EUROPEAN IMAGERY

The Church that Enlightens

Oriol Caba

Nôtre-Dame en flames

All eyes were raised to the top of the church. They beheld there an extraordinary sight. On the crest of the highest gallery, higher than the central rose window, there was a great flame rising between the two towers with whirlwinds of sparks, a vast, disordered and furious flame, a tongue of which was borne into the smoke by the wind, from time to time.

The Hunchback of Notre-Dame, Victor Hugo

The fire at Notre-Dame on 15 April added a new image to a long series of historical depictions of the imposing Parisian cathedral. As the flames dangerously approached the almost-twin towers and we imagined their smoking debris on the Île de la Cité, the magnetism of the destruction at the very heart of France transformed a fire of uncertain origin into a symbol with ambiguous meanings.

Emmanuel Macron saw the opportunities it could provide that very night. The twenty-fifth President of the French Republic wanted to capitalise on the dramatic power of the moment to turn a society that was standing against him into a society united behind him. With the firefighters in the background still dousing the flames ravaging the church, he issued a call to arms: “Rebuilding the cathedral will be a great national cause, beyond all social, religious, cultural and political differences.” And the next day he went even further, proclaiming: “Our collective mission is to ensure the continuity of the French nation by rebuilding our cathedral. We will rebuild Notre-Dame more beautiful than ever; this will be our mission for the next five years.”

L’empereur Napoléon se couronnant lui-même, Jacques-Louis David, Museu del Louvre.

It is not the first time that someone has used this church to exhort national cohesion and fly higher than the masses. The French Revolution had desacralized the cathedral and guillotined the statues of the kings on its facade, but in 1802 Napoleon Bonaparte returned it to the Church and two years later he was crowned emperor with the blessing of Pope Pius VII, who paid for the restoration of Catholicism in France by supporting Napoleon. French royal coronations had always been carried out at Reims Cathedral by the grace of God, but the emperor wanted to be seen as the legitimate heir of the positive aspects of the French Revolution, while simultaneously reaffirming Paris’ status as the nation’s capital, which is why he chose Notre-Dame.

Le Sacre de Napoléon, Jacques-Louis David, Museu del Louvre.

Napoleon commissioned its depiction for the sake of posterity to Jacques-Louis David, the precursor of Goebbels, who had supported the execution of Louis XVI, painted the portraits of the ill-fated Le Peletier and Marat, organised the multitudinous Festival of the Supreme Being at the Champ de Mars and passed the torch to Robespierre to give way to the Cult of Reason, burning atheism, ambition, egotism and false simplicity. Years before painting the

imperial coronation, David had already redeemed himself by converting Napoleon's pathetic crossing of the Alps into a heroic image, transforming the general's dejected journey on the back of a mule into an image of Bonaparte pointing out the path to victory while gracefully mounted on a fiery steed. On the immense painting of the imperial coronation, David leads our eyes to Napoleon, who, after crowning the empress, consecrates himself, embodying the will of the people.

A few years later, Victor Hugo wrote *Notre-Dame de Paris* with the cathedral as the fabulous romantic setting to denounce the injustice of the Second Restoration, contrasting the marginal good of the hunchback Quasimodo and the gypsy girl Esmeralda with the evil instituted by the Bourbon regime, which was represented by the evil Frollo and the forces of arbitrary rule under Captain Phoebus. Almost coinciding with the publication of the novel, the reign of Charles X ended with the July Revolution, which Eugène Delacroix represented by embodying France as a woman armed with a rifle and hoisting the recovered Tricolour. In the painting, Liberty guides the people towards their emancipation and leaves Notre-Dame, which is the only element that is recognisable beyond the insurgent barricade, behind.

La Liberté guidant le peuple, Eugène Delacroix, Museu del Louvre.

