

Gift to the Church



I physically felt it watching the live television coverage of the fire at Notre Dame cathedral.

My first visit to this storied church was long ago. I was a seminarian on holiday touring Europe. I have returned to Paris many times and have made the point to go to the cathedral.

I often went there for Mass, but just as often, I stopped in the cathedral for a moment of prayer. Each time I recalled the greatness that Catholicism has given France. Notre Dame cathedral has symbolized this gift for 850 years.

St. Joan of Arc and a throng of other great saints worshipped at Notre Dame. When Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself emperor of the French in its sanctuary, he asked Pope Pius VII to bless him. Pius VII was one of many popes to visit the cathedral.

When the Allies drove the Germans from Paris in 1944, French General Charles de Gaulle led the troops as they marched into the city. They marched to Notre Dame, where the general himself knelt in thanksgiving for the city's liberation.

I remember watching de Gaulle's Requiem Mass at Notre Dame, after his death in 1970.

The cathedral, first and foremost, has always been a Catholic church where the faithful prayed.

The devastating fire reminded me that the Church has had its troubles, but with the grace of God and the firm purpose in faith of believers, it has come back.

The Church is troubled now. Recently, the senior French

bishop, Cardinal Philippe Barbarin of Lyon, was convicted in civil court for mishandling cases of clergy sex abuse. Sound familiar?

Exactly how the Church will survive the present is a question, but this is certain. The Catholic history of France confirms that the Church will come back, and wrongs will be righted when all Catholics, including religious leaders, deliberately remember who and what they are, think about Jesus and are truly faithful to him.

One of the bad times for the Church occurred about 400 years ago. Vice and corruption literally permeated the Church. Many said the Church was finished.

Then Catholics awoke. They took Jesus seriously and followed him. The result that surged forth was a genuine, New Testament, Christ-inspired, bold, active and life-giving Faith.

Americans today still benefit from that historic re-birth of French Catholicism: Eucharistic devotion such as perpetual adoration, First Fridays, effective seminary training, the great network of Catholic hospitals founded by orders of nuns with their origins in France, the Christian Brothers that were founded to help poor boys achieve, the Little Sisters of the Poor, missionary efforts, helping hands for immigrants, the University of Notre Dame and other American schools.

The Church is multiethnic, but no national society has made a greater contribution to Catholicity than the French. Indeed, no society has enriched human behavior more than the French with respect for every person, care for the poor, children, the powerless, elderly and, of course, art as an expression of faith.

Public response after the Notre Dame fire showed that people everywhere revere what the cathedral has represented – Christianity. Indeed, French President Emmanuel Macron said

so.

As we stagger amid reports of scandal in the Church today, as violence terrorizes us on a regular basis, as religion and morality are insulted and great numbers abandon the Church, remember what Christianity has given the world.

No other philosophy and no person has given such a gift. Give the gift again. The world needs it.

Msgr. Owen F. Campion is OSV's chaplain.