

## EMERGING FROM THE ASHES: FRANCE AS “ELDEST DAUGHTER”

When teaching religion as a younger priest, one of my favorite units centered on the High Middle Ages. As part of that discussion, I focused heavily on the way in which the **medieval cathedral** was a living and breathing religion class for the people, including those who could not even read. One resource I used during that unit was based upon a book written by author **David Macaulay** entitled “Cathedral.” PBS turned it into an informative video. While he told the story of a fictitious Cathedral, the themes were clearly real, as these projects were filled with mystery, toil, intrigue and God’s grace. It could have represented any number of French cathedrals at the time. Alternating between video segments that morphed into a cartoon, it kept the interest of my students, while accurately teaching about the **intricate process** of constructing such massive buildings given obvious technological deficiencies. You can see the video on YouTube– it is well worth an hour of your time.

He begins the film with the obvious, yet vexing question, “How were they built?” It is as relevant as ever. Many had no idea so much wood was used at Notre Dame because what is visible to us is the massive amount of stone. Aren’t they indestructible? The film describes the process for constructing a vaulted ceiling, which made use of wooden timbers and molds to lay a foundation for the stone. It rightly detailed the Cathedral’s effect upon the faithful’s civic pride. Undoubtedly, a city’s **importance was often gauged** by the quality (and sheer size) of its Cathedral. Today, I suspect many cities are judged by the innovation present in the latest billion-dollar sports stadium. Neither is ideal, but it is true.

Like so many, I watched in utter disbelief as Notre Dame burned. Television commentators wondered where it started and why it took so long before any fire hoses were employed? Those are legitimate questions that will be answered in time. But the first published post-fire interior photos revealed that, while surely devastating, the fire was **largely relegated to the upper reaches** of the cathedral. Much of the interior appears intact. I couldn’t help but also wonder just how much wood do we have in our Cathedral? I have climbed to the dome many times and have seen all of the wooden planks located between the inner and outer dome. How on earth would we get water **nearly 300 feet** in the air? Shouldn’t we at least treat the wood with some type of fire-retardant materials?

Notre Dame had a **massive** amount of **deferred maintenance**, obvious to the glance of any visitor. It was heartening to see people step forward to commit large sums of money to rebuild. But here are some cynical questions I pondered that day while watching the flames: To what degree is this symbolic of our modern struggles with faith? How has pervasive secularity threatened to turn once great cathedrals into little more than museums for selfie-taking tourists? And if the church is not a living house of worship, then why should we bother to preserve it? While solemnly consecrated with Chrism Oil, a church is but a reflection of the faith of those who inhabit it on a regular basis. Churches **cannot be relics** of any age– they must remain alive. They are not only for saints and the “saved,” but for all who traverse this “valley of tears” that we call life.

The Gothic structure was the brainchild of **Abbot Suger**, a late-11th century monk credited with popularizing the style of architecture. Stained glass windows served a practical purpose too, as priests and nuns explained the mysteries of our Catholic faith– windows became a virtual catechism for the faithful in colored glass. The vaulted ceiling design (smaller stones wedged together 45 feet across) creates tremendous friction. The ceiling exerts lateral thrust requiring the walls to be reinforced by means of flying buttresses from the outside. The buttresses create an amazing visual image that is as practical as it is graceful. By supporting the walls from outside by means of flying buttresses, it enabled the vast expanses of light to enter through the glass. The most amazing example of this is in the cathedral Basilica of Saint Denis, not far from Paris. The choir is especially effused with light, and people still marvel at how all the walls can stand with seemingly such little stone amidst so much glass.

The story of the great Gothic Cathedrals is not without its own lessons. Sometimes, a city’s zeal to build taller cathedrals backfired– they collapsed. They often took over a century–even two– in order to be completed.

Those who began the work fully knew that they would die before seeing its completion. But that didn't stop them because they knew that Cathedral was the living and breathing expression of the faith of the people, and not just any singular generation. It is the work of the church, the people of God. May the Holy Week events in Paris remind Parisians of their **rich Catholic heritage**, so they realize exactly what went up in flames along with the massive wooden roof. May they rebuild much more than an architectural treasure, but reclaim their heritage as the "eldest daughter of the church," a title earned in 498 A.D., when Saint R mi baptized King Clovis.

- In the midst of our own celebration of the Paschal Triduum, the devastating bombings that took place in Sri Lanka may have slipped notice. Targeting Catholic churches–St. Anthony's Shrine in Colombo and St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo among others– Isis claimed responsibility for the bombings that took 300 innocent lives.
- I was edified to see so many visitors for Easter Mass. My singular sentiment was one of profound gratitude for their presence. Easter Sunday is a prime opportunity for self-reflection. I hope many of them return again very soon.
- Low Monday, indeed! Do you ever wonder what do priests do on Easter Monday? Among other things, I shared a leisurely breakfast with three dear priest friends, and took an afternoon nap!
- After providing **Regina's Candies** treats to our altar servers in thanksgiving for their outstanding service, I was hoping just one solid **milk-chocolate Cross** might remain. But upon returning to the Sacristy following the 10:00 a.m. Mass, they were all gone! Not to worry–I discovered an Easter basket hidden under the sink at my mother's apartment. Among the treats were **two solid chocolate crosses**! I didn't ask any questions and assumed the Easter bunny left it for me!
- In a *New York Times* interview, the Rector of Union Theological Seminary (Presbyterian roots) opined that worship of an "omnipotent, omniscient being...is a fabrication of Roman juridical theory and Greek mythology." An ordained United Church of Christ minister, she calls the Virgin Birth a "bizarre claim." On Easter: "For Christians for whom the physical resurrection becomes a sort of obsession, that seems to me to be a pretty wobbly faith." Union is now renting unused classroom space to Columbia University. Gee, I wonder why? Thanks Reverend, but I'll stick with my "wobbly" faith.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector