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Religious Tourism and Rural Tourism, an Alternative for Development in Isolated Regions

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ABSTRACT

This paper problematizes and critically examines rural development research carried out in Argentina, especially in the Andean region of northern Patagonia. The study focuses on the steppe, one of the nation's most sparsely populated regions, adjacent to the Andean region, which is known for being one of Argentina's most attractive natural tourist destinations. In this context, rural tourism is envisioned as a prospective development path, an aspiration stymied by significant infrastructure deficiencies. Furthermore, recent studies are beginning to reveal the deep religious roots in the foundations of local resilience. This encompasses the diverse religious landscape of the Mapuche people, the largest Indigenous group in the region, evangelical denominations, and Catholic practices. This article advances by highlighting how the recognition of resilience rooted in faith practices allows for rethinking tourism, designing attractions from a religious tourism perspective, and boosting the region's production associated with possible rural tourism strategies, not as mass tourism, but as an endogenous development strategy based on living heritage with a community-based and community-controlled nature of the tourism practices. This proposal builds upon the pivotal role of women in both economic production and the preservation of faith. Through practices of faith, it is possible to explore the existence of underlying channels of contact that, while integrated into daily life, often remain overlooked. These channels make it

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ARTICLE INFO
Received: 23 January 2026 | Revised: 26 March 2026 | Accepted: 3 April 2026 | Published Online: 10 April 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/nc.v5i2.1116

CITATION
Nuñez, P.G., 2026. Religious Tourism and Rural Tourism, an Alternative For Development in Isolated Regions. New Countryside. 5(2): 50–65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/nc.v5i2.1116

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possible to envision other futures, with greater sustainability in productive practices, diversified in terms of tourism, and increasingly socially significant as they become rooted in the faith of each place.

Keywords: Religious Tourism; Patagonian Steppe; Rural Indigenous Resilience; Internal Colonialism; Transhumance; Endogenous Development

1. Introduction

Patagonian steppe development represents a historical challenge that is part of the global issue of marginal regions. In the case of Argentine Patagonia, this challenge dates back to its coercive incorporation into the national state at the end of the 19th century. This process, based on the deterritorialization of indigenous peoples, imposed a sheep-raising, latifundia development model aimed at export, disconnected from domestic consumption and subordinated to British demand [1,2]. In its early decades, this model integrated steppe production with the Andean valleys, which facilitated sustained commercial ties with Chile, relegating the region to an extractive logic. This extractive logic, far from fostering sustainable growth, entrenched what has been termed 'internal colonialism' [3], which not only refers to a historical precedent but also to a legacy of structural marginality.

Given the exhaustion of this model and the recurring crises of connectivity and services, other territorial dynamics are emerging. Following the decline of large-scale sheep farming, the persistence of a population that embraces traditions and practices renders spiritual factors more visible as structural elements of territorial permanence. In this work, we ask about the material and immaterial factors that affect the resilience of the population, as well as the productive initiatives that take these factors into consideration. We systematize the contradictions and potentialities in the Ñorquinco Department, in towns such as Ñorquinco, Río Chico, and rural areas (Fitamiche, Chenqueniyen), where the presence of Mapuche Lofs and Creole inhabitants has shaped productive and symbolic resilience, which connects with urban dynamics of the mountain range through spiritual engagement. The surface area of the department of Ñorquinco is 8,413 km^2, and it has a population density of 0.17 inhabitants per km^2. It is one of the most sparsely populated regions in Argentina.

Through a multidimensional analysis, this work examines the records of faith in close connection with production processes. This relationship allows for a critical examination of the configuration of architectural space and gender structures, exploring the feminization of devotional practice and its link to the ethics of care. Furthermore, the research situates these phenomena within the broader context of colonialism, taking into account the unique historical context of the territory in question.

We argue that, in addition to the material dimension inherent in livestock production, there is a structuring spiritual dimension that intertwines Christian faith, Mapuche cosmology, and subsistence livestock farming. This phenomenon transcends mere syncretism, representing instead strategic forms of spatial appropriation. Through the analysis of a network of Franciscan chapels established at the request of the local population since the late 20th century—understood as nodes of a living heritage—we propose that the link between religious and rural tourism not only diversifies the economic base but also redefines the region's cultural landscape, transforming isolation-related stigmas into local development values.

2. Materials and Methods

This research is ongoing. This text presents results recorded in recent years up to the present. It employs a qualitative approach, utilizing oral history techniques based on ethnographic records and documentary analysis. Given the intangible nature of the factors under investigation, a qualitative and ethnographic approach is ideally suited to address the research questions.

The study area encompasses the Department of Ñorquinco, Río Negro Province (see **Figure 1**, lower left corner). Fieldwork was conducted between 2020 and 2026, a key period for understanding the territorial and religious reconfigurations of the region.

