

Monsieur le Président,

On the evening of 15th April, the whole world looked in horror at the fire in Notre-Dame, reminding us how this monument does not belong solely to Catholics, Parisians, French or even European people, but is a heritage that the genius of its successive builders bequeathed humanity. France was amongst the first countries to see the role played by those historic monuments, adopting very early, partly influenced by Victor Hugo's masterpiece novel pleading for the Parisian cathedral, a legislation aiming not only at protecting them, but also, as part of the Legislative branch's foresight, designing the conditions in which to act should they become mutilated by men or time. As soon as 1862, the government chose to place the Parisian cathedral, then being restored, under the protection of these laws. Over a century later, France, once again, alongside other countries, pushed for the UNESCO to put in place a World Heritage list, with specific protection criteria. In 1991, France asked, and obtained, that the banks of the Seine in Paris be placed on this list, putting forward, in particular, the central place of Notre-Dame and, more widely, a structured perspective constituted between the Middle Ages and the early 20th century, which deserved protection.

Such a protection cannot exist without a deontology for all those charged with upkeep, conserving and restoring those monuments. Once again, France was a pioneering figure, building on the practice of Jean-Baptiste Lassus and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in the Île de la Cité, both in the Sainte-Chapelle and in Notre-Dame. This deontology, of course, has changed over time. It led to the Venice charter in 1964, amended by the Nara document in 1994, giving an internationally recognised procedure for heritage interventions, for conservation as much as for restoration or partial reconstruction.

In this history, France has, for a long time, played a central role, based on world-class institutions educating protection specialists, internationally recognised and drawing students from across the continents (École de Chaillot, Institut national du patrimoine, universities, as well as the compagnonnage, now part, as per France request, of UNESCO's immaterial heritage). It is not by chance that the International Council for Monuments and Sites is based in Paris. This French excellence in heritage, we saw it at work once again last week, in the praiseworthy action of the firemen who prevented much worse a disaster, and in the following acts that allowed the urgent propping up of the building and the removal of most of the mobile artworks. We are all conscious that we avoided much worse a disaster, the potential collapse of the cathedral and the destruction, with it, of the 850 years of history it preserves.

Alas, this tradition of excellence was slightly forgotten by the previous governments, and with it, national investments in heritage preservation: as shown by the Senate's report on the 2019 budget, the credits allowed to the conservation of the Monuments Historiques have diminished, in current euros, between 2010 and 2012, before stabilising themselves, still in current euros, from 2013 onwards. Yet, for a long time now, alerts have been raised as to how insufficient those budgets were, and that only urgent works, like those that were taking place in Notre-Dame, could be done, rather than a planned, structured approach.

We now have to face the disaster, and it goes far beyond us all. Notre-Dame of Paris is not just a cathedral, not just one of the major heritage of European architecture. It is one of the buildings around which, for nearly two centuries, French and world heritage protection and deontology were constituted. The emotion it created showed how much this was a world drama, the historical perspective of which we still have to grasp.

This is why we, academics, researchers, heritage professionals, from France and elsewhere, are now coming to you, Monsieur le Président, to ask, as Jean Nouvel expressed so well, that “historians and experts be given the time to diagnose before [you] take a decision on the future of the monument”. We know that the political time requests quick action, we know how much a mutilated Notre-Dame weighs on French image. Nevertheless, what will happen in Notre-Dame in the years to come engages all of us, far beyond that time. The challenge of these works goes far beyond political mandates, beyond generation, it is by how we respond to them that we will be judged.

As such, we don't come to you to plead for this or that solution. It is too early. What can we or can't we do, what are the options? We don't know yet. It will depend on technical constraints, resulting from what the building can bear. But these choices must also be done respecting what Notre-Dame is, more than a cathedral amongst others, more than a heritage site amongst other, with a scrupulous, thoroughly thought, conception of deontology. The history of Notre-Dame in Paris means that the breadth of the fire goes far beyond its material consequences. You have said, Monsieur le Président, that you wanted to rebuild Notre-Dame so that it would be “even more beautiful”. It is what we all want, but in order to do so, we must not ignore the complex process of thought that must drive this endeavour, beyond the necessary efficiency. Let's take the time to diagnose. The Executive branch can't afford not to listen to the experts, of which France educates some of the best, a large number of which are in your administration, in the Ministère de la Culture. Let's acknowledge their expertise, take the time to find the right way and then, yes, fix an ambitious goal for an exemplary restoration, not only for the present, but also for the future generations.

French artisanal and business excellence and experience, that of our architects, the expertise of its curators and historians are renowned throughout the world. The special place of the cathedral has drawn towards it, throughout the world, academic attention and numerous research programs, the result of which are now at our disposal. Those French and international resources give France all the opportunities to bring Notre-Dame its symbolic dignity back. Let's listen to them. Let's trust them. Trust France, without delay, but also without precipitation. The world is watching us. The world and the centuries to come.

Today, this is not just an architectural gesture, but millions of gestures, humble or expert, governed by science and knowledge, within a renewed, ambitious, willing, heritage policy, caring for each monument, that will give back to the cathedral of Hugo, Viollet-le-Duc, ours, yours, its place and its role in history and in the future.