

FROM JOKERS TO FOOLS: THE FIRE OF NOTRE DAME AS A CALL TO HOLINESS

Megan Joy Rials on Modernity,
Architecture, and Hope

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A CALL TO HOLINESS

We are fools for Christ's sake. . . . When reviled, we bless;
when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we retreat.

—1 Corinthians 4:10, 12-13 ESV

In the late afternoon of April 15, 2019, Notre Dame de Paris was leisurely preparing for the upcoming week of Easter services. Visiting tourists attended her vespers, or evening prayers, while nearby bread and cheese shops braced themselves for the usual evening rush consisting of those same sightseers and of parents picking up their children from school.¹ But in less than an hour, Notre Dame was fighting for her life: a fire, the cause of which is still undetermined, was raging in her main attic and

¹ Agnès Poirier, *Notre Dame: The Soul of France* (Minneapolis: OneWorld Publications, 2020), 3-4.

consuming its “forest,” the latticework roof structure composed of 1,300 oak beams, many of which date from the 13th century.² The world stopped to hold its breath as the flames eagerly devoured their ancient prey and a massive team of firefighters, led by their commander in chief, General Jean-Claude Gallet, fought to save Our Lady of Paris.³ Journalist Agnès Poirier, author of *Notre Dame: The Soul of France*, explains that among capital cities’ firefighting teams, the Paris fire brigade is unique in several ways. Its average age is 27, as compared to other teams’ average age of 40, and General Gallet refers to the firefighters as “gymnasts” for their ability to perform life-saving pull-ups if the floor beneath them collapses.⁴ The most unusual aspect of the Paris fire brigade, though, is its tactic of fighting fires from inside, not outside, a burning building.⁵ For the Notre Dame blaze, General Gallet strategized to quench the fire on all fronts from within, even as her spire collapsed and shattered the nave’s stone vault.⁶ The fire soon raced its way up the north tower, where eight of Notre Dame’s bells hang: Gabriel, Anne-Geneviève, Denis, Marcel, Etienne, Benoît-Joseph, Maurice, and Jean-Marie.⁷ If it collapsed, the buckling of the north tower would in turn destroy the south tower, followed by the façade and the

² Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 5-6.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9, 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

rest of Notre Dame.⁸ To halt this catastrophic domino effect, the firefighters swarmed the north tower.⁹ They also targeted the south tower, where Emmanuel and Marie, the last two bells, hang, to cool it down as well.¹⁰ As water from the hoses flowed over their bronze waists, Emmanuel — Notre Dame’s oldest bell, dating since 1686 — let out a wail: even the bells of Notre Dame were weeping over her destruction.¹¹ According to Poirier, upon a call from the archbishop of Paris, in a “solemn” and “sublime” moment, the bells of other churches in Paris, then all throughout France, began tolling in solidarity for “their siblings, prisoners of a deadly inferno.”¹²

Hours later, thanks to General Gallet’s and his fire brigade’s heroic efforts to stave off the worst of the flames in the towers, Notre Dame was spared.¹³ The fire, Poirier observes, brought many in France to their knees in prayer, young and old alike, as this “staunchly secular” nation watched the blaze and realized “how profoundly Christian its history is, even if it is buried under a century or more of secularism.”¹⁴ When he inspected the cathedral that morning, General Gallet found on the

⁸ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 15-16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17, 149.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

remains of the altar an open lectionary full of Scripture.¹⁵ Through the thick dust covering the pages, the French word for “hope” peeked up at him: the book was open to a page describing the Resurrection.¹⁶ Although the roof and spire were lost, we should take heart, for Notre Dame’s famed rose windows survived, as well as her great organ and gold cross behind the altar.¹⁷ Despite the roof’s collapse, her main sanctuary remained intact, and a group of workers managed to rescue approximately 80 percent of the artifacts she contained.¹⁸

Almost three years later, the hope of rebirth and new life after devastation endures, not only for Notre Dame, but also the world. In hindsight, the burning of Notre Dame was an ominous premonition of the global upheaval that began in 2020 as the COVID-19 virus swept across the world. This profound societal discord, however, has been growing for some time, as France’s religious decline indicates. Poirier notes France became especially secularized after the separation of church and state in 1905, to the point that today, religion is “never . . . allowed to enter the polity and the life of the city.”¹⁹ In a recent, bluntly titled piece from *The Atlantic*, “Why Is France So Afraid of God?”, reporter Rachel Donadio

15 Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 23.

16 *Ibid.*, 23.

17 Bill Hutchinson, “Notre Dame Cathedral’s Famed Rose Windows, Organ Spared: Church Official,” *ABC News*, April 17, 2019, last accessed January 3, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/notre-dame-cathedrals-famed-rose-windows-organ-spared/story?id=62436661>.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 179.

attributes this hostility to France's excessive reliance on *laïcité*, which generally means "secularism" but has come to signify the nation's opposition to religion having any place in public life.²⁰ Consistent with this spiritual dissension, the discussions of Notre Dame's repairs have resulted in deep disagreements. The National Heritage and Architectural Commission recently voted for significant renovations, such as updating the straw seating with "mobile benches," projecting Bible verses in different languages onto the walls, removing altars from the chapels, and reducing the number of confessionals on the first floor, that more traditionally minded critics say are too radical and will convert the cathedral into a "theme park" like Disneyland.²¹ Supporters of the renovations protest these characterizations as unfair and argue the changes will make Notre Dame more welcoming to those from different religious backgrounds.²²

Only time will tell both the true character of these renovations and the end results of spiritual decline,

²⁰ Rachel Donadio, "Why is France So Afraid of God?", *The Atlantic*, November 22, 2021, last accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/12/france-god-religion-secularism/620528/>.

