News



French President Emmanuel Macron, center, is seen during a visit to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris Nov. 29, 2024. The cathedral is set to reopen in early December, with a planned weekend of ceremonies on Dec. 7 and 8, five years after the 2019 fire that ravaged the world heritage landmark and toppled its spire. Some 250 companies and hundreds of experts were mobilized for the five-year restoration costing hundreds of millions of euros. (OSV News/Christophe Petit Tesson, pool via Reuters)

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The world was left stunned when the first images of the rebuilt Notre Dame were published and spread with viral speed as President Emmanuel Macron walked through the bright, unrecognizably beautiful Parisian cathedral on Nov. 29, a week ahead of the Dec. 7-8 official reopening.

Accompanied by first lady Brigitte Macron, the president was welcomed on the forecourt of the cathedral by Archbishop Laurent Ulrich of Paris and the rector-archpriest of Notre Dame Cathedral, Father Olivier Ribadeau Dumas. As he entered the cathedral, he shared with them his first impression — describing the cathedral's interior as "sublime," evoking the inner light that now characterizes it.

All traces of construction work had disappeared for this visit, and the liturgical furnishings had been installed. The only thing missing were the chairs. The nave was empty and spacious. The light from its white stone and cleaned stained-glass windows now make the cathedral appear much larger than it once did when it was dark.

Macron was also accompanied by Philippe Jost, president of the public entity that was responsible for the reconstruction after the April 15, 2019, fire, Rebâtir Notre-Dame de Paris, Minister of Culture Rachida Dati and Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo.

The delegation was welcomed in the cathedral by Philippe Villeneuve, chief architect of the historical monuments and a great Notre Dame enthusiast.

Macron toured the cathedral and at every point he was greeted by workers of dozens of trades responsible for explaining the work that had been carried out.

Briac Thomas, head engineer for the stonecutters and stonemasons of the French company Lefèvre, was present in the cathedral for the president's visit. He worked on Notre Dame's stones full time for two and a half years.

"The pace of work was intense," Thomas explained. "Two teams worked every day, the first from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., then the second until 9 p.m."

"Our first mission was to secure the cathedral," Thomas explained. "We had to reinforce the base of the damaged vaults, to prevent stones from falling, and causing them to collapse completely."

"First we worked on the stones that were to receive the wooden framework," he said. "We had to prepare the stones on which the carpenters would lay it."

From providing stones matching the original materials to securing the famous gargoyles, Thomas said that finally, in May, once the spire construction was complete, "we returned to the transepts crossing, to plug the arches of the central vault, and thus close up the cathedral."

"This last job was repetitive and very delicate," he said. "Crane-mounting the 7,000 custom-cut stones was complex, with the spire framework already rebuilt, and the pace to keep was demanding."

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As TV cameras were able to go all the way up to the roof structure, where the woodwork was described in detail, for the presidential visit and for television viewers, Macron admired the new, particularly shiny reliquary of the crown of thorns, and spoke with Guillaume Bardet, the artist responsible for the liturgical furniture.

Another significant moment was spent at the foot of the Pieta, at the back of the cathedral. There, sculpture restorer Nathalie Pruha explained the decision to leave a few traces of the lead that had fallen from the roof timbers on the statue of the Virgin carrying her crucified son.

This charred piece of lead, intended to preserve the memory of the fire, was shown up close on television, in the hand of Christ lying on his mother's lap.

The second part of the visit consisted of a meeting with some 1,300 craftsmen who were invited to enter the nave, all lit up. "You have transformed coal into art," Macron told them. "The blaze at Notre Dame was a national wound, and you were its remedy through will, work and commitment."

The president spoke of the successful completion of the work in five years. "You have achieved what we thought impossible," he said. "This is an immense source of pride for the entire nation."

Macron's voice was veiled with emotion as he spoke of Gen. Jean-Louis Georgelin, former Army chief of staff, who died in a hiking mountain accident in August 2023, while presiding over Rebâtir Notre-Dame de Paris.

"I believe that he would have been proud and happy, that he would have greeted each of you by name, your first name," the president said.

After visiting the cathedral, Macron posted a picture on X, formerly known as Twitter, with over a thousand trade workers inside the cathedral, with a comment: "Achieving the impossible together. That's France."

Confirming the team effort, stonemason Thomas said, "Working together at Notre Dame helped make this an exceptional project, one that will go down in the history of French heritage restoration and conservation."

"We were aware of the world's expectations as we worked," he said, and today "just a few days before the reopening, we realize the magnitude of the work accomplished. The result is magnificent. Being able to return the cathedral to everyone in due course is a great source of pride, gratitude and joy, which outweighs the sadness of leaving this exceptional construction site."

Thomas emphasized that "we have all left a bit of ourselves in these stone walls that are almost a thousand years old."

"Working on a project like this pushed us all, whatever our religious convictions, to put our heart and soul into it. We really wanted to lead this rebirth as best we could, whether for urban architectural reasons or to give the faithful back their place of worship."