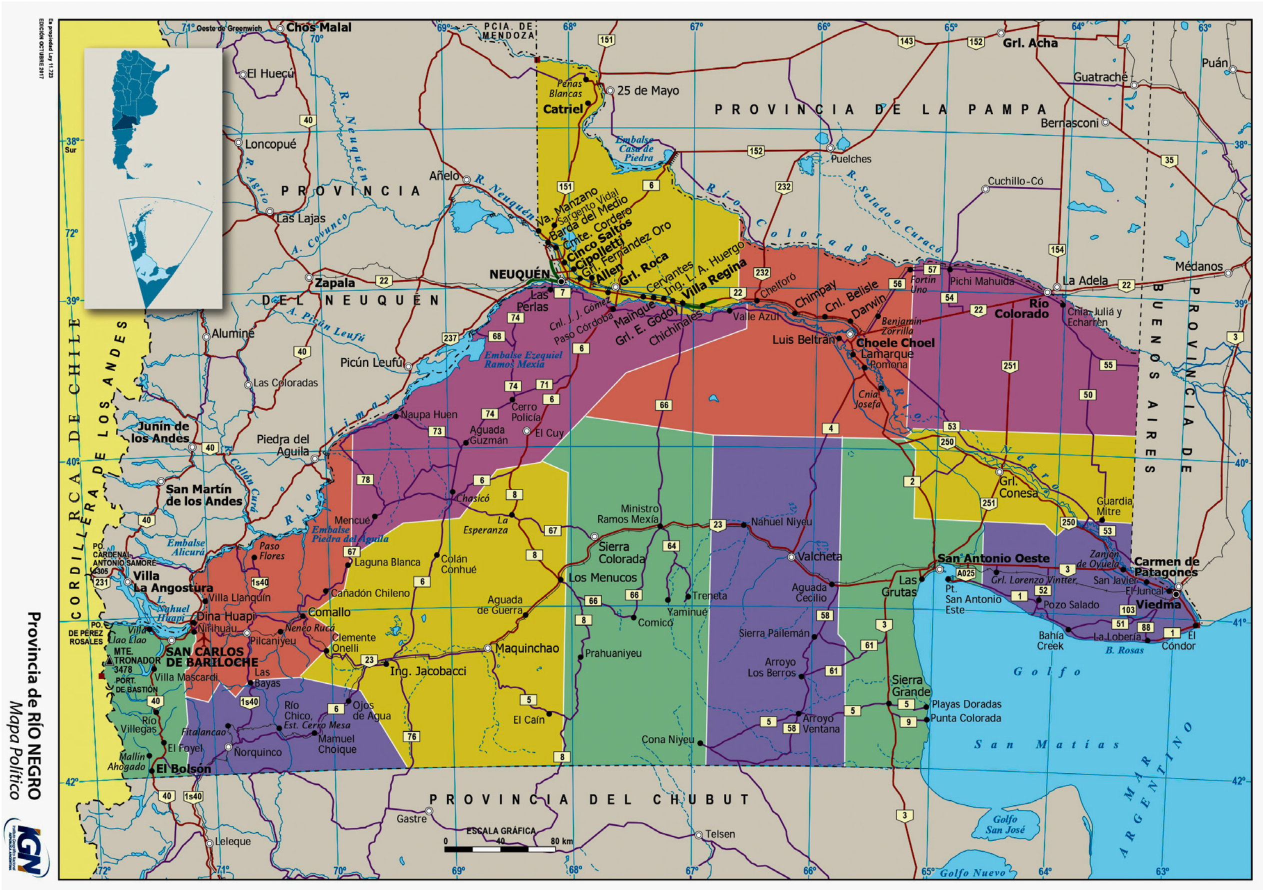

Figure 1. Location of the study area.

Source: Instituto Geográfico Nacional. https://www.ign.gob.ar/AreaServicios/Descargas/MapasEscolares#nanogallery/gallery19/0/95.

The empirical corpus was constructed by triangulating two instances of engagement with the territory: participation in university outreach projects and accompaniment of the pastoral missions of the Immaculate Conception Parish in San Carlos de Bariloche. This site was chosen following a 2024 jurisdictional shift by the Diocese of San Carlos de Bariloche, which extended parish responsibility to the steppe region. This institutional milestone allows for an analysis of the transition between the historical Franciscan mission (present between 1949 and 2022) and the new dynamics of the diocesan secular clergy. Of particular interest in this work is the arrival of the researchers in a dual role: as part of research and outreach projects shared with local communities, and as members of the church congregation that organized the missions. This led to close and recurring participation of the researchers in pastoral and missionary activities, resulting in systematic shared experiences that form the basis of the empirical data analyzed.

Data collection techniques included participant observation during the mission's outreach activities and the conducting of unstructured interviews and informal conversations. These oral records allowed for the recovery not only of religious practices but also of local memory, the history of production, and the senses of cultural belonging of the populations that prompted the establishment of chapels in these isolated locations.

The empirical base consists of 19 field sessions, during which the trajectories and perceptions of 35 participants were systematically documented. For analysis, the data were categorized according to gender, age range, community role, and place of residence. Following research ethics protocols, the anonymity of the participants was guaranteed through the use of an alphanumeric coding system that protects their identity. The alphanumeric code used to differentiate each oral recording will consist of a letter indicating gender—"F" for female, "M" for male—followed by a number related to the number of voices recorded from a given location. A three-letter code following

a hyphen is then added, referencing the data collection site. For example, F4-Che would indicate the fourth woman recorded in Chenqueniyen.

In light of the above, it is necessary to delve deeper into the epistemological implications of this approach from two critical perspectives. First, acknowledging the reflexivity inherent in the research process, it is important to highlight that the dual role assumed—as an academic and an active member of the ecclesiastical congregation—did not constitute a pre-established design bias, but rather a condition of possibility for an ethnography of proximity.

It was in the instances of liturgical sociability and shared celebration that reflections on the capacity for "shared action" emerged organically, allowing for a problematization of hegemonic paradigms regarding rural development and resilience. Second, recognizing that the territory is conditioned by historical tensions linked to internal colonialism and by the ambivalent institutional roles of the Church itself in the region, data collection adhered to the methodological protocols of international research networks in local development.

The result is a dialogical and interdisciplinary ethnographic process, validated through the systematic feedback of findings to local populations to ensure the co-construction of knowledge. This empirical corpus was analyzed under the guidelines of grounded theory, oriented towards the identification of native categories and local meanings, thus allowing the characterization of the contradictions and potentialities of remaining in the steppe.

3. Results

3.1. Territorial Overview

The Ñorquinco Department is located in the southwest of the Río Negro Province, Argentina, forming a transitional zone between the Andes Mountains and the Patagonian steppe. The department's territorial organization has its historical roots in the establishment of Indigenous Reserves (or settlements) in the early 20th century, state-run entities designed to relocate Indigenous populations displaced to areas of lesser agricultural suitability following military campaigns [4,5].

