

You've seen the photos this week of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. I'm thinking of the interior shots, taken just after the flames subsided, of the heavy smoke arising in the cathedral nave after the charred Medieval beams had come crashing down. It was all muted gray and black . . . except for a single object shining through the destruction.

It was of course the chancel cross.
The most visible, maybe the only intact, thing amid the destruction.

That's ironic, isn't it?
When we've just heard the story of the cross itself as the ultimate source of destruction, the means by which Jesus Christ was humiliated, tortured and killed. The standard means of capital punishment in the Roman Empire for common criminals and other "undesirables".

O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument of shameful death to be for us the means of life . . .

It is only because of the passionate story we heard tonight that the symbol of the cross has been transformed, from a source of shame to joy, from death to life.

Because it's upon a cross that God incarnate chose to bear all the sins and burdens, humiliation and hurt, humanity can possibly know. By going there first, going there with us, God in Jesus turned the cross into a source of hope and strength, once and for all.

This doesn't mean that we'll never know pain and despair. We're still mortal, still living in a broken world. We're still living in a world where a landmark of some 800 years standing can go up in flames in a matter of hours.

Where life as we know it can shatter in an instant.
Still living in a world where our lives –
no matter how together we may look on the outside –
can feel, *can be*, empty on the inside.

And it is there that the cross endures as a defiant beacon of hope,
a sign of God's presence, God's passion,
in the midst of human sin and folly.

*O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument
of shameful death to be for us the means of life . . .*

There are of course some basic principles of metallurgy why
the gold cross remains amid the rubble of Notre Dame;
gold can sustain higher temperatures wood.
But it's not the gold that makes the cross valuable, is it?
The most precious cross in the history of the world is the old,
rugged, weather-beaten, blood-stained cross of Jesus.
That's the cross that has become for us the source of life and
symbol of hope.

So it is fitting this Holy Week that the world see in the rubble of Notre Dame,
the cross --
spanning the glory of the past into hope for the future,
amid the despair of the present.

Because of the cross of Jesus we remember this night,
we have hope shining deep in us.
Because of Jesus' passion and compassion,
we have the promise that the cross endures this night
not only in the shell of Notre Dame,
but anywhere and everywhere that needs God's hope and healing.

Those three African-American churches in Louisiana burned by arson
within a week this spring?
We don't have to see pictures to know that the cross is there
with those suffering the crime of racism and hate.
The cross is there tonight on our southern border with immigrants,

no matter their religion,
seeking safety and asylum for their families.

The cross is there, lifted high, with the man who's just received a
devastating diagnosis.

The woman who's been sexually assaulted but is afraid to report it.

The kid who doesn't fit in.

That's where the cross is lifted high.

Tonight we drop our burdens and cares, sins and prayers,
at the foot of the cross.

Leave them there for Jesus.

Let them go up in the smoke of the paschal fire tomorrow night
at the Easter Vigil.

Be purified, be freed, to carry the healing hope of the cross of Jesus
from this place out where it belongs –
in this broken and broken-hearted world God so loves.

*O God, by the passion of your blessed Son you made an instrument
of shameful death to be for us the means of life,
so make us instruments of your peace and compassion.*

AMEN.

