

Archbishop Aupetit invites Parisians to light a candle to dispel fire's darkness

PARIS — Archbishop Michel Aupetit of Paris invited the faithful to attend the annual chrism Mass at historic St. Sulpice Church April 17 in the wake of the massive fire that seriously damaged the historic Notre Dame Cathedral.

“This will be an opportunity for all of us to manifest our unity, our fervor and our confidence in the future. We feel well that we will not only have to rebuild our cathedral but also reconstruct our church whose face is so wounded,” Archbishop Aupetit said in an invitation issued April 16.

The archbishop also asked “people of goodwill” to place a light or a candle in their window on the night of Easter “as we will do in all our churches started with the Paschal vigil by the rite of the new fire.”

“It means that light illuminates the darkness, that life definitively triumphs over death,” he wrote.

St. Sulpice Church is Paris’ other prominent Catholic church. With origins in the mid-17th century, the Baroque-era church is nearly the size of Notre Dame Cathedral. Its construction incorporates intricately designed stained glass windows that are often compared for their beauty and elegance with the medieval-era windows in the now damaged cathedral.

“France cries and with it all its friends from all over the world. It is touched in the heart because its stones are the testimony of an invincible hope which, by the talents, courage, genius and faith of the builders, has raised this luminous lace of stones, wood and glass. This faith remains ours. It is she who moves the mountains and will allow us to rebuild this masterpiece,” Archbishop Aupetit said in his invitation.

“Let this tragedy allow our country to regain a happy unity so that we can build

together what is written at the pediment of our public buildings: brotherhood," he concluded. "We believe that it originates in the fatherhood of God as the source of all love."

Meanwhile, Pope Francis talked by phone with French President Emmanuel Macron the afternoon of April 16, according to a tweet from Alessandro Gisotti, interim director of the Vatican press office.

"During this exchange, the Holy Father expressed his solidarity with the French population in the aftermath of the fire that ravaged the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris," the message said.

Cathedrals and basilicas throughout Europe tolled their bells for Notre Dame in a coordinated action at midday April 16, including several, such as Vienna's St. Stephen Cathedral and St. Wojciech Cathedral in Gniezno, Poland, which had themselves been damaged in fires.

Soon after the flames erupted and devoured the upper level and roof of the iconic cathedral, church leaders around the globe celebrated Masses of solidarity and sent messages and prayers to the Archdiocese of Paris.

Bishop Lionel Gendron of Saint-Jean-Longueuil, Quebec, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, was among those offering prayers and sympathy to Archbishop Aupetit in an April 16 letter.

"We are at the same time confident that the devotion, generosity and Catholic faith of the people of God which inspired the construction of this cathedral and made it so admired, loved and revered over the centuries as an eloquent expression of Christendom, will transform this moment of sorrow into an Exsultet of paschal hope and trust," the letter said.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster said it was in "shock and deep dismay" that he watched the fire engulf the cathedral in his letter to the Archdiocese of Paris.

"Our prayers and tears have mingled with those of your people, and of people all over the world who recognize in Notre Dame a symbol of enduring faith and hope in our heavenly Father, in his Son Jesus Christ and in our Blessed Mother, Mary," he

wrote.

“Your tragedy is ours also,” the letter said.

“We offer our sympathy and support in prayer to the people of Paris and our deepest desire that Notre Dame should rise again to watch over your city and all its people,” the message ended.

Bishop Hugh Gilbert of Aberdeen, Scotland, president of the Scottish bishops’ conference, said the fire reestablished the importance of churches “to a city, to a great nation and beyond.”

“Like the crowds last night, we stand in silent solidarity, reassured that there has been no loss of life and that the substance of the building has been saved,” he said. “The resolve to rebuild is uplifting. Already, there’s a generous response from many quarters,” he said.

“And beyond the tragedy, Easter remains. Fire cannot thwart the essential purpose of Notre Dame or any church building. Wherever it may be, God’s people — the living stones — will still come together to celebrate the resurrection of Christ and hope reassert itself,” he added.

From Argentina, Bishop Oscar Ojea of San Isidro, president of the country’s Catholic bishops’ conference, shared words of “communion and fraternal closeness ... in the face of grief” with Archbishop Aupetit in an April 16 message.

“We join Pope Francis who implores that this cathedral may soon return to ‘the architectural and spiritual heritage of Paris, France and humanity,” Bishop Ojea wrote.

The president of the German bishops’ conference said in an April 16 letter that the tragedy could not be put into words. Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising said the flames turned “a place of retreat into a place of mourning.”

“For centuries, Notre Dame has combined architectural styles, art history and important historical events shaping the European continent. While speechless about this stroke of fate for your country, I assure you of the prayers of German faithful,”

Cardinal Marx wrote.

In neighboring Austria, Cardinal Christoph Schonborn of Vienna, the bishops' conference president, said the "worldwide wave of solidarity and great movement of connectedness" touched off by the fire was an encouraging sign of public awareness of "what an incomparable treasure cathedrals are for Europe."

In Poland, the Catholic primate, Archbishop Wojciech Polak of Gniezno, said the "terrible tragedy" would have worldwide effects. He said he was moved by scenes of young French Catholics demonstrating "unity, pain and spiritual togetherness" by praying alongside Archbishop Aupetit on the square in front of the still-smoldering cathedral.

"This is not just a historical monument, or even just a symbol of the Christian tradition," Archbishop Polak told Poland's Catholic Information Agency, KAI, April 16. "It also embodies a very concrete presence of the community of faith, in other words of people for whom Notre Dame, besides its global, European and historical dimension, is above all a place for praying."

The Hungarian bishops' conference expressed "solidarity and love" to the French Catholic community.

"We reinforce our conviction in the merciful love of Christ and declare our hope that the almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead, is going to resurrect our communities to new life, faith and love as well," Cardinal Peter Erdo of Esztergom-Budapest wrote April 15.

Other messages were sent by prelates in Czech Republic, Spain and Belgium. The Czech bishops' conference said April 16 that it had organized a nationwide collection for rebuilding Notre Dame.