Biophysically, the region is characterized by aridity because of the marked precipitation gradient, which decreases from west to east. The hydrography exhibits an intermittent regime, with streams experiencing a drastic reduction in flow during the summer months. In this context, seasonal wetlands (locally known as *mallines*) are of critical strategic importance. Defined as "wetlands located on flat-concave terrain [...] with permanent or temporary flooding" (p. 4) [6]. These ecosystems, though limited in size (although occupying only between 1% and 5% of the surface area), are vital as they sustain high seasonal forage yields, dictated by the region's environmental heterogeneity. It shapes livestock management, forcing production units located to the east to maintain seasonal migration patterns toward summer grazing areas located to the west in the Andean foothills.

In sociohistorical terms, the indigenous populations transitioned from hunting and gathering subsistence economies to their integration into trans-Andean exchange networks that, from the 18th century onward, linked the region with the Pacific coast [1,2,5]. With the consolidation of the nation-state and the expansion of merchant capital—associated with the Chile-Argentina Trading Company and the Cochamó meatpacking plant—the productive matrix was reconfigured toward the raising of sheep, goats, and horses [7]. In the mid-1920s, the arrival of immigrants (Spanish, Syrian-Lebanese) introduced a new social stratum dedicated to commercial intermediation and land accumulation. This process culminated in a polarized agrarian structure, characterized by the coexistence of large estates and small subsistence farmers, predominantly of Mapuche descent [4,8]. Currently, the department's socioeconomic profile reflects a pluriactive subsistence economy.

Livestock farming exhibits low technological integration and limited capital investment [9–11]. This economic complexity exists alongside a significant reliance on public sector employment, which serves as a necessary buffer against agricultural volatility. This dynamic, coupled with historically inconsistent state intervention [12], has fostered youth emigration and rural depopulation.

In response to this stagnation, rural tourism has emerged in planning discourse as a strategy for territorial revitalization and productive diversification. Its proximity to the international tourist center of San Carlos de Bariloche positions Ñorquinco as a potential area for tourism expansion or a hinterland [13]. While the Strategic Plan for

Sustainable Tourism of Río Negro—*Plan Estratégico de Turismo Sustentable de Río Negro* (2012)—identifies opportunities in the enhancement of railway heritage (*La Trochita*) and adventure tourism, the present research proposes to incorporate a substantial dimension often overlooked in traditional planning: the spiritual and religious matrix as a heritage resource and axis of endogenous development.

This proposal transcends the mere search for new attractions; it posits that religious memory and the celebration of faith have historically operated as mechanisms for territorial anchoring. Regional life is marked by a network of diverse practices—from the Mapuche prayer ceremony (*Camaruco*) to Catholic masses and evangelical gatherings—that not only satisfy spiritual needs but also act as "supports of permanence" and social cohesion in the face of economic and climatic adversity [14]. In this sense, faith emerges not only as a refuge but also as a social infrastructure capable of sustaining networks of visitation and respectful religious tourism. It involves visitors as participants rather than consumers and the design of community-controlled and community-based tourism practices.

The case study presents a unique historical case that challenges the hegemonic narrative of Patagonian Catholic evangelization, centered almost exclusively on the Salesian work [15]. In Ñorquinco, a network of chapels and parishes stands out, erected by a Franciscan mission that traveled and evangelized from the Andes Mountains to the Patagonian steppe, with its center in the town of El Bolsón. In contrast to externally imposed models linked with internal colonialism, this mission built its churches within rural communities, including Mapuche Lof, at the request of the communities themselves. This sacred materiality, born from Indigenous agency and a little-documented missionary legacy, constitutes a distinctive vernacular heritage that intertwines spirituality with rural productive identity. Its preservation and enhancement allow for the development of religious tourism that links spirituality with rural productive culture, offering an original narrative about coexistence, interculturality, and enduring presence in the territory.

The inquiry into the convergence between the spiritual matrix and rural development processes transcends the mere cataloging of architectural materiality, placing the analytical axis on the social meaning and persistence of faith practices as structural factors of territorial permanence. This approach recognizes that religiosity is not an external imposition, but rather the result of a deliberate local agency that demanded institutional presence for liturgical celebration, giving rise to a complex of hybrid practices where Christian faith and indigenous cosmology converge. In this context, spirituality operates as an invisible infrastructure of resilience, linking shared rituals with the critical challenges of subsistence production and the construction of emotional security in scenarios of isolation and structural marginalization.

3.2. Production, Care, and "Living Religiosity": Faith as a Territorial Anchor

Productive dynamics research in the steppe of Río Negro reveals that organizational structures are intrinsically linked to spiritual dimensions. Beyond the dichotomy between the productive and the symbolic, our records show that faith acts as an invisible infrastructure that sustains community resilience.

Political and territorial resilience manifests itself through an Indigenous agency that appropriates external elements to strengthen local leadership. One example is the *Lonko* who uses her evangelical faith as a tool for personal validation and governance in the face of environmental hostility: 'I do this because I am an evangelical Christian...Jesus loves me, so I keep going' (F1-Cha, field notes, March 2022).

This hybrid spirituality does not weaken identity, but rather acts as an invisible infrastructure that sustains leadership capacity in contexts of marginalization.

This response challenged the notion of a purist identity; here, a spirituality that we could call syncretic or hybrid does not weaken, but rather strengthens, the capacity for political and territorial management. The Christian faith appears not as a colonial imposition, but as something appropriated as a tool for personal validation in the face of environmental hostility [16]. The region's historical trajectory reveals a complex interplay between early evangelization processes and the expansion of the nation-state, a phenomenon framed within the logic of internal colonialism.

However, the persistence of a missionary paradigm facilitated symbolic appropriation and indigenous agency by Mapuche communities, resulting in a hybrid spirituali-

ty that functions as a mechanism for territorial anchoring. This process does not imply the creation of a space free from tensions or neighborly conflicts; on the contrary, it defines a territory where the sense of belonging constitutes a social infrastructure that transcends individualism, strengthening the cohesion and emotional security necessary for permanence in contexts of isolation. This is recognized in multiple dimensions, which in this case we have summarized in four topics.

