

Reflection for Thursday 26th November 2020

Tremendous Victory: Notre Dame Cathedral Will Be Exactly Restored

You may remember seeing the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris ablaze on the night of 14th April 2019. Many people, regardless of the depth of their faith or lack of it were shocked to see a much revered building apparently burning to the ground.

TV and newspaper reporters discussed the cathedral's importance as a French landmark, tourist attraction and UNESCO heritage site. Offers of donations poured in from all over the world and almost immediately there was a clamour that the cathedral be rebuilt exactly as it was before the fire.

For devout Catholics, the partial loss of this treasure was traumatic. Indeed, from a purely architectural point of view, Notre Dame de Paris ranks with Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. Some cathedrals may be older, larger or even more beautiful but no cathedral is more recognizable than the great Gothic structure near the River Seine. Notre Dame is the towering symbol of the Catholic Faith in France.

The influence of Notre Dame goes far beyond France to the whole Catholic world. Architects in the United States drew inspiration from the French interpretation of the Gothic style. Millions of American Catholics worship in front of altars and windows influenced by the architectural style of Notre Dame. Unfortunately that influence was threatened by the first plans presented for the restoration.

Many architects made outlandish modernistic proposals that would have remade the great cathedral in their own image and totally unsympathetic to the original design. French President Emmanuel Macron appeared to be considering some of them.

A great outcry erupted throughout France, asking for an "authentique" restoration. The French Society for the Defence of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP) gathered nearly 144,000 signatures in a short time as part of the reaction against those who would disfigure the structure through an inauthentic restoration and their efforts paid off.

According to the Associated Press, “Macron came around to the traditionalists’ argument, and approved reconstruction plans for the twelfth-century monument that were presented on Thursday [July 9, 2020], according to a statement from the state agency overseeing the project, That means it was how Notre Dame looked on the afternoon of 15th April 2019, before the fire broke out, consumed the roof and threatened the rose-windowed twin towers that keep the cathedral upright.”

As a demonstration of the restoration, craftsmen presented a sample oak truss in front of the cathedral on 19th September 2020 and as part of European Heritage Days and displayed one of the twenty-five trusses that will support the new roof in front of the Cathedral.

The truss was made with medieval carpentry techniques. The original trusses of giant French oak were built during the thirteenth century but replaced during a nineteenth-century restoration. It will be years before this new truss takes its place on top of Notre Dame, but the sample proves that the medieval methods can still be replicated.

So far, the restoration has suffered many delays and when COVID-19 struck, all work stopped losing a full 3 months and another delay was the threat of workers’ exposure to lead. Notre Dame’s roof contained 460 tons of lead. Researchers found lead dust up to thirty-one miles from the site. The restoration can only begin after removing massive amounts of scaffolding. When the fire struck, the cathedral was undergoing a restoration process, which required scaffolding. It must now be carefully removed because the fire affected both the metal in the scaffolds and the stone which supports them.

The stone may present a more critical problem. Most of Notre Dame is built of limestone, which can turn to dust at roughly 800-900 degrees Celsius. The heat of the fire was estimated at 800 degrees. The possible effect of the water on the heated stone must also be considered. The possibility of heat and water damage means that the thousands of stones that will support the new roof and spire need to be carefully and individually inspected.

However, medieval builders knew what they were doing as Stone Specialist points out, “The medieval masons who constructed the massive cathedral had put the lead-covered wooden roof structure above a vaulted ceiling constructed of 800m³ of limestone, intended to protect the interior in case the roof ever did catch fire. It was largely successful. Below it, rattan chairs, priceless paintings and stained glass windows were largely undamaged. A gold-plated cross above the altar and the Pieta were among many priceless works of art that were protected from the effects of the blaze.”

It took about two hundred years to build Notre Dame. If the spirit of those who want to see Notre Dame restored to its pre-fire appearance hold firm, the job will be accomplished in much less time.

Generations yet unborn will see its magnificence. The restoration may yet serve to bring the French people back to the Faith, which too many of them have ignored in the past fifty years.

Let us pray that it be so!

Notre Dame de Paris, ora pro nobis.

Deacon Kevin

(Adapted from an article by Edwin Benson from *catholicismpure.wordpress.com*)