News
Analysis



Construction workers are seen on scaffolding at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris Dec. 3, which was ravaged by a fire in 2019, as restoration works continue before its planned reopening ceremonies Dec. 7 and 8. (OSV News/Reuters/Stephanie Lecocq)



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On Monday, April 15, 2019, Patrick Kollannur was enjoying a day off after a busy Palm Sunday when he received an emergency phone call. Flames had engulfed Notre Dame and he needed to provide instructions to the firemen amid their operation to rescue the beloved cathedral's most treasured possession: the crown of thorns.

A little over five years later — after a restoration that cost upwards of a billion dollars and captivated Catholics and nonbelievers alike — the former sacristan to one of the most storied churches in the world has just finished returning the vestments, chasubles and chalices to their home that was nearly destroyed but is now set to reopen this weekend.

"Notre Dame's fire and closing was a sign of a difficult period for the church," Kollannur told the National Catholic Reporter ahead of the cathedral's Dec. 8 inaugural Mass. "Now, for me, the reopening is a great hope."



Flames and smoke billow from Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, on April 15, 2019. (OSV News/Reuters/Benoit Tessier)

The inferno that nearly turned the 860-year-old cathedral into ashes is remembered as one of France's darkest days. But for the historically Catholic country, it only served as a harbinger of further things to come.

A year later, all of the country's churches were effectively shuttered due to COVID-19. Then, just as the global pandemic began to subside, a national investigation revealed that some 330,000 children were victims of clergy sex abuse in France over the past 70 years. Two months later, the archbishop of Paris resigned in scandal, and in 2022, one of the country's cardinals admitted that he had abused a teenage girl 35 years ago. Earlier this year, reports emerged that one of the country's national heroes, the late Abbé Pierre, had been accused of sexually assaulting or harassing numerous women.

"The Notre Dame fire has been interpreted as a symbol of everything that was wrong with society and the church in France," Bishop Matthieu Rougé of the Diocese

of Nanterre told NCR. "Its reopening might be a real sign of hope once again for church and society."



Bishop Matthieu Rougé of Nanterre, France, speaks during a news conference Oct. 4 at the Vatican. (CNS/Justin McLellan)

Rougé, who once served as secretary to the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger — one of the country's most well known churchmen of the 20th century — admitted that the church in France is in a "fragile" state.

But, he said, citing Pope Francis, this is an opportunity for "real pastoral and missionary creativity."

"The beauty of Notre Dame is such that it can be widely missionary," he said.

Such a sentiment certainly aligns with Kollannur's experience serving as a cathedral sacristan from 2011 to 2019.

Prior to the fire, an estimated 13 million people passed annually under the 28 monumental statues of the kings of Judah that tower above the cathedral's entrance. Inside, their attention is often on the famed rose windows or the medieval "Virgin of Paris" statue.



Patrick Kollannur is pictured inside Notre Dame Cathedral. He served as sacristan there from 2011-2019. (Courtesy of Patrick Kollannur)

Kollannur recalled that it could sometimes prove to be a nightmare trying to move around inside the cathedral due to the hordes of visitors that flooded into the sacred space in between its five daily liturgies.

"It was like you were crossing human waves," he said. "But these human waves really represent what Notre Dame is for people."

Once people are inside, he said, visitors realize they are in more than just a historical landmark.

"I would say it's a discovery for people, even though they know they are going to visit a church," he said. "Everyone is impressed by the beauty of the place. Humanely, you cannot enter the cathedral and leave without being touched."



Notre Dame Cathedral is pictured Dec. 1 in Paris, still under construction ahead of its Dec. 8 inauguration Mass. The cathedral has been closed since the April 15, 2019, fire that nearly destroyed the 860-year-old landmark. (NCR photo/Christopher White)

Perhaps that's why when it caught fire in 2019, thousands of Parisians took to the streets, many weeping, as they feared their beloved cathedral — even if they had not entered it in years or had no faith at all — might be lost for good.

"Notre Dame is, in a way, France's cathedral," said Rougé. "An essential part of its cultural and spiritual identity."

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And with declining Mass attendance throughout the country, rapid secularization and a tidal wave of bad headlines in recent years, the cathedral's reopening offers something different for the church: positive news that the whole country seems eager to celebrate.

Leading the charge is none other than French President Emmanuel Macron, whose own government is in disarray. Here in the capital city, commentators have blasted the embattled leader for appropriating the occasion for his political benefit. The cover of one of the country's most popular daily newspapers, Libération, captured that sentiment by featuring a cartoon of the president etched into stained glass with a halo — mocking him for turning this weekend's festivities into "one-man show."



Cassandre Verhelst of Hozana, a social prayer network (Courtesy of Cassandre Verhelst)

Cassandre Verhelst, who works for the Hozana prayer network, told NCR that it's important to remember that Notre Dame is not about Macron or even the thousands

of workers who have spent the last five years on the project.

"The point of the building is prayer and all of this work that has been done has been to enhance prayer," she said. "This has been a rebuilding of a place of faith."



Notre Dame Cathedral as seen on Dec. 1 in Paris, still under construction ahead of its Dec. 8 inauguration Mass (NCR photo/Christopher White)

Verhelst, who is 25, said that for many young French Catholics, the devastation of the fire has heightened the awareness of the cathedral in their minds.

"It became something we were attached to even though we didn't really know it as parishioners," she said.

Now, she said, many of her friends are taking time off of work to volunteer to help at the reopening, traveling to Paris for the occasion and clearing their calendars to find time to attend one of the first liturgies to be held in the restored space.

Verhelst acknowledged that after being battered by bad news over the last five years, the cathedral's reopening offers much needed relief.

In times of crisis, she said, "you want to go into something that is the heart of the French church. And I'm excited for it to be Notre Dame again."



Notre Dame Cathedral is pictured Dec. 1, 2024 in Paris, still under construction ahead of its Dec. 8 inauguration Mass. (NCR photo/Christopher White)

Reflecting back to five years ago, Kollannur said that when he received that unforgettable phone call informing him of the fire, he ran to the cathedral, where as sacristan, he remained until late into the night.



A sign is seen near Notre Dame Cathedral on Dec. 1. (NCR photo/Christopher White)

"When the fire happened, we all began to ask ourselves questions, asking what does it mean?" he recalled. "We were all afraid."

As news poured forth with various reports on abuse and other misdeeds by church leaders, Kollannur said it was very clear that Catholics in France were facing a trial and the church was "spiritually shaken."

"But a trial is for the good. It also allowed for the truth to come out and provide light," he said. "Now, maybe, we are just crossing this dark period and maybe slowly we are regaining something in a spiritual way."

"The reopening of Notre Dame is something really motivating for the whole church. It's a big signal that hope is still there," he continued. "And that we are going to gain spiritually something that is new."

Read this next: Q&A with Sr. Anne-Marie Aitken: After a long Advent, Notre Dame is reborn

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