3.2.1. Encounter of Beliefs and Spatial Appropriation

Religious expression in the region transcends formal places of worship, becoming territorialized through rural gates (*tranqueras*), daily greetings, and domestic life. The intertwining between the Mapuche worldview and Catholicism is configured as a strategy of spatial appropriation that legitimizes presence in the territory [14].

Memories of Lucerinta Cañumil, historical *Lonko* (Mapuche chief) of Chenqueniyen, a leading figure in the defense of Mapudungun as a vernacular language worthy of study, illustrate this continuity. Her descendants link and experience the Camaruco ceremonies and the Mass. In fact, the priest's presence at the ceremony functions as a formal recognition of indigenous culture: "His presence and blessing were a recognition of our culture" (M1-Che, field notes, February 2025).

This religiosity is not only symbolic, but becomes vital in the face of the fragility of rural life. F2-Che, a resident of the highlands, recounts how the priest's arrival to bless homes transforms the domestic space:

> "Since the priest arrived, we've been waiting for the clergy to come and bless" (F2-Che, field notes, January 2026).

The blessing is not only a liturgical act, but also a protection against climatic and economic uncertainty. Even in liminal moments such as death, faith acts as a bridge, as recognized in the following account.

Lived faith acts as a symbolic bridge in territories marked by internal colonialism. Lonko M1-Ñor's request for monks to bless his deceased mother—based on the premise that 'prayers pass through doors and walls'—demonstrates how faith allows one to reframe pain and connect loss with the sacredness of the land (*mapu*) (Field notes, December 2025). This practice reveals that spirituality is essential to social life, opening paths of hope where sustaining it seems utopian.

Vernacular spirituality connects in this crossing of walls and encounter of beliefs. M1-Ñor's account of his mother's death and the priest's blessing of the land, or the monks' prayer "that passes through doors," demonstrates that faith allows one to reframe pain and connect it with the sacredness of the land (*mapu*). As Ameigeiras [17] points out, these are records where lived faith allows for a recognition of the everyday that is not limited to recurring limitations and difficulties, but rather opens up avenues of hope even in scenarios where sustaining hope seems utopian. It is in this practice that faith is revealed as substantive to social and productive life, where it connects with local identities and redefines tradition.

The dimension of transcendence is not a peripheral element, but rather a structuring component that permeates both subsistence production practices and expressions of faith lived on the steppe. The logic of territorial permanence in these settings is not exhausted by material profitability, but is based on a relational ontology where values such as autonomy (freedom), environmental stability (tranquility), and, fundamentally, affective bonds with the land and animals—especially the proximity to the horse—act as pillars of resilience that prevail even over social or neighborhood tensions.

This interweaving of emotions and spirituality is articulated with the understanding of faith as a symbolic bridge and a re-signification of pain. In territories marked by internal colonialism, faith operates as a bridge that allows for the re-signification of suffering and loss, linking them to the sacredness of the land (*mapu*). Like the aforementioned account by Lonko M1-Ñor of prayers that "pass through doors and walls," the sense of transcendence pierces the barriers of material hardship to give profound meaning to one's presence in the land.

Vernacular spirituality allows for a recognition of the everyday that is not limited to recurring difficulties, but rather, from the "paths of hope," it opens, the sustenance of life seems utopian from a purely urban or technical perspective. This capacity for vision is what prioritizes the value of freedom and the bond with animals above the contingencies of social conflict.

Faith is fundamental to social and productive life because it redefines tradition and connects with local identities. Within this framework, the relationship with the horse is not utilitarian but rather one of identity. The animal becomes integrated into a human and non-human reciprocity that explains why these affective bonds are the crux of territorial anchoring and the foundation of emotional security, strengthening social cohesion. Ultimately, this matrix of transcendence functions as an invisible infrastructure that transforms isolation into a value for endogenous development, allowing the community to inhabit climatic and economic uncertainty through an ethic of care and a fidelity to the bonds that sustain life.

3.2.2. Faith in the "Ethics of Care": Women, Water, and Fragility

It is women who, for the most part, sustain this spiritual infrastructure. Their faith practice is intrinsically linked to an ethics of care that encompasses both the human family and non-human affections, including landscapes and animals.

The case of F3-Che is illustrative. Her prayers at Mass are not abstract; she asks for water for the flocks in a context of extreme drought. Her sadness at seeing the emaciated animals in a particularly dry winter offers us a story about death as an ever-present reality.

"Do you see all these animals?" She tells us, pointing to the sheepfolds as we travel by truck, "If it snows now, they'll die, and if it doesn't rain in the summer, they'll die too" (field notes, August 2025). This assessment, rooted in an intimate understanding of the winter's impact on the land, highlights the intertwined nature of F3-Che's productive role and spiritual life. She prayed for water in the right amount and form, knowing the fragility of her future. Faith allowed her to inhabit the uncertainty without falling into despair; it is part of her mechanism for maintaining resilience amidst the precariousness of subsistence [18,19].

This capacity to maximize resources through gratitude is also observed in F4-Che. Standing before the Jubilee Missionary Cross, caring for her dying father in a house with limited access to clean water, she asked to begin the prayer by saying:

> "Sometimes it seems we have nothing, and we don't see all that we have" (F4-Che, September 2025).

Here, faith allows for a revaluation of local assets (connections, environment, knowledge) that would be ignored by traditional economic metrics of development, and even by urban dwellers who only recognize deficiencies where local people see resources. It is in these places that the meanings of faith are rooted in the everyday life of rural communities. These references expose gendered practices as central to rural resilience and development.

3.2.3. Mealtimes and the Body: Embodied Identity

Faith in the territory is not limited to liturgy; it is embodied in the practices of sharing meals and in the relationship with what modernity calls "natural resources." A particularly powerful intersection was observed around food practices, where the distinction between human subject and animal object blurred in favor of a relational ontology and interspecies reciprocity [20,21].

