

# The Loss of Notre Dame Reawakens the Heart of the West

The emotional outpouring prompted by news of the fire at Notre Dame de Paris has been extraordinary. It has been marked by both depth and breadth, prompting myriad expressions of concern for the fate of Paris' venerable cathedral and affecting Catholics and non-Catholics, those who live in France and those who don't, those who have been to Paris multiple times and those who have never been to Paris or even thought of going there.

I cannot recall so much concern ever being expressed over the fate of a building. Yes, the reaction to the collapse of the Twin Towers was stronger, but that reaction was not prompted by an emotional attachment to those skyscrapers but by the knowledge that they had been full of innocent people whom evil men hoped to kill.

By contrast, no one died in the flames that caused the world to turn its attention to Paris' great Gothic cathedral, and no one in authority has even hinted that those flames were the result of arson.

What is on display all over the West is deep love for a building. My wife told me how moved she was to see a Parisian tell a reporter asking why she had bicycled to Notre Dame upon hearing news of the fire that that's what you do when a friend is in trouble. A lot of us, it turns out, think of Mary's church in the heart of France as a friend. And that friendship reveals several important truths and, ultimately, suggests a reason for hope.

The outpouring of concern for Notre Dame by numerous ordinary people exposes the fatuousness of the iconoclastic impulse

that sees great churches as a waste of money that should have gone to the poor instead. We shouldn't have needed a fire along the Seine to tell us this, but the poor have never resented money spent on glorifying God. Instead, they have often insisted upon it.

The point of pride in even the most obscure corners of Europe has long been the local church. And when poor peasants began coming to America in large numbers, they brought an attachment to beautiful churches with them, often taking out second mortgages to help erect churches whose beauty puts to shame the banality of the churches built by their prosperous suburban descendants.

People are still drawn to beautiful buildings dedicated to the worship of God, notwithstanding the sustained effort by the great and good to convince them that they shouldn't be.

This affection for Paris' great cathedral also suggests that those who dismiss Europe's cathedrals as mere museums miss the mark. One of the things that struck me on each of my three visits to Notre Dame was the evidence of all those who had come there at least in part to pray, as shown both by people kneeling in the pews and by row upon row of lighted votive candles.

Although dire news reports prepare Americans to encounter empty churches in Europe, many European churches, while not full, do see a respectable number of worshippers, as I saw both at daily Mass at the church near my hotel on my most recent visit to Paris and the steady stream of pilgrims I saw later that day at the modest Chapel of the Miraculous Medal, where the patroness of Notre Dame appeared to St. Catherine Laboure. Many of the Parisians who came to be near their friend in her hour of need could be seen praying and even singing hymns. Even more secular Frenchmen respect the religious nature of the building they love: no one is suggesting that Notre Dame be rebuilt as anything other than a

Catholic cathedral, and there was widespread relief that Paris' brave firefighters and their intrepid chaplain had succeeded in rescuing relics and the Blessed Sacrament from the fire. It is hard to imagine such an extraordinary outpouring of affection for any purely secular building, even one full of great art.

The widespread concern for Notre Dame also points to another truth, albeit a highly unfashionable one, namely the unmatched artistic greatness of Western Civilization. Some years ago I bought a print of Notre Dame at an art show in Cleveland. I told the art dealer that I regarded the great Gothic cathedrals as the most amazing buildings on the planet. At first the art dealer disagreed, telling me I couldn't say that because it was too "Eurocentric." We continued chatting, though, and eventually the art dealer confided that he actually agreed with me, and described how one of his art classes had spent two days in Chartres simply studying the exterior sculptures on that city's magnificent cathedral.

Medieval man used the flying buttress, the pointed arch, and ribbed vaulting to build what no one had built before, walls of glass reaching to the sky. And what medieval man built continues to amaze. My wife and I also visited Sainte Chapelle the last time we were in Paris, and we both witnessed an Asian tourist gasp as she ascended the stairs leading from the drab lower chapel to the luminous upper chapel and saw the magnificent stained glass Louis IX had built to honor the Crown of Thorns. The beauty wrought by Western Christendom took this Asian tourist's breath away, even though she knew, intellectually, what to expect. Imagine what it would have been like to be an ordinary person in 13th century France and see the likes of Notre Dame or Chartres or Sainte Chapelle for the first time.

In the last few days, the world has been considering what it would mean to lose one of the masterpieces of medieval Christendom for all time. There is widespread agreement that

such a loss would be profound. And there is reason to hope that the near loss of something that people have come to realize is so dear to them will cause at least some to reflect upon their attachment to Notre Dame and, as a result, come to cherish the civilization that built her.

The civilization that built Notre Dame was the result of the Western Church's sustained effort to unite the Gospel with Greco-Roman culture and the folkways of the barbarian tribes, including the Goths who gave their name to the architectural style so memorably embodied by Notre Dame de Paris. May the near loss of one of the greatest monuments of Western Civilization and an irreplaceable treasure lead us back to the faith without which the West would not have come into existence, and without which the West will not continue to exist.

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