

Church Renovation: A Crisis of Fashion

By Michael S. Rose

Much can be learned from Viollet-le-Duc's restoration of the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris.

The contemporary trend of renovating Catholic churches calls to mind Victor Hugo's classic novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Hugo, writing in 1831, provides an emotional reflection on the architecture of the famous cathedral of the Ile-de-France. The French novelist expressed his sorrow and indignation at the "numberless degradations and mutilations" which the hand of time and that of man had inflicted upon the venerable monument.

"Upon the face of this old queen of the French cathedrals, beside each wrinkle we constantly find a scar," wrote Hugo. "Tempus edax, homo edacior. Which would willingly render thus: Time is blind, but man is stupid."

Hugo drew up a list of criticisms: the colored stained-glass windows had been removed, the interior white-washed, rows of statues removed, niches left empty, the tower over the central part of the cathedral had been ripped off, the shape of the central entrance to the Cathedral had been deformed, and the chapels were filled with "ugly decorations."

He explains that the ruin of his beloved Notre Dame was precipitated by three forces:

1. Time, which "has gradually made deficiencies here and there, and has gnawed over its whole surface";
2. "Violence, brutalities, contusions, fractures—these are the works of revolutions." This is the type of destruction, wrote Hugo, wrought by indiscriminate revolutionary violence; and
2. Fashion, which, Hugo contested, has done more mischief than revolutions: "It has cut to the quick—it has attacked the very bone and framework of the art."

Hugo observed that the first two inroads to destruction of the cathedral devastated the edifice with impartiality and grandeur. Yet the third, "fashion," was perpetrated by "school-trained architects, licensed, privileged, and patented, degrading with all the discernment and selection of bad taste." Thus, Hugo is saying that the worst destruction was perpetrated not by the atheistic iconoclasts of the bloody French Revolution, as many historians have it, but by these school-trained architects, slaves to bad taste.

Hugo accused these men, who assume the character of the architect, of willful destruction, perversion, and re-creation, all in the name of fashion. The results? Mutilations, amputations, dislocation of members—"restorations."

And so, in the same manner it appears that, to appease liturgical fashion—surely it is not the universal Church making such demands, just look at how Rome treats its own treasured churches of centuries past—a certain caste of "school-trained architects," licensed, privileged and patented by a local bishop, gallop from one house of worship to the next, requiring the disfigurement of priceless works of sacred art, in the end mangling the entire edifice of the church—in its form as well as in its meaning, in its consistency as well as in its beauty.

In the case of countless churches, fashion has audaciously fitted into the wounds of traditional architecture its wretched gewgaws of the day—its stage platform, its rearranged pews, its dry-wall sanctuary, its emasculated baldacchino and so on...

Even so, looking to Notre Dame de Paris, we understand there is hope. Despite the traces of destruction imprinted on this ancient church, Our Lady at Paris is still at this day a majestic and sublime edifice.

In the 1850s, inspired by Hugo's novel, architect Eugene Emmanuel Violet-le-Duc drew up a plan to properly restore the cathedral to its former splendor. He created stained glass windows by copying stained glass from the cathedrals in other French cities that had escaped the fashion-driven architects and the indiscriminate destruction wrought by the Revolution.

He also replaced all the sculptures; he researched the pictorial records of other French Gothic cathedrals, and by doing so he was able to recreate the works of the medieval sculptors. He designed a new flèche to top off the crossing of the cathedral as it had once been. He also restored the great doors of the cathedral and the gargoyles on the rooftop. Lastly, he had the interior scoured of the old whitewash and treated the exterior with a chemical that would preserve the stone from the industrial pollution which was already becoming a problem in the 19th century.

Thus, Violet-le-Duc took on one of the greatest projects in the history of restoration, and was very much successful in returning the cathedral to its original beauty and charm. Perhaps then, in a decade to come, after some semblance of sanity returns to certain diocesan bureaucracies, our churches—those still left standing and still owned by the Church—can be restored to their original beauty—stained glass windows, statues, communion rails, tabernacles, murals, stencilwork, pews, and the various traditional furnishings—fonts, confessionals, altars, shrines, tabernacle lamps, and people—in essence, the "stuff" that makes a building a Catholic church.

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