F5-Che and M3-Che welcomed us into their home, where the observation provided insights into traditional meat-curing processes. When we inquired about their origin, F5-Che explained that they came from a horse the family had recently slaughtered. Far from a purely utilitarian logic of discarding an unproductive animal, their explanation reveals an ethic of care that transcends the animal's death:

"Here in the countryside, when we kill a horse, it's always an old horse, one that worked with us its whole life, and afterward, it continues to be a part of us" (F5-Che, September 2025). The animal is not merely consumed but remains integrated into the family's collective body, fulfilling a cycle of human and non-human reciprocity. Food practices on the steppe challenge urban development metrics by being based on a relational ontology and interspecies reciprocity. By stating that the sacrificed horse 'continues to be a part of us,' a reality is described where the animal is integrated into the collective family body. Under the lens of feminist political ecology, this cycle of care transcends death and positions women as guardians of an identity that rejects the purely utilitarian logic of modernity.

Consistent with de la Cadena's [20] framework, non-human entities are viewed as active participants in the

social and affective network. The horse, having given its labor (energy) throughout its life, gives its body (matter) at the end of it to biologically sustain the family that cared for it. When F5-Che says "it continues to be part of us," the interviewee is not speaking metaphorically; she describes a literal reality where the animal integrates with the human body, closing a cycle of reciprocity.

The insistence on sharing this food with those of us who visited, and their affective response to our participation as diners, marks a moment of communion. They don't seek validation from urban sanitation, which often views these practices with suspicion regarding food safety [11], or moral suspicion; they seek validation of their way of inhabiting the world. In this framework, faith manifests as fidelity to the bonds that sustain life: the horse isn't "thrown away," it's transformed, remaining within the community fabric. These culinary practices are, ultimately, rituals of identity and territorial persistence. Amidst this, the risk of parasitic infections from household chores makes these practices part of the health challenges recognized by the entire population [11], but this doesn't prevent each horse slaughter from being a celebration, bringing together numerous neighbors in their shared culture.

3.2.4. Chapels as Living Heritage and a Horizon for Development

Finally, the embodiment of faith in rural chapels reveals the potential of these spaces for local development. They are not just buildings; they are monuments to the collective effort of the communities, where memories especially highlight the work of women, such as those from Río Chico who carried stones from the river (field notes, June 2025), or F6-Che in Chacay Huarruca, who walked 15 km to care for a small chapel, often alone (field notes, April 2025).

The chapels function as territorial anchors that transform the landscape into a living heritage. More than physical structures, they are spaces of emotional safety where women's caregiving practices are formalized in liturgy and extend into daily life through hospitality and the re-sacralization of the environment.

This faith-based design of attractions enables community-based tourism that strengthens local autonomy in the face of long-term state neglect. Therefore, throughout the Masses, the concept of a reinterpreted sacred landscape emerged. The appeal of rural practices, the opportunities to accompany transhumance as livestock migrate from winter to summer pastures, horseback riding, and barbecues began to be presented as an extension of lived faith, which was celebrated in the chapel with the formality of Mass, but which continued in daily life through personal strategies. From these dense networks of practices, these communities open the door to initiatives such as religious tourism, not as a commodification of faith, but as a strategy for visibility and sustainability [13]. As F1-RCH points out, receiving visitors "is good for us," reactivating not only the economy, but also community self-esteem and deepening the significance of ceremonies. Religious tourism is presented as a way to strengthen the faith practices of the locality, which require the attention and participation of the entire local social fabric [22].

In this region, faith is not peripheral; it is the fundamental framework through which life is articulated. Its potential to be considered an attraction is particularly inspiring for showcasing the region's unique heritage. It is an approach that places a tourist in a space of emotional connection, not so much as a consumer of a service, but as a participant in shared prayer. From a faith-based perspective, production and development are evaluated, health and environmental risks are managed, and the leading role of women as guardians of identity and territory is consolidated. The tangible and the intangible are deeply intertwined, and from this perspective, heritage-making processes unfold as a sharing of experiences, which are fundamental to the creation of this type of attraction [23]. The very history of the chapels used in these celebrations demonstrates their potential as territorial anchors.

3.3. The Chapels: Nodes of Faith and Territory

The chapels, reflecting lived faith practices, embody a distinct history, linking specific Catholic liturgies with modes of inhabiting a vastly heterogeneous territory. The practice that gave rise to these buildings should not be interpreted in isolation, but rather as part of a missionary framework with regional reach.

The specific territory under study covers an approximate radius of 100 km, linking sites and towns that function as nodes in a network, each with its respective chapel:

El Manso, Villegas, Foyel, Mallín Ahogado, Los Repollos, El Bolsón (as the central node of the circuit), Lago Puelo, Maitén, Cushamen, Ñorquinco, Fitamiche, Río Chico, and Chacay Huarruca. Some of these locations are shown in **Figure 1**, while others are absent from official maps. While this research focuses on experiences within the Ñorquinco Department, a subsequent analysis will encompass the entire corridor.

The region's remarkable environmental diversity warrants particular attention, ranging from Andean enclaves with high rainfall on the border with Chile (El Manso and Paso León) to the arid steppes of the study area. This environmental diversity is reflected in population dynamics: in the Andean zone, migrations from diverse origins converge, with worldviews linked to neo-rurality [24], which contrast with the conceptions of the Mapuche communities interviewed. Although Mapuche communities exist in the Andean zone, they represent a demographic minority compared to the predominant migrant population in that area. Added to this is jurisdictional complexity, given that, in the mid-20th century, Franciscans moved freely between two provinces and different dioceses. Today, after the cessation of integrated missionary activity, the silent permanence of these paths, chapels, and collective memory persists.

