlman, 2025). This reflects a broader shift in power relations, as consumers increasingly hold organisations accountable in the public sphere. Early high-profile cases illustrate the entanglement of individual and corporate reputations. In 2018, Roseanne Barr faced extensive backlash for a racist tweet, leading to the cancellation of her television show and prompting the sleeping-pill brand Ambien to publicly distance itself, signalling how corporate actors seek to manage reputational spillovers from individual controversies (Scheinbaum & Poehlman, 2025). Campaigns such as #BoikotScarlett and recurring boycotts of companies like Starbucks show how perceived misalignments between corporate actions

and dominant social or political values can generate sustained economic and symbolic consequences (Ardiningrum & Liwoso, 2025; Parker et al., 2024). Unlike individuals, corporations often possess resources for reputational recovery, crisis communication, policy reforms and rebranding, yet individual cancellations can still have significant corporate consequences when reputational damage spills over to affiliated organisations and partners (Abbasi et al., 2022). Jeffree Star's personal controversies, for instance, led to the termination of brand partnerships with companies such as Morphe, illustrating how closely associated corporate actors can be drawn into the orbit of an individual's cancellation regardless of their own conduct (Eaves, 2021). As Roos (2020, p. 13) summarises, the goal of cancel culture is ultimately "to squash the influence of these individuals or companies and eventually make them powerless by boycotting them financially, politically, or professionally".

The reach of cancel culture extends beyond the corporate sphere. When a transgressor occupies a position within a religious, cultural or civic institution, cancellation demands frequently target not only the individual but also the institution itself, its leadership, symbols, physical spaces and affiliated bodies, especially in religious contexts where institutional authority rests on claims to moral integrity and spiritual trustworthiness (Casanova, 1994; Demerath & Williams, 1992). When that moral foundation is publicly challenged, the institution as a whole becomes subject to cancellation pressures, irrespective of its direct involvement in the original transgression. The Catholic Church is therefore not exempt from these dynamics: scandals involving individual clergy can trigger broader demands for institutional accountability and sanctions, as in the case of Jesuit Marko Ivan Rupnik.

CASE STUDY: THE RUPNIK AFFAIR AND CENTRO ALETTI

Chronology of the Marko Rupnik Case

Understanding the unfolding of the Rupnik case is essential for analysing how cancel culture discourses emerged and developed in response to both individual misconduct and institutional failure. The case of the Slovenian Jesuit Marko Rupnik concerns allegations of sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse of adult women, mostly nuns from the Loyola community that he himself founded. Although the allegations date back to the 1980s and 1990s, the wider public only became aware of them in 2022. For greater clarity, the development of the case can be divided into several phases.

Initial period and first allegations (1980s – 1993)

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Rupnik, together with Sister Ivanka Hosta, founded the Loyola community in Mengeš, Slovenia. It was precisely in this period that the first allegations of various forms of abuse (sexual, psychological and spiritual) emerged. Among the claims mentioned are group sexual relations, coercion to watch pornographic content and manipulation through spiritual authority. The first known complaint was filed in 1993; however, according to media reporting (Giangravé, 2025), no formal canonical or administrative proceedings were initiated by ecclesial authorities at that time. Already in 1993, Rupnik left the Loyola community following internal complaints from the sisters. Media accounts further report that a sister who submitted a complaint left the community around the same period, with no public institutional explanation provided (Giangravé, 2025).

First official investigations and sanctions (2018 – 2020)

After a long-time gap, the case came back into focus in 2018, when the Jesuit superior received allegations against Rupnik of sexual abuse as well as the specific canonical offence of absolving an accomplice in a sin against the sixth commandment. A preliminary investigation was launched within the Society of Jesus (Verschueren, 2022). In 2019 the allegations were deemed credible and the case was forwarded to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. At the beginning of 2020, canonical investigations concluded that the administrative criteria for the alleged offense of absolution of an accomplice had been met. In May 2020, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith formally declared that Rupnik had incurred automatic excommunication (*latae sententiae*), which was subsequently remitted by decree shortly thereafter (Verschueren, 2022).