²¹ Vincent Noce, "Catholic Church's Proposed Redesign of Notre Dame Interior Provokes Outrage," *The Art Newspaper*, December 1, 2021, last accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/12/01/interior-redesign-notre-dame-cathedral>; Matt Hickman, "France Approves the Controversial Interior Redesign of Notre Dame Cathedral," *The Architect's Newspaper*, December 13, 2021, last accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.archpaper.com/2021/12/france-approves-controversial-interior-redesign-of-notre-dame-cathedral/>.

²² Noce, "Proposed Redesign."

which, as we will see, is not confined to France. The construction of Notre Dame and her storied history, however, reveal many lessons for the foundations of our lives and our faith as we fight the fires of religious decline and seek to restore the shattered foundations of our individual lives, society, and culture. As Notre Dame demonstrates through the comprehensive nature of her artistry, only Christ heals the many divisions modernity has created on the individual and societal level and unites the whole of our existence in service to Him. Her holistic artistry directs us to ancient readings of Scripture, which correspond to the past, present, and future, and equip us to focus on Christ as our bedrock and to recognize the primary importance of memory as a building block for our present and future. This properly structured understanding of our temporal existence lays the groundwork for finding our identities in Christ, the divine *Logos*, and for our renewal, individually and societally, through Him.

“THIS WILL DESTROY THAT”: VICTOR HUGO’S PREDICTION OF THE FRACTURING OF MODERNITY

France and its discontents are only a microcosm of the societal and spiritual corruption the modern world is currently experiencing. In 2020, the COVID-19 virus ravaged the world as various political and social events exposed the collapse of our civilizational underpinnings and the weaknesses of our institutions. A recent study showed that four out of ten adults in the United States rely either heavily or moderately upon a syncretic belief system known as “Moral Therapeutic Deism.”²³ Although

²³ *American Worldview Inventory 2021*, Cultural Research Center, Arizona Christian University, “Release #02: Introducing America’s

three out of four people who rely substantially on Moral Therapeutic Deism claim to be Christians, it espouses a number of tenets that conflict with basic Christian theology, including the beliefs that God is distant but allows “good people” into heaven and that there are no absolute truths.²⁴ Even more troubling, only one sixth of those who are purportedly Christians but rely on Moral Therapeutic Deism espouse the belief that only faith in Jesus Christ as our savior allows us to enter heaven.²⁵ Such individuals also possess a number of other beliefs that are incompatible with Christianity; these beliefs include the view that having any religious faith is more important than which faith is followed and the denial of God as the basis of all truth.²⁶ Their behavioral choices, including lying, falsely claiming tax deductions, and engaging in sexual immorality, also conflict with basic Christian tenets.²⁷

Not surprisingly, religious faith and affiliation have been on the decline. A December 2021 Pew Research Center study revealed three in ten U.S. adults are religious “nones”: atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular.”²⁸ Christians now outnumber the “nones” by

Most Popular Religion—Moral Therapeutic Deism,” April 27, 2021, last accessed January 3, 2022, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CRC_AWVI2021_Release02_Digital_01_20210427.pdf.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gregory A. Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” *Pew Research Center*, December 14, 2021,

only two to one, whereas when the study was first conducted in 2007, Christians outnumbered “nones” by five to one.²⁹ In an 18 percent increase since 2007, roughly one third of adults report they seldom or never pray, and only 63 percent of adults identify with Christianity, down from 78 percent in 2007.³⁰

Moreover, in recent years, faith in American institutions has declined. According to the Pew Research Center, a majority of Americans now believe the federal government and the media withhold important information from the public.³¹ Particularly since 2020, trust in institutions such as the Supreme Court, the criminal justice system, newspapers, and organized religion has dropped.³² Another facet of this splintering in society is the increasing polarization of political parties and the factions within those parties, as a November 2021 Pew Research Center poll indicated.³³

last accessed January 3, 2022,
<https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Lee Rainie and Andrew Perrin, “Key Findings About American’s Declining Trust in Government and Each Other,” *Pew Research Center*, July 22, 2019, last accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/22/key-findings-about-americans-declining-trust-in-government-and-each-other/>.

³² Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Confidence in Major U.S. Institutions Dips,” *Gallup*, July 14, 2021, last accessed January 3, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/352316/americans-confidence-major-institutions-dips.aspx>.