Symbols, though, however striking they may be, are also loaded with ambiguity. On 24 August 1944, the commander of the German forces in Paris was having dinner in his office in the Hôtel Meurice. Dietrich von Choltitz had only been in the post for a month and, if we are to believe his story, he saved Paris from annihilation by disobeying the order to blow

the city up if he could not hold it. When, halfway through dinner, the phenomenal bell of Notre-Dame led the ringing of the bells of Paris's churches after four years of silence imposed by the fascist occupation, Choltitz told his colleagues that the bells announced the arrival of enemy armies and that they should now prepare themselves.


L'Hôtel Meurice durant l'ocupació nazi de França.

However, Jean Guéhenno's diary tells a different story: "Yesterday evening, around 9:00 they were still building barricades on Boulevard Sérurier. They were chopping down the plane trees at the street corners. I came back home around ten. Friends call me, saying they can see huge fireworks over the Hotel de Ville, with red and blue rockets answering them in the south and west. It was the signal. The first tanks of Leclerc's army had just rolled up to Notre-Dame. And then all the bells of all the churches rang in the night, drowning out the rumbling of the big guns. Freedom—France is beginning again."

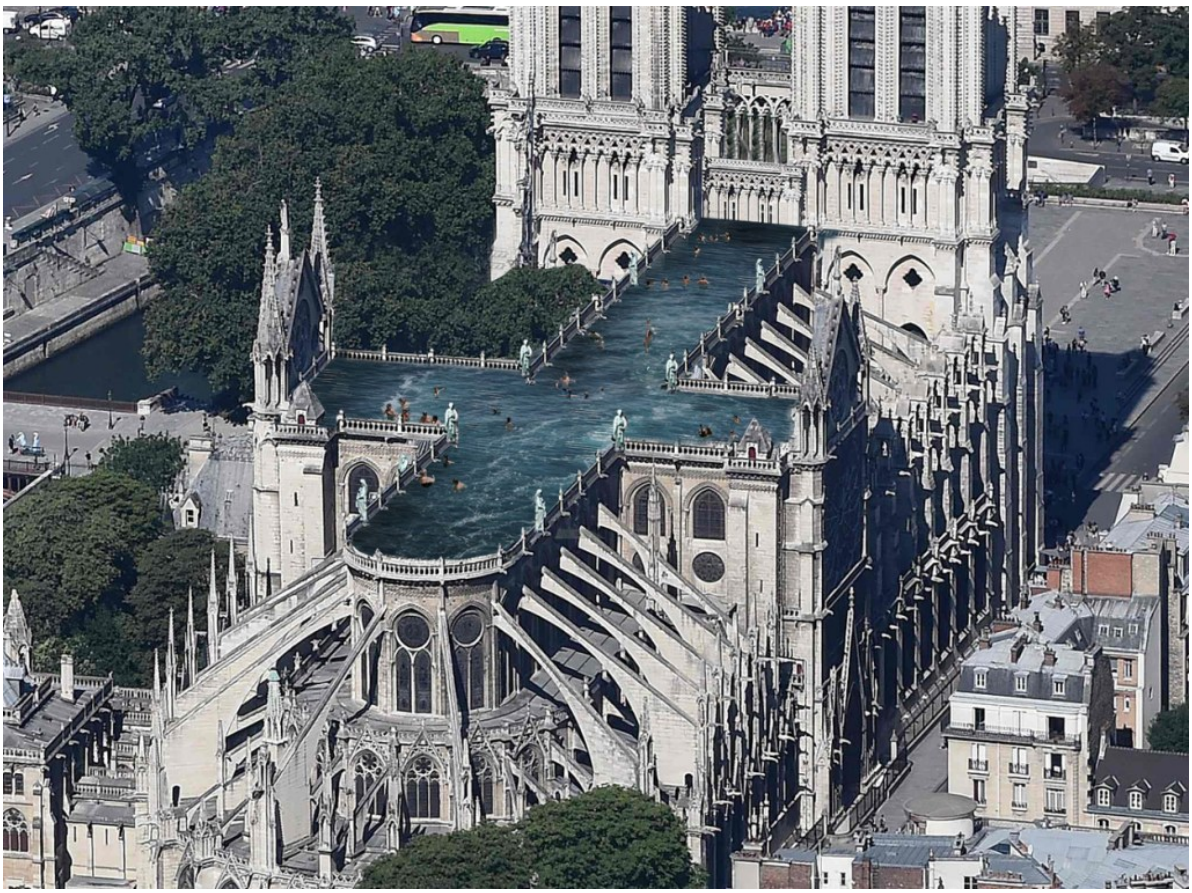
European history is full of moments that should raise us up and leave superstition behind, but God continues to be a powerful presence and those who in life held Him close also seek Him out when they are about to die. In some cases, funeral rites fill someone's existence with meaning or even change what they had represented. The Church has centuries of ritual experience and its pomp contains powerful imagery.

