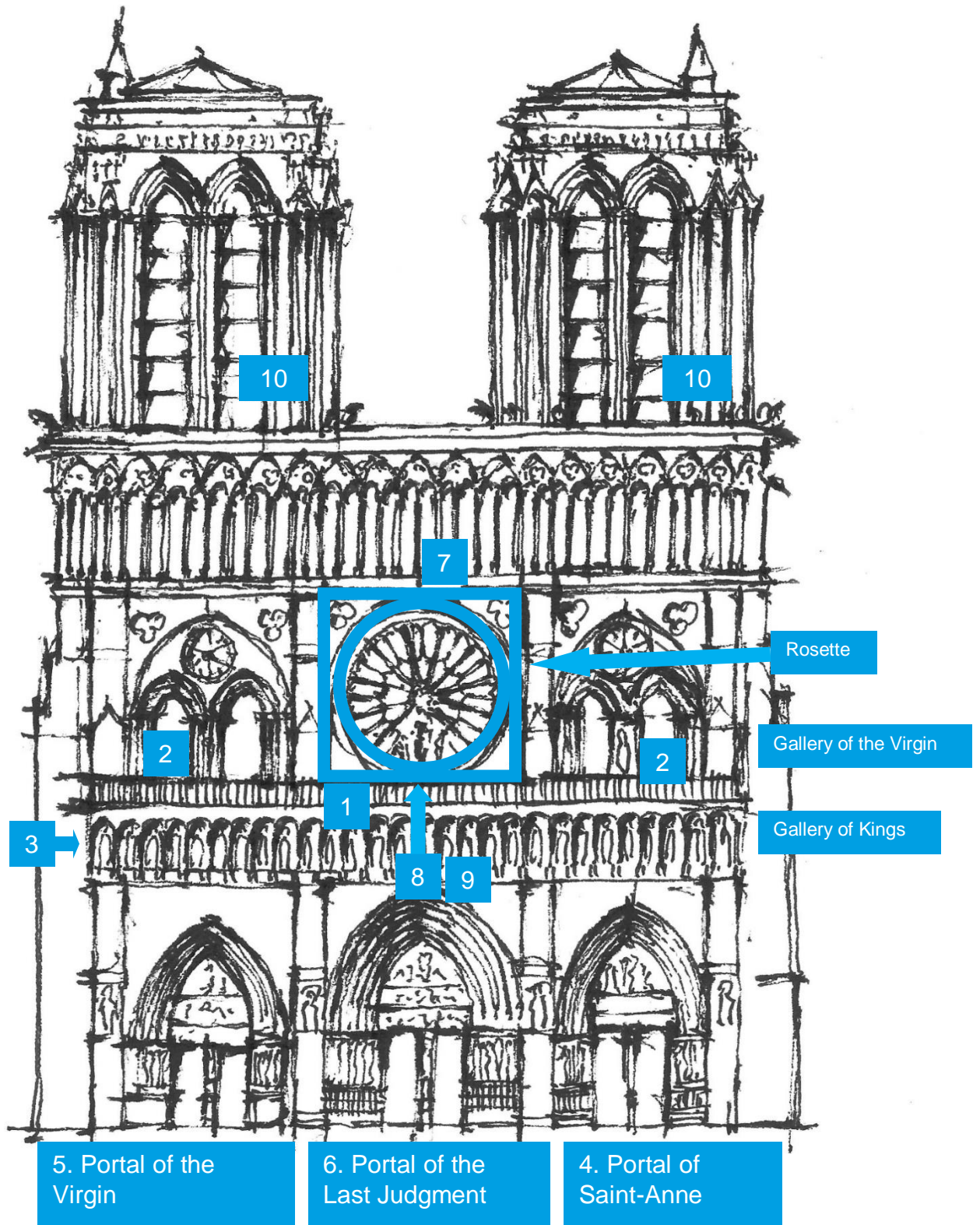




EDUCATIONAL GUIDE

Western facade of Notre-Dame de Paris



READING PATH FROM THE FORECOURT

To guide the contemplation of the western facade of Notre-Dame de Paris, here is the proposed reading order, from bottom to top and from right to left — in the sense of salvation, from promise to fulfillment :

1. **The square** — symbol of the earth, the created world, and the human condition.
2. **Adam and Eve** — humanity wounded by sin, called to salvation.
3. **The kings of Judah** — the lineage from which the Messiah will be born, memory of the promise.
4. **The Portal of Saint-Anne (right)** — the promise fulfilled in the birth of Our Lady and the preparation for salvation.
5. **The Portal of the Last Judgment (center)** — Christ the Savior and Judge, heart of the Christian faith.
6. **The Portal of the Virgin (left)** — Mary glorified, image of the Church and the action of the Spirit.
7. **The circle** — the great rosette, sign of divine perfection and of the Incarnation : God is inscribed in creation.
8. **Marie at the center** — meeting place between heaven and earth, mediation of salvation.
9. **The angels** — spiritual figures, amazed by the mystery of God made man.
10. **The towers** — elevation of faith towards the light, horizon of eternal praise.

In a glance, the facade of Notre-Dame leads from the terrestrial square to the divine circle, from the world created in the light of God.

It reads like an invisible cross where the vertical lines of the impulse of faith meet the horizontal lines of the history of salvation, united in Mary, at the center of the mystery of the Incarnation.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The facade : gateway into the mystery of the cathedral

The western facade of Notre-Dame de Paris is not only a monumental entrance : it is a symbolic threshold, a passage between the tumult of the city and the encounter with God. The one who stops on the forecourt and looks up discovers more than a gothic masterpiece. The facade is a stone manifesto, intended to instruct, edify and lead to interiority.

Begun in 1163 under the episcopate of Maurice de Sully, the cathedral was completed in the middle of the 14th century. Built between 1200 and 1250, the western facade owes much to this visionary bishop, elected in 1160 on the advice of Louis VII to choose "the most zealous for souls". Faced with the heresies of time, notably Catharism which denied that God could be made flesh, he wanted to affirm the heart of the Christian faith : the mystery of the Incarnation.

The facade proclaims in stone the central mystery of faith : God became man and took flesh at the heart of the world. The square, symbol of the earth, opens to the circle, figure of the divine: geometry itself reveals this encounter. Three portals open onto three biblical narratives, three superimposed registers organize the vertical reading, two towers frame the whole and soar towards the sky : everything contributes to a harmony that reflects the divine order.

