

Daily Meditation 12-09-24

Notre Dame Rising from the Ashes. Part II

Good morning.

We are meditating on the rise of Notre Dame Cathedral, after the fire that devastated so much of it, just five years ago.

And of course, this 800-year-old building, a masterpiece of Gothic architecture, kind of a culmination, a gathering of the great arts, sciences, engineering, stained glass, and so much else that makes it an example of the tremendous gift of creativity, that architects of all generations and of all cultures, and artists of all kinds, bring to our common places. Think of all the great temples around the world, and mosques, and churches, that are often humankind's best efforts to express our aspirations, sense of transcendence, sense of holiness, even.

I suspect that Otto Rank had that in mind when he said that “you don't cure democracy with more democracy,” but you cure an ailing democracy with more of what he called “the irrational,” which is to say, more art, more creativity, and with more love, as he said.

“Can we build structures that actually awaken love and awaken beauty and awaken wonder, awaken gratitude and reverence?” And this was the effort 800 years ago by our ancestors in Europe, ancestors in France. So all this is being celebrated this weekend with the return of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. But of course, a cathedral is meant to be a place to worship. And as we talked about in our last daily meditation, Aquinas says that “the primary meaning of Sabbath and word worship is to give thanks.”

I'd like to share with you a teaching from Thich Nhat Hanh, about the thanks that Christians give in the Eucharist, or worship that takes place in the cathedral or any simple chapel or church. I think it's significant that this comes from a person who is not Christian as such, although he admired Jesus from the time he was a child growing up in Vietnam. But he understands. He's written two books on Christ, that are very profound in bringing together the wisdom of Buddhism with the wisdom of Christ, and Christ followers. So he writes about the mass:

“Not many people want to become priests in our day, but everyone is hungry. So many people are hungry for spiritual food. There are so many hungry souls.” This is Thich Nhat Hanh speaking.

And then he turns to the subject of the Last Supper, and of the Eucharist worship service that takes place in churches, whether they be the Grand Cathedral like Notre Dame, or a simple table.

Take, my friends. This is my flesh. This is my blood. Can there be any more drastic language in order to wake you up, says Thich Nhat Hanh. What could Jesus have said that is better than that? This piece of bread is a body of the whole cosmos. If Christ is a body of God, which he is, then the bread he offers is also the body of the cosmos. Look deeply and you notice the sunshine in the bread, the blue sky in the bread, the cloud and the great Earth in the bread. Can you tell me what is not in a piece of bread? The whole cosmos has come together in order to bring to you this piece of bread. You eat it in such a way that you come alive, truly alive.

So Thich Nhat Hanh recaptures the cosmic dimensions to this particular ritual, the worship service of communion or the Eucharist. But it's true of every piece of bread that we eat, that is a cosmic event. And this is what our architecture should be celebrating. He says,

After all, when I touch a rock, I never touch it as inanimate. The tree is Spirit, Mind. The rock is Spirit, Mind. They say the rock is Spirit Mind, the air, the stars, the moon, everything is consciousness. They are the object of your consciousness.

And then he goes on to tell us about the Buddha Nature, which is everywhere and in everyone. And of course, the Cosmic Christ is everywhere and in everyone. And that is what is shared in a worship service, in a Christian church or cathedral, when people gather to give thanks, which is the literal meaning of the word Eucharist.

So all this coming together, and I think it echoes what Otto Rank calls for, more in a time of ailing democracy, he says you can't cure it with more democracy, you cure it with more art, with more love, and with what he calls the Unio Mystica, the mystical union.

So the real question around a cathedral that's thrived, if you will, for 800 years is, is it awakening a Unio Mystica, a mystical union? Is it bringing about a sense of awe and wonder and gratitude and reverence that is part of the Unio Mystica?

And people may want to talk about the cost of renovating a cathedral like this. It cost about \$700 million, which is a lot of money. But they say that there will be 40,000 tourists, human beings (I hope some of them are pilgrims, and not just tourists), visiting this renewed structure every day. And that's a lot of people. Will it affect all these people? And is that a worthy investment? \$775 million or so?

Well, I did a little research, and I found out that to buy, to create, to make four Lockheed Martin F-35s -- these are the most current and advanced jet fighters that America makes -- they cost \$177 million apiece. One jet fighter. So four of those would cost the price of the renewal of this cathedral. And needless to say, it stands for something significant in the human heart and in humanity, that effort to name the transcendent spirit in our lives.

So I invite you to meditate on that, to weigh it: Four of the most advanced jet fighters, versus a space where people hopefully can recover their sense of the mystical, awe, wonder, beauty, and gratitude, and maybe have changes of heart. So that the military, whether it be four jet fighters, advanced in kind, or battleships or nuclear submarines or nuclear bombs, or all the other military fetishes that occupy our minds and our pocketbooks.

Meditate on that. And what hopefully can transpire in a renewed space that Notre Dame represents, and renewed feminine energy. And let me close with a statement from this important book on Henry Adams, who wrote about the revolution that 12th-century Gothic architecture was all about, in a big section of the book that is entitled, "The Virgin and the Dynamo."

What he's doing, and by dynamo, he says, in the 19th century, the Dynamo in the West was railroads. And in America, for sure, it's a railroad that got to the West Coast fast,

brought capitalism there and all the rest. In the process, of course, it tore through Indian lands, and did a lot of destruction. But it did bring East Coast and West Coast together, and it became the Dynamo, the energy of the American system, the American country coming to be born.

But he contrasts that energy to that of the cathedral, to Mary as an archetype: that Mary represents this different archetype that we have in today's and the other day's daily meditation, the architect of love and compassion and unity and beauty light and color. And he says,

We have that choice between the Dynamo value of a railroad, and the other values represented by Mary -- and of course, today I'm substituting the jet fighter for the railroad of the 19th century – It's not an either/or just to be an either/or, but which one is most lacking today? Which one do we have to invest more energy into giving birth to in new ways, and what is the Dynamo of our time?

And it's not just bringing these previous monuments back into a healthy condition. I think it has to do with the new spirit, the new science of cosmogenesis, that we are all participants in the history of the universe, that we are creating and birthing a new vision for humanity. And I think this is the cathedral of tomorrow. This is a chair where the Goddess sits, preaching love, compassion, creativity, demonstrating light and color and beauty and wonder.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.