Regarding the specific historical experience, it began in 1949 in the town of El Bolsón with the arrival of the Franciscan Friars Minor mission from Italy, led by Father Emilio Favaratto [25]. This milestone marks the beginning of the systematic celebration of Masses and the construction of religious and educational infrastructure. However, beyond the physical structure of each building, a broader view of the experience reveals a specific way of occupying space: the chapels stand as nodes of "living heritage," recognized and activated by current experiences of faith.

This route highlights the particularities of religious practice in rural Patagonia [14,15]. Unlike other, more densely populated regions of the country, where the church brings together an immediate community, in Patagonia, the low population density necessitated the establishment of itinerant missions that went out to meet the faithful. The image of the cross on distant hills served as a rallying point for a dispersed population, transforming the small chapels into true achievements of social cohesion. Thus, the heritage value of these sites lies not in the sum of the buildings, but in the recognition of the route and the journey; it is about valuing the experience of coming together within a vast landscape.

The Franciscan enterprise transcended individual capacities, depending on the friars' ability to engage the local population. Oral histories highlight the affection and closeness of this presence. As one local testimony notes: "Father Feliciano spoke with everyone [...] He went into every house. He also came to my house almost daily, even if only for a few minutes" [26].

At first glance, memories tend to be anchored in local events; however, when systematized, mobility emerges as the true common thread. In the chapel of Río Chico, they remember "the beloved Friar Gentile, who with his old Citroën visited every house he passed," braving often impassable routes. Acknowledging these journeys entails recovering the Franciscan presence as a site of faith in itself and as part of the intangible heritage, uncovering a network of spirituality that links devotion with regional rural identity.

Currently, the systematization of these memories and the characterization of the buildings and liturgical elements allow for the appreciation of the parish complex. While much of the information still resides in family albums and oral traditions, the systematic recording in the Department of Ñorquinco is beginning to reveal how faith operated and continues to operate as a response to isolation, insofar as its value transcends local environments.

In this sense, the recovery of these routes offers an opportunity to rethink connectivity. The Franciscans not only covered distances but also wove networks, staying in homes and building chapels that often included a space for overnight stays. This historical logic resonates with current proposals for developing local tourism oriented toward local consumption [27]. The heritage designation of the chapels, therefore, links the appreciation of movement among inhabitants of the same region, starting from informal activities (such as family gatherings) to consolidate a network of services and tourist attractions.

Franciscan Materiality

The Franciscan experience also fosters encounter through its architectural dimension. There are precedents of emblematic routes in the American territories, such as

the missions of San Antonio in Texas [28], Alta California [29], and, in Argentina, the province of Formosa [30]. These cases demonstrate the collaboration between native populations and Franciscans, materialized in chapels that never function as isolated units, but rather as interconnected systems.

The local architectural features echo the Porziuncola and San Damiano, the small churches restored by Saint Francis of Assisi [31–33]. These are single-nave buildings, lacking large structures, adapted through the integration of local construction techniques and materials [34,35].

These buildings seek a spatiality in keeping with the vow of poverty: a welcoming environment that offers solace through austerity. They function as the foundation of the "purgatorial building," where manual labor and simplicity express penance [31]. Aesthetics are not discarded but rather reconfigured through a lens of harmonious simplicity [34]. As in other Franciscan hermitages around the world, the liturgical vestments are simple, inscribing the spiritual experience within this stripped-down materiality that facilitates the theophanic experience.

As a summary of Franciscan chapels, five shared characteristics can be highlighted:

1. Poverty and humility as an architectural choice, based on the use of vernacular materials, modest dimensions, and limited ornamentation.
2. Simplicity of design, with single-nave floor plans, solid volumes, and no large structures that draw attention to the building.
3. Harmonious integration with the surroundings and the use of native techniques.
4. Construction as a pedagogical tool, as these spaces open to the exterior (atriums, courtyards) to encourage large gatherings and the use of interior visual elements for catechetical purposes.
5. Hospitality, as these structures are designed to facilitate community gatherings and extended sociability.

The Franciscan materiality in the steppe is not merely an aesthetic choice, but an extension of rural identity based on austerity. As in other historical mission systems, these chapels function as interconnected nodes where the "vow of poverty" translates into a welcoming space. This architectural simplicity resonates with the life of the rural inhabitant, offering a comfort that comes not from ornamentation, but from a stripped-down materiality that facilitates community gatherings in the vastness of the landscape.

The characteristics of these buildings—the use of vernacular materials, modest dimensions, and single naves—function as a social infrastructure designed for hospitality. Far from being a limitation due to a lack of resources, simplicity is a political and spiritual strategy for permanence: it allows the chapel to integrate harmoniously into its surroundings without imposing itself, functioning as a space of emotional security where sociability extends beyond the liturgy.

The Chapel of Chacay Huarruca (**Figure 2**) exemplifies this role as a visual landmark in the vastness of the snow-covered steppe. Beyond its corrugated iron roof or white walls, its value lies in being a meeting point "won" from the otherwise inaccessible landscape. The perimeter fence not only defines a sacred space but also symbolizes a boundary of community cohesion in the face of isolation; it is a destination node that captures a faith that transcends the physical form of the building to become a territorial anchor. Simplicity serves as a deliberate strategy rather than a mere consequence of resource scarcity. It's a way of arriving and remaining that has an aesthetic dimension, recognized and valued in every religious celebration. This image demonstrates the presence of this architectural style in the region, exemplifying both the vastness and isolation of the geographical environment in which it is situated.

Figure 2. Chapel of Chacay Huarruca, 2025.

It is a single-nave, rectangular building with a gabled sheet metal roof and white-plastered masonry walls, reflecting the austerity characteristic of the order. The

semicircular entrance arch, constructed with exposed local stone voussoirs, emphasizes the entrance and demonstrates adaptation to the surrounding resources. Visually, the chapel stands out as the only built structure in the vast landscape of the snow-covered steppe, serving as a visual landmark for a dispersed population. The perimeter fences define the sacred space within the immensity, reinforcing the idea of a community meeting point "won" from the landscape. The presence of the road and the sign confirms its role as a destination node along a transit route, capturing in its image a faith that transcends the building's physical form.

