



A homily preached by the Rev. Charleston D. Wilson on the occasion of the Annual Meeting of the Sarasota-Manatee Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, 6 May 2019, Sarasota, Florida.

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

In the 24 April edition of the *New York Times*, Alex Marshall, the *Times* journalist for European culture, published an article entitled “Musicians Rejoice That Cathedral’s Organ Was Spared.” The article interviewed several contemporary European organists who’d recently played recitals on the Grand Organ at *Notre-Dame de Paris*.

Predictably, all the organists interviewed were greatly relieved that the most famous organ in France—and arguably the most famous pipe organ in the world—had largely been spared. “Damaged, But Not Destroyed,” was another headline I saw. Obviously, virtuosos like Vierne and Devernay couldn't be interviewed, but I'm sure they are quite relieved as well.

About halfway into the article, which I commend to you in its entirety, we hear from Olivier Latry, whom you will all know is of three persons currently holding the title of Organist at Notre-Dame (interestingly, it's an appointment managed by the City of Paris, not the Cathedral). Latry was the organist on Palm Sunday, which turned out to be the last time the instrument was played before the blaze:

It had been a beautiful service, he said, especially the moment when, according to tradition, a priest knocked on the cathedral's door with his processional cross and demanded to be let in. As the cathedral's doors opened, he let the organ's full volume swell, sending its musical colors reverberating around the Gothic building. It sounded like Christ was entering the cathedral.

Do you remember the photographs of the nave the morning after the fire – that unforgettable image of the timber roof missing, with that radiant beam of morning light piercing the darkness of a burned-out, still-smoldering medieval shell? You could almost smell the moist air and smoke damage just looking at it. Yet, no matter the devastation, that image was eternally gorgeous, hopeful and Easter writ large.

What I really want to say in this little homily is quite simple, and I hope quite profound.

And it is this: no matter how burned out your shell is right now, no matter the intensity emanating from the fire that's burning around you in some relationship, or at work with the boss from hell (surely, he or she is a clergyperson!), I want you to know that you matter! And you matter incredibly. And you matter eternally—and not just because God loves everyone, which He surely does.

What I mean is this: your dedication to the grace of music is very often THE (!) way that light enters – the moment Christ Himself enters – the burned-out shell of our lives. “It sounded like Christ was entering the Cathedral,” said Latry.

And when Christ enters anything – a burned-out building or a worn-out heart – the whole thing is instantly filled with love and light and resurrection hope. That’s why I have to say, from the bottom of my own heart, and on behalf of all God’s people, thank you for everything you do for us in this community.

Finally, and with no disrespect to St. Paul's memorable hymn about love in 1st Corinthians, a closer reading of the New Testament reveals that music, like love, also endures forever. At this point someone might argue that the pipe organ itself at Notre Dame might endure forever; it’s well on its way, having survived the French Revolution, two world wars, the crushing secularism of twentieth century France and now a devastating fire. But I'm not talking about well-built pipe organs or even the love *of* music. I’m talking about the music of love: that is what endures forever. That’s the real fire!

In the end, we are forced to admit that all fires aren’t bad. While even a simple fire can surely destroy when set in the wrong place, the same small fire can also provide necessary warmth and glowing light in the darkness. And we rightly speak, on occasion, of the fire of love. We all had that feeling at least once.

And a raging fire alters everything. The fire of God’s love alters everything – really, everything! That’s what you mean to me as your chaplain: you are fire to me – the fire of God’s burning, glowing love, as you praise Him in music.

In a word, your work endures, like love itself, because, when you offer your gift in love – in praise of God's love – especially in those times when the “strife is fierce” and “the warfare is long,” I promise you that Christ enters the cathedral of our hearts. And that gives us hope and a stunning glimpse of that “distant triumph song” — the one that’s always been playing and drawing us to that place “where hearts are brave again and arms are strong. Alleluia. Alleluia.”

Thank you for your ministry. It is a pleasure to pray for you and to serve you as your chaplain.