New allegations and restrictions (2021 – October 2022)

During 2021, in the framework of the apostolic visitation of the Loyola community, Bishop Daniele Libanori received accusations from at least nine women against Rupnik, who had served as the community's confessor and spiritual director for a number of years (Brockhaus, 2022; Pentin, 2022). These complaints were subsequently forwarded to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. In response, the existing restrictions on Rupnik's public activity were further tightened, with the aim of avoiding scandal and preventing further traumatising of the victims (Pentin, 2022). Nevertheless, Rupnik was still permitted to engage in artistic work and limited liturgical activity within his own community (Brockhaus, 2022). In October 2022, the Vatican declined to initiate a canonical procedure, ruling that the allegations fell outside the canonical statute of limitations, although the statute of limitations had previously been waived in other cases (Brockhaus, 2022; Pentin, 2022).

Public disclosure and escalation (December 2022 – February 2023)

Only at the end of 2022 did the case gain wider public visibility. The Society of Jesus published a detailed chronology of the investigations into Rupnik, covering the period from the 2018 allegations through excommunication to the 2022 restrictions, affirming the credibility of the allegations and inviting victims to contact the order through a dedicated support team (Verschueren, 2022; Vatican News, 2022). The statement expressed empathy towards those affected and outlined the establishment of a reporting and support system for survivors. The Slovenian Bishops' Conference expressed sorrow over the abuse, characterised it as unacceptable, and voiced support for the victims, while expressing regret over the delayed institutional response. The statement called for greater transparency and assistance to victims, and explicitly distinguished Rupnik's personal conduct from his artistic work (Slovenian Bishops' Conference, 2022). At the beginning of 2023, following the receipt of fifteen additional credible reports of abuse, further measures were imposed: Rupnik was prohibited from travelling outside Rome and from engaging in any public artistic activity (Eternal Word Television Network, 2023; Brockhaus, 2023). The Slovenian Jesuits issued a formal apology to the victims, acknowledging the credibility of their allegations and their distress, reaffirming the order's commitment to justice, and expressing regret for the suffering endured (Jesuits in Slovenia, 2023).

Key institutional decisions (June 2023 – October 2023)

In June 2023, the Society of Jesus published a decree formally dismissing Rupnik from the order on the grounds of his repeated refusal to comply with the imposed restrictions. The decree clarified that the administrative measure of dismissal was based on canonical disobedience—specifically his refusal to abide by imposed restrictions—rather than a definitive judicial finding on the abuse allegations, noting that Rupnik retained the status of a diocesan priest pending further canonical review (Brockhaus, 2023b). In October Pope Francis lifted the statute of limitations for this case, thereby opening the possibility of initiating a canonical procedure (Da Silva 2023). The Vatican announced that Pope Francis, following a report from the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors on problems in handling the case and the lack of support for victims, had requested a review by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and had lifted the statute of limitations so that the procedure could begin. The statement emphasises the Pope's conviction of the need to listen to victims with compassion, inspired by the Synod. This enables a formal trial (Holy See Press Office 2023). The case thus remains open in 2025/2026, and its final outcome also depends on the outcome of the canonical process. Namely, in 2025 the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith appointed five judges who will conduct the procedure, with emphasis on their independence (Holy See Press Office 2025). Pope Leo XIV confirmed that the process had begun and called for patience and respect for the rights of all involved (Wooden 2025). While the canonical process against Rupnik remains ongoing, the scandal has not remained confined to his person alone. The allegations and the institutional responses they generated have progressively drawn Centro Aletti, the art centre Rupnik founded in Rome in 1991 and which served for decades as the primary hub of his artistic activity (Allen, 2024; Christian, 2024) into the public controversy. Questions about the centre's role in Rupnik's work, its institutional responses to the allegations, and the fate of the artworks produced under its umbrella have opened a parallel public debate that merits separate examination.