Arriving by the street Neuve-Notre-Dame, pierced by Maurice de Sully to provide a perspective of six meters (19 ft.) on the central portal, the medieval visitor suddenly discovered the great rosette, halo of stone and light around the Virgin and Child. The visual shock was all the stronger because the forecourt, a vast esplanade at the foot of the facade, was an intense place to live. They preached to the crowd, they rendered justice, they played religious mysteries, real catechetical plays that staged the great biblical stories. There were also the famous honorable fines : guilty parties, in shirts and bare feet, came publicly to beg for forgiveness. These spectacular rituals inscribed the cathedral at the heart of the social and judicial life of the city, reminding that it was both a house of prayer and a place of collective memory.

Even today, the message remains : this facade was built to be lifted up, made to last and to speak to everyone, believers or not, yesterday as today. It remains a living threshold where everyone can find a light, a memory and a beauty that invites him to enter, and to let himself be led towards the truth of the Christian faith that it proclaims.

Notre-Dame : cult building, place of faith, place of history and culture

From its origins, Notre-Dame was designed as a cathedral, that is to say the church of the bishop.

The word comes from the cathedra, the seat that symbolizes the teaching authority of the bishop and makes the cathedral the mother church of the diocese. It was here that the great Christian feasts were celebrated, the sacraments gathered the people of God and the Gospel was proclaimed to all.

Yet, from the Middle Ages, its role went beyond the religious sphere alone. Located in the heart of the Île de la Cité, Notre-Dame has established itself as an urban and political landmark. The kings of France had Te Deum chanted there, preachers marked the collective consciousness, and students from the nearby University received intellectual and spiritual nourishment. In 1239, Saint Louis deposited the Crown of Thorns acquired in Constantinople there, before being transferred to the Sainte-Chapelle. In 1302, Philip the Fair summoned the first States-General of the kingdom.

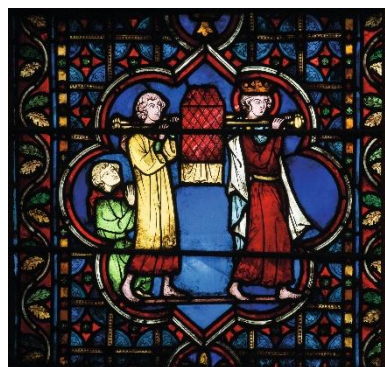
Later, in 1638, Louis XIII consecrated France to the Virgin Mary with a solemn vow. In 1886, Paul Claudel was converted there during a Christmas mass. The history of Paris and that of the cathedral merge : Coronation of Napoleon I, dynastic marriages and baptisms, national funerals, liberation of 1944... Notre-Dame was always the setting for major events.

Place of worship, it has also become a place of memory. We prayed there before the wars as well as after to thank their outcomes, they gathered there after the attacks on the Bataclan — and the Marseillaise was played at the great organ. The funerals of heads of state were celebrated there. Cathedral of the kings, then of the Empire and the Republic. Through it, the unity of the nation, and even of the world, is manifested, as witnessed by the planetary emotions on the evening of the 2019 fire.

The cultural dimension is very real : literature and arts have taken over its image, from Victor Hugo to contemporary cinema. But this culture is not an end in itself : it is at the service of worship, which remains the primary vocation of the cathedral.



Cathedra, seat of the archbishop. Liturgical furniture created by Guillaume Bardet (2024)



Saint Louis and his brother Robert, barefoot, wearing the Crown of Thorns at Notre-Dame on 19 August 1239.

The cathedral district : cloister, archbishopric,

Hôtel-Dieu

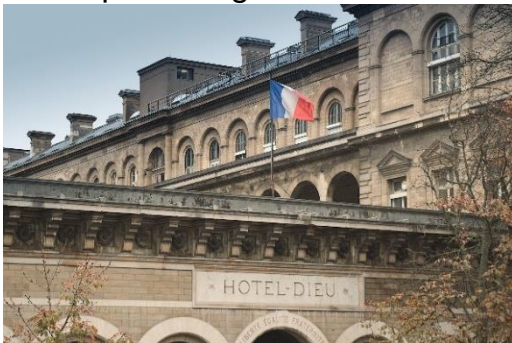
From the outset, the cathedral was part of a coherent urban, spiritual and intellectual ensemble. At his side stood the cloister of Notre-Dame, true heart of canonical life where the canons resided. This cloister was not only a place of prayer, but also a cathedral school : they taught theology and liberal arts, preparing the rise of the University of Paris. Masters like Pierre Lombard passed on their knowledge, and the students came to train there before spreading throughout Europe.

The cloister of Notre-Dame, true heart of canonical life, opened to the north of the parvis by a door next to the church of Saint-Jean-le-Rond, without direct communication with the street Neuve-

Notre-Dame. Created by Bishop Maurice de Sully in the 12th century to provide a six-meter view of the central portal, this artery was initially intended to open up the parvis and the cathedral, connecting them on one hand with street Marché Pallu, today's street de la Cité, and, beyond, to the streets of Arcis and Saint-Martin, now merged, and on the other hand, by the Petit Pont, to the street Saint-Jacques. It quickly became the "street of booksellers", animated by copyists, partholder and booksellers who disseminated manuscripts through the system of pecia, in use in medieval universities. This process consisted in dividing a manuscript into books rented separately, allowing several scribes to make copies simultaneously and accelerate the transmission of knowledge. Thus, by directly connecting the forecourt of the cathedral to the university district of the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, the street Neuve-Notre-Dame contributed to making Paris one of the most radiant spiritual and intellectual centers of medieval Europe.

In the immediate vicinity, along the Seine to the south, stood the episcopal palace, residence of the bishop and then the archbishop of Paris. This building, which symbolized the pastoral authority and institutional continuity of the Church, was vandalized in 1830 and 1831 during riots. On the north side of the cathedral was the small church of Saint-Jean-le-Rond, which served as a baptistery : dedicated to St. John the Baptist, it recalled that entry into the cathedral begins with entry into Christian life, through baptism.

Finally, the Hôtel-Dieu, founded by Saint Landry in 651 and then rebuilt in the 12th century, developed along the street Neuve-Notre-Dame, on the south side of the forecourt. Replacing the



The Hôtel-Dieu, belonging to the cathedral space.

hospital Saint-Christophe, it welcomed the sick and the poor. Its location, directly opposite the cathedral, said in stone the double commandment of Christ : on one side the worship of God, on the other the service of the suffering brother. Processions and prayers frequently linked these two institutions, showing that faith and charity never go one without the other.

This ensemble gave the Île de la Cité its nickname of "ringing island", as the bells of the many nearby churches echoed there. The cathedral was therefore not an isolated monument, but the beating heart of a neighborhood where the prayer of canons, the teaching of masters, charity towards the poor and intellectual research in the service of God and men were combined.

