



PRIX
FRANÇOIS GUIZOT
INSTITUT DE FRANCE



Prix François Guizot-Institut de France 2024

Award ceremony

Monday 9th December 2024, 6:00 PM, Grande Salle des Séances

Speech of Eric Roussel

Président of the jury

By recognizing your book this year, we aim to commend exemplary historical work coupled with literary success. In seeking to illuminate the collision of mythologies surrounding Notre-Dame de Paris—this sacred edifice embodying a heritage jewel, a Christian power center, and a state power sanctuary—you have also given new life to the cathedral ravaged by fire five years ago. While, under the direction of General Georgelin and Mr. Philippe Jost, countless anonymous actors, aided by very generous donors, have been striving to meet the deadline set by the President of the Republic to reopen the doors of the edifice, you have endeavored to give meaning to this rehabilitation. Your book is a monument of erudition, and it reads like the most captivating of biographies. In his "Odelettes," Gérard de Nerval went so far as to write: "Notre-Dame is very old: we may see her bury Paris, which she saw born." This illustrates how Notre-Dame is a symbol of eternity, from which the throne, the altar, and the Republic have attempted over the centuries to wrest some glimmers.

The central theme of your work, what your science and talent illuminate in a captivating way, is the double, even triple, face of the cathedral, which over the centuries was both a hub of disobedience and resistance to power and a place where that same power came to reinforce its legitimacy. Until the Renaissance, this Christian sanctuary, whose dimensions and elegance captivate the imagination, was primarily one of the great intellectual centers of Europe. Its doctoral school, where Abelard taught, was famous across the continent. Its legacy is not insignificant, as all this gave rise to the University of Paris and also to Western music.

Notre-Dame, you show, is one of the most important sites of memory in our country because it was built when the Capetian dynasty was asserting itself. Initially, it was a place of shared power between the king and the bishop before becoming the founding site of Gallicanism, the doctrine by which the throne and the altar, united against the imperial ambitions of the Papacy, proclaimed the independence of the Church of France from Rome. This is the purpose of the first Estates-General convened in 1302 at Notre-Dame by Philip the Fair. The conflict was very violent but also foundational. In response to the provocation of the King of France, Pope Boniface VIII reacted energetically but, after direct confrontations, he lost the battle while Philip the Fair managed to rally the French prelate behind him.

"The Assembly of Notre-Dame in 1302," you rightly emphasize, "is therefore doubly foundational to our national identity:

- by the affirmation of Gallicanism, a fundamental French passion, a national creed, an essential pillar of the life of the monarchy, empires, and even republics, at least until the era of Jules Ferry, and only ended by the separation of Church and State at the beginning of the 20th century.

- by the institution of the Estates-General, the precursor of the modern state parliaments and the early beginnings of representative government [...] After the Revolution, the assembly of Notre-Dame acquired a particular resonance and entered the iconography of French history, alongside the opening of the Estates-General of 1789 by Louis XVI."

From this founding act, it follows, as you show, that little by little, and especially under the Bourbon dynasty in the 17th century, Notre-Dame, now an archbishopric, became the privileged place of royal power legitimization. The first of the Bourbon kings, Henry IV, attended a mass there in 1594 to bolster his popularity, having just converted, and with Paris still hostile to Protestants. His grandson Louis XIV went even further, having a group of statues erected in the middle of the choir, the most sacred part of the building, where he is represented with his father Louis XIII and the Virgin in a Pietà. From the cathedral, the Sun King made the place where the great events of his reign were celebrated: the birth of his children, military victories, and the grand funerals of the most eminent servants of the monarchy, starting with Turenne and the Great Condé.

You perfectly show how Notre-Dame was predisposed, from the early days of the French Revolution, to undergo a violent backlash. An iconoclastic rage then fell upon the edifice. In 1793, the convention ordered the beheading of twenty-eight statues of crowned heads, mistakenly believing they were stigmatizing a now detested power, when the statues actually represented the kings of Judea, not the kings of France... Under the sacred vaults, the goddess Reason was soon celebrated, and then, according to Robespierre's wish, the Supreme Being.