³³ Pew Research Center, “Beyond Red and Blue: The Political Typology,” November 9, 2021,

Additionally, loneliness rates have increased. As Robert Putnam observes in “Bowling Alone,” features of modern society such as greater mobility and the dominance of television have contributed to our society’s atomization and resulted in decreased participation levels in church, civic organization, and social groups.³⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these trends: in 2020, loneliness rates skyrocketed, with approximately 75 percent of men and women in the United States reporting they feel lonelier because of the pandemic.³⁵

This splintering of modern life was predicted by Victor Hugo, author of *Notre Dame de Paris*, or, as it is better known in English, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In the novel, which eventually became “one of the first worldwide media phenomena,” Hugo sounded the alarm about the state of deterioration into which France had allowed its historical monuments to fall, particularly Notre Dame herself.³⁶ His activism almost single-handedly saved her from certain death. Hugo’s efforts resulted in the creation of the Department of Historic Monuments, which appointed Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, a self-taught architect, to lead the charge in restoring Notre Dame to her former glory.³⁷ As the original French

<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology-2/>.

³⁴ Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” in *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (January 1995), 68-69, 74-75.

³⁵ Jamie Ducharme, “COVID-19 is making America’s loneliness epidemic worse,” *TIME*, May 8, 2020, last accessed October 2, 2020, <https://time.com/5833681/loneliness-covid-19/>.

³⁶ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 93, 95, 99.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

title indicates, Hugo lovingly centered his novel on Notre Dame as his main character. The book is significant not only for its success in rallying France to save the cathedral, but also for Hugo's extended commentary on the decline of architecture — an analysis that also applies as a discourse on our modern, fragmented lives. In the chapter "This Will Destroy That," Hugo rails against the printing press and argues its advent caused the decline of the art of architecture. Although we may observe the irony inherent in the publication of Hugo's criticism in a book created by the very printing press he condemns, his observations proved prescient for modernity.

In the chapter, Hugo extolls the cathedral as the locus of all the arts and describes it as "the social, the collective, the dominant art," noting that in the past, "[H]e who was born a poet became an architect. . . . All other arts obeyed and put themselves at the service of the one."³⁸ Hugo points out that in architecture, various types of artists joined forces: sculptors, glaziers who created stained-glass windows, and poets and singers who used their talents to serve the cathedral.³⁹ He refers to architecture as "the sum total of art" that united artists to create an integrated work of art together, and he regards architecture so highly that he characterizes Solomon's temple as "the sacred book itself."⁴⁰ The "parent idea," the Word, thus found its most concrete form in architecture.⁴¹ By containing the Word not only in its

³⁸ Victor Hugo, "This Will Destroy That," Book V, Chapter II, in *Notre Dame de Paris*, <https://www.bartleby.com/312/0502.html>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

foundation, but also in its very structure, the Ark of the Covenant both contained the Word and made the image of the Word “visible on its outer covering.”⁴² When societal support for architecture waned, however, the different arts united under it splintered.⁴³ Of the individual arts, Hugo laments that “[t]hus isolated, each waxes great,” and “each province becom[es] an independent kingdom” as they pursued their individualized ends.⁴⁴ In his complaints, Hugo goes so far as to call printing, which has displaced architecture as the dominant communicative artform, the “second Tower of Babel” because of the incessant debates and the “furious contest” among authors inaugurated by printing.⁴⁵ For Hugo, the “durability” of architecture was exchanged for the book’s supposed “immortality” by virtue of its ubiquity in society.⁴⁶

Our first reaction, particularly among evangelicals who place a high emphasis on the reading of the Word of God, might be to consider Hugo’s criticism of the printing press as overly shrill. Indeed, for all Hugo’s sneering at Gutenberg, he enabled the Bible to be published cheaply and purchased by those who otherwise never would have been able to afford a personal Bible. But we should consider that Jesus, the divine *Logos* Himself, came not to distribute tracts filled with rules, but rather to live His

⁴² Hugo, “This Will Destroy That.”

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

life for us, and then give that life as a ransom for all.⁴⁷ As Paul points out, our bodies are now temples of the Holy Spirit, and therefore we must follow Jesus' example to honor God with our bodies.⁴⁸ Thus, the grandeur of a cathedral such as Notre Dame reminds us our duty to build our own edifice for God: a life lived obediently to His commandments.

The process of Notre Dame's construction validates Hugo's praise for the holistic, unifying nature of architecture and is instructive for us as we seek to construct such a Christ-centered life from the rubble of our individualized, isolated modern lives. It models the all-encompassing, single-minded focus on Christ that should characterize our individual lives, as well as the unity of believers in the body of Christ. Historian Stephen Murray in his book *Notre Dame of Amiens: Life of the Gothic Cathedral* explains that the "makers and users" of Notre Dame alike contributed to her construction.⁴⁹ The clergy, of course, conducted services and celebrated special feast days at Notre Dame, and a number of bishops assisted in furthering the progress of construction in various different ways.⁵⁰ Artisans such as masons and carpenters, meanwhile, used their talents to lay the foundations of the cathedral.⁵¹ Sculptors constructed the magnificent portals, or entrances, that

⁴⁷ 1 Tim. 2:5-6, ESV.

⁴⁸ 1 Cor. 6:19-20.