Brief chronology : construction, transformations, destructions, restaurations, reconstruction after 2019



Paris becomes the capital of the Frankish kingdom. During his reign, which ended in 511, Clovis laid the foundations of contemporary France. Lutetia, the Roman city, was renamed Parisii. The city, limited at that time to the île de la Cité, becomes the capital of a unified Frankish kingdom, and already strongly linked to Christianity with the conversion of Clovis around 498.

508



The Crusades.

At the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban II called on Christian nobles to come and defend the Christian holy places occupied by the Turks. During the Third Crusade (1189-1192), Philip II Augustus and Richard the Lionheart took up the cross at Notre-Dame in 1189. Then, at the start of the Seventh Crusade (1248-1254), Saint Louis received a blessing for his journey.

1095

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1291



Saint Louis prays at Notre-Dame and lays down the Crown of Thorns.

1239

During the Fourth Crusade, Saint Louis bought the Crown of Thorns from the Byzantine emperor Baldwin II of Courtenay. He brought the relic insignia to Notre-Dame, leading a procession, barefoot and dressed in a simple tunic. Subsequently, the Sainte-Chapelle was built to preserve the various relics of the Passion.



The Hundred Years' War.

Between France and England, the war spared Notre-Dame. However, it became the scene of several decisive moments of the war. Thus, in 1431, Henry VI, aged 10 years, was crowned king of England and king of France, even though Charles VII had been crowned king of France in 1429 at Reims. The latter also celebrates a *Te Deum* in the cathedral in 1447 during the reconquest of Paris by the French.

1337

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1453



1804

Coronation of the Emperor Napoleon I, in the presence of Pope Pius VII.

On 2 December 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte, First Consul from 1799 to 1804, became Emperor of the French in the presence of Pope Pius VII in the Parisian cathedral decorated by architects Percier and Fontaine. He took the name of Napoleon I. During the coronation ceremony, his wife Joséphine also became empress. The painter David represents this scene on two immense canvases.



Publication of the book *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo. The novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo, published in 1831, generated a national momentum for the restoration of the cathedral, damaged during the 1830 revolution. The dazzling success of the book leads to four reissues in just one month.

1831



Separation of church and state.
1905 On December 9, 1905, this central law for the Republic was enacted : "The Republic does not recognize, subsidize or subsidize any religion." Cults are no longer public institutions. The state becomes a secular state, allowing and guaranteeing the celebration of all religions' faiths.

Magnificat sung for the liberation of Paris.
The liberation of the city of Paris marked a decisive time for the Second World War. A Magnificat resonates in the heart of the Parisian cathedral, in the presence of General de Gaulle and General Leclerc. The Magnificat, a song whose words come from different passages of the Old Testament, is a Church thanksgiving canticle.

1944



Cathedral fire.
2019 On the 15th of April 2019, a major fire destroyed the framework (known as "the forest") of the cathedral ; the spire built by Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc also collapsed on the vaults of the transept crossing. This sinister event triggers a surge of generosity allowing the rapid implementation of a restoration project.

Consecration of the altar.
After five years of work, the cathedral reopens its doors to the public on December 8, 2024. Many ceremonies celebrate the reopening of the building: the revival of the organ and the consecration of the new altar by Archbishop Ulrich.

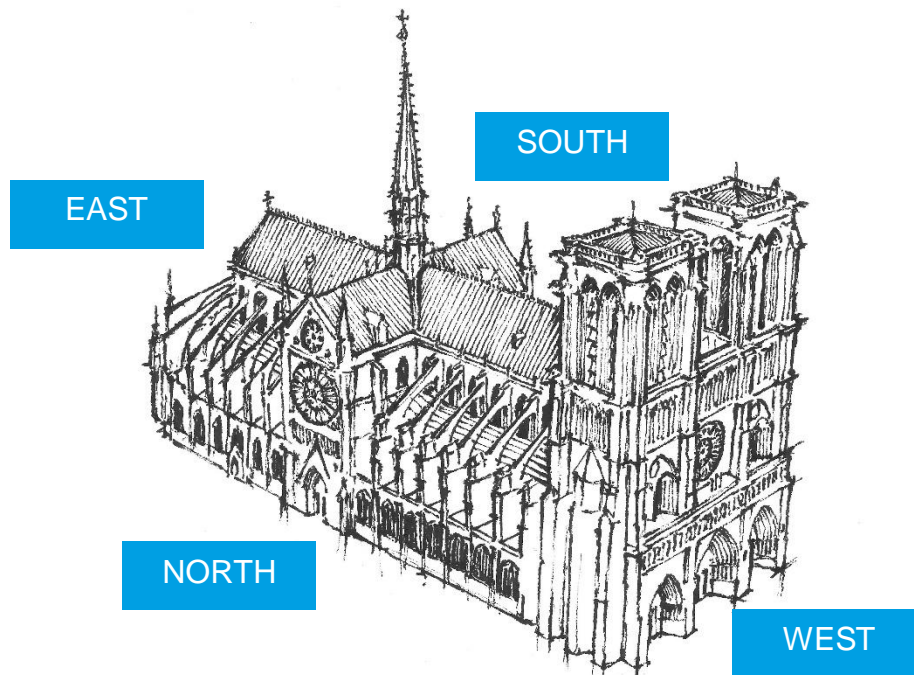
2024



TO READ A GOTHIC FACADE

The function of a western facade in cathedral architecture

In Gothic architecture, the western facade holds a decisive place. It is not only the monumental entrance of a building : it is the face of the cathedral, the first encounter between men and the mystery he is about to cross. Located in the west, it welcomes the faithful coming from the city and leads them symbolically towards the east, that is to say, towards the choir turned towards the sunrise, sign of the risen Christ. It sums up in itself the message of the edifice : passage from shadow to light, from the profane to the sacred, from the everyday world to the Kingdom of God.



In medieval Europe, the western facades were conceived as true architectural and theological programs. In Chartres, Amiens, Reims or Paris, they stand out for their width, their symmetry and the richness of their sculpted decoration. At Notre-Dame de Paris, begun around 1200, the facade measures 43.5 meters wide (142 ft.) and 45 meters high (147 ft.) up to the Gallery of Kings, framed by two towers that rise to 69 meters (226 ft.). This monumentality, unprecedented for the time, was intended to demonstrate both the power of the Christian faith and the prosperity of the capital of the Capetian kingdom.

The facade also plays a practical role : it brings together flows, concentrates access, and allows for the deployment of a unified iconography. Three portals open onto the nave, offering the crowd an orderly passage, each bearing a biblical teaching. The superimposed registers — gates, gallery of the Kings, rosette, towers — structure the vertical reading and gradually raise the gaze. The facade thus becomes a threshold crossed both physically and spiritually : those who enter the cathedral allow themselves to be first instructed from outside, before being invaded by the light from inside.