CENTRO ALETTI: A CHRONOLOGY

Centro Aletti is a centre for spiritual art and theology founded in Rome in 1991 by Marko Ivan Rupnik, initially established with the aim of fostering dialogue between Eastern and Western Christian traditions and providing a space for theological and artistic research (Drozdziak, 2024). Over the following decades, the centre became specialised in the production of large-scale mosaics for churches and shrines worldwide, functioning as the primary hub of Rupnik's artistic activity (Allen, 2024; Christian, 2024). Rupnik served as the centre's director until May 2020, when, coinciding with the imposition of administrative restrictions, he formally ceased to hold that role (Verschueren, 2022).

Following Rupnik's dismissal from the Society of Jesus in June 2023, Centro Aletti's director Maria Campatelli issued a public statement in which she described the dismissal as the result of a "lynching" stemming from what she characterised as defamatory allegations and contested the Jesuits' account of the grounds for dismissal (Winfield, 2023; Centro Aletti, 2023).

In September 2023, the Vicariate of the Diocese of Rome published the conclusions of a canonical visitation to Centro Aletti, ordered by Cardinal Vicar Angelo

De Donatis, which concluded that the centre maintained “a healthy community life free of particular critical issues”. Based on the final report, the Vicar Cardinal, after confirming that there were no reasons to take further measures within his jurisdiction, decreed the closure of the Canonical Visit (Zenit, 2023; EWTN Vatican, 2023). In July 2024, Campatelli issued a further public statement opposing calls for the removal of Rupnik’s artworks, describing such pressure as a manifestation of “cancel culture” and “the criminalisation of art.” She argued that the mosaics are not the work of a single author but a collective effort of dozens of artists and theologians, and that their removal would cause unjust harm to innocent collaborators and to members of the faithful (OSV News, 2024). Despite the ongoing canonical process, Centro Aletti continued to promote Rupnik’s artistic and spiritual work, including his mosaics at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Aparecida in Brazil and a new e-book of his spiritual writings published in April 2025 (Esteves, 2025b)

The debate over rupnik’s artworks

At the beginning of 2024, several alleged victims, including Gloria Branciani and Mirjam Kovač, publicly testified for the first time about their experiences of spiritual, psychological, and sexual abuse, explicitly linking these experiences to the context of Rupnik’s artistic activity (Pullella, 2024; America Magazine, 2024). Their accounts emphasised that the mosaics and other artworks produced in this context function as a reminder of the abuse and can be experienced as retraumatising for both survivors and members of the faithful who encounter them in liturgical spaces (OSV News, 2024). In published accounts, a complainant identified under the pseudonym Sister Samuelle alleged that abuse occurred during the installation of a mosaic, and explicitly called for the removal of his works (Esteves, 2025b). On 28 June 2024, five women alleging abuse sent letters to bishops worldwide, arguing that the continued display of Rupnik’s works in churches and shrines is inappropriate and harmful to victims, and proposing their removal as a visible sign of institutional commitment to change (Christian, 2024; Winfield, 2024).

These demands led to concrete institutional reactions throughout the Church.

In June 2025 Vatican News removed all of Rupnik’s mosaics and illustrations from its website, replacing them with blank spaces or other images (Milinare 2025; Guzik, 2025).

The Shrine of Lourdes in France covered Rupnik’s mosaics on the side doors of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary with aluminium panels already on 31 March 2025, and soon afterwards on the central doors as well. Bishop Jean-Marc Micas explained that the aim was to facilitate access for those who feel traumatised by the mosaics and unable to cross the threshold of the basilica. Complete removal has not yet been carried out; the focus is on a symbolic and pastoral step in the context of the Jubilee Year (Vatican News 2025).

The Knights of Columbus covered the mosaics in the Chapel of St John Paul II in Washington and in the Chapel of the Holy Family at their headquarters in New Haven with fabric (decision announced on 11 July 2024). The fabric will remain until the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith issues a final decision on the case, and permanent covering with plaster is also possible. Supreme Knight Patrick Kelly emphasised that the first concern is the protection of victims and that shrines must not cause additional suffering (Christian, 2024; Winfield, 2024).

