

After the catastrophic fire at Notre Dame, what might rebuilding look like?

The 12th-century cathedral was already beginning to crumble.

by [Adelle M. Banks](#), [Tom Heneghan](#), and [Yonat Shimron](#)

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Firefighters tackle the blaze as flames and smoke rise from Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris as it burns on April 15, 2019. AP Photo/Michel Euler.

Pledges to rebuild followed quickly after the 856-year-old Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was engulfed in flames yesterday, destroying most of its roof and the entire wooden frame in the interior.

Its landmark rectangular towers withstood the flames, as did its rose-shaped stained-glass windows, along with some of its relics and works of art. A firefighter and two police officers were injured, according to news reports.

The fire alarm went off at about 6:30 p.m. As several hundred firefighters fought the flames, people on the street stood weeping at the sight—gasping when the spire collapsed—and gathered after sunset to sing the Ave Maria in French.

“It’s a part of our own flesh that has been damaged,” said Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, head of the French Catholic bishops conference. “There is something terrible about seeing the work of the centuries destroyed.”

The cause of the fire is not yet known, but is thought to be linked to a \$6.8 million renovation project.

A prime example of Gothic architecture and the seat of Paris’s Roman Catholic archbishop, the building dates back to 1163, when its cornerstone was laid. Work continued through the 14th century, when its large flying buttresses—its famous arched exterior supports—were installed.

Notre Dame was also beginning to crumble. Last year leaders issued an urgent call for funding to restore it. The statues of the 12 apostles and four evangelists that stood around a steeple erected in the 1840s were lifted away by cranes the week before the fire.

French president Emmanuel Macron declared at the scene that the cathedral would be rebuilt.

“We will appeal to the greatest talents,” he said, “because that’s what our history deserves, because it’s our profound destiny.”

Jim Shepherd, director of preservation and facilities at Washington National Cathedral, said it is often “challenging in this day and age to raise money to implement repairs for cathedrals.” Notre Dame had struggled to raise money for the renovation work that was in progress and had sought donations from beyond its country’s borders—including from wealthy Americans. Yet after the fire three wealthy French business owners alone pledged 500 million euros for reconstruction.

There had been a series of attacks on churches around France in prior weeks, including a fire at another Paris church, Saint-Sulpice. But the blaze there was at an entrance on ground level, not on a high cathedral roof that would be difficult to reach.

This is not the first time the church has suffered damage. Its religious imagery was damaged during the French Revolution, and Notre Dame has undergone numerous renovations. But this blaze may be its most catastrophic.

[At the same time Notre Dame was burning, but otherwise apparently unrelated, a small fire broke out that damaged the roof of Marwani Prayer Hall near al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, on what Judaism recognizes as the Temple Mount. The fire was extinguished quickly, according to local news reports.]

—Religion News Service; added information

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