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(Unsplash/Josh Applegate)



by Barbara Thorp

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Five years ago, prior to the fire that engulfed Notre Dame de Paris, I was traveling in France. On a bright Sunday morning I entered the cathedral to attend Mass. The renowned beauty of Notre Dame drew me in to her sacred jewel-lit arms. Having arrived early, I quietly circled the perimeter with each niche and corner, with each lit candle, resonant with the prayers and hidden joys and sorrows of countless women and men whose steps had preceded me. I was alone, yet accompanied by these fellow pilgrims.

As Mass was about to start I found a seat. My high school French served me well and the familiar ritual and prayers carried me forward. As I stepped into line to receive the Holy Eucharist, I was enveloped by profound awe. In communion with all those who had gone before me in this great act of faith over the centuries, I was also accompanied by those who walked with me on this ordinary Sunday morning to receive the most extraordinary gift of Jesus made small in a wafer of bread to be consumed by his beloved sisters and brothers.

I returned to my seat filled with a rush of exploding joy. Again Jesus, despite my unworthiness, was within me and was within those who sat inches away to my right and to my left, behind me and in front of me. I lifted my head from prayer to see the final few people approaching the priest in the Communion line.



People stand in line outside Notre Dame Cathedral Aug. 22, 2014, in Paris. (CNS/Reuters/Charles Platiau)

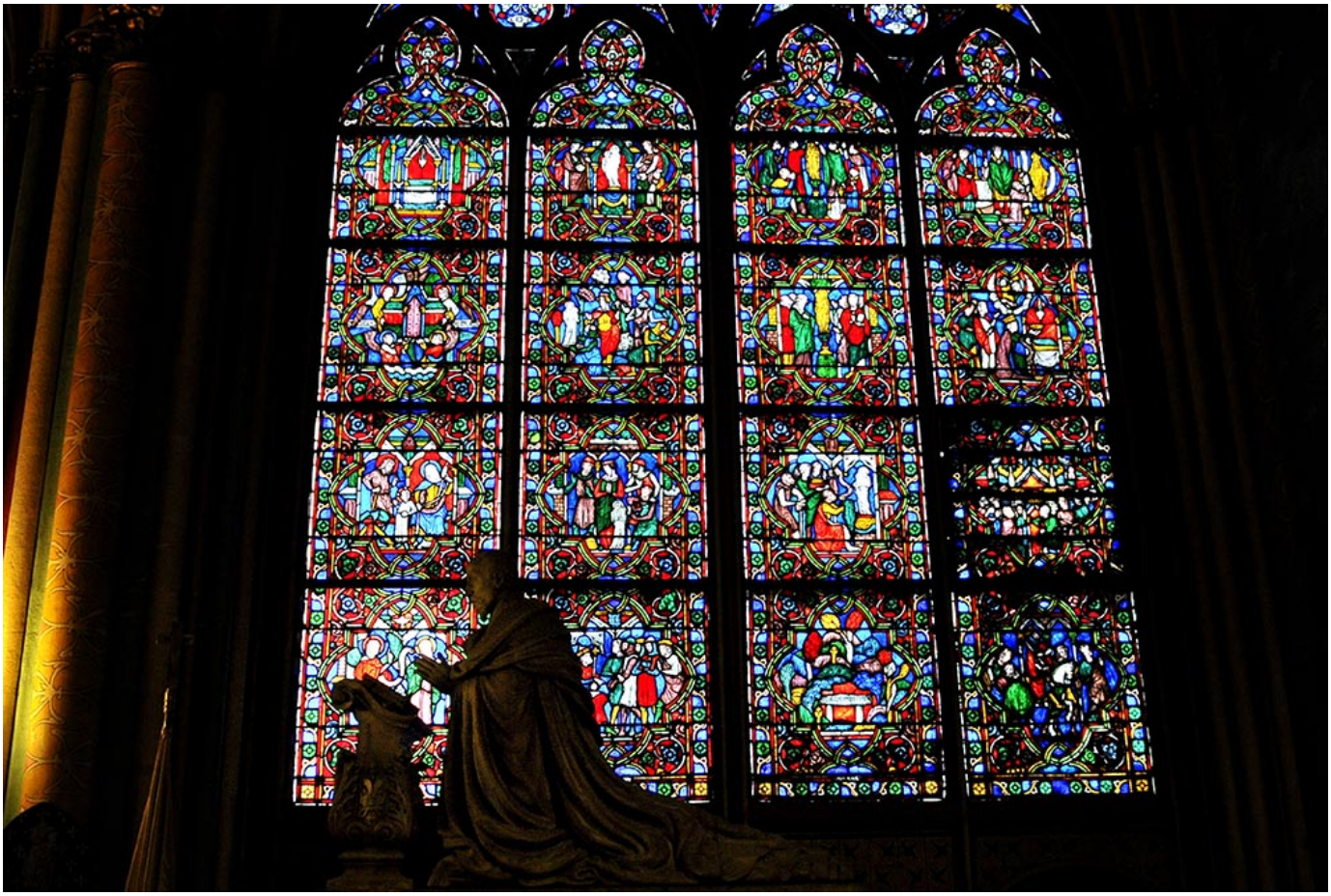
The last person in line, a young woman, moved forward slowly and extended her hands. The priest exchanged some words with her, covered the ciborium with the palm of his hand and slightly shook his head, turning his back to return to the altar. The shock of it was as if he had slapped her. The woman, with head down and tears streaming, quickly walked past me.