As early as the 12th century, Maurice de Sully had wanted this facade as a living catechesis, a response to the heresies that challenged the Incarnation. The Cathars, very present in the south of France in the 12th century, taught that matter was bad and that God could not truly be incarnated in a human body. By proclaiming that "the Word was made flesh" (Jn 1:14), the facade of Notre-Dame thus forcefully asserted the central truth

of Christianity : God has assumed our human condition to save and transfigure it.

In reading this mineral catechesis, the faithful did not only receive a teaching of stone: the parvis, directly linked to the facade, also served as an open-air pulpit. Justice was dispensed there, processions were organized, and preachers could point to a prophet, king or carved scene to support their sermon. The street Neuve-Notre-Dame, specially drilled to open a perspective towards the central portal, highlighted this "sacred theater" which proclaimed, in the eyes of all, the Christian faith. True stone prologue, the facade prepares souls for the encounter with God.

Christian symbolism of the facade : the passage from the secular world to God's world

The western facade of a cathedral is thought of as a passage. At Notre-Dame de Paris, it marks the threshold between the city and the sanctuary ; the forecourt, a transitional space, already invites the faithful to leave the tumult of the world to enter into the mystery of faith... The orientation itself expresses it : one enters from the west, place of the setting and death, to walk towards the east, direction of the rising sun, image of the risen Christ. Each step is a conversion, a passage from darkness to light. "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12).

The facade receives the evening light, it is not a coincidence but a spiritual intention. When the sun declines, the stone is inflamed with gold and fire : this light of the sunset announces that of Christ, "Light of the world" (Jn 8:12). At the moment when the day is passing away, the facade proclaims the promise of the return of the Lord, sun without decline.

Men can meet God in the flesh of Christ, and the material world is not despicable : it is the very place of redemption. Thus, the facade shows the Virgin presenting her Son, the humanity of Jesus exalted in his Coronation, and the Last Judgment which recalls the destiny of each one.

This symbolism remains current. The visitor of today, even non-believer, senses that he is crossing a single threshold. The facade recalls that the Church is not only a museum, but a house of God, open to lead men from the tumult of the city towards an inner encounter.

The forecourt is not just a waiting or circulation space : it is already a place of spiritual passage. In medieval symbolism, it represents the world still profane, but already visited by grace. There man leaves the tumult of the city to prepare himself to enter the house of God. They preached there, they did justice, they gathered the people :



the court is therefore the first step of the sanctuary, the place where the world meets the call of God.

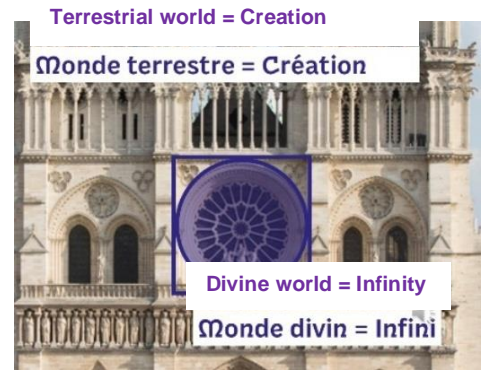
Spiritual reading of the facade from the forecourt

Seen from the forecourt, the facade of Notre-Dame appears as a page of stone, both cosmic and theological. Its geometry, lines and figures tell the mystery of the Incarnation.

In medieval symbolic, the square symbolizes the earth : created world, place of the human condition. It is here that Adam and Eve, whose medieval representation was inside the cathedral, on the back of the south transept, while the statues visible today on the outside are part of Viollet-le-Duc's rereading of the 19th century. Above the portals, the gallery of the kings of Judah, aligned above the portals, inscribe this humanity in a history: that of the genealogy of Christ, which crosses generations and fulfills the divine promise.

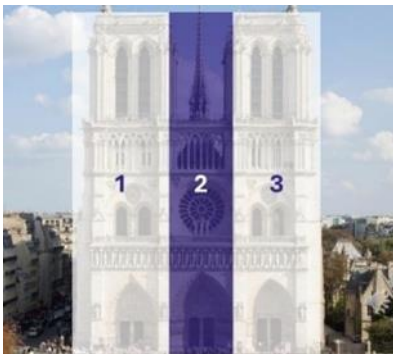
Above the terrestrial square is inscribed the circle of the great rosette : God who incarnates in creation. The circle, a perfect and infinite figure, comes to rest on the square as the sky embraces the earth. At the center of this encounter, Mary appears, carrying the Child Jesus in a halo of stone and light : she is the heart of the mystery, the one in whom the divine marries the human.

The angels express the spiritual world at the service of the mystery of salvation. Their contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation reminds us that the whole creation, visible and invisible, participates in the work of salvation.



The lines and the invisible cross of the facade

The vertical lines structure this spiritual ascent. They start from the land of men, run along the foothills, cross the gates and culminate in the towers. These four buttresses draw three vertical spaces, an image of the Trinity :



on the right, the portal of Saint-Anne, place of promise and human motherhood; in the center, the portal of the Last Judgment, where Christ, reveals himself as Savior and Judge; on the left, the portal of the Virgin, where the Spirit glorifies Mary and manifests the fullness of salvation. Thus, the Trinity crosses the stone: the creator Father, the redemptive Son and the sanctifying Spirit express themselves together in architecture.



*Portal of the Virgin
Glorification of Mary
Fullness of salvation*

*Portal of the Last
Judgment
Christ the Savior and
Judas*

*Saint-Anne Portal
Promise
Human motherhood*

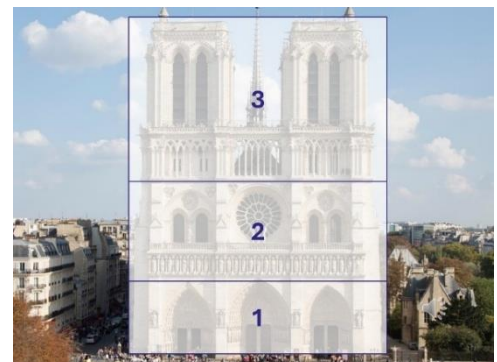
The horizontal lines, meanwhile, connect the levels of the facade as the degrees of a spiritual ascension.

- The lower register belongs to the visible world : the portals tell the story of salvation in the flesh and time.
- The median register, marked by the Gallery of Kings and the great rosette, unites earth and heaven : God comes to dwell in his people.
- The higher register, that of angels and towers, opens to divine glory and eternal praise.

These horizontal lines express the fidelity of God throughout time : they tell the story of salvation, which is accomplished in Christ and extends to all creation.

At the crossroads of vertical and horizontal lines is inscribed an invisible cross : that of Christ, center of the world and key to reading the edifice.

Everything converges towards Mary, who stands at the meeting point of the divine and the human: she is the bridge between God and men. The square and the circle. The square, the stone and the light, history and glory meet in her.