4. Discussion

This article examines the intersection between faith practices and productive dynamics. From this central theme, several lines of inquiry were proposed, encompassing the architectural dimension, gender perspectives—with special emphasis on care work and the feminization of religious experience—and the decolonial tensions inherent in the territory's historical trajectory. As Carballo [36] argues, it is imperative to recognize the complexity of religious territories, dense spaces where past and present intersect, as well as the sacred and the profane. Power networks also operate in these settings, which, although omitted from this initial review because they are not explicit in the primary sources, demand a distinct documentary approach for future investigations.

In this region, the dynamics of internal colonialism manifest themselves in the fragility of everyday life: in the practice of herding and in the challenge of traversing precarious paths and trails. Bodies not only inhabit the territory but also embody it, and their experiences inscribe practices of faith in the depths of their daily lives [37]. Similarly, chapels carry territory; however, rather than being static places, the regional dimension is revealed here in the act of moving through them. While the poor road conditions and the discontinuation of the railway reinforced feelings of isolation, the "Route of Faith" restores a sense of connection. This link unites the memory of the Franciscan friars' fragile Citroën with the new dynamics of adventure tourism.

The appreciation of the route as a space for mobility and connectivity facilitates historical recovery in a territory of faith that cannot be confined to isolated towns. Its value lies in the whole, in the idea of a pilgrimage that weaves together spaces as an experience of personal enrichment, of contact with monumental landscapes, and of immersion in the rural world. It is a proposal for discovery, not only of architecture, but also of the spiritual experience of traveling along it, recovering the Franciscan pilgrimage as a step towards sustainable tourism of cultural and religious heritage.

This proposal compels us to rethink these dynamics as part of a broader Patagonian history, where the area was conceived as a "territory of faith" from the late 19th century. A review of the historical background allows us to connect the particularities of the Franciscan mission with other foundational practices. The Salesian missions, beginning in 1879, led the evangelization efforts under the mandate of Don Bosco, who decreed the mission to the southern territories of Italy [38]. This arrival unfolded against the tragic backdrop of military campaigns (1875–1885), which resulted in the extermination and subsequent misery and marginalization of the indigenous people of Patagonia. In addition, due to late integration and the marginalization of the local population, the aforementioned "internal colonialism" was promoted [3]. Consequently, decision-making capacities were removed from local populations, weakening the social fabric through the systematic interventions of central governments.

This was the context in which the missionaries attempted their work, often through the imposition of a civilizational complex alien to the native cultural world [39].

In this regard, Lema and Nuñez [40] observe that Patagonia is often presented discursively as empty, ignoring the populations that actually settled there even after the extermination process, and reducing the region to a mere resource provider. This state-sponsored vision subordinated progress to a future promise, where people and nature were seen as obstacles; "Argentine" (agricultural development) was associated with immigration, while the Creole and Indigenous populations were linked to barbarism.

Faced with the state's perspective that presumed the need to erase the local population, the Salesians understood that the "salvation of the soul" allowed for a non-violent incorporation of the native population. To this

end, they proposed agricultural schools that combined productive training with religion [38]. These educational spaces were fundamental to the productive structuring of the province [41]. While this model took hold in the Río Negro basin, it only reached the plateau region—linked to the mountains—in a limited way, leaving the latter relegated to a subordinate role in provincial planning [12].

It is precisely in this area where Catholic practice replicated the missionary approach, with a strong precedent in the image of the "Missionary Virgin," created in 1978. This devotion arose from a parish consultation, based on the Church's premise that the faith-development nexus necessitated a cultural synthesis. The image, dark-skinned, wearing a humble Mapuche poncho and walking barefoot with the child, sought to recover and reconcile the denied historical culture of the territory [42].

Likewise, the current Catholic mission inherits the memory of initiatives such as the "A Sheep for My Brother" campaign, designed to respond to the losses from the great snowstorm of 1984, a crisis that received scant attention from the State [43]. Since the 1980s, this initiative has been central to the formation of livestock cooperatives [44]. These precedents demonstrate the profound links between faith practices and development. Added to this is the importance of considering the caregiving capacities developed from "feminized practices," which, linked to the appreciation of daily life, the land, and the landscape, and extending to the entire population with a special focus on women, can be seen as the starting point for a possible form of heritage preservation.

From this perspective, we can recognize that religious practices translate into development-relevant outcomes, for example, through the emotional security that strengthens social cohesion. Recognizing the value of chapels as physical hubs where these bonds are consolidated, we can consider productive practices for heritage appreciation that foster a sense of belonging to the land, based on the care practices that are explicitly demonstrated and valued in spiritual gatherings.

It is essential to analyze the mechanisms by which the spiritual and religious matrix transitions from a symbolic and emotional dimension to tangible results in the material and institutional development of the steppe. This transition is not merely metaphorical; faith operates as an "invisible infrastructure" and a "social infrastructure" capable of sustaining networks of reciprocity where the State has historically been limited due to internal colonialism.

Historically, this connection manifested itself in direct interventions supporting production, with the memories of the 1980s and 1990s being particularly illustrative through initiatives such as the "A Sheep for My Brother" campaign, which catalyzed the formation of livestock cooperatives that responded to climate crises with little support from the central government. Currently, ethnographic records reveal more subtle dynamics of lived religion, where rituals—whether Catholic masses or the Mapuche Camaruco—function as nodes of social and spiritual encounter that unveil bonds of belonging and reinforce territorial identity.

These encounters generate "emotional security," a factor that strengthens social cohesion and allows the population to navigate climatic and economic uncertainty without succumbing to despair. From this perspective, spirituality should not be seen as a peripheral element, but as a central component of rural resilience that allows for the revaluation of local assets often ignored by traditional economic metrics. Therefore, incorporating the spiritual dimension into production scenarios and the design of endogenous development policies is imperative to ensure planning that is socially meaningful and respectful of local agency, especially under the leadership of women and their ethic of care.

