Opinion

News



People stand in front of a statue of Our Lady of Notre Dame during a vigil near Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris April 16, a day after a fire destroyed much of the church's wooden structure. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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While the roof of Notre Dame de Paris Cathedral was still aflame last week, the interpretations of what this fire meant began to flood the internet and Twitter. We Americans are nothing if not utilitarian and so we seemed unable simply to sit with our sadness as we watched the fire engulf the much beloved cathedral. No, we needed to find an explanation. Like pagans discerning entrails, the search for a deeper meaning took shape and the shapes were, of course, predictable.

Ben Shapiro, the conservative talk radio host, tweeted that Notre Dame "is a central monument to Western Civilization, which was built on the Judeo-Christian heritage." People quickly noted that Notre Dame is a monument to the Mother of God, but Twitter does not value precision. The more problematic issue was his use of the term "Judeo-Christian tradition." Those who invoke the "Judeo-Christian tradition" tend to know precious little about either Jewish or Christian traditions, and I am betting Shapiro did not read the essay by Mark Silk on the origins of the phrase published here at NCR the same day of the fire! It was quickly pointed out to Shapiro that not long after the cathedral was completed, the Jews were expelled from France. Most of them fled to Muslim jurisdictions where they were welcomed.

Shaprio's comments were superficial, ignorant of history and devoid complexity in order to shoehorn the fire into a pre-existing narrative. And, in the event, they were wrong, but they were not mean-spirited. That did not prevent the outrage police from rushing to the scene. At the Washington Post, Talia Levin took Shapiro to task for stoking anti-Muslim hatred, which he emphatically did not do. Others did assuredly. The Post owes Shapiro an apology, and maybe they could throw in a lesson in medieval history.

Conservative Catholic blowhard Bill Donohue of the Catholic League was so irresponsible in his speculations about the source of the fire that his Fox News host, Neil Cavuto, ended the interview abruptly and hung up on Donohue. Kudos to Cavuto. Please God, bless me with friends who will keep me from embarrassing

myself on national television when I get older.

The most hysterical of all was Rod Dreher at the American Conservative:

> *What happened in Paris today has been happening across our civilization.*
>
> *It happens whenever we fail to live out our baptism, and fail to baptize our children. It happens by omission, by indifference, and it happens by commission, from spite. It happens in classrooms, in newsrooms, in shopping malls, in poisoned seminaries and defiled sacristies, and everywhere the truths that Notre Dame de Paris embodied are ridiculed, flayed, and destroyed in the hearts and minds of modern men. The fire that destroyed Paris's iconic cathedral made manifest what we in the West have been doing to ourselves for over 200 years.*
>
> *This catastrophe in Paris today is a sign to all of us Christians, and a sign to all people in the West, especially those who despise the civilization that built this great temple to its God on an island in the Seine where religious rites have been celebrated since the days of pagan Rome. It is a sign of what we are losing, and what we will not recover, if we don't change course now.*

I am dying to know what Dreher thinks the fire of 1194 that burned Chartres cathedral signified. Was there a surfeit of religious ridicule in that city in the middle of the "Age of Faith"? What about the fire in 1823 that destroyed St. Paul's Outside the Walls? Rome and all of Europe was in the midst of the post-Napoleonic restoration, a time that I would have thought Dreher would find most amenable. Or, what about the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford, Connecticut, which burned down in 1956? Wasn't that the golden age of American Catholicism in the eyes of conservatives like Dreher? It was before the pill and the sexual revolution, before Woodstock, before the New Left. Does Dreher imagine it was a sign that even in the 1950s, the tide of infidelity was coming in?

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Not all the insanity was on the right. Bob Kuttner is one of my favorite political commentators, but he was stretching just a bit when he wrote at The American

Prospect that "God must be very angry at Her children" and that the fire was "a metaphor for the larger devastation of all God's creation by an ungrateful and all-consuming humanity. It should be taken as warning. Humankind keeps neglecting all of the other warning shots, from glaciers melting, to exotic diseases spreading, to biblical floods, to the sharks invading my cherished Cape Cod beaches."

It is true that the French state which owns the property would not spend taxpayer money on its refurbishment and that much-needed repairs were delayed or never even undertaken. It is also true that there is no more biblical motif than the idea that humankind grows faithless and is only brought back to fidelity by calamity. All of us in this self-sufficient age can forget to be grateful for all the blessings that make our achievements possible and, in this, we have merely perfected a sin found in ancient Israel and throughout church history. But, Notre Dame was not felled by climate change and to reach from the fire to the sharks off Cape Cod in one graph is a reach.

Even my friend, Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese, got into the act, writing:

> *In recent decades, Notre Dame was more a tourist destination than a place of pilgrimage or a seat of Catholic potency. More people could tell you the story of its fictitious bell-ringing hunchback than of any one of its bishops. Inside, more selfies took place than prayers, and there were more art connoisseurs among its enthusiasts than worshipers.*

This spiritual emptiness didn't come overnight. The church in Europe has been the target of secularists and anticlericals for centuries — since long before the secularizing revolution that happened on its doorstep.

Surely Reese noticed the many post-Christian Parisians who took to the streets and sang the Ave Maria and Salve Regina from memory. Yes, our culture is more secular than the culture of the Middle Ages when Notre Dame was built, although I am sure at least some of the stone masons had a cynical and unbelieving bent, but needed a job. And, while I share many of Reese's views, he is off kilter when he states that "there is no institutional strength supporting [Pope Francis'] message. The church is a shell of what it once was. Yes, let us weep for Notre Dame, but we have lost more than a building." I am sure many French Catholics felt exactly the same way towards the end of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic years, that is, just before France witnessed the greatest flowering of spirituality in centuries. Institutional vigor emerges from spiritual renewal, not the other way round, and spiritual renewal is the

work of the Spirit.

All this self-indulgent commentary provoked a brilliant riposte on Twitter from Kevin Clarke, senior editor at America Magazine:

> *I'm concerned that what's left of Notre Dame will soon collapse with all the interpretative weight being loaded onto its poor smoldering beams. Sometimes a fire is just a fire ...*

Amen.

[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.*