Spiritual geometry: square, circle, verticality and harmony

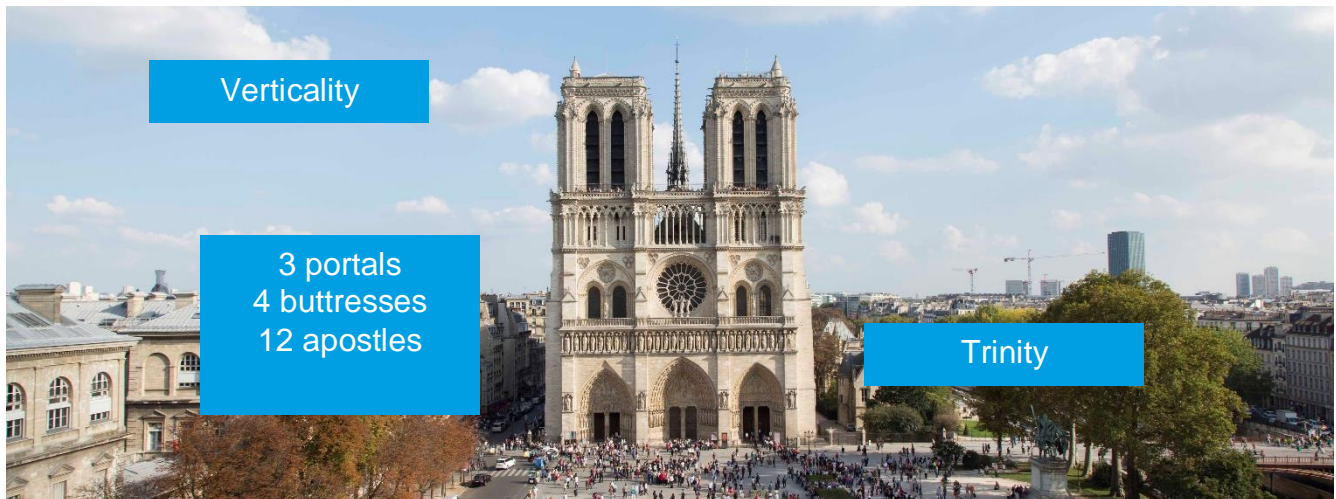
The medieval builders conceived every measure, every report with a symbolic meaning. The facade of Notre-Dame perfectly illustrates this conviction : it is structured by geometric shapes that express the mystery of faith.

The square, anchored in the earth, and the circle, figure of eternity, unite in the facade : the meeting of the created and the divine.

The facade is also organized according to the large symbolic numbers. The three portals lead to the Trinity ; the four buttresses inscribe the edifice of the created world and the cardinal points ; the twelve figures of kings or patriarchs evoke the tribes of Israel and the genealogy of Christ . From bottom to top, the façade is laid

out in five identifiable levels, a figure traditionally associated with man, particularly interesting for a cathedral placed under the sign of the Incarnation. The language of numbers thus unites with that of forms to make theology visible.

The harmony of the facade results from this rigorous composition. The apparent symmetry of the two towers, the regularity of the galleries, the balance between the lower registers and the central rose reflect a desired order, a reflection of higher intelligence. In the eyes of medieval men, to contemplate this harmony was already to foresee the cosmic harmony created by God. The rose itself appears as an image of the ordered cosmos around Christ where each creature finds its place in the divine economy.



Verticality adds an essential spiritual dimension. Everything in the facade invites you to look up : the lines of the buttresses, the openings of the gates, the elevations of the towers. Gothic architecture, with its pointed arches, ribbed vaults and flying buttresses, reflects the desire of the human soul to rise towards God. Technique becomes a spiritual language: it frees the walls so that the stone turns into light.

"I lift up my eyes to you, who sit in heaven" (Ps 123:1).

Finally, this geometry is not just an abstract science : it is a pedagogy.

The facade as a "stone book": a visual catechesis

In the Middle Ages, access to reading and writing was unevenly distributed according to the backgrounds, places and languages. If a part of the population, especially in rural areas, is not proficient in reading, cities and Paris in particular are experiencing a real spread of reading, carried by "small schools", market activities and administrative institutions. In this context, the transmission of faith is not only based on the written word: it also passes through words, liturgy and images. The facade of the cathedral is a complementary visual language, which images the faith of the Church and makes it accessible to all.

At Notre-Dame de Paris, this catechetical function is evident. The central portal presents the Last Judgment: Christ in glory, the archangel Michael weighing souls, Abraham welcoming the elect, while the damned themselves holding their chains. It is a homily carved on the ultimate destiny of man, intended to awaken consciences. The portal of the Virgin celebrates the Dormition, the Assumption and the coronation of Mary, reminding that humanity is called to share in the glory of heaven. The older portal of Saint Anne tells

the story of Anne and Joachim, parents of the Virgin; it also shows Saint Marcel, bishop of Paris, slaying the dragon, symbol of evil. Thus, each portal develops a biblical lesson, like a chapter in a vast teaching offered to all. This pedagogy is in line with the exhortation of St. Paul: "Faith is born from what one hears, and what one hears is the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).



The statues that populate the embrasures are not superfluous ornaments : they represent patriarchs, prophets, apostles, saints protectors of Paris, offering to the faithful the company of a true procession of witnesses. On the central portal of the Last Judgment, two allegorical figures attract attention : the Church, crowned and victorious, and the Synagogue, blindfolded and with a broken spear, symbolizing according to medieval theology the old Covenant superseded by the new. The Gallery of Kings recalls the lineage of David, from which Christ comes. The rosette, placed above, displays a cosmic vision where Christ is at the center of the world, surrounded not only by saints and angels, but also by the zodiac signs and the works of the months : all creation ordained to God.

This catechesis of stone was not only contemplated, it was explained. Medieval preachers used it as a support for sermons, pointing to a scene, a prophet, a gesture. The facade was thus both a book and a pulpit. Even today, it retains this strength : anyone who takes the time to look at it carefully discovers a real carved Bible, offered to all, believers or not. It is a silent but always living preaching, which raises the spirit of those who contemplate it.

STRUCTURE AND DIMENSIONS OF THE FACADE

The towers and the elevation : verticality and call to look up

The two towers of the western facade are one of the most recognizable elements of Notre-Dame de Paris. Completed in the middle of the 13th century, they rise nearly 69 meters (226 ft.) above the forecourt. Their monumentality impressed from the outset : in a city still dominated by half-timbered houses of a few floors, these two masses of stone seemed to float above the city, guiding pilgrims towards the spiritual heart of the kingdom. Despite the bowl-like topography of Paris, they were visible from afar and served as a landmark for all those who approached the Île de la Cité.

