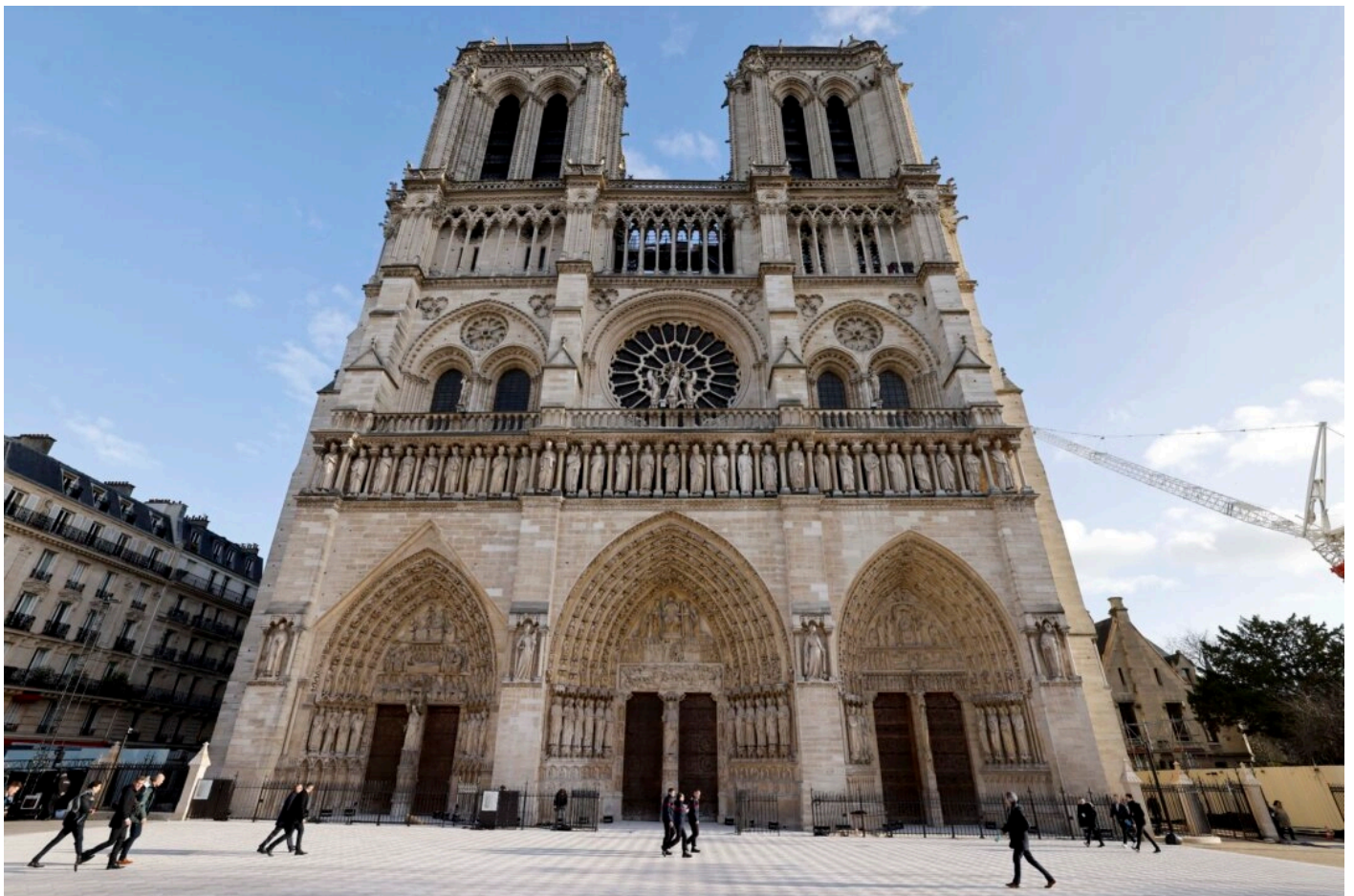


# The Symbolism of Fire and Rebuilding

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People walk in front of the Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral, ahead of its official reopening ceremony after more than five years of reconstruction work following the April 2019 fire, in Paris on Dec. 7, 2024. Ludovic Marin/Pool/AFP via Getty Images



By Jeffrey A. Tucker

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*Commentary*

The joy present at the reopening of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, more glorious than ever before, is a point of unity and celebration throughout the world. It was more than five years ago that so much of it was ruined in a fire, the origins of which we still do not know. It seemed like a foreshadowing of something terrible. It was. Indeed, a year later, the whole world seemed to be on fire.