The Shrine of Fatima in Portugal decided on 3 April 2025 not to remove the mosaic in the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity, but to ban any promotional use of the work (images, reproductions, promotional materials). The wall surface of the largest and most modern prayer space in the shrine, the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity, is covered by a huge golden mosaic stretching from floor to ceiling. The work was created in 2007 by Father Rupnik and his collaborators from the Aletti Centre. The mosaic, approximately 10 x 50 metres in size, depicts the Paschal Lamb in the centre, surrounded by saints and angels. The shrine stated that it condemns the acts committed by Father Rupnik and expressed its solidarity with the victims (Esteves 2025a).

On the other side, many churches and shrines, like ones in Poland, Slovenia, Italy, and Spain have so far refused complete removal, awaiting the final decision of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. Jesuit representatives in Spain acknowledged that there is currently no clear policy on what to do with Rupnik's mosaics (Brockhaus & Martínez-Bordiú, 2025)

ANALYSIS

The study is based on a document analysis of selected media reports and institutional documents concerning the Rupnik affair. The search covered the period from December 2022 (when the allegations first gained widespread public visibility) to late 2025. Relevant news coverage and official materials were identified through web searches using targeted search queries (such as “Marko Ivan Rupnik”, “Centro Aletti”, and “Rupnik cancel culture”) in Google and relevant news databases. The examined corpus includes two main categories of sources: (1) ecclesial and institutional documents, comprising official press releases, decrees, and statements issued by the Holy See Press Office, the Society of Jesus, the Vicariate of the Diocese of Rome, the Slovenian Bishops Conference, Centro Aletti, and administration of major shrines and organizations (e.g. Lourdes, Fatima, Knights of Columbus); and (2) media coverage, encompassing both specialized Catholic news agencies (e.g. Catholic News Agency, OSV News, National Catholic Reporter, Crux, EWTN, Vatican News) and major secular international news outlets (e.g. Reuters, Associated Press). Documents were selected based on three key relevance criteria: (a) direct focus on the canonical or institutional proceedings concerning Marko Rupnik and Centro Aletti; (b) explicit articulation of discourses surrounding cancel culture, boycott, or reputational sanctioning; and (c) coverage of concrete institutional decisions, policy statements, or debates regarding the removal, covering, or preservation of Rupnik's artworks in physical and digital spaces.

The Construction of the Rupnik Affair as Cancel Culture

The analysis of selected media reports and institutional documents reveals that, within the examined corpus, the explicit mention of cancel culture originated from a specific institutional actor, Centro Aletti itself, as a deliberate discursive strategy. In a statement published on 24 July 2024, director Maria Campatelli explicitly invoked the concept to characterise calls for the removal of Rupnik's artworks, describing such pressure as “the widespread diffusion of the so-called ‘cancel culture’” and as a form of “criminalisation of art” (OSV News, 2024; Centro Aletti, 2024). By positioning survivors' demands within the discourse of cancel culture, Campatelli reframed the debate

from one about institutional accountability to one about artistic freedom and collective injustice toward innocent collaborators. This rhetorical move was not without precedent. As early as June 2023, Campatelli had characterised the allegations as “defamatory and unproven” and described media coverage as a form of “lynching” directed at both Rupnik and the centre (Winfield, 2023), indicating that the July 2024 statement represented an escalation of a defensive narrative that had been developing since the scandal became public. This pattern reflects the contested nature of cancel culture as a discursive category that, as the literature review has shown, functions simultaneously as a tool of accountability and as a rhetorical defence against legitimate demands for reform (Norris, 2023; Scalcau, 2023).

Cancel Culture at the Institutional Level

The analysis of institutional responses to the Rupnik affair reveals the progressive extension of cancel culture logic from the individual transgressor to the symbolic objects associated with him. This institutional dimension of cancel culture operates through the collective withdrawal of symbolic support from a primary target (Norris, 2023; Saldanha et al., 2023), a logic that, as the examined cases illustrate, can extend beyond the individual to encompass the spaces and objects through which his legacy remains publicly visible.

Survivors’ demands did not target Rupnik alone, but extended to the symbolic objects associated with him, calling for the removal of his artworks from the spaces where they remain publicly visible (Christian, 2024; Winfield, 2024). In this configuration, the mosaics functioned not merely as aesthetic objects but as institutional symbols of continued association with a sanctioned individual. The call for their removal can be interpreted as a call for institutional distancing, a demand that churches and shrines perform their rejection of Rupnik’s legacy in a publicly visible and symbolic manner.