The towers of Notre-Dame are distinguished by the absence of arrows. That it results from a architectural choice or technical constraints related to the structure, this choice confers anchoring power and stability that contribute to its monumental majesty.

During the French Revolution, the architecture of the towers remained intact. The damage mainly concerned the furniture and the symbols: the gallery of the kings was destroyed and the bells were lowered to be melted, with the exception of the Emmanuel drone, which has been preserved due to its weight.

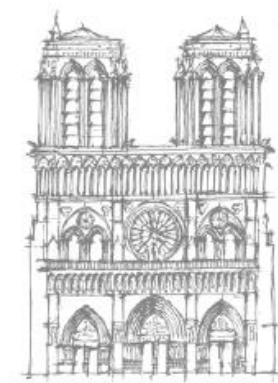
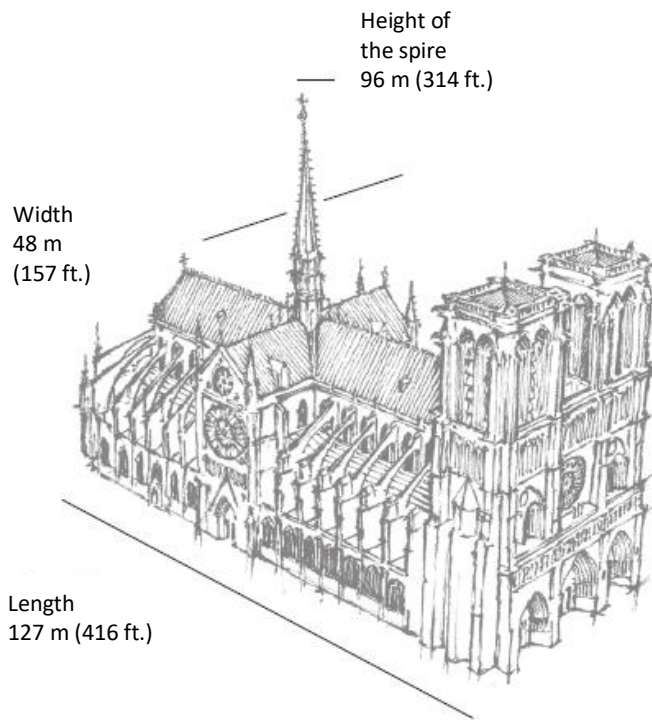
In the 19th century, Viollet-le-Duc intervened in a logic of consolidation and maintenance. His most assertive gesture is the creation of the gargoyle decor and chimeras. Nevertheless, he restored the main tympanum that had disappeared under Soufflot. Beyond their aesthetic function, the towers fulfilled specific roles. They house the cathedral's bells, including the famous Emmanuel drone, cast in 1681 and weighing more than 13 tons, located in the south tower. Its deep tone, still audible today, punctuates the great hours of the nation : funerals of heads of state, *Te Deum*, calls to prayer or gatherings.

These two towers stand like two biblical columns, recalling those of the Temple of Solomon that the Bible names Jakin and Boaz (I Kings 7:21). These columns symbolized the stability and strength of the sanctuary: placed at the entrance, they marked the sacred threshold. Thus, the towers of Notre-Dame appear as monumental guardians, visible signs of the presence of God in the heart of the city.



The apparent symmetry of the two towers adds to the general harmony of the facade.

Yet each has its own story: the north tower was completed around 1240, under the direction of Jean de Chelles, while the south tower was about ten years later.



Height of the spire
96 m (314 ft.)

Width
48 m
(157 ft.)

Length
127 m (416 ft.)

Height of the towers
69 m (226 ft.)

Height of the façade without the towers
45 m (147 ft.)

Width of the façade
43,5 m (142 ft.)

Also :

- 113 windows
- 12 doors
- 75 columns and pillars
- Interior area : 4 800 m² (51666 ft²) (more than 11 basket-ball fields !)
- Total area : 5 500 m² (59201 ft²)
- Diameter of the western rosette : 9,70 m (31 ft.)
- Diameter of the northern and southern rosettes : 13,10 m (42 ft.)

The western rosette : light and the Christian cosmos

The large rosette of the western facade, with a diameter of 9.60 meters (31 ft.), is one of the jewels of Notre-Dame. Completed around 1220, it is the oldest of the three large rosettes in the cathedral and constitutes, with those of the north and south transept, a unique triptych in Gothic art. It proclaims the mystery of the Incarnation.

The rosette is a monumental stained glass window that filters and colors light. In the Middle Ages, light was not perceived as a neutral physical datum, but as a sign of the divine presence. Entering the nave, the visitor is captivated by the colorful flow that crosses the glass roof : he discovers a transfigured universe where the terrestrial light becomes an image of the celestial light. It makes visible what the Prologue of Saint John proclaims :

« *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not stop it* » (Jn 1,5).

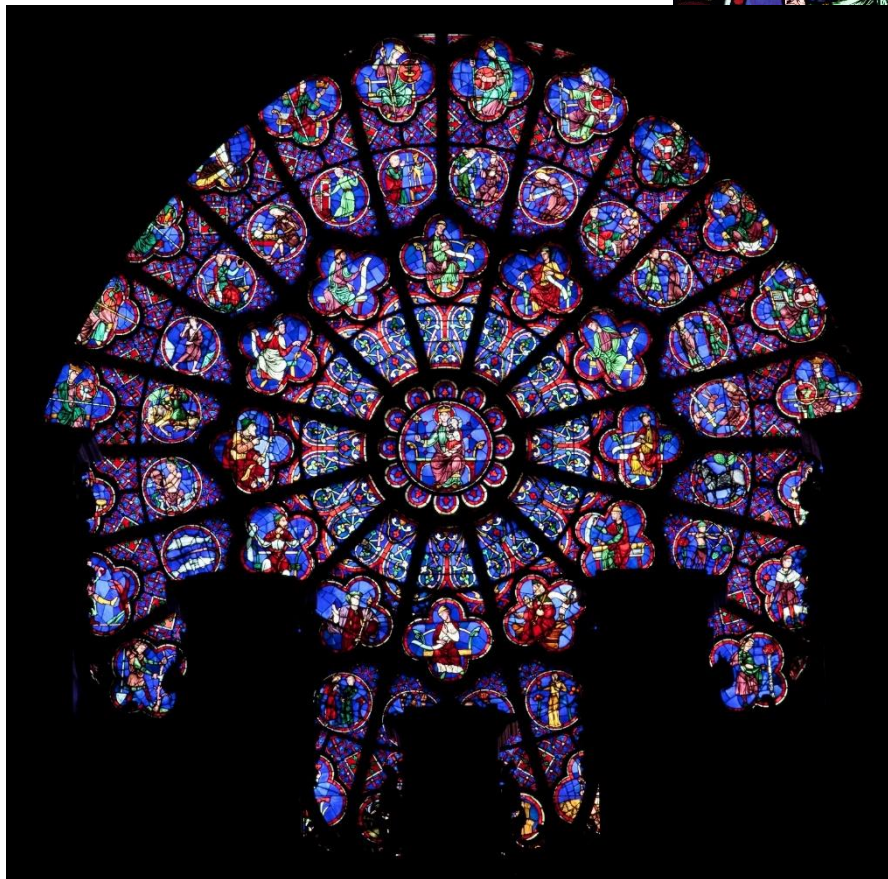
The iconographic program of the western rose placed at its center Christ, master of the cosmos, surrounded by virtues, vices and zodiac signs associated with the work of the months. The cycle of human time, marked by the seasons and daily toil, is thus inscribed in the eternity of God. This composition offered a lesson both theological and social : ordinary life, with its rhythms and work, is ordered to salvation.