I knew immediately that I needed to seek her out. As the final prayers and hymn were sung, I worried that she may have left or that in the large crowd she would be invisible. As I turned to find her, she was standing alone four rows behind me weeping and desolate. Approaching her I prayed for the words and even the language. I introduced myself and asked her permission to speak with her. She nodded acknowledging that she had limited English.

I told her how sorry I was to witness what happened as she approached to receive Communion. She quickly began to tell me that something terrible had happened to

her as a child that left her with a deep sense of shame and unworthiness.

Whispered fragments of her story tumbled out in broken pieces. She had been sexually abused. As I listened, utterly brokenhearted for her, I realized that another woman had joined us and had also witnessed what had happened. She identified herself as a parishioner of Notre Dame and expressed beautiful and kind words of comfort and welcome. Her presence was a gift.



Statues are silhouetted in front of stained-glass windows inside the Notre Dame Cathedral Feb. 2, 2013, in Paris. A major blaze engulfed the iconic cathedral April 15, 2019, sending pillars of flame and billowing smoke over the center of the French capital. (CNS/Gerard Roussel, Panoramic via Reuters)

As they talked I recalled that I had rosary beads blessed by Pope Francis in the recesses of my purse in a small satin bag. I asked if I might give them to her. She held out her hands to receive them. Gently removing the beads from the little bag she had a puzzled expression on her face. She told me she was not familiar with rosary beads and did not understand their meaning.

Standing in Notre Dame Cathedral, where for millennia women and men have sought the solace of Our Lady, this was as sweet a moment as the heart can hold. With our hands clasped around the rosary, I explained that the rosary was a simple means to pray with Mary. Though delicate and small, the beads lead us on a sure path to the heart of Jesus.

Already in Mary's embrace, the woman weeping before me was not unworthy of the love of Jesus; she was not unworthy of his tender mercy. We stood quietly for a moment with the other woman from Notre Dame. Grace streaming through the shimmering light of the rose window, it was as if the whole world stood still with us. She asked if she might embrace each of us.

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The prayer we offer before receiving Jesus in the Eucharist welled up in my heart: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. Only say the word and I shall be healed."

The streets of our cities are riven with gun violence. Systemic and historic racism demands a reckoning. Broken immigration policy is long overdue for reform. LGBTQ brothers and sisters and their families struggle to be seen, to be respected and to be welcomed. Hundreds of thousands of families are grieving the lives of loved ones lost to COVID-19. Ferocious fires and floods are erupting with unexpected fury. And the profound wounds of clergy sexual abuse and betrayed trust continue to cry out for healing and justice.

It is both dispiriting and perplexing, with all the fears and distress bearing down on the families and the people of the world, for the bishops to be entangled with the political divisions that continue to roil the country. With people tentatively returning to church after months of separation, a rancorous disagreement among the bishops over something called "eucharistic coherence" is jarringly disconcerting.

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Long months of pandemic anxiety and isolation point to a deeper recognition of our frailty, of our need for God and our common humanity. Reading the signs of the times, the pastoral opportunities before the bishops are extraordinary. Each one of us is the woman of encounter at Notre Dame de Paris, with trembling hands extended, longing to touch the hem of his garment.

As the burnt embers are cleared away and the great Notre Dame Cathedral is restored and rebuilt, let us find in that challenging but determined work the hope and the strength to open wide the doors of the church as a place for all of humanity to find refuge, to find healing, to find mercy in the one Body of Christ.



Scaffolding surrounds the damaged Notre Dame Cathedral April 15 in Paris. (CNS/Reuters/Benoit Tessier)