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Archbishop, fully vested, pictured in profile holding crozier with massive blue stone; other bis

Archbishop Laurent Ulrich looks on as clergy members leave the nave after the inaugural Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, five-and-a-half years after a fire ravaged the Gothic masterpiece, as part of ceremonies to mark the cathedral's reopening after its restoration, in Paris, Dec. 8, 2024. (OSV News/Sarah Meyssonnier, Reuters)

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Chilling rain and the "City of Lights" completely locked down due to high profile guests did not stop the crowds from arriving as close to Notre Dame Cathedral as possible for its inaugural Mass celebrated Dec. 8. The beloved Paris icon also opened its doors to the public for the first time after the devastating fire in 2019, with the second Mass that Sunday for Parisians and tourists.

The first solemn Mass witnessed the consecration of the cathedral's new bronze altar by Archbishop Laurent Ulrich of Paris, with France's president and his wife watching in the first row.

After a spectacular evening reopening ceremony Dec. 7, the cathedral was illuminated by daylight this time, when the procession of 170 bishops entered Notre Dame Sunday morning, followed by more than 100 banner bearers representing all of Paris' parishes, and seven priest representatives of the various Eastern Catholic churches.

The bishops wore vestments adorned with golden crosses, created by star French designer Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, who was inspired by the large golden cross at the back of the cathedral over its Pieta. Castelbajac is known for his friendship with the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, longtime archbishop of Paris.

The celebrants took their places in the carved oak stalls of the cathedral's canons' choir, whose 18th-century upper panels depict scenes from the life of Virgin Mary. They were placed on either side of the group of children of the Maîtrise Notre Dame de Paris choir, dressed in blue albs.

The cathedral was packed when Ulrich sprinkled the crowd with holy water, before blessing the altar, ambo and the lectern from which the texts of the Scripture were read.

As President Emmanuel Macron with his wife, first lady of France Brigitte Macron, sat in the first row with Grand Duke Henri and Grand Duchess Maria Teresa of Luxembourg, the cathedral was filled with invited guests, including presidents of French fashion companies and top politicians.

Outside, on the quayside behind the Seine River, hundreds of worshippers gathered near the picturesque second-hand bookshops, closed at the time, to follow the Mass on a big screen, despite the rain.

"Whether you are in this building or in front of a screen, or outside in the rain, you are recipients of God's benevolence," the archbishop said at the beginning of Mass. He also paid tribute to those "who face the rigors of war," and prayed for France, "which scans its future with concern," referring to the political crisis the French are experiencing these days.

The French government was officially forced to resign Dec. 5, after parliament ousted the prime minister in a no-confidence vote over his fiscal plans.

Given the large presence of political representatives, the archbishop of Paris addressed everyone in his homily, believers and non-believers alike.

"Do not be content to simply enjoy the pleasure of being here on such a special day when the cathedral of Paris regains its splendor, such as no one has ever known it before," he told those gathered. "Whether you are believers or not, you are welcome to participate in the joy of the believers here who give glory to God for having found their mother church."

"Do not only remain dazzled by the beauty of the stones found, but let yourselves be led to the greatest joys, to the most beautiful gift that God gives you and gives us of his loving presence, of his closeness to the poorest, of his transforming power in the sacraments," Ulrich said.

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"This morning, the pain of April 15, 2019, is erased," he said of the fire, which caused the cathedral's spire to collapse, leaving Parisians in tears on the streets, praying for firefighters who went to battle the flames. The firefighters were applauded by a standing crowd for five minutes straight, as they walked through Notre Dame between dozens of heads of state, including President-elect Donald Trump and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, at the reopening ceremonies Dec. 7.

"Even if the shock caused by the fire may have been lasting, the pain was already overcome when prayer rose from the banks of the Seine and from hundreds of millions of hearts around the world," Ulrich emphasized.

What happened with Notre Dame — a speedy 5-year resurrection from the ashes — is not the only example of God's grace through the centuries, Ulrich stressed.

"Generation after generation — believers experience it — the Lord does not abandon his own," he said. Even if "distress and violence do not cease throughout the history of men," it is God and his disciples "who feed on his strength to show the way to the victory of life."

The consecration of the new main altar was a central part of the inaugural Mass. The bronze modern structure designed by French artist Guillame Bardet stunned anyone

entering the renewed cathedral as an example of contemporary architecture gently completing the centuries-old design.

First, the archbishop placed the relics of five holy men and women inside the altar, three women and two men, whose history is linked to the church in Paris, including those of St. Marie Eugénie Milleret, St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, St. Charles de Foucauld and Blessed Vladimir Ghika. Among the relics were also those of St. Catherine Labouré, who was especially connected to the day of the altar's consecration.

St. Catherine is known to the world for having received apparitions from the Virgin Mary in 1830 in her convent on rue du Bac, in Paris, after which the religious sister asked, following Mary's request, that the Miraculous Medal, also known as the Medal of the Immaculate Conception, be struck. The feast of the Immaculate Conception ordinarily is celebrated Dec. 8 in the Roman calendar; this year, however, as it fell on the Second Sunday of Advent, it's been moved to Dec. 9.

After a long prayer of dedication, Ulrich anointed the altar with the blessed oil of the holy chrism, spreading it at length over the entire surface with his bare hands. Then, incense candles were lit at five points on the altar, on the five crosses engraved in bronze. Finally, the priests covered the altar with the white cloth and lit the candles to continue with Mass, accompanied by the choir's singing.

In a message sent to the archbishop of Paris on Dec. 7, the night of the reopening ceremony, Pope Francis said that soon Notre Dame will "be visited and admired once again" by huge crowds of people from all walks of life.

"I know, Your Excellency, that your doors will be wide open to them, and that you will be committed to welcoming them generously and freely, as brothers and sisters," he wrote, making waves of comments in France that the pope himself spoke up against the cathedral's entrance fee proposed by France's Ministry of Culture.

"May they, lifting their eyes to these vaults that have regained their light, share his invincible hope," the pope said of 15 million people expected to visit Notre Dame every year from now on.

Notre Dame's inaugural Sunday wrapped in Paris with a second cathedral Mass, this time open to the public, and celebrated by Notre Dame's rector-archpriest, Father Olivier Ribadeau Dumas. To attend, it was necessary to have reserved a place in a

new digital application set up for Notre Dame de Paris.

On Dec. 3, the day the application went live, the 1,500 places on offer for this first Mass had all been reserved within 25 minutes, The Associated Press confirmed. Ribadeau Dumas had long been looking forward to returning to the cathedral to celebrate such a simple Mass, once the "pomp" of the reopening ceremonies had been replaced by "humble normality," he told OSV News several times.