Like Napoleon, Charles de Gaulle was aware of the power of symbols and the immensity of his stature, which is why he left instructions that no-one should capitalise on his funeral: "I wish my funeral to take place at Colombey-les-Deux-Églises in a very simple manner. I wish no national funeral services: neither presidents, nor ministers, nor the Bureau of the Assembly, nor other formally constituted bodies are to attend. Only members of the French Army may participate officially as such, but their participation should be on a very modest scale without music, fanfare or bugle calls. I wish no eulogies, in church or elsewhere; no funeral oration in Parliament, no seats reserved except for my family, for my companion members of the Order of Liberation and for the Municipal Council of Colombey. Men and women of France and other countries of the world who wish to honour my memory may accompany my body to its last resting place, but I should like it to be borne there in silence."

When the time came in 1970, de Gaulle was buried in Colombey in an austere ceremony, as he had instructed, but Georges Pompidou and hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen also participated in an ostentatious ceremony that culminated at Notre-Dame. An enormous French flag was hung behind the choir and on that occasion the Church wanted to unite behind the new president a society that was tired of authoritarianism and enraged by events of May 1968. Attracted by the aura of the general, dignitaries from all around the world attended, some of whom representing countries that were at war, forming an image of respect for the deceased that had never been seen before and completely unfounded hope for the future.

Much more recently, in 2015, Michel Houellebecq also used Notre-Dame as a dramatic location, but in his case, it was to represent a culture shock that was very different from this idyllic image of communion. Following the dissolution of the Republic and the establishment of an Islamic regime in France, the protagonist of *Submission* frees himself of the Judeo-Christian vestiges that he still bore and embraces the new reality: “The next morning, after I filled up my car and paid at the hotel, I went back to the Chapel of Notre-Dame, which was now deserted. The Virgin waited in the shadows, calm and timeless. She had sovereignty, she had power, but little by little I felt myself losing touch, I felt her moving away from me in space and across the centuries while I sat there in my pew, shrivelled and puny. After half an hour, I got up, fully deserted by the Spirit, reduced to my damaged, perishable body, and I sadly descended the stairs that led to the car park.”

Emmanuel Carrère compared *Submission* to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the book in which George Orwell warned us of a totalitarian future in which objective truth would completely disappear. In the case of the Notre-Dame fire, Macron wanted to use the destruction of the cathedral to revitalise a Republic in crisis by means of *alternative facts*, speaking of social cohesion that he associates and orders by removing meaning from it and exempting himself from action in accordance with the values he preaches, in line with the *doublethink* of Francois-Henri Pinault and Bernard Arnault or the torrent of proposals to rebuild the cathedral.



Proposta per una nova teulada per Notre Dame, Ulf Mejergren Architects 2019, Estocolm. @ulfmejergrenarchitects

We have not chosen the image of Notre-Dame in flames to illustrate *The Future of the European Project* because it is a valid symbol of modern Europe —for Marx and Engels it would be a prehistoric monument! Rather, on the contrary, we have chosen it because it highlights the deep contradictions of our society, the arbitrary nature of European cultural heritage and the urgency of a debate based on actual facts and honest premises that makes it possible to build a different future.

Oriol Caba

Oriol Caba is a developer and producer of editorial, audiovisual and new media content in order to generate solid narratives provoking reflection and debate, especially in the fields of art, design and culture, politics and society, propaganda and advertising.