Table 1: Institutional Responses to Calls for the Removal of Rupnik’s Artworks

Institution / site	Country	Type
Vatican News (Holy See news portal)	Vatican	Digital illustrations of Rupnik’s mosaics removed
Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima (Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity)	Portugal	Mosaics physically kept, but promotional use suspended.
Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes (Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary)	France	Mosaics covered
The Knights of Columbus (St. John Paul II Shrine)	USA	Mosaics covered

Source: Data collected by the authors based on Christian (2024), Esteves (2025a), Vatican News (2025), Guzik (2025), and Milinare (2025)

The responses of major Catholic institutions can be understood as varying positions along a spectrum of institutional distancing. At one end, the Knights of Columbus and the Shrine of Lourdes opted for visible and immediate symbolic action, covering the mosaics with fabric and aluminium panels respectively, explicitly framing these gestures as expressions of solidarity with survivors (Christian, 2024; Vatican News, 2025). Vatican News’ removal of Rupnik’s illustrations from its website extended the

logic of cancellation into the digital sphere (Millinare, 2025; Guzik, 2025). These actions collectively constitute what the cancel culture literature describes as the withdrawal of support (Dias et al., 2022). In this case, the withdrawal of institutional visibility and endorsement from an artist whose personal conduct had been publicly condemned. At the other end of the spectrum, the Shrine of Fatima suspended promotional use of Rupnik's images while retaining the physical mosaic, and numerous churches and shrines in Poland, Slovenia, Italy, and Spain declined any immediate action, awaiting the outcome of the canonical process (Esteves, 2025a; Brockhaus & Martínez-Bordiú, 2025). This reluctance reflects a tension specific to religious institutional contexts: the canonical process functions as a brake on the speed and totality of cancellation that public pressure demands, illustrating the coexistence of public cancellation pressure with institutional procedural frameworks that resist or slow its logic.

Centro Aletti occupies a particularly significant position within this landscape. Unlike the institutions that introduced at least partial measures of distancing, Centro Aletti explicitly refused such distancing and continued to promote Rupnik's artistic and spiritual work throughout 2024 and 2025 (Esteves, 2025b). This refusal, combined with Campatelli's active reframing of accountability demands as cancel culture, positioned Centro Aletti as the primary institutional site of resistance among the institutions examined in this study.

This dynamic illustrates how cancel culture, when it encounters an embedded institutional network, produces a ripple effect of accountability demands that moves from the individual to his symbolic output as process shaped by the perceived inseparability of Rupnik's person, his artistic legacy, and the institution he founded.

Resistance and Contestation: The Limits of Cancel Culture in a Religious Context

The Rupnik case is instructive precisely because it does not follow the pattern of rapid and total cancellation that characterises many high-profile cases in secular cases, where institutional ties are severed within days of a scandal (Zeitchik & Heil, 2018; The Associated Press, 2017). Instead, it reveals a set of structural, theological, and communicative factors specific to religious institutions that slow the cancellation dynamic.

The most significant structural factor is the canonical process itself. Several institutions explicitly cited the pending canonical procedure as the reason for deferring any definitive action on Rupnik's artworks, framing their inaction not as indifference to survivors but as procedural prudence (Brockhaus & Martínez-Bordiú, 2025; Holy See Press Office, 2025). This appeal to canonical procedure allowed institutions to resist cancellation demands while maintaining institutional legitimacy which is a strategy unavailable to secular institutions facing comparable pressure.

A second form of resistance is theological and aesthetic in character. Campatelli's argument that the mosaics represent "a collective effort of dozens of artists and theologians" and that their removal "ought never to be thought of as a punishment or a cure" invoked a theological understanding of sacred art as a communal object that exceeds the moral status of any individual contributor (OSV News, 2024). This draws on a longstanding theological tradition distinguishing between the moral character of an artist and the spiritual value of their work (Ramos, 2026). In the religious context,

this distinction carries additional theological weight, as sacred art is understood to belong to the community of the faithful rather than to its creator (Office of Liturgy of the Archdiocese of New York, 2016). The Shrine of Fatima's decision to retain the mosaic while suspending its promotional use (Esteves, 2025a) reflects a similar logic, acknowledging the moral problem while preserving the theological function of the artwork.