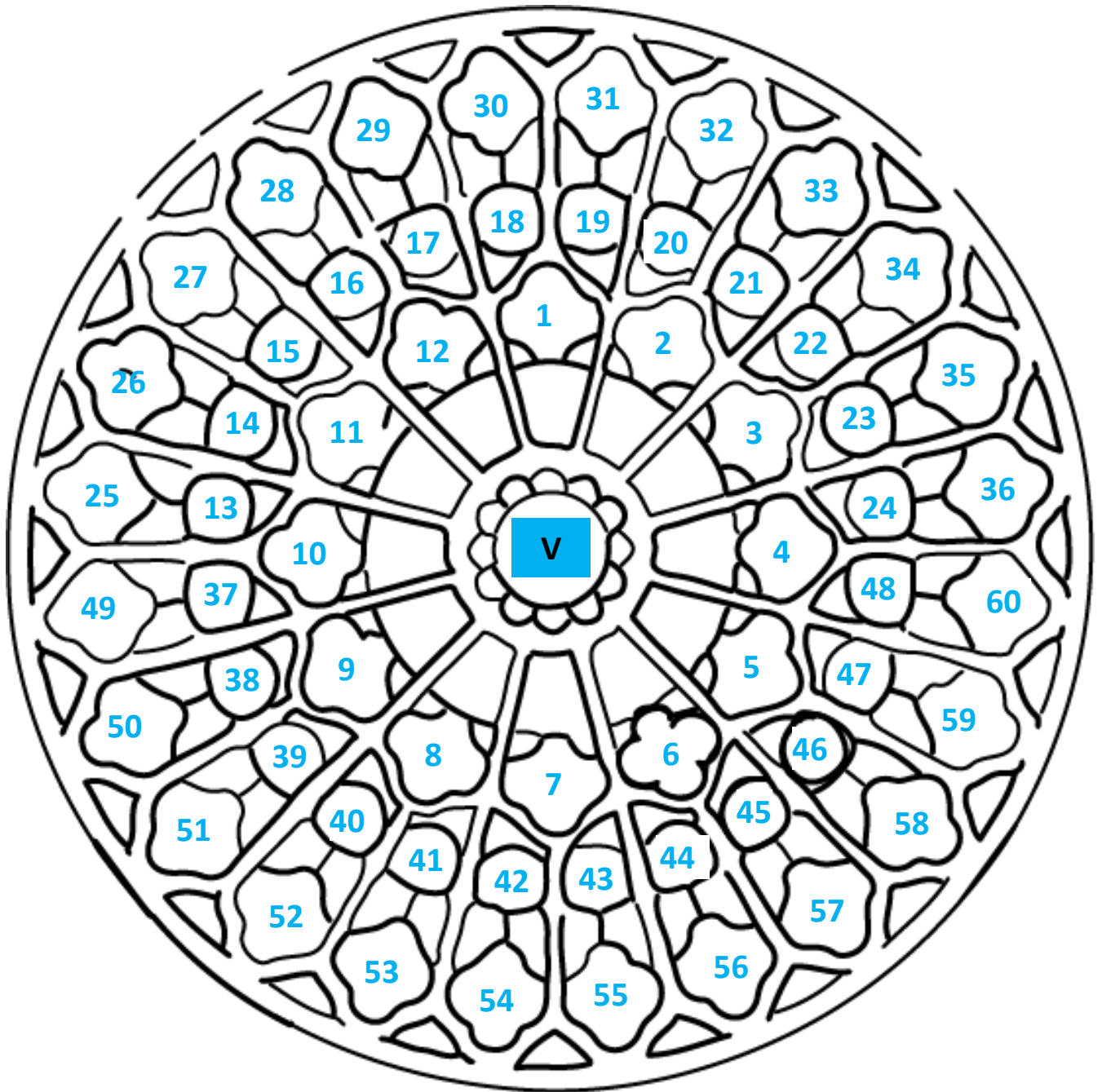
This rosette has survived centuries, surviving revolutionary mutilations, the impacts of war and even the fire of 2019 that threatened its stability. Restored in the 19th century by Viollet-le-Duc, it was partly reconstructed, but its original spirit was respected. Visible from the forecourt, it catches the eye with its geometric harmony ; seen from the inside, it overwhelms with its colorful brilliance.

It remains today a powerful symbol of the unity of the universe in Christ : a world that is not closed in on itself, but open to the light of God.



*View of the Western
and Child. Mary offers*





LEGENDS OF THE WESTERN ROSETTE

In the center: the Virgin (V)

1st circle: 12 prophets from 1 to 12

UPPER PART

2nd circle: 12 vices

13. Cowardice
14. Pride
15. Madness
16. Luxury
17. Avarice
18. Inconstancy
19. Idolatry
20. Anger
21. Despair
22. Severity
23. Discord
24. Rebellion

3rd circle : 12 virtues

25. Strength
26. Humility
27. Prudence
28. Chastety
29. Charity
30. Perseverance
31. Faith
32. Patience
33. Hope
34. Kindness
35. Peace
36. Obeidance