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In the months following the fire, every horrible ideology took a crack at how it would be rebuilt in a modern way, with a glass spire or a swimming pool or some other modern outrage. That did not happen



and for one reason: The people of France stood up and demanded a full and perfect restoration. The money poured in from all over the



world—\$1 billion in total—and now we observe it in its fullest glory.



General view outside Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral during the first Mass in the restored church in Paris on Dec. 8, 2024. Pascal Le Segretain/Getty Images for Notre-Dame de Paris

I'm stunned and relieved, and billions of people the world over are, too. If the fire was a foreshadowing of the global destruction that would unfold less than a year later with lockdowns, what does this reopening symbolize? It could mean that humanity as a whole has turned the corner on destructionism as an ideology and toward the

real task at hand, which is building beautiful lives, art, cities, and societies.

This is why the event is so inspiring. It reveals what is possible with enough commitment and work, fueled by the right ideals.

I took a moment to read [my reflections](#) after the burning from April 2019, and I'm struck by the sense of terror that I can discern herein. I'm pleased to share it with you.



Smoke billows as flames burn through the roof of the Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral in Paris on April 15, 2019. Fabien Barrau/AFP via Getty Images

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The day that Notre-Dame burned elicited a deep pain across the world, regardless of religion and nationality. We watched helplessly on YouTube as the fire raged for 12 hours, our hopes placed on the 400 firefighters who fought the fire that destroyed two-thirds of the cathedral that took 100 years (and so many generations) to build in the 12th and 13th centuries.

There is no way to assess the full losses, even once the insurance adjusters are finished with their job, because there is no way to replace much of what is gone. The promise to rebuild is encouraging, but we all know the terrible truth: Much of the loss is permanent. And it hurts us all deeply, unsettling us emotionally and intellectually with the realization that even that which we believe to be fixtures of culture and life are vulnerable to the exigencies of human error and natural forces.



Inside view of the restored Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on Nov. 29, 2024. Christophe Petit Tesson/Pool via AP

It seemed impossible that it was happening at all. Notre-Dame withstood upheavals over many centuries, with regimes coming and going, one period of history flowing into the next, its walls and awesome interior proving themselves mercifully impervious to the waves of ideological and cultural change.

It was supposed to stand forever, as an untouchable, indestructible reminder of where we've been and, even after all these centuries, still an inspiring look at what is possible. It was and is a monument to the highest achievement of the human mind in the final centuries of the

medieval period, both a celebration of God and of the promise of human life on earth, an architectural light that pointed the way out of an era of poverty and sickness into new times of safety, prosperity, and progress. Indeed, its seeming permanence appeared to grant to the world permission to experiment; we knew she would always be there as a reminder of truth and a refuge against error.

The interior and exterior were added to over the centuries (the spire that fell yesterday was a 19th-century addition), with layer upon layer of artistic, architectural, and aesthetic advance, becoming over time a physical embodiment and repository of the piety, discipline, and expertise that built civilization itself, one stone at a time.

It moves us especially because it is incredibly obvious that such a structure could never be built in a single generation. The vision and the technique to make Notre-Dame possible—for such a monumental achievement even to exist at all—must extend over time and defy mortality itself. Notre-Dame achieved what no single lifetime could achieve.



People arrive to attend a second Mass, open to the public, at Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral on the day of its reopening in Paris on Dec. 8, 2024. Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images

There is a line that Catholics hear from the mouth of the priest on Ash Wednesday: From ashes you came and to ashes you shall return. This applies to individual lives. It was never supposed to apply to this great cathedral.