Napoleon brought order to all this and, aware of the symbolic importance of the place, had himself crowned by the Pope there in 1804. Those who succeeded him until the end of the Second Empire were very conscious of the regenerative power of the place for the legitimacy of power.

Then came the more chaotic period of the Third Republic, during which the cathedral suffered the backlash of the separation of Church and State. Ministers no longer dared to show themselves there, only sometimes delegating their wives for major occasions. The Sacred Union during the Great War contributed to some appeasement. In the spring of 1940, as the German breakthrough was threatening Paris, a singular spectacle was even witnessed in the cathedral: the participation of the government, composed mostly of agnostics or free thinkers, in a Te Deum, which unfortunately had no effect on the determination of the adversary.

In your writing, dear Maryvonne de St. Pulgent, all these episodes make up an enlightening narrative that reveals our identity, reflected in the cathedral. And today, as you show, over the years, Notre-Dame has become a sort of French Westminster, where the funerals or commemorative ceremonies of the great figures of our recent history are celebrated: General de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, or François Mitterrand. Even though the separation of Church and State remains intangible, the centuries-old sanctuary and theater of so many memorable events remains a place of the sacralization of power.

As you all know, this year marks the 150th anniversary of the death of François Guizot, whose memory will be honored tomorrow under the dome of the Institut de France. I believe we couldn't have made a better choice this year for our prize. For your book, dear Maryvonne de St. Pulgent, is also, in a way, a tribute to Guizot since, as you point out, he was, during the July Monarchy, the very effective and wise promoter of a heritage policy from which the cathedral, then in a pitiable and even worrying state, was to benefit. If Victor Hugo brought Notre-Dame into our imagination, it is to Guizot that we largely owe the renewed interest that contributed to the rehabilitation of the edifice.

There is finally another person you wanted to do justice to: Viollet-le-Duc. To this day, a legend, if not dark then at least grey, surrounds this great but ultimately poorly understood figure. We had recent proof of this during discussions on the reconstruction of the edifice, particularly the famous spire he created and whose fall into the flames struck Parisians with astonishment on April 15, 2019.

Viollet-le-Duc, as you brilliantly demonstrate, remains one of the great misunderstood figures of our history. Self-taught, always on the fringes of institutions, sometimes opposing

them and notably, it must be said, the Institut de France, he further aggravated his case in the eyes of many by seeking, to carry out his ventures, the support of the ruling power, even displaying his closeness to Napoleon III. Yet it is essentially to him that we owe the rescue of so many medieval monuments looked down upon by a certain official ideology fond of classicism and antiquity. And Viollet-le-Duc, as you point out, did not merely reorient the artistic taste of his contemporaries, he rediscovered the techniques that had once allowed so many boldly built edifices to defy the centuries. Thus, he was able to construct the spire, which has now fortunately been restored: "Weighing a total of seven hundred and fifty tons, the spire," you write, "is carefully calculated to withstand the most violent winds, as proven by a hurricane in February 1860." Viollet-le-Duc had not foreseen climate change, but he gave us the means to defy it.

Thank you, dear Maryvonne de St. Pulgent, for giving us this beautiful book. As you recall, during the solemn session of the Institut de France gathered to pay tribute to the cathedral, our friend Michel Zink, whom I am honored to succeed as president of this jury, concluded by quoting the last verse of "Après de ma blonde," in which the Belle enumerates what she would give to see her soldier friend, imprisoned during Louis XIV's war in Holland, again: "I would give Versailles, Paris, and Saint Denis, the towers of Notre-Dame and the bell tower of my country." Since the fire, Michel Zink asserted, everyone sees in the towers of Notre-Dame what is dearest to their heart: the bells of their country.

"The parish of the kings, then that of the nation, has also become," you write, "the cathedral of the people." Let me tell you that you too have powerfully contributed to this with your memorable book, and I thank you for it.