A third form of resistance is institutional in character. The Diocese of Rome's canonical visitation of Centro Aletti, concluding in September 2023 with a finding of "healthy community life free of particular critical issues," (EWTN Vatican, 2023; Zenit, 2023) provided the centre with a formal institutional endorsement that functioned as a buffer against cancellation pressure, though survivors contested these conclusions (Mares, 2023).

These forms of resistance reveal the limits of cancel culture as an analytical and social mechanism in religious contexts. Cancel culture, as theorised in the literature, derives its power from the ability of mobilised publics to withdraw symbolic and economic support from a target and its associates, thereby making continued association reputationally and financially untenable (Norris, 2023; Roos, 2020). In secular contexts, particularly in the corporate and entertainment industries, this mechanism tends to operate rapidly and decisively, as the reputational and economic costs of association with a cancelled figure quickly outweigh the costs of distancing (Zeitchik & Heil, 2018; The Associated Press, 2017; Saldanha et al., 2023). In religious contexts, however, the calculus is more complex. Institutions such as churches and shrines derive their legitimacy not primarily from public opinion but from theological authority, canonical procedure, and the spiritual needs of their communities. This means that the reputational costs of continued association with a sanctioned individual are partially offset by the theological costs of removing sacred art, disrupting community life, or acting in ways perceived as capitulating to secular pressure. The result is a slower, more contested, and more ambiguous cancellation dynamic, one in which resistance is not simply denial or cover-up, but a genuinely complex negotiation between competing institutional, theological, and reputational imperatives.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how discourses of cancel culture emerged and developed around the Rupnik affair, and how calls for the removal or preservation of his artworks generated institutional cancellation pressures that extended beyond the primary target to the spaces and symbolic objects associated with him. Drawing on a case analysis of selected media reports and ecclesial documents, the study has addressed the following research question: in what ways does the Rupnik affair illustrate how cancel culture operates at both individual and institutional levels within a religious context?

The analysis yields three principal findings. Given the single case-study design of this qualitative research, these findings should be understood as exploratory insights grounded in this specific controversy, rather than broadly generalizable patterns across all religious or organizational settings. First, the cancel culture framing of the affair was not a spontaneous product of public discourse, but a deliberate discursive strategy introduced by Centro Aletti as a defensive communicative response to mounting public pressure. Second, cancel culture logic, when it encounters an embedded institutional

network, produces a ripple effect of accountability demands that extends from the individual to his symbolic outputs, generating a spectrum of institutional responses that reflect varying reputational, theological, and communicative strategies. Third, religious institutional contexts generate specific forms of resistance to cancellation dynamics, grounded in canonical procedure, theological authority, and the spiritual function of sacred art, that distinguish them qualitatively from secular corporate contexts, resulting in a slower, more contested, and more ambiguous cancellation dynamic.

While the case-specific nature of this study inherently limits the direct generalizability of these conclusions, these exploratory findings carry significant theoretical implications for communication research. Existing theoretical frameworks, developed largely in relation to secular corporate and media contexts, require adaptation when applied to religious institutions, whose logic of legitimacy and public communication differs fundamentally from that of corporations or public figures. At the same time, the Rupnik case suggests that cancel culture, despite its risks of excessive or premature symbolic sanctioning, can function as a mechanism of public pressure on institutions that have historically been slow to protect survivors - a dynamic that needs further scholarly attention.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The corpus was assembled through purposive web searches rather than systematic sampling, which means the findings cannot be generalised beyond the examined documents. The study does not include a systematic analysis of broader media framing of the Rupnik affair, nor does it examine audience reception or the perspectives of all institutional actors involved. Future research might address these gaps by conducting systematic media content analysis, exploring comparable cases in other religious traditions, or investigating the long-term reputational consequences for institutions that resist cancellation pressure in the face of credible abuse allegations.

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