



ACU Centre for Liturgy PODCAST:

After the Fire: the liturgical refurbishment of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris

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ENGLISH TEXT

Paradoxically, the tragedy of March 15, 2019, provided the Paris diocese with an opportunity to rethink the liturgical layout of Notre-Dame Cathedral.

The team appointed by the archbishop to look into the matter began with a wide-ranging survey, which confirmed that the 2004 layout put in place by Cardinal Lustiger was generally satisfactory. After several temporary arrangements where, as was often the case at the time, an altar was installed on a podium at the transept crossing, in 2004 the Vatican II sanctuary at Notre Dame was reunited with the prestigious but under-used space of the former canons' choir following the liturgical reform. This arrangement, adapted to large-scale concelebrations, restored part of the transept to the faithful and gave the architectural choir back its liturgical lustre. However, a few adjustments were made: to the ergonomics of the ambo, to the location of the tabernacle, now clearly separated from that of the reliquary of the Crown of Thorns, and to the cathedra, which was restored after the archbishop was installed in a dignified stall following the 2004 refurbishment.

The question of whether or not to rebuild the emblematic altar by Jean Touret, Cardinal Lustiger's artist, was initially set aside, but successive archbishops have all been sensitive to its non-acceptance by some of the clergy. Hence the final decision to commission a new altar, but on the exact same site as the previous one, on an identically rebuilt plateau. Once these issues had been settled, the next step was to rethink the overall economy of space in a building that had been described from the outset as entirely Catholic, and therefore open to all.

Not only is Notre Dame Cathedral a major liturgical site, it also welcomes 12 million visitors a year, and perhaps 15 million after the reopening, more than double the number at the time of the 2004 redevelopment. The decision was made early on not to reserve an intimate space for liturgy, but to continue to celebrate, even on weekdays, at the main altar, amid the uninterrupted flow of visitors. It's an important choice, one that has never been called into question, and one that aims to order the entire space according to its liturgical purpose, avoiding any separation between spaces reserved for worship and spaces in the process of being museumized. This point was decisive for the rest of the reflection process. On the other hand, Archbishop Michel Aupetit had explicitly asked us to think about the layout from the nave upwards, and not just from the liturgical plateau, with a real sensitivity to the question of the link between baptismal priesthood and priestly ministry, and to think about how to accompany, with a missionary concern, the visitors we wish to continue to welcome widely and free of charge. The stakes are high: in symbolic and missionary terms, but also in terms of their consequences. In a secular country such as ours, there is a great risk of reducing the liturgical layout of a cathedral to the choice of an altar, ambo and presider on the liturgical platform, with everything else being the responsibility of the heritage authorities linked to the state that owns the building. This is what we wanted to avoid in Paris: the entire space, including nave, aisles, chapels and ambulatory, was designed around the cathedral's liturgical heart. The design is based on two interrelated systems:

1. A liturgical axis stretching from its baptismal source, with a large baptistery at the entrance to the cathedral, to its Eucharistic heart, with the altar, and a beyond liturgy manifested in Notre Dame by Marc Couturier's great cross of glory and the oriental tabernacle. In this way, the nave is now embedded between the two major sites of Christian liturgy: baptism and the Eucharist. We would have liked to have gone further in this distancing from the theatrical model of face-to-face between a stage and the mass of strangers and mute spectators, to use SC's expression, but this was not possible.
2. A pilgrimage path, conceived as a diffraction of the liturgical axis, to accompany visitors who enter through the central portal and are thus immediately seized by the major liturgical axis, strolling from north to south, from darkness to light. This path will follow an *allée de la promesse*, along the north chapels, each dedicated to a major figure from the Old Testament, then after the transept an *allée de l'Incarnation*, along the reliefs depicting the Infancy of Christ in the choir enclosure, then the turning point of the path with the reliquary of the Crown of Thorns reinstalled in the axial chapel, followed by the Alley of the Resurrection along the eponymous reliefs to the south of the choir, and finally, after the statue of Notre Dame, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church, an Alley of the Saints along the south chapels of the, each dedicated to a saintly figure from Paris. This is not a catechesis *sensu stricto*, but rather a way of accompanying visitors to the threshold of the Mystery for which the cathedral was built, and without a minimum understanding of which it is impossible to understand the building, especially with visitors from a predominantly post-Christian or non-Christian culture. The proposal is more initiatory than catechetical, with an aesthetic and sensory dimension, as well as proposals for places of devotion and some sacramental proposals (in particular reconciliation). A series of contemporary stained-glass windows will give substance to the alley of saints in the south aisle.

Last but not least, particular attention was paid to the lighting of the building, with a view to overcoming the divide between liturgical lighting, which only concerns the "plateau", and lighting of other spaces, including the nave, which is mainly dedicated to heritage enhancement. Here too, we wanted and obtained the liturgy to be in charge: soft lighting, favouring natural light as much as possible, lighting with adjustable temperatures according to the time and type of liturgical celebration, and lighting designed to make the pilgrimage itinerary intelligible.

Thus, the program implemented under the authority of two successive archbishops is the fruit of a global reflection, with an organic approach to all the spaces, entirely dedicated to the cathedral's liturgical vocation, while at the same time addressing in a differentiated way the faithful and tourists, two "populations" that we have always refused to separate, given the multiple and changing motivations of our visitors.

The choice of furnishings was a secondary issue, but not a secondary one, once the major space-saving choices had been made. Archbishop Michel Aupetit wanted to avoid a competition and asked a team of artists to work on a co-construction project for the main elements of the furniture, in line with the overall project. His successor, Mgr Ulrich, wished to organize a competition to appoint the sole designer of the 5 essential pieces: altar, ambo, cathedra, baptistery and tabernacle. He chose designer Guillaume Bardet's project, featuring bronze objects with supple, uncluttered forms.