This draws attention to specific aspects when considering the centrality of gender initiatives, as acknowledged in the quotes taken from the fieldwork. This set of results, in light of the importance of the ethics of care in this region and peasant context, is particularly relevant. Rovaretti et al. and Portocarrero [16,45] allows us to position women's actions, both in their material activities and in the exercise of their faith, as a central aspect of possible developments, provided that the preponderance of their actions is made explicit and preserved. The hospitality, cordiality, and network of affection that unfold in each encounter position them as fundamental actors in the pursuit of more sustainable and equitable proposals.

Even more, feminist political ecology [46,47] demonstrates how women are challenging dominant ideas and practices of development from the emerging ideas of Eth-

nic and Black feminism and moving towards an Ethnic feminist political ecology in the Americas. This challenges perspectives on development from the recognition of the relevance of the female experience in general, and even more so when it is situated in rural contexts.

The connection between lived religiosity and rural development is manifested in the communities' capacity to erect chapels, which function as a social infrastructure for encounter and cohesion in the face of the region's historical marginalization. These celebrations and sacred landmarks serve as mechanisms for territorial anchoring, validating the choice of space and transforming dwelling into a process of collective and shared action.

In this way, the materiality of the buildings transcends their architectural function to become nodes of living heritage, where the link between faith and local identity underpins the strategies of resilience and permanence that sustain the social fabric in contexts of isolation. This spiritual dimension acts as an invisible infrastructure that gives social meaning to productive practices and redefines tradition as an engine of endogenous development.

5. Conclusions

The central conclusion of this work points to the need to consider spirituality as a key factor in development and, specifically, to the heritage designation of spaces of faith—both places of worship and transit routes. The heritage-making processes appear as a keystone of this type of attraction design. The objective is to build a community-based and community-controlled tourism proposal that, far from being a palimpsest of divergent interests, is structured as a space for common encounter. The value of local faith practices in territories subjected to internal colonialism is not minor, as it implies the recognition of elements linked to social cohesion and emotional security that result in strengthening local autonomy, thereby contributing to the reassertion of local agency in contexts of long-term state neglect.

Faith, as experienced here, demonstrates a potential for cohesion that would allow us to rethink the territory. In the syncretic practice of these mobile cults, the territory is re-cognized and re-sacralized. A kind of community reconnection seems to take place through faith and walking, understood above all as a form of self-knowledge in relation to the environment; a rediscovery of trajectories and genealogies that provide meaning in the face of state abandonment and the symbolic deconstruction of territories.

This itinerant dimension is structurally connected to transhumant and pastoral practices: it involves a round trip, meticulous care, and monitoring of access to land, pasture, and water. Lived faith and chapels emerge as a social infrastructure capable of sustaining networks of visitation and respectful religious tourism because it sustains local cultural roots. In this way, both the Catholic Mass and the Camaruco (a Mapuche religious ceremony) embrace community sociality. The journey of people from Bariloche serves not only as an encounter with the mission, but also as a reunion with family and friends who, from the Andean city, promote Mapuche cultural demands and practices. This starting point, while raising new questions, provides an initial synthesis for considering the elements that can shape change in isolated rural regions. The practical implications of these findings for debates on rural development could be linked to a potential dialogue with rural policy, planning, or development initiatives, not only in the studied territory but also in other isolated regions. Attending to faith-based processes and recognizing their value as part of strategies to increase the autonomy exercised and experienced by local populations, while acknowledging the limitations of cross-regional applicability, is an approach that opens new debates on the need to broaden our understanding of development.

Integrating faith-based heritage processes requires that rural planning frameworks, such as the Río Negro Sustainable Tourism Strategic Plan, move beyond cataloging tangible assets (railways or buildings) to incorporate the "invisible infrastructure" of faith as a category of public investment. This implies designing rural connectivity policies that not only prioritize freight transport but also recognize the "Faith Route" as a corridor for basic services and local tourism, where chapels function as hubs of refuge and communication in low-density areas.

Likewise, policies promoting productive development must recognize the role of faith-based cooperatives (such as the "A Sheep for My Brother" initiative), which have demonstrated greater resilience to climate crises than standardized state interventions, as they are grounded in

networks of trust and local reciprocity. For community-managed religious tourism to be viable, it is imperative to reverse the logic of internal colonialism through the effective decentralization of decision-making to local populations and Mapuche communities (*Lof*).

Institutional viability depends on the creation of intercultural management committees that recognize Indigenous autonomy and the agency of women as "guardians of the territory." These committees must have the power to regulate tourist traffic to prevent the commodification of the sacred, ensuring that the activity is a mechanism of local sovereignty and not a new extractive model. State support, therefore, should not be limited to funding, but should include the legal validation of these forms of community ownership and management of living heritage.

Although faith-based development offers solutions for rural resilience, its transferability is limited by the socio-historical context. This approach is highly effective in regions with late integration or histories of expropriation and structural marginalization, where faith has filled the gaps left by the state. However, its application in contexts of mass tourism or in areas with urbanized and fragmented social structures could be ineffective, as it requires a "relational ontology" and a memory of mobility (such as transhumance) that is not always present. The proposal does not seek to be a universal recipe, but rather a strategy for isolated territories, where spirituality already operates as the main driver of permanence and social cohesion.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The data are not available due to ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments

I appreciate the openness to observing the missions carried out by the Parish of the Immaculate Conception and by the populations of the region. I thank the AI tool NotebookLM. I also appreciate the dedicated and crucial anonymous review, whose contributions and suggestions significantly enriched the text.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author used the AI tool NotebookLM for translation, grammatical refinement, and conceptual consistency, as this article was originally written in Spanish. The author subsequently reviewed and edited the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

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