A biblical reflection on Notre Dame de Paris in light of Easter’s promise

Like most French cathedrals, Notre Dame de Paris is named for Our Lady (French: Notre Dame), not simply to identify Mary as patroness over cities inhabited by Christians, but also to identify the mother-church of the diocese with the Mother of Christ and His disciples. Why? Because it was Our Lady who gave to the Son of God His ‘bodiliness’ (Lk 1:31; Gal 4:4); this bodiliness of Jesus continues in the ecclesial Body of Christ (Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 12:12). This is why the ‘Woman clothed with the sun’ in Revelation 12:1-6 is both Mary and the Church.

With the April 15 fire that caused untold damage, it seems timely to reflect on this ‘Bible in stone’ in the light of Easter’s promise, first proclaimed to Parisians by the martyr-bishop, St. Denys of Paris.

‘Church,’ from the Greek noun ekklesia, means ‘called out,’ because Christians are called out of the world and gathered to be the People of God: “I will be their God and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord” (2 Cor 6:16-17). The façade of Notre Dame de Paris faces west, the direction of the sunset, of darkness that symbolizes wickedness. In the ancient liturgy, catechumens made their triple renunciation of the devil, his works, and his empty promises while facing west, since Christians are to keep themselves “unpolluted from the world” (Jas 1:27; cf 1 Jn 2:15).
The soaring power of stone that marks Gothic architecture reminds us of St Paul's dictum to “not be conformed to the world,” but “transformed by the renewal” of our minds (Rom 12:2). This façade occidentale describes the Church’s confrontation of the world’s darkness by the tympanum of the Last Judgment over the royal portal. As in the first reading of the Easter Sunday Mass, St. Peter said the Risen Lord “commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that He is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (cf Acts 10:34-43). Hence, in this ancient liturgy, Christians would then turn facing east—with their backs to the west—in making the threefold profession of faith in the Trinity as they are reminded of Christ who appeared “in the East” (cf Mt 2:2).

Gothic architecture, defined by soaring arches, compels those entering to immediately gaze upward: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). Only one stone holds together block upon block reaching upward and together at the peak; take out this one capstone, and the whole structure collapses. Likewise, without Christ, the Church collapses: “with Christ Jesus Himself as the capstone. Through Him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord” (Eph 2:20 nabra; cf Zech 10:4; 1 Pt 2:6).

Entering from the west, the eastern focal point—with the windows in the apse—highlights both the Church’s Incarnational and Apocalyptic orientation: Incarnational, because the first advent of Christ was described as “the dawn from on high” (Lk 1:78); Apocalyptic, because Malachi foresaw of the second advent: “the Sun of Righteousness shall rise, with healing on its wings” (4:2; cf Mt 24:27). This east-west axis reminds the pilgrim Church that, between Christ’s two advents, we must enter wholeheartedly into worship: “From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised!” (Ps 113:3).

Our Lady clothed Jesus in our humanity so that He would be offered bodily on the Cross (Heb 10:5-7), about which He said, “and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself” (Jn 12:32-33). To highlight the Cross as the Church’s centre of gravity, the footprint of Notre Dame, as all Gothic churches, is in the shape of a cross, with its ‘arms’ being the north and south transepts.

At the crossing on the roof, the flèche (French: arrow) points upward to the Cross: “But far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal 6:14). Descending from the base of the flèche are statues of the Twelve, signifying the Church’s preaching of the Paschal Mystery: “And with great power the Apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). Their presence on the roof reminds us of Jesus’ words: “what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops” (Mt 10:27). The Church remains irreversibly apostolic.
Uppermost on the flèche, while pointing towards heaven, is the rooster-motif, recalling Peter’s repentence over his betrayal of Jesus: “And he went out and wept bitterly” (Lk 22:32). Many grieved at the felled flèche, but “worldly grief produces death.” Paul reminds us that “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation” (2 Cor 7:10). Perhaps, even before the fire, we felled our interior flèche pointing to heaven by pretending it was attainable without repentance?

The Second Vatican Council instructs us to “scrutinize the signs of the times ... interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (Gaudium et spes, 4), and God’s permissive will is never without meaning. After the fire, three significant monuments within were found intact: The golden Cross, the altar, and the pulpit. From the pulpit, the Church preaches Christ, whose self-offering on the Cross for our salvation is given to us in the Eucharist. Christ came to offer Himself as the “ransom for many” on the Cross (Mt 20:28), the same Christ who is “known in the Breaking of the Bread” (Lk 22:35; cf 22:30-31), this very Christ of whom Paul charged St Timothy: “preach the Word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).

Christ is present to us in the Church as the Paschal Christ (1 Cor 5:7), the Eucharistic Christ (Jn 6:48-58; 1 Cor 10:16), and the Verbal Christ (Col 3:16), this whole Christ who nourishes His ecclesial Body to “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to [maturity], to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13; cf Col 1:28). Perhaps the uncompleted tower steeples remind us that we, the ecclesial Body of Christ, are a building in progress until Christ returns?

May our sorrowing over the fire at Notre Dame de Paris be transformed into that “travail until Christ be formed in you!” of which Paul spoke (Gal 4:19).

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!” (Rev 2:7, 29, 3:22).

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