⁴⁹ Stephen Murray, *Notre-Dame of Amiens: Life of the Gothic Cathedral* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 159, 215.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 182-83.

welcome visitors inside, and glaziers fashioned the stunning stained-glass windows, particularly the famed rose windows, that tell Biblical stories.⁵² The contribution of the laypeople, Murray writes, is less readily apparent, but they also played a vital role by contributing gifts and alms for the construction itself and by establishing endowments to pay for a chaplaincy.⁵³ In sum, Murray considers Notre Dame “the visible sign of [the] great contract” of salvation, which the priests believed they were partially fulfilling through their emphasis on the cathedral’s status as a “type of Ark of the Covenant,” as a sermon from the era suggested.⁵⁴ The middle of the cathedral, the crossing, united the lives of the laypeople and the clergy “through liturgical and devotional activities,” particularly as enhanced by the “architectural form, space, light, and song” that “contribute to the unifying force of the cathedral.”⁵⁵

Notre Dame thus reminds us of our faith’s comprehensive nature, which we should reflect by using our talents in both our individual and communal pursuits of Christ. The unity of art in Notre Dame reminds us we should not utilize our talents in isolation from others and their own talents, even if they differ from ours, and warns us against this modern tendency toward the disintegration of the arts. The poet William Wordsworth best describes such fragmentation in his

⁵² Murray, *Notre-Dame of Amiens*, 190-91, 199-201, 207-208.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 209-211.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

famous line, “We murder to dissect.”⁵⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*, issues a further warning about its destructive effects on us as individuals through his character Gandalf’s observation, “[H]e that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.”⁵⁷ The fracturing of modernity prevents us from using our talents wisely and cohesively and estranges us from the Lord and one another. Notre Dame, by contrast, is a concrete, vivid reminder of God’s intention for our talents to be used alongside those of others and in service to Him and our neighbors.

NOTRE DAME’S SANCTIFYING FOUNDATION: THE QUADRIGA AND MEMORY

Throughout the eight hundred years since Notre Dame’s construction began, she has stood as a bulwark not only for this but also for God’s other truths, even in radically changing times and shifts in worldview. As a sanctuary — derived from the Latin *sanctus*, meaning literally to sanctify or make holy — Notre Dame trains us in proper spiritual habits, which increase our holiness and conform our lives to Christ’s example. In our modern age, where the very foundations of civilization are cracking as we question fundamental, age-old truths, Notre Dame’s rich, Christ-centered orientation is particularly instructive. Notre Dame’s success in pointing us toward Christ is a fruit of her artistry’s heavy

⁵⁶ William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned,” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed January 2, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45557/the-tables-turned>.

⁵⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954, repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 252.

reliance on Scripture. According to Murray, Jean d'Abbeville, the prominent theologian and Amiens dean who led the project of constructing Notre Dame's portals, would have studied the *quadriga*, or the "medieval hermeneutic methodology" of Scripture.⁵⁸ This approach taught four levels of meaning in Scripture: first, the literal reading of the Bible as a historical account; second, the typological reading that sought to understand its symbolic meaning, particularly as between the Old and New Testaments; third, the "moral application" of the text to the reader's life, which is also known as the "tropological" reading; and fourth, the "anagogical" approach that would lead the reader to a "perfect union with God."⁵⁹ These levels of meaning, we should observe, also correspond roughly to the past, present, and future, and it is only by rightly ordering them in Christ that we approach a godly identity.

Although the present constitutes our first experiences in life, the past supplies the foundation for our lives, as we find in it the models of who we wish to be. Jesus, our primary example, is the *Logos*, according to the fourth Gospel, or the "ordering principle," in Murray's terminology.⁶⁰ As another historian, Wilfred McClay, explains, the Greek word *logos* is also sometimes translated as "account" or "argument," stemming from the verb *legein*, "to select."⁶¹ Thus, Christ as the divine *Logos* is the ordering principle of the cosmos Who directs

⁵⁸ Murray, *Notre Dame of Amiens*, 139-40.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶¹ Wilfred McClay, "The Claims of Memory," in *First Things* 319 (January 2022), 26.

the world and trains us in the art of holy discernment. This selectivity, beyond obviously guiding us to make wise decisions, has a fundamental connection to history and memory. According to McClay, the “selectivity [of memory] is essential to the mind’s quest for rational order,” for memory, as it relates to history, necessarily involves both remembering and forgetting: we prune certain events from memory so that we may “remember the things that fit a template of meaning and point to a larger whole.”⁶² Thus, Notre Dame necessarily features Christ as her sanctifying force, Who instructs us in rightly ordering our memory around Him. He thus molds our identity in the shape of His righteousness and reverses modernity’s narrow-minded focus on whatever fragment of the fractured self is currently in vogue.

Our modern age, as Hugo observes, has divided the arts, but it also has splintered our past. Modernity tells us to abandon the past, to smash the relics of memory and history, in favor of unfettered self-creation according to our own whims. But unlike God, we cannot create *ex nihilo*. The iconoclast cannot find the reflection of who he wishes to become in a mirror he has already shattered. Political theorist Hannah Arendt cautions that the abandonment of memory is a sign of a society crumbling under totalitarianism, where “[g]rief and remembrance are forbidden” and “the monstrous forgeries in historiography of which all totalitarian regimes are guilty” are possible.⁶³ She further warns of the dangers in the “oblivion” of “forgetting,” which deprives us of

⁶² McClay, “The Claims of Memory,” 26.

