Opinion

NCR Voices



Cranes are seen around the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris Nov. 7, 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/Reuters/Sarah Meyssonnier)



by Michael Sean Winters

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As Christians, every day, indeed every moment, is cause for giving thanks, but tomorrow is our *national* Thanksgiving Day.

First established by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, that is, in the midst of the Civil War, Lincoln wrote in his proclamation that we should "fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation, and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union."

After a brutal election that sometimes felt like a civil war, this Thanksgiving may be harder for some more than others. For us Catholics, however, there is one thing that may help us because it helped me on Wednesday, Nov. 6, the morning after the election.

That morning, going on about 2 hours sleep, I poured a coffee and went outside to smoke a cigarette. (I permit myself an occasional pack, and when I realized the election wasn't going the way I had hoped, I permitted myself a second pack. Mea culpa.) While smoking and downing the coffee, I scrolled through the feed on my phone and amidst all the election coverage, there was a story about the reopening of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris next month.

Forget about the swing voters in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and Nevada. Forget about Trump and Harris. Forget about all of it. Here was something to be happy about. Here was something to introduce some perspective.

We all remember that dreadful day, April 15, 2019, when we turned on the TV or a friend called and told us to turn on the TV, and watched helplessly as the great cathedral of Paris burned. At first it appeared to be confined to the roof of the crossing, where the nave and transepts intersect, but soon the entire roof was ablaze. As I wrote at the time, it felt like a giant Tenebrae service, all gloomy lamentation. The French people may no longer be distinguished for their Mass-

attendance rates, but thousands stood silently and wept as the cathedral burned.

Many have followed the reconstruction on YouTube or on "60 Minutes." The decision to rebuild the church using the techniques of the past was as inspired as the architecture being rebuilt.

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Proposals for an avant-garde roof were happily cast aside. That the work has been done in barely more than five years is remarkable in every way.

Churches acquire a sense of sanctity along with the soot from the candles and the smoke from the incense. The prayers of the faithful seem to soften the stones of a church over time. The reconstruction has cleared away all the accumulated grime, and we 21st-century Christians will be the first in hundreds of years to see Notre Dame as it was when first built.

The stone will be almost white.

The windows will be clean.

It will be stunning.

I do not think the sanctity has been washed away with the grime. Earlier this month, the statue of Our Lady of the Pillar was carried back into the cathedral with vast crowds singing hymns to the Blessed Mother. That statue has stood to the right of the main altar for centuries. People stood before it to offer a prayer and light a candle when they sought protection from famines in its early years and from the plague in the 17th century, for deliverance from invaders in the 19th and 20th centuries, and for more quotidian reasons throughout. I always stopped and said a Hail Mary whenever I went to Paris.



A Virgin of Paris statue replica is carried during a Marian candlelit procession through the streets of Paris Nov. 15, as the original, for security reasons, was transported on a truck back to Notre Dame Cathedral. The statue was kept at the Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois Church near the Louvre for five years since Notre Dame was ravaged by a fire in 2019. (OSV News/Reuters/Stephanie Lecocq)

The return of the statue reminds us that this is a story with its origins in the life of a Jewish woman who lived 2,000 years ago. She had no education (and no original sin either), she never wrote a treatise, never invented a widget. Yet, through the centuries, the Blessed Mother has inspired some of the greatest works of art and architecture, none more beloved than the cathedral in her honor along the Seine River in the French capital.

The Blessed Mother encourages us Christians to humble obedience. She also points to the radicalness of God's promises: The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty (Luke 1)! In good times and in bad, she is the one to whom millions of Christians turn, asking for her intercession, and she never

disappoints, always pointing us to her blessed Son. This monument of Western European culture begins, and never ceases to be, a monument to a Semitic mother.

One of the few regrets to register is that the late Pope Benedict XVI is not around to deliver the sermon at the cathedral's reopening. It would have been a tour de force.

Trump will still be sworn in on Jan. 20. The problems that beset the world — and the church! — will continue after the official reconsecration of Notre Dame on Dec. 8, the Solemnity of Immaculate Conception. But when Trump is gone, when all our problems have given way to different problems, Notre Dame Cathedral will stand, receiving pilgrims and inviting them to draw closer to God through the intercession of His Mother. That is a darned good reason to be grateful. Happy Thanksgiving!