

HISTORIC EVENT

The world celebrates Notre Dame symbol of Christian civilisation

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1,500 people inside and 4,000 outside, 170 bishops not only from France, two cardinals from abroad (Timothy Dolan from New York and Béchara Raï from Lebanon) and 40 heads of state: the world's attention for the reopening of Notre Dame on the evening of

Saturday 7 December equalled the universal dismay of 2019, when a symbol precious not only to Parisians was in danger of disappearing in the building's fire. Having fulfilled his almost messianic promise to rebuild the temple - but with the wisdom to say "five years" instead of the evangelical "three days" - President Emmanuel Macron enjoyed a moment of unquestionable grandeur, thanks precisely to a symbol of the Europe that was once Christian, with all due respect to laïcité.

Macron was also lucky: the rain on Saturday evening meant that his speech had to be delivered inside the cathedral instead of outside as originally planned. So at times there seemed to be two officials, the president and Archbishop Laurent Ulrich, outside the temple, where Macron greeted the "procession" of world leaders, including - to name but a few - Italian President Sergio Mattarella and Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Prince William of Wales, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelens'kyj, US First Lady Jill Biden and the newly elected Donald Trump, as well as Elon Musk who arrived late. Trump, who was warmly greeted by Macron and sat between him and first lady Brigitte, also took part in a mini-summit at the Elysée Palace with Zelens'kyj. Outside, according to ritual, the Archbishop of Paris knocked three times on the closed door of the cathedral and three times the choir responded by singing Psalm 121. The first voice to ring from the cathedral was that of another Emmanuel: the great seventeenth-century bell which, ironically, shares its name with the French president.

The great absentee was the Pope, who sent a [message](#) read by the Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Celestino Migliore. He did not even mention the event at yesterday's Angelus. In a week's time, Francis will be in Corsica, but last Saturday, instead of going to Notre Dame, he had scheduled the Consistory for the creation of new cardinals, which faded into the background, almost a routine ecclesiastical event. Instead, the media's attention was focused on Paris, where the Pope's absence did not diminish the impact of the historic event. Another sign of how ephemeral the 'Bergoglio effect' is, so much talked about at the beginning of the pontificate. If anything, it has damaged Francis' reputation, comments Vatican expert Luis Badilla: 'The Pope could at least avoid humiliating Paris and the many French who do not understand the Pope. In France, the 'no' to Notre Dame is lived in this way, regardless of what the Pope's true thoughts are'.

Yesterday morning the first mass with the consecration of the controversial new bowl-shaped altar was celebrated. Archbishop Ulrich placed there the relics of Saint Marie Eugénie Milleret, Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat, Saint Catherine Labouré, Saint Charles de Foucauld and Blessed Vladimir Ghika. He then anointed the altar, starting with the five crosses at the corners and in the centre, and then sprinkling the whole

surface. Earlier in the homily, he had praised the artefact, the work (as well as the cathedra, baptistery, tabernacle and other furnishings) of designer Guillaume Bardet, starting with the material: "bronze, it enters into an open dialogue with the stone building, it is the first shock that captures us". Together with the ambo, in an exchange without confusion, it forms the table of the Word and the table of the Eucharist. As for the lines of the two furnishings, their purity, their simplicity, are extremely accessible".

And here ends the glory of the 'renovated' Notre Dame. For the 'shock' that Monsignor Ulrich evokes does indeed 'capture us', but for very different reasons. Not that Jean Touret's modern altar, destroyed in 1989, was any better. Where the Gothic acts as a window that projects beyond, yesterday's modernism and today's ponderous minimalism end up as a screen that encloses us in the mundane. And it also hides the sculptural set of the old high altar from 1723, whose Pieta today seems almost a mourning for the newly inaugurated liturgical furnishings. Paradoxically, there is also a classically shaped altar: it is included in the [new reliquary of the Crown of Thorns](#) by Sylvain Dubuisson, but it will only serve to hold candles. Instead, the Blessed Sacrament will have to make do with Bardet's bowl and tabernacle.

The renovation of Notre Dame has been accompanied by controversy over the "mad desire" to break with the past that [unites President Macron and Archbishop Ulrich](#) - and that was launched at the time by his predecessor, Monsignor Michel Aupetit, who was the first to propose modern furnishings and new stained glass windows. The latter were rejected by the Commission nationale du patrimoine et de l'architecture (under the Ministry of Culture), especially as the 19th-century stained-glass windows by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc had escaped the fire. A year ago, Didier Rynkner, founder of La Tribune de l'Art, launched a petition, signed to date by more than 242,000 people, to prevent them being given to the museum and replaced. But Ulrich and Macron continue to press ahead, and on 21 November the commission responsible for evaluating the projects for the new stained glass windows met to select the eight finalists: Jean-Michel Alberola, Daniel Buren, Claire Tabouret, Philippe Parreno, Yan Pei-Ming, Christine Safa, Gérard Traquandi and Flavie Vincent-Petit (probably only the latter would be able to keep up).

While we wait for the winner, let us "enjoy" the vestments made for the occasion, among which the multicoloured cape worn by Mgr Ulrich on Saturday evening, which some have already dubbed the "Lidl cape", stands out. To be more precise, it is a Benetton-style vestment, and not in the sense that the designer is in fact the stylist [Jean-Charles de Castelbajac](#), former artistic director of the clothing giant (and already engaged by the Archdiocese for the 1997 World Youth Day in Paris). Castelbajac's

trademarks include "a love of pop and rainbows" and a fondness for street art. Couldn't the vestments at least have been entrusted to the dear 'old' nuns? Instead, designers and stylists were brought in at great expense, which smacks more of ecclesiastical grandeur than the 'noble simplicity' claimed by Bishop Ulrich.

But everyone's eyes were rightly fixed on Notre Dame, reborn from the flames, and certainly not on the 'masterpieces' of Bardet and Castelbajac. It is these sacred and imposing vestiges of a civilisation that was once Christian that have attracted the great and good of the world, who would never have taken a plane to see the new altar-cum-church and the other unfailing tributes to the 'cult' of contemporaneity.