⁶³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (rev. ed., New York: Harcourt, 1976), 332, 452.

“depth in human existence,” for “memory and depth are the same, or rather, depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.”⁶⁴ By contrast, Notre Dame celebrates the many riches we find in mining memory. The most famous chancellor of Notre Dame, Richard de Fournival, stated that God, to provide for man’s natural urge to possess knowledge, gave him the faculty of “Memory,” which “has two doors: Sight and Hearing. And to each of these two doors a pathway leads, namely Depiction and Description. Depiction serves the eye and Description serves the ear. . . . Memory . . . renders the past as if it were the present.”⁶⁵ By seeing the cathedral, and hearing and telling of her beauty, we wear the grooves of good spiritual habits into our beings, just as we do when we obey Scripture’s commands to memorize the Word of God and thereby lay it up into our hearts and souls.⁶⁶ This meditation upon what is good, true, and beautiful, such as Notre Dame herself, inculcates the way of Christ and His virtue into our souls and lays a foundation in our lives that equips us to fight the destructive spiritual fires of modernity.

NOTRE DAME’S HISTORY: FORTITUDE ACROSS THE AGES

In this contemplative remembrance, we reflect on history and its lessons for us. A history of Notre Dame,

⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), 94.

⁶⁵ Richard de Fournival, *Master Richard’s Bestiary of Love and Response*, ed. and trans. Jeanette Beer, illustr. Barry Moser (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), I, quoted in Murray, *Notre-Dame of Amiens*, 353.

⁶⁶ Deut. 11:18.

corresponding to the first level of meaning in the *quadrige*, the literal, demonstrates the Scriptural wisdom that he who obeys Christ's words is like a house built on a rock that withstands all forces.⁶⁷ Reviewing Notre Dame's past underscores the firm foundation we find in Christ and instructs us in a godly approach for holistically integrating our faith into our lives and for interacting with the events of our own time.

The construction of Notre Dame — which, as Poirier notes, likely began in approximately 1161 — reveals an involvement of and concern for the entire community, which spanned classes and vocations.⁶⁸ She was built upon the site of an already existing ancient cathedral on the Île de la Cité of Paris, which had, as Poirier explains, “acquired a fourfold vocation: as the royal city, the merchant city, the bishop's city and the university city” where different peoples and vocations collided.⁶⁹ The work entailed building the new cathedral as well as a complete overhaul of the Île de la Cité itself and its narrow, filthy streets that were lined with homes and shops and stalls and homes of the rich and poor alike.⁷⁰ Both classes contributed to Notre Dame, the rich through making cash donations and establishing chantries of trust funds to compensate priests who conducted Masses for the recently deceased, and the poor by paying the Catholic Church's *taille*, or land tax, and by performing

⁶⁷ Matt. 7:24-27.

⁶⁸ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 37.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

more mundane tasks such as plowing and farming.⁷¹ Because Bishop Maurice de Sully, the churchman credited with beginning fundraising and appointing the initial unknown architect who laid Notre Dame's first plans, insisted the church remain open for services throughout construction, the builders' demolition of the old house of worship occurred simultaneously with the beginning of the new construction.⁷² A total of three more architects, whose names are all lost to history, would work on the project until approximately 1220, when architects Jean de Chelles and Pierre de Montreuil completed Our Lady of Paris.⁷³ As Notre Dame's bedrock in Christ was built on an existing cathedral, so also the same is true for believers: Jesus does not raze His followers to the ground when we accept Him; rather, He calls us where we already are in our lives.⁷⁴ Similarly, as all in Paris banded together in their collective effort to build the cathedral, He raises each of us — young and old, men and women, rich and poor — to walk with Him in a new life and to participate in the body of Christ.

Jesus warned us, however, that because of our belief in Him, we will face trials in this world, and Notre Dame has certainly not been spared.⁷⁵ Poirier notes the Hundred Years' War, spanning from 1337 to 1453, ended a French age of prosperity and ravaged Notre Dame: among the damages were her stained-glass windows, the

⁷¹ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 32-33.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 31, 35, 37.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

⁷⁴ 1 Cor. 7:17.

⁷⁵ John 16:33.

rood-screen, and the choir enclosure.⁷⁶ Over time, she would suffer even greater indignities. During the French Revolution, the revolutionaries used her as the site of their vote to nationalize all property of the Catholic Church.⁷⁷ In 1793, they degraded her very body by ordering her bells and bronze art to be melted down to create cannons.⁷⁸ The same year, the revolutionaries would abolish Catholicism in favor of the religion of “Reason” and convert her, the only church they allowed to remain open, into their “Temple of Reason.”⁷⁹ In 1794, during Robespierre’s Reign of Terror, she was rechristened yet again as the place of worship for “the Supreme Being and the Soul’s Immortality.”⁸⁰ At last, in 1795, Notre Dame was returned to the Catholic Church, although she remained under state control.⁸¹ Even during the Terror, however, Notre Dame had guardian angels looking after her. An archaeologist, Alexandre Lenoir, convinced the revolutionaries they should place all the art they confiscated in one place, and he used this ploy to recover art from looters and safeguard other pieces preemptively from them.⁸²

