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- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

FROM ASHES TO NEW LIFE

"Barn's on fire!" the humble farmer yelled at the top of his lungs in the middle of the night as he saw his family's future up in flames. When a college classmate shared that piece of her past, the intense pain still showed in her eyes from an event that happened when she was eight years old, almost fifteen years earlier. Life changing moments do that to people. Fire has a way of searing itself into the psyches of those who have been victims of it. It comes out of nowhere. It creates, at the very least, a temporary sense of helplessness. It has the real possibility of claiming life. It can take away a family's home, business, and way of life. It *does* alter their lives forever. I could see that in the eyes of a twenty-two-year-old college senior without a word being spoken beyond "Fire!"

My classmate's barn was destroyed, much of their dairy herd was lost, and their home was damaged beyond repair. It was devastating spiritually, emotionally, and economically. With the grace of God, and the help of neighbors, extended family, and insurance, they were able to rebuild their farm and home and be restored to a normal life, at least externally.

As I prep this column, I have just seen the images of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris up in flames, likely caused by an accident connected to a renovation project in the building. The image of the burning icon to Our Lady, Christ, and the ingenuity of the designers, artists and artisans who began the structure in 1163 is nothing short of heartbreaking. It is the symbol of Paris as both a city and a place of historic faith. Notre Dame and Paris are inseparable. When Paris became a hotbed of terrorist attacks, one of the first places where protection was sent was the beloved Gothic Cathedral.

The images are gruesome physically and spiritually. Details are sketchy about how the fire started and what was destroyed and what was not.

We know Notre Dame is filled with relics of saints from the last 800 years. I pray that they aren't destroyed. We also know many artifacts were removed for the restoration project, so they will hopefully be preserved. Sadly, we also know that the image of the identity of Paris has been a recent target of vandalism, and churches all over France have been burned in acts of religious hatred. It's the world we live in now, and we pray that by God's grace and mass conversion, those acts will become things of the past through the goodwill of people, and not military protection of the sites.

I also saw an image of people, young and old, gathered around the Cathedral and reportedly singing Ave Maria, Hail Mary. In a nation consecrated and historically devoted to Mary, it is fitting and a testament to faith that the ones bruised most intensely turn to our Mother for comfort in the face of an inferno of tragedy. Their lives will never be the same. Depending on who you ask, Notre Dame is the second or third most significant religious, artistic, historical, and architectural structure in the world. Right now, that is no consolation to the people of a city and country whose hearts are altered forever.

No, their consolation will come not from the history of what was, but what is. A faith that continues despite the damage to a beautiful and symbolic building. It's no secret that the faith in France needs renewal. There are pockets of renewed fervor, but the practice of the faith that inspired Notre Dame has been waning for over a century. Maybe this can be a catalyst for renewed fervor which would bring great joy or Our Lady's heart.

The bitter irony of the fire happening during Holy Week is not lost. It is sad and maybe even draws more attention to the event, but the spiritual glow from the ashes is not one of destruction, but rather a reminder that our roots and our faith are based in death leading to new life. Jesus walked into the conspiracy of His eventual death, only to rise again. That same reality repeats itself in our lives as individual disciples and as communities of disciples. We are constantly renewed in the goodness and mercy of God in our own mini-deaths each day.

No matter how hot and destructive the fire, no matter how searing the images of flames are in our memories, we hold ourselves and brothers and sisters in Paris in the truth that in our faith, the death in ashes leads to new life in the Risen Christ.