

Pinnacle of civilisation in flames

Steve Howard Tuesday 16 Apr 2019 5:29 pm



The spire and parts of Notre Dame cathedral is on fire in Paris, Monday, April 15, 2019. A catastrophic fire engulfed the upper reaches of Paris' soaring Notre Dame Cathedral as it was undergoing renovations Monday, threatening one of the greatest architectural treasures of the Western world as tourists and Parisians looked on aghast from the streets below. AP

The late Kenneth Clarke, in his 1980's TV series, *Civilisation*, that had such an early influence on me, stood in front of Notre Dame and said: "What is civilisation? I don't know. I can't define it in abstract terms, yet. But I think I can recognise it when I see it."

Turning to face Notre Dame, he went on to say: "And I think I'm seeing it now."

Clarke's version of art history has been since much maligned. But in this case, at least, he was spot on. Notre Dame was a pinnacle of the expression of what it means to be human. We built this. It is us at our best.

Those who did build it lived for years in the mud. To me, as I try to imagine the feelings they must have had when they started work on laying the first stones, what they were eventually going to achieve must have felt almost unimaginable, equivalent to living in the early 1960's and dreaming of sending man to the moon.

Yet they did it. A kind of madness driven by faith that led to incomparable beauty. And it stood there for centuries, withstanding all sorts of historic possibilities, of war, failure and despair.

Now I am overcome with grief, as if I have lost a loved one.

I saw it for the first time in Autumn 1985, what would become my lodestar, my centre of spiritual gravity, global "headquarters" in the city of my childhood dreaming.

It didn't then have the creamy, glowing stones; it was a brooding, sooty mass, nevertheless imposing itself, solid and commanding, at the heart of Paris.

It seemed so ancient, improbable, that my first impression was that, eons ago, the River Seine had had to work its way around it, on both sides, creating the island on which it stood, so cleverly protecting it from the vicissitudes of everyday life.

Every time I returned to Paris, including my regular periods living within walking distance, I made my pilgrimage to this sacred place, often alone, sometimes cajoling others into its spell.

Mass late on Sunday mornings was my favourite. Those soaring heights were matched by the ethereal, echoing voices of the choir and the thundering power of the pipe organ, bellowing so loud as to almost push the flying buttresses to their limits.

It never failed to overcome. It had a spiritual universality about it. Christian, yes, but something larger again, as witnessed by the millions of visitors who would queue in the winter cold, then enter its vast nave and shuffle around the interior, gobsmacked and, as for me, humbled by its combination of majesty and earthiness.

Those beautiful rose windows. That soaring roof above. The stillness, even with the huge crowds passing through.

Humility was the first emotion it usually evoked for me. What love and devotion, what vision and persistence could possibly have led to this masterpiece of Western, in fact, of any civilisation?

We will rebuild it, stone by stone, stained glass by stained glass window. Treasures have been lost and are irreplaceable, yet its essence, tangible as well as not, will always stand.

Steve Howard is Secretary General of the Global Foundation. He has lived in Paris and visited France many times. These are his personal views.

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