News



People look at cranes around the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris Oct. 23, 2024, which was ravaged by a fire in 2019, as restoration work continued before its reopening. The iconic cathedral is scheduled to reopen Dec. 8, to be followed by six months of celebrations, Masses, pilgrimages, prayers and exhibitions. (OSV News/Stephanie Lecocq, Reuters)

Caroline de Sury

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Paris — October 28, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The countdown has begun for the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral throughout the weekend of Dec. 7-8. As the last pieces of scaffolding are being removed on the outside, Culture Minister Rachida Dati has proposed introducing an entrance fee to visit Notre Dame, which has caused a stir.

The iconic cathedral is set to open its doors again five years after it was ravaged by fire in April 2019.

Dati's proposal is to charge tourists 5 euros (US $4.16), which could generate 75 million euros (US $62.41 million) annually to help restore France's crumbling religious buildings. Dati believes Notre Dame could serve as a model for the country's preservation efforts.

"Across Europe, visitors pay to access the most remarkable religious sites. With 5 euros per visitor at Notre Dame, we could save churches all over France. It would be a beautiful symbol," Dati said in an interview with Le Figaro newspaper Oct. 23.

The Archdiocese of Paris immediately answered the minister, saying that "Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris wishes to recall the unchanged position of the Catholic Church in France regarding free entry to churches and cathedrals."

At Notre Dame, there has never been a distinction between pilgrims and visitors, the archdiocese said Oct. 24. "Services are celebrated during visits, and visits continue during services." Establishing differentiated access conditions would create "a physical separation" and would "deprive pilgrims and visitors of the communion between all that is the very essence of the place." On a practical level, the Archdiocese of Paris said, "it would be difficult to distinguish visitors, pilgrims and the faithful."

Meanwhile, final work on the cathedral is being finished at full speed.

"Time constraints are very strong," Olivier Josse, Notre Dame's general secretary since 2022, told OSV News. A breathtaking number of 2,800 new light points are

being installed. "But it is not easy to place the cables at the top of the pillars, taking into account the other trades that are still on site," Josse said.

The challenge, he said, was to get the different companies to work together. "But the craftsmen testified that they were happy to learn how to 'build a cathedral together,' as in the Middle Ages," Josse pointed out.

"On a site like this, you discover surprises as soon as you lift a stone," Josse added. In 2022, 1,035 fragments of the 13th-century sculptures were discovered at the transept crossing, including a "magnificent" head of Christ. This stone enclosure separating the choir from the nave had been destroyed in the 18th century. "Such discoveries could have extended the duration of the work," Josse said. "But the deadlines were met," he added.

"Today, we feel the impatience of the whole world," Josse said. "An estimated 15 million visitors a year will come to Notre Dame, or 40,000 visitors a day. This will be twice the number of visitors to the Château de Versailles (Versailles Palace of the French kings), for a surface area 12 times smaller!"

The flow of people will be managed by a specialized company, with a booking platform that will be available from early December. "It will still be possible to arrive at the last minute, but with the constraint of having to queue for several hours," Josse indicated. "Admission will remain free. The archbishop of Paris insisted on this point. Those wishing to make donations will be able to do so inside."

Advertisement

Another special online booking will enable attendance at Masses and services. "This will only be for the early days," Josse clarified. "We hope to dispense with it very quickly, so that anyone can enter the cathedral at any time, just like in any other church."

Josse is one of the privileged few who are already familiar with the cathedral's now luminous interior. "The stained-glass windows explode with light and project their colors onto the walls and floor," he testified. "The length of the nave becomes more apparent."

The liturgical platform, on which the altar will be placed, has been completed, while the floor slabs around it are being laid. The new bronze furniture will be installed in early November. "I saw the craftsman polishing the baptistery at the beginning of October," Josse recounted. "He told me he was putting his heart into it, thinking of the millions of people who will pass by when they enter the cathedral. I feel the same way about all these preparations," Josse added.

Personally, Josse is impressed by the large cross at the end of the nave. "It dates from 1996, but it now forms a coherent whole with the Pieta just below it, which dates from the 18th century," he explained. After being cleaned up, it "now has great strength."

In addition to the traditional audio guides, a new smartphone application will be made available to visitors on their cellphones, offering links to the texts of the day's services, meditations and prayers. "It will enable them to deepen the spiritual aspects of their visit," Josse said.

On Nov. 15, an iconic statue that was spared by the fire will be returned to the cathedral: the statue of the Virgin and Child, often referred to as the " Notre Dame statue" or " Virgin of the Pillar," It has since been housed in the church of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, near the Louvre.

Archbishop Laurent Ulrich of Paris will preside over a procession through the streets of Paris on that day, to accompany her solemn return.

On Dec. 7, the cathedral will open for the official vespers service, in the presence of French President Emmanuel Macron and numerous heads of state, invited by Macron.

"The archbishop will strike the central portal three times," Josse explained. "The singers will answer him from inside. The door will open. He will first enter alone. Then he will turn to greet the president and heads of state, with whom he will walk around the cathedral while the other guests enter the nave."

That will also be the moment of the awakening of the organ, Josse explained. "The archbishop will call out to the organ, and the four titular organists will respond with musical improvisations. It will be a moment of joy, of dialogue, of sharing."

The consecration of the new altar will take place at the reopening Mass on the morning of Dec. 8, also to be attended by Macron and the heads of state. Masses over the following days, until Dec. 15, will be celebrated for selected audiences: priests and religious of Paris, patrons, charity representatives, craftsmen and those who coordinated the restoration work, as well as local shopkeepers and residents.

Finally, from Dec. 16, the cathedral will be open to all. Josse recommended, however, that people plan a visit from January onward, due to the December rush. For the first few months, only individuals will be able to visit the cathedral. Groups will be able to enter from June onward.