

# A Cathedral for a Fragile Age

The centuries made Notre-Dame everyone's. Never has French civilization felt more important.



*The interior of Notre-Dame cathedral after Monday's fire. CreditAgence France-Presse — Getty Images*

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April 16, 2019

Kilometer Zero: Notre-Dame de Paris, the place from which distance in France is measured, the reference of a people, the starting point and endpoint, the “epicenter,” as President Emmanuel Macron put it. That is why so many people, religious or not, were in tears as the great cathedral burned. A part of themselves, their bearings, was aflame.

Ransacked during the revolution in an anticlerical frenzy, restored and rebuilt during the 19th century after tempers cooled, site of imperial coronation, national liberation and presidential funerals, Notre-Dame became the nation's soul, the place where France could reconcile its turbulent history, the monarchical and the republican, the religious and the secular.

The centuries proved ecumenical. Time made the cathedral everyone's, in France and beyond France. “A mine of memories,” said Claire Illouz, an artist born and raised in Paris. “For us all.”

What is Paris after all? Beauty. The horror of it lay in watching beauty burn, the delicate spire toppling into an inferno of 800-year-old beams. Here was the best of humankind, as powerful an expression as exists of the sacred, going up in black smoke.

The loss of human life is terrible to behold, but the destruction of beauty may be no less so. In a time of anxiety, of ugliness and hatred and lies, the blaze felt ominous. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” John Keats wrote, and that is “all ye need to know.”

A friend in Paris, Sarah Cleveland, wrote to me: “It was strangely quiet and still, as if people were in a trance, watching the fire boil inside the shell of the cathedral walls, like a caldron. The scene was solemn, reverent. Hopeless. It seemed impossible that something so monumental could be so fragile.”

Civilization is fragile. Democracy is fragile, like that spire. It is impossible today, it is dangerous, to ignore that. When a universal reference goes up in smoke, an abyss opens up.

I remember the cool of the immense interior, now open to the sky, during the summer of 1976, the first I lived in Paris. There was a heat wave. Rivers were reduced to a trickle, fountains dry, stores emptied of bottled water. People sat in the pews, stunned. Some prayed. Children played. The young and the old, the innocent and the wise, were gathered. Blue light filtered through the magnificent stained-glass rose windows above the portals. The air smelt of stone and candle wax.

The holiness struck me as inclusive. Notre-Dame is a sanctuary, in a time when the American president spits on sanctuaries and has considered, as punishment, dumping poor migrants in those cities that dare to call themselves by that name.

The half-lit cathedral I first saw as a young man allowed for human error, like those revolutionaries after 1789 lopping the stone heads off biblical kings they mistakenly took to be French. In time the children playing in the transept would be mine. Two of them were born in Paris, city of gilt and gravel, its islands pointing their prows to the bridges, its arteries anchored by Notre-Dame; the cathedral always there across the Seine, reassuring, its facade as solemn as the twin bell towers, its flanks fanciful as the flying buttresses and gargoyles, monumental from any angle whatsoever.

Our Lady of Paris is still there after the blaze, with her towers, roofless now. President Macron vowed to rebuild the cathedral. Money is pouring in. The French president was dignified, a reminder of the unifying power of dignity at a time when it has vanished from the White House.

Notre-Dame, Macron said, is “our history” and “our imaginary”: a means, in other words, to remember and an inspiration to all who aspire for something transcendent, beyond self. The contribution of President Trump, for whom self is all, was to suggest sending “flying water tankers” to douse the cathedral. His advice was ignored.

Perhaps, for an American, the closest thing to Notre-Dame, in its power to represent the nation, is the Statue of Liberty, work of a French sculptor. A mist hung over the water the other day, with the magical result that the torch of liberty hovered in the air, apparently detached. Seeing it, I imagined Emma Lazarus’s poem rewritten for the age of Trump:

*Give me your despots, your rich,  
Your vulgar tax evaders yearning to flee,  
The depraved and debauched that itch  
To steal, I will make them free.  
Send these, the dishonorable, to watch  
How easy it is to corrupt like me.*

I don’t recall French civilization feeling so important in my lifetime. It’s what we have. There will be ugly polemics over the coming weeks, once the first shock passes, over who was responsible, how this disaster happened, what negligence was involved. But in those silent, reverent, hymn-singing crowds on the streets of Paris, I also saw the possibility of a French coming-together in the determination to rebuild — not only the cathedral, but also a nation shaken by the violence of the Yellow Vest movement and the social divisions it reflects. The story of Notre-Dame is a story of endurance and rebirth.

It is also a story of European civilization. Notre-Dame survived Hitler, just. Its fragility, now demonstrated, demands Europe’s unity, too.

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