LOWER PART

2nd circle : 12 zodiac signs

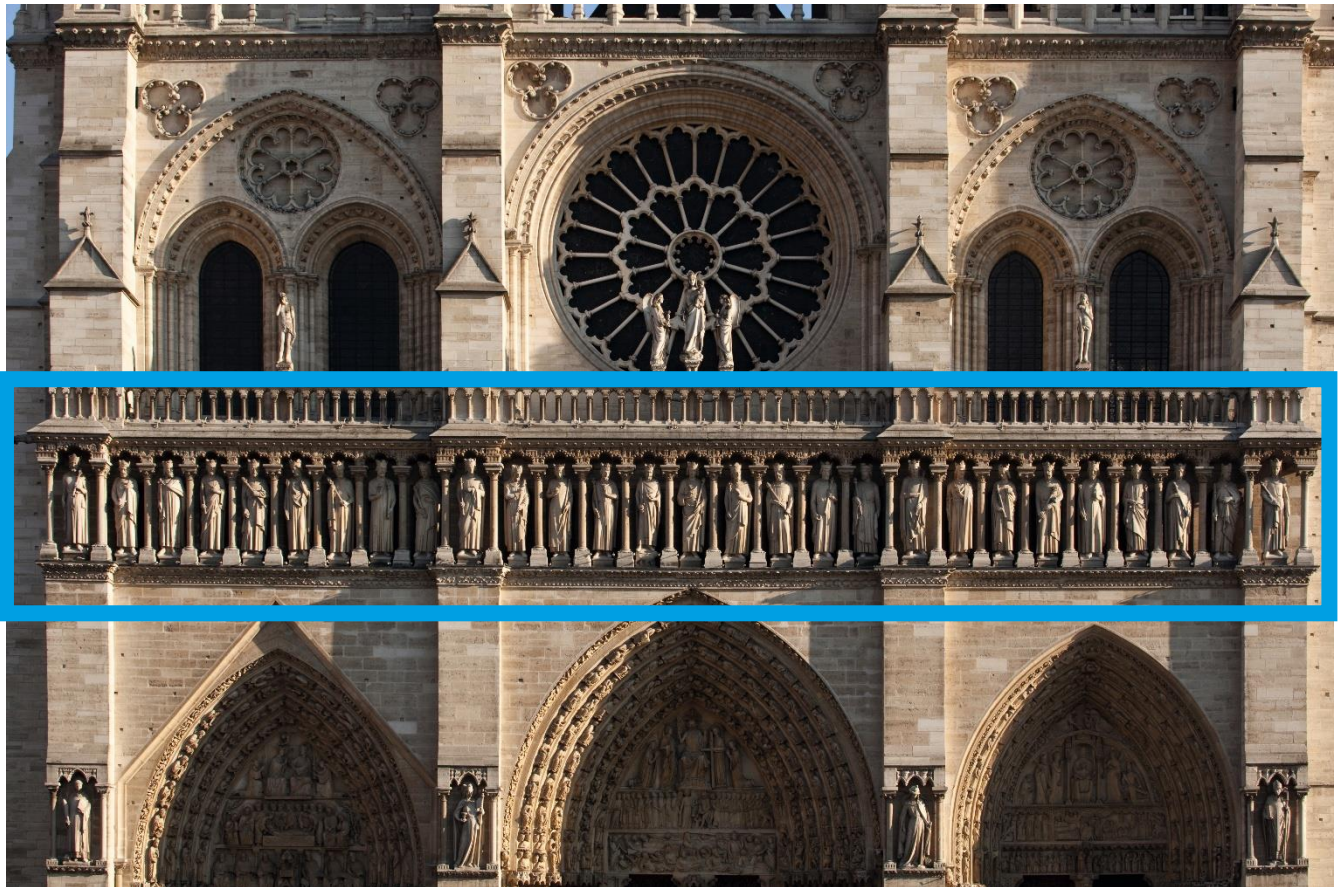
37. Aquarius
38. Pisces
39. Aries
40. Taurus
41. Gemini
42. Cancer
43. Leo
44. Virgo
45. Libra
46. Scorpio
47. Sagittarius
48. Capricorn

3rd circle : 12 months of the year

49. January
50. February
51. March
52. April
53. May
54. June
55. July
56. August
57. September
58. October
59. November
60. December

The Gallery of Kings : ancestors of Christ and historical reading

Just above the portals stretches a long carved frieze : the Gallery of Kings. Twenty-eight colossal statues represent the kings of Judah, biblical ancestors of Christ according to the gospel of Matthew. Their presence reminds us that the Son of God is part of a human lineage: the Incarnation takes shape in history.



Gallery of Kings - 28 kings of Juda. They were confused during the French Revolution (late 18th century) with kings of France. The statues were decapitated. The heads were found in 1977 during preventive archaeology excavations in the 4th arrondissement of Paris. The history of France has joined with biblical history.

Halfway up the facade, the gallery forms a real hinge, it marks the meeting of humanity and the divine.

These twenty-eight figures belong to the lineage of David, from which the Messiah will be born. Their succession evokes the fidelity of God to his Covenant through generations, from Uzziah to Zedekiah. The sculptors of the thirteenth century gave these kings a noble gravity : calm faces, hieratic attitudes.

From the Middle Ages, this biblical reading was not always perceived. Many faithful and authors spontaneously identified these statues with the kings of France. This confusion is explained by the political and religious context: sacred kings, anointed during the coronation, the French sovereigns willingly perceived themselves as spiritual heirs of David. This reading had consequences for the Revolution: in 1793, the statues were decapitated and thrown to the ground, a symbol of the break with the Ancien Régime. Twenty-two heads, found in 1977 during work on the rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin, in the courtyard of an old private mansion, are now preserved in the Cluny museum.

During the restoration of the 19th century, Viollet-le-Duc had new statues sculpted to replace those destroyed. Faithful to a discreet use of this century, some figures deliberately bear the features of the restorers themselves: King Éla, eighth from the north pillar, takes over those of Viollet-le-Duc; King Achab, fifth from the north, those of Pierre-Émile Queyron, inspector of works; and Jean-Baptiste Lassus is traditionally identified as the king of the twenty-third from the north. Far from a symbolic appropriation, these portraits are a humble and assumed signature of the craftsmen who have revived the facade.

The program of the gallery therefore lends itself neither to a strictly literal genealogical reading, nor to a political or biographical interpretation. It is above all a theological and symbolic language.

The great statues: Adam, Eve, founding saints, allegories of the Church and the Synagogue

Two allegorical statues attract particular attention: the Church, crowned and holding a chalice, symbolizes the Christian people guided by Christ and strengthened by the Eucharist. The Synagogue, depicted blindfolded, with a broken lance and the Tables of the Law inclined, expresses according to medieval theology the refusal to recognize the Messiah. This contrast, now outdated, reflects the vision of the time. Analogous representations can be found in Strasbourg, Bamberg or Metz, evidence of an iconography widely shared during the Middle Ages.



Diagrams of the statues Church and Synagogue

However, Saint Paul already reminded the Christians : "You are not the one who carries the root, it is the root that carries you" (Rm 11,18). And the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed, in *Nostra Aetate*, "the spiritual bond that unites the people of the New Testament with the lineage of Abraham." Today, these statues invite to reread history with a renewed look: they recall the necessity of dialogue and brotherhood between Jews and Christians.

