Opinion
Spirituality



Flames and smoke billow from the Notre Dame Cathedral after a fire broke out in Paris April 15. Officials said the cause was not clear, but that the fire could be linked to renovation work. (CNS/Reuters/Benoit Tessier)



by Michael Sean Winters

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This year, Tenebrae came early. At the medieval service, celebrated on the Wednesday of Holy Week and serving as a vigil to the Triduum, Jeremiah's lamentations are sung. The lamentations are cries from the heart, bemoaning the evil that has come upon God's people Israel with the destruction of the temple and their exile in Babylon.

As the service progresses, and the sorrowful tones are accumulated, the candles on the hearse are extinguished one by one until the church is left in darkness, the congregation throws down its hymnals to mimic the sound of a thunder clap and all depart in silence.

Yesterday, watching flames engulf Notre Dame de Paris Cathedral, it felt like Tenebrae. Lamentations over the destruction of this magnificent temple of devotion to the Mother of God were as heartfelt as they were appropriate. As the flames leapt higher and higher, it seemed like a darkness was descending upon the spirit of all who have worshiped within the walls of the cathedral at the heart of Paris. After the ancient roof had come crashing down to the floor, like a clap of evil thunder, silence and sorrow seemed the only thing anyone could manage.

There are those who will criticize such emotion being shown for a pile — even a noble pile — of stone when human beings the world over are suffering. But that misunderstands what a cathedral is, especially an old and venerable cathedral like Notre Dame. It is not mere stone, but the house in which the living stones of the people of God have prayed through the centuries, beseeching their Lord and His Mother for succor and salvation. The statue of the Blessed Mother that stood to the right of the altar — people seeking relief from the Great Plague prayed before that statue. People beset by famine and other hardships have lit candles in this cavernous space. The guns of several wars could be heard by the priests who stood at the altar, leading the people of Paris in prayer. In 2015, a congregation of national and city leaders gathered to pray for the victims of the terrorist attacks within Paris as Olivier Latry did the unthinkable, playing an improvisation on the tune of "La

Marseillaise" at the offertory on the great Cavaille-Coll organ. That organ could be no more, one of many cultural treasures that did not survive the flames and smoke.*

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The arches of the cathedral in Amiens are far higher than those of the cathedral in Paris. The stained glass windows of the cathedral in Chartres are more magnificent. The cathedral in Reims rivals that of the gothic masterpiece along the Seine in terms of history. But, there is something about Notre Dame de Paris, something that reverberates with the spirit of Catholic France. Those other cathedrals are also dedicated to the Mother of God but when one speaks of "Notre Dame" without designating the city, it is understood you are speaking about the cathedral in Paris. It is the very heart of the city that is the heart of France. The devotion of France, the eldest daughter of the church, to the Blessed Mother is nowhere more tangible, nowhere more laden in history. How many pilgrims have lit a candle and sought refuge in the mantle of Mary here? That thought, too, is why we owe no one an apology for our tears.

Notre Dame's great flying buttresses, when seen from the ground, look like God's own oars rowing the great ecclesial ship through the rough waters of history. When you see them up close, they are massive marvels of masonry that serve a practical purpose, supporting the walls by transferring the weight of the roof. This permitted the architects to cut large holes in the walls where the stained glass windows were placed. The dark, wonderfully gloomy naves of the great Romanesque cathedral, like that in Santiago de Compostela or Saint-Sernin in Toulouse, gave way to the light and airy naves of the gothic era. The combination of solidity and beauty was powerful, such that even in our country, we have tended to build more of our great churches in the gothic revival style than any other. Thankfully, the buttresses of Notre Dame are still standing and with them, the walls.

No other cathedral has, to my knowledge, a finer location. The slow moving waters of the Seine stream by along the south side of Notre Dame. The park, now dedicated to the memory of St. Pope John XXIII, who presided at Mass at Notre Dame many times while serving as apostolic nuncio to France after World War II, is an enclave of quiet and greenery in the busy and noisy city. The square before the West Front, with its two towers immortalized by Victor Hugo and the fictional bell ringer Quasimodo, permits one to see the entire façade, its rows of statues, its three

enormous doors, the great bell ringing the hour. Who can forget the leaders of Paris' Jewish community and some of his relatives gathering in that square to recite the Kaddish over the body of Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger before his Christian funeral inside? In light of the long history of anti-Semitism in France, and throughout Europe, it was a moment of singular profundity.



People react near the Notre Dame Cathedral after it suffered heavy damage from a fire in Paris April 15. (CNS/Reuters/Benoit Tessier)

Paris was not leveled in World War II and so Notre Dame escaped destruction. When you go to the great churches of Germany, in the vestibule there is usually a photograph of what the building looked like in 1945. The Frauenkirche in Munich, the Cathedral of the Assumption in Hildesheim, the Berliner Dom, all were ruined by Allied bombing and have been rebuilt. Notre Dame will be rebuilt as well. It must.

"Mankind was never so happily inspired as when it made a cathedral," wrote the Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson. And so, watching a cathedral burn is one of mankind's sadder moments. The extinguished candles of Tenebrae, however, are

relit at the Great Easter Vigil. The lamentations give way to alleluias, darkness to light, sadness to Easter joy. Through the centuries, the Christian faith has brought solace, especially to the poor and the bereft. A cathedral was the one architectural monument to which the poor had the same access as the powerful. The shock and sadness of watching Notre Dame burn will pass because the faith that built it once has not been extinguished, and the faithful will build it anew.

* *This column has been updated. The cathedral's cultural director and other French officials reported later April 16 that the organ and certain other artifacts and artworks had not been destroyed.*

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest: Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*

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