

Reflection for April 2019 Peter Millar

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The Agony and the Hope:

I am writing this on Friday April 19th - Good Friday, when through the centuries the world church has remembered the agony of Jesus on the Cross and the many sufferings experienced within the human family both then and now.

Which brings me to some words I read on this Good Friday. Many of us have the experience that sometimes in our reading the words in front of us directly address us in our depths. In a way which is not easy to define they are articulating what we can rightly term, "the heart of the matter."

I read such words today. They appeared in The Times - not everyone's favourite paper but let us for a moment put aside our prejudices! The paper's leading article had the title **'Easter Rising: the flames engulfing Notre Dame and the persecution of Christians worldwide show a faith embattled. Yet its adherents stand firm and command respect.'**

(If you feel it is appropriate please share this article with others, perhaps especially with younger people, with those of other faiths, and with those who are not followers of a religious path, but believe, along with millions of others in basic human goodness and the continuing search for truth within a moral order.)

***** In large parts of the globe, these are dark times in which to profess Christian faith. The plight of the persecuted faithful is intensifying. Recent figures from a Dutch charity called Open Doors suggests that 245 million Christians worldwide face violence and oppression, a rise of 15 million over the previous year. As Christians worldwide commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, those who do so in liberty and safety will be mindful of the risks undertaken by their sisters and brothers overseas. Particularly, but not only, Roman Catholics will have imprinted on their consciousness the images this week of a historic cathedral engulfed in flames.

The durability of Notre Dame, allied to the willingness of Christians to undergo mortal risks for their faith, is a reminder of an essential truth. In an age of secularism and doubt across much of the western world, Christianity retains its crucial historical role in civilisation and inspires ordinary people to extraordinary acts of heroism and sacrifice.

The facts of persecution are grim. Christians face danger in 73 countries. The worst is North Korea, where a personality cult of the dictator has developed into a bizarre and brutal civic religion. Not all places of persecution are so extreme, which is why they must be kept in the public eye. In India, the world's most populous democracy, Christians face dangers from a wave of violence meted out by ultra-nationalists to non-Hindus. In China, new constraints on religious worship have given the authorities license to shut down and demolish churches. Jeremy Hunt, the UK's foreign secretary, launched in December a review into the worldwide persecution of Christians. Its first steps must be to gauge its extent and aid the victims.

It is in this maelstrom that the burning of Notre Dame at the heart of a great western democracy has caused anguish and despair. The damage is a cultural and historical tragedy. Yet the popular response by Parisians, and by French people of all faiths and none, revealed far more than shock and grief. It also evinced a powerful awareness of from where civilisation derives.

Notre Dame has stood through nine centuries and under vastly different temporal rulers. Till 1789 it was a symbol of clerical power and wealth. During the French Revolution it became a target for destruction and looting. Many statues affixed to the facade were decapitated, apparently owing to the misunderstanding that they depicted kings. In 1804 the cathedral was the setting for the coronation ceremony of Napoleon as emperor, with Pope Pius VII in attendance. It was a symbol of the new relationship between church and state established under a concordat in 1801. In the ensuing 200 years many societies have contended (and many still do) with defining the limits of religion, on this model.

The beauty, dignity and symmetry of Notre Dame awe anyone who visits. It survives, through the heroism of fire crews. The faith that inspired its construction still inspires people after centuries. When, this weekend, Christians commemorate Jesus' suffering and resurrection, they will testify to a vision of nobility that demands respect in an age of pluralism.

The iconoclastic American novelist Gore Vidal wrote a novel, *Julian*, dramatising the efforts of The Roman Emperor known as Julian the Apostate in stemming the spread of Christianity. What might have happened had he succeeded? We cannot possibly tell. The contribution of the Christian faith to civilisation, culture and philosophy is so immense that it is impossible to conceive of a world history without it. The faithful will see in the initial dogged

survival of Christendom an act of grace. Those of other faiths or none will ever be reminded of the moral obligation to defend the religious liberties of all. *****

***** There is considerable up-to-date information on the web about the current persecution of Christians. Google: persecution of Christians world-wide.**

***** Lord of the Cross, as we celebrate Easter in freedom and without fear, be close to the millions of our sisters and brothers in the world who suffer persecution, often daily, because they are Your followers. Even if they are far away, allow our hearts to feel their struggles, and to become more spiritually aware through their faithful witness. *****