Just as this wonderful church represented much more than its material properties, so too does this fire suggest the need for a renewed consciousness of the fragility of all the treasures that surround us in our daily lives.

We are encircled by gifts of the ages, smaller cathedrals, from which we are daily beneficiaries. In each of our local communities, we find buildings and objects that instantiate the sacrifices and labors of people we knew and did not know. They worked to build the quality of life we now enjoy, digging a little further out of the state of nature into the safety, prosperity, and progress we all enjoy. We are all spoiled by it. We take it for granted. We all, no exceptions, carry with us a sense of entitlement because of what came before.



An interior view of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris in the aftermath of a fire that devastated the cathedral, on April 16, 2019. -/AFP via Getty Images

The cathedrals around us are both visible and invisible. The visible forms we see in our skylines and cityscapes, from the tallest buildings in mighty urban centers to the manors and plowed lands in the countryside. The invisible forms consist of the values we hold, the knowledge passed from generation to generation, the mores and habits we inherit from—and which are embedded within—our cultures, languages, religious stories, philosophical outlooks, bodies of knowledge from specific disciplines, literature, art, commercial practices, and the creative imagination that grants us a sense that our lives are not pointless but rather driven by a sense of direction and achievement. All of this constitutes the invisible cathedral that we did not create but rather inhabit by virtue of having been born at this place and time.

With the burning of Notre-Dame, the question rings out: What might have been done better to have prevented this catastrophe? The time to ask the same of all the cathedrals around us is now, before we inadvertently set fires that cause irreparable damage. The damage can come in many forms. There is the inactive damage caused by neglect and ignorance, as well as the active form wrought by the arrogance of political ideology that longs to replace what came before with some untested experiment of what could be in the future.

Where is the fire that threatens this invisible cathedral? These days, it comes mainly from politics, and the arrogant ideologies that daily threaten to displace what we know to be true with the products of minds who aspire to rule others through the application of power. These people are daily making outrageous demands that we, for example, shatter established trading relationships, surrender private property, abandon industrial techniques it took centuries to develop, turn our backs on what our parents and theirs knew to be true, ignore the discoveries of science, disregard once-settled postulates concerning the rule of law and human dignity, and assault all that has come before as hopelessly biased and corrupt.



Clergymen, officials, and guests attend the first Mass for the public during Notre-Dame Cathedral's reopening ceremony in Paris on Dec. 8, 2024. Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images

They seek to shame us into abandoning common sense and the wisdom of experience in favor of their superior plan. They promise to tear down and rebuild according to a new theory of how we should live. They can destroy with a word, an edict, an order. If we follow them, and if we allow them to prevail, we will observe many more experiences of pained and irrecoverable loss.

It is only a minor solace that the French president went on television to promise to rebuild.

Perhaps so. In time. At astonishing expense. With results that will only be a recreation and not the real thing, at best. The destruction is too overwhelming, too shocking, too inexcusable for us to believe a political leader can somehow put it back together again. He cannot and will not.

What the Notre-Dame fire of 2019 should teach us is that civilization is more fragile than we want to believe. We dare not take it for granted.



The fires come when and from a place we least expect, and the damage is often unreclaimable.



People attend a Mass, open to the public, at Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral on the day of its reopening in Paris on Dec. 8, 2024. Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images

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Maybe you see why I wanted it reprinted: It was correct about the damage and what it foreshadowed, but I was incorrect to doubt the possibility of renewal. The truth is that the cathedral looks more wonderful today than it has at any point in the past. It feels like a miracle. But saying that also diminishes the astounding sacrifice, craftsmanship, labor, and courageous determination that consumed five years of pain and hard work to give back to humanity what was taken.

We stand in awe. Let us also be inspired. No matter how damaging the fires, no matter how demoralizing the turn of events, there is always a path toward rebuilding. With the restoration of this brilliant cathedral as an example, we all need to find that path in our own lives.

*Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.*

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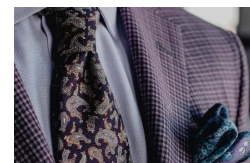
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