

Easter Vigil 2019 Homily
by Rev. William H. Gurnee, Pastor of St. Joseph's on Capitol Hill

The building is iconic. Millions of visitors come to see her and, she has become the symbol of a country. But tragedy struck, Fire. Efforts were made to save precious artwork. People nearby looked on in horror as flames rose in the night. It seemed as if a blow had been struck to the national soul. Thank goodness there were no deaths or serious injuries but by the next day, the cry rose from the people to rebuild!

That is what people said, August 25, 1814 in Washington, DC after the White House had been burned. British soldiers had attacked the President's home during the War of 1812, and we can imagine the shock and fear that Washingtonians felt looking at the damage, worried that things would never be the same. But of course, they got even better. It took time, it was a struggle and some things had to change, but the symbol of our nation as a country who vests her executive power in a democratically elected leader, was restored.

This week, the world looked on in horror as one of the most historic and important structures ever built received a devastating wound. The Cathedral Church of Paris, built in honor of Mary, the Mother of God, the seat of the faith in the Eldest Daughter of the Church, had been gutted. Parisians wept, the French President promised to rebuild, billionaires pledged money and average citizens vowed to save her. It is a moving tribute to the human spirit.

But right now, in her saddened condition, I think we see an honest reflection of the state of the Christian Church in many places. She is in ashes, attacked from outside and from within. Let's be clear, the practice of the faith has never been perfect. We heard on Palm Sunday and Good Friday the story of the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. In 2000 years of history, the number of scandals and personal failures is beyond counting. Every cradle Catholic knows of times when the really believed the faith and desired to be a living saint, and also times when we weren't even sure if they had faith in God.

So this is just an ordinary time. No, I don't think so. More than ever, the dangers of disbelief are all around us. You may have seen the figures. Gallup recently released figures suggesting that 50 % of people no longer even believe in God, down dramatically in the last 20 years. God plays no role in their lives whatsoever. 70% of young people leave church by their 20's. 93% of Christians are uncomfortable talking about their faith with their grandchildren.

It seems to me that we have three choices in regard to the Cathedral Church in Paris and in the Catholic faith. We can do nothing and leave the thing to rot. That's the easiest choice. We can patch the roof, put inexpensive furnishings back inside and worry about it later. That takes some effort, but can also be an excuse to do nothing later. Or the third choice we have, we can build it brick by brick, timber by timber, stone by stone. It will be the longest, the hardest and the most expensive choice. But it is really the only thing to do.

That's why what we do tonight really matters. In the midst of the fire of the priest and bishop scandal, four people in this parish have stepped forward and said, "I want to build." I want to build a spiritual life for myself, for my family, for my community. I am willing to step forward, start cleaning up the mess inside the Church and in my own life and start rebuilding. I am willing to spend what it takes to get the job done right. They, like all of us, need to base our lives on the **resurrection**. If we truly believe that Jesus is Lord, if we truly believe that He walked out of the tomb raised by the Father, if we truly believe that we have life only in Him, then we can rebuild.

Maybe we should recall the famous incident of the life of St. Francis recounted by St. Bonaventure. "One day when Francis went out to meditate in the fields he was passing by the church of San Damiano which was threatening to collapse because of extreme age. Inspired by the Spirit, he went inside to pray. Kneeling before an image of the Crucified, he was filled with great fervor and consolation as he prayed. While his tear-filled eyes were gazing at the Lord's cross, he heard with his bodily ears a voice coming from the cross, telling him three times: 'Francis, *go and repair my house which, as you see, is falling into ruin.*' Trembling with fear, Francis was amazed at the sound of this astonishing voice, since he was alone in the church; and as he received in his heart the power of the divine words, he fell into a state of ecstasy. Returning finally to his senses, he prepared to put his whole heart into obeying the command he had received. He began zealously to repair the church materially, although the principle intention of the words referred to that Church which Christ purchased with his own blood, as the Holy Spirit afterward made him realize...."