Napoleon Bonaparte would eventually restore Catholicism as France’s official state religion, albeit in a

⁷⁶ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 45.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 62.

weakened form subject to state control.⁸³ Notre Dame celebrated the occasion with a Low Mass.⁸⁴ By this point, she was in such a poor state that tapestries from the Gobelins manufactory and paintings from the Louvre were hung inside to disguise the ruins.⁸⁵ In an affront to the faith he had just reinstated and one of its most potent symbols, 1804 saw Napoleon turn his back on the Pope to crown himself emperor on the altar of Notre Dame.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Notre Dame's long night of neglect was drawing to a close: in 1832, as already detailed, Victor Hugo rallied France to restore Notre Dame, which resulted in the appointment of architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc to lead her restoration.⁸⁷ In his renovations, Viollet-le-Duc sought to recapture the grandeur of Bishop de Sully's original vision for Notre Dame with measures such as restoring the original thirteen steps up to her façade and the gargoyles of the drain pipes.⁸⁸

Even through World War II, Notre Dame continued to stand firm as a symbol of our faith's strong hope. During the German occupation and the war, she never stopped holding religious services.⁸⁹ Then, on August 25, 1944, when the French 2nd Armored Division thundered into the city upon orders from Charles de Gaulle, Notre Dame's bourdon bell, or the bell with the lowest note,

⁸³ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 69.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

Emmanuelle — “God with us” — rang out to announce Paris’s freedom from the Nazis.⁹⁰ The next day, on August 26, 1944, Notre Dame would witness the attempted assassination of de Gaulle, who calmly and miraculously walked away unscathed.⁹¹

Thus, the history of Notre Dame reminds us of the value of the *quadriga*’s first entry: the literal reading of Scripture. Meditating upon the historical events of Scripture summons us to model the lives of the holy while rejecting the examples of the unfaithful. Similarly, contemplating Notre Dame’s past, as when we reflect on the lives of the saints, reveals a tumultuous history she has survived because of her dedication to Christ and beckons us to imitate her witness. She reminds us to stand upon the bedrock of Christ amid the shifting sands of our circumstances and demonstrate to the world the foundation upon which our hope is built through proclaiming our Creator in the use of our individual talents. In doing so, we ring out His glory as Gerard Manley Hopkins describes: “[L]ike each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s/Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name. . . . Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:/Deals out that being indoors each one dwells[.]”⁹² Through using our talents in this manner, we proclaim God’s magnificence to the world and remind ourselves of His fidelity in keeping His promises from the past, and His continued faithfulness to us.

⁹⁰ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 134-35.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 140-41.

⁹² Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As kingfishers catch fire,” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (rev. ed., reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129.

NOTRE DAME'S ARTISTRY: TYPOLOGICAL AND TROPOLOGICAL READINGS IN ARCHITECTURE

Our present and future depend on a healthy connection to and respect for our past, which, as Notre Dame illustrates, lays the foundation for our lives. Through the emphasis of Notre Dame's artistry on Scripture, we have seen the past is related to the first reading of the *quadriga*, the literal or historical meaning. Her grounding in the past makes possible a joyful present in Christ and therefore points us toward the *quadriga*'s second and third readings of Scripture: the typological reading that seeks to understand the Bible's symbolic meaning, particularly as between the Old Testament and the New; and the tropological or moral reading that applies the text to the believer's life. These two readings are associated with the present, as taken together, they connect the past to the present and encourage us to appreciate God's continuing work in our lives and the world.

From the moment visitors arrive at Notre Dame's portals, or entrances, she reminds them of Christ's constant and continuing presence by introducing them to typological elements. Together, Murray explains, the portals tell the story of "God's plot for humanity" by displaying the "interwoven stories of the Old and New Testaments and the lives of the saints" in a left to right fashion that cultivates an experience akin to reading a book.⁹³ The painted sculptures, which depict various essential Biblical stories, encourage an allegorical reading of Scripture through portrayals of typologically linked Old and New Testaments events, such as the

⁹³ Murray, *Notre-Dame of Amiens*, 139-40.

continuum of Old Testament patriarchs and New Testament bishops.⁹⁴ The South Portal of the Virgin Mary further features a number of Marian Old Testament typological allusions, particularly the similarities between the Ark of the Covenant, a symbol of God's covenant with His chosen people, and Mary, whose submission to God's plan extended that covenant to all people.⁹⁵ As Murray notes, just as the Ark contained the manna that fed the Israelites during their desert wanderings, so Mary carried "the life-giving Savior."⁹⁶ The prominence of these typological elements in Notre Dame's portals exhorts us to recognize Christ's previous actions in the world and our lives so that we may more clearly see His continued presence and work.

The portals stimulate visitors to reflect on their need for Christ, as Murray explains the entrances inspire the moral reading of Scripture and the necessity of human transformation through emphasizing fallen human nature and the good news of salvation, which thanks to God's graciousness is available to all who repent.⁹⁷ In her depiction of the bodily resurrection of believers, Notre Dame particularly highlights Christ the Judge displaying His wounds, and this portrayal in turn reminds visitors of the means of their salvation.⁹⁸ Jesus as the *Logos* or the "ordering principle" is also shown separating the saved from the damned at the Last Judgment in an effort to

⁹⁴ Murray, *Notre-Dame of Amiens*, 140-42.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 140-41.

warn visitors about the eternal consequences of this life's choices.⁹⁹ The central portal featuring Christ, meanwhile, urges visitors to follow the apostles' examples and be transformed into the image of God.¹⁰⁰ Combined with the other portals' emphases on the Church and the Virgin Mary, the portals as a whole encourage visitors to break their contracts with death and the Last Judgment by means of the "new contract" that Christ offers in salvation.¹⁰¹ According to Murray, medieval visitors who were more familiar with Biblical stories than are modern visitors would have viewed Notre Dame as inviting them to decode God's plot for the salvation of all.¹⁰² Notre Dame's "spatial dimensions" are crucial to developing this sense in visitors, Murray writes, for Christ, "the Beau Dieu, stands at the center of that spatial plot inviting — even compelling — us to enter."¹⁰³

Just as Jesus beckons us to enter Notre Dame, so He invites all to repent and join the body of Christ. There, we may both bask in His presence and discover additional truths about Him through communion with our brothers and sisters in His community of saints. Similarly, Murray writes, the entirety of Notre Dame's layout invites us to explore more deeply. He notes the genius of her artistry lies in her "dynamic perception of sameness and difference" so that our "anticipation" of unseen areas

⁹⁹ Murray, *Notre-Dame of Amiens*, 135.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 143-44.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

compels us forward in an effort to “compare the parts already seen and remember with new spaces yet to be seen.”¹⁰⁴ According to Murray, for visitors, there is an inherent tension between *ductus* and *statis*, between standing still to absorb Notre Dame’s grandeur and continuing on into the cathedral to discover the further meanings she holds.¹⁰⁵ This tension also exists on the spiritual plane. As Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is a time for everything, and there are times for savoring the Lord’s presence in a given moment and for pressing onward under the Holy Spirit’s guidance to discover His plan for our lives.¹⁰⁶ By being attentive to Him and by making decisions that enact His will, we balance *ductis* and *statis* and draw closer to Him. He blesses these efforts to know Him more deeply and more broadly by rewarding each discovery of another facet of His character with additional and more profound truths. This dynamic relationship with Him demands the entirety of our lives and heals the many divisions in the disintegrated modern self, as we saw previously in His unification of our talents. Here, our faith’s holistic character reveals Christ connects our past with our present through His continued presence and action in them.

THE HEAVENLY, ANAGOGICAL FOCUS OF OUR LADY OF PARIS

As we have seen, one of Notre Dame’s grandest achievements is her marriage of many varying aspects of

¹⁰⁴ Murray, *Notre-Dame of Amiens*, 65.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰⁶ Eccles. 3:1-8.

life. Poirier locates an additional dimension of Notre Dame's unifying nature in her combination of "the secular and the sacred" through assimilating theology and the mathematical prowess of the logician to create the majestic "symphonic quality of [Notre Dame's] space."¹⁰⁷ The architects and masons collaborated with ecclesiastical authorities such as Bishop de Sully, and together, they merged theology with the "science of numbers" taught in church-owned educational institutions to render Notre Dame "a triumph of both logic and mysticism": "Problems of statics and dynamics preoccupied them as much as those of elucidating the divine mysteries. In fact, both builders and clerics were inspired by both grace and truth."¹⁰⁸ For Poirier, "the union of solemnity and serenity in its ornamentation and austerity and majesty in its lines" is a key component of Notre Dame's powerful effect on visitors.¹⁰⁹ In this and other ways we have already discussed, Notre Dame illustrates the comprehensiveness of our faith: Christ calls us to an integrated truth, one that spans all the seeming divides in our lives and demands we surrender every aspect of them to Him.

This holistic quality, which, as we have seen, is also embedded in Notre Dame's emphasis on the past and the present through the first three readings of the *quadriga*, foreshadows the spiritual realities of our future union with God and thereby builds the necessary foundation for our future. It points us to the *quadriga's* fourth reading of Scripture: the anagogical, which leads to a

¹⁰⁷ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 42-43.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

“more perfect union with God.”¹¹⁰ Commenting upon the relationship between the liturgy and Gothic architecture, Murray explains various churchmen believed the liturgy and visual aids were necessary to help humans comprehend the heavenly.¹¹¹ Services in Notre Dame were illuminated by the vivid natural light flooding the beautiful rose windows, which illustrate the infancy of Christ and the Tree of Jesse, as well as the story of Paul’s conversion and the Last Judgment; conversely, the use of candlelight during evening services reminded visitors of the darkness during Jesus’s crucifixion.¹¹² Sound also overwhelmed attendees, as the cathedral’s very structure amplified the choir’s voices by bouncing them off various surfaces to blend individual voices together into a harmonious whole for those standing in the middle of the cathedral, and for visitors entering through the portals, to render the sound ambient so that it seemed the entire cathedral was singing.¹¹³ According to Murray, Gothic architecture was meant to mimic the heavenly host’s worship of God and recreate such worship on earth.¹¹⁴ The angel sculptures in the crossing or liturgical space contributed to this effect and the “upward-lifting (anagogical) force possessed by the ceremonies of the church.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Murray, *Notre Dame of Amiens*, 139-40.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 332-33.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 342-43.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 343-44.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 344.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

These anagogical features bring us ever closer to the perfect union with God we as Christians anticipate. In appealing to the senses of sight and sound, as de Fournival recognized when he linked “Sight” and “Hearing” to memory, which “renders the past as if it were the present,” Notre Dame lifts us heavenward, toward our everlasting home.¹¹⁶ Contemplating our future eternal destiny, however, should also remind us of the path that leads us there. As William Faulkner famously remarked, “The past isn’t dead. It’s not even past.”¹¹⁷ We cannot hope to reach the City of God without first acknowledging the claims of the past, and in turn the present, upon us, and the essential work of memory in fusing them into our lives. Memory requires recollection, which spurs us to act accordingly in the present to shape our character. In recognizing the vital role of memory plays in the formation of our identity, we begin rebuilding the cracked foundation of our modern lives.

THE ROOSTER’S RENEWAL

The post-modern society we inhabit bids us to abandon the past, to obliterate the memory of both our sins and the sins of those who came before us. As McClay observes, such a forced ignorance of our past is connected to our current culture’s refusal to forgive and its resultant obsession with erasing the parts of the past

¹¹⁶ de Fournival, *Master Richard’s Bestiary of Love and Response*, I, quoted in Murray, *Notre-Dame of Amiens*, 353.

¹¹⁷ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, <https://www.fadedpage.com/books/20190243/html.php>.

it wishes to condemn.¹¹⁸ But he rightly notes that in life, remembrance and forgiveness are necessary.¹¹⁹ The denial of forgiveness harbors a prideful claim, for in refusing to grant others the mercy we have been shown, we deny our own flaws and set ourselves up as gods. We then deny our need for God's grace, and because we have rejected Him, cannot find our true selves in Christ. To raze our identities in this fashion is to destroy the only firm foundation upon which to build our lives. On the individual and cultural level, we have deteriorated into T.S. Eliot's "hollow men" devoid of all convictions.¹²⁰ In destroying our holy traditions and rejecting the sound teaching of Scripture, we resemble Notre Dame on April 15, 2019: we burn from within.

Even in her great tragedy, however, Notre Dame continues to instruct us. The firefighters of Paris on that evening demonstrated how to succeed in stopping such a blaze. It must be stamped out from within, just as our old sinful selves must be put to death through individual rebirth in Christ. Notre Dame is not only a lovely cultural artifact; her splendor reflects the majesty of the cosmos's King, Who calls us beyond merely superficial aesthetics to a radical inner beauty and goodness that permeate every aspect of our lives. We must abandon glib expressions of faith that pay only lip service to Him and begin living out the radical message of the Gospel by offering every talent we have been given as a sacrifice back to Him and by rightly ordering our past, present,

¹¹⁸ McClay, "The Claims of Memory," 27.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (Harcourt: Orlando, 1991), 79.

and future with Him as our bedrock. Only through this never-ending praise, this “inner health made audible,” as C.S. Lewis characterizes it, and in losing our lives to find them, will the rot in our souls and our society be burned away to make room for the new men and women into whom Christ fashions us.¹²¹

After Notre Dame’s fire, Poirier interviewed Philip Villeneuve, the architect in charge of her latest restoration, and Olivier Latry, her organ player, and asked if they were believers. Villeneuve’s initial response was “Joker,” which in France, according to Poirier, is a deflective answer indicating the person believes in “some transcendence,” but the matter is too personal to discuss with a stranger.¹²² Villeneuve, however, then immediately spoke of Notre Dame’s beauty in terms of transcendence.¹²³ Latry responded to Poirier’s question by discussing the role artists play in serving as a link to another dimension: “Call it God, if you will. . . . Playing at the Grand Organ, I often wondered if I was indeed the one making this music. There has to be something else, something other.”¹²⁴ In these remarks, Villeneuve and Latry inadvertently acknowledged the two doors to memory that de Fournival identified: Sight and Hearing. It is time for us to unite the talents that engage those senses in the service of Christ our Lord, Who as the *Logos* of the cosmos unifies and rightly orders our lives; to repudiate the untethered identities of modernity and

¹²¹ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958; repr., Orlando: Harcourt, Harcourt: Orlando, 1986), 94.

¹²² Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 179-80.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

embrace the claims of memory; and with Christ as our bedrock, to unify and order our past, present, and future properly so that we may with His grace attain the heavenly promised land of our future.

Miraculously, when Notre Dame's spire collapsed during the fire, the copper rooster at her peak survived completely intact.¹²⁵ It is Villeneuve's dream to place this rooster, a symbol of renewal after Peter's three-fold denial of Christ, onto Notre Dame's new spire once restorations are complete.¹²⁶ By that time, may we also reject modernity's denial of Christ and find restoration in Him as we pass through the twin doors of Sight and Hearing to restore our memory of our faith's rich depths. The only hope we jokers have lies in exchanging the folly of this world for the wisdom gained in becoming fools for Christ.

¹²⁵ Poirier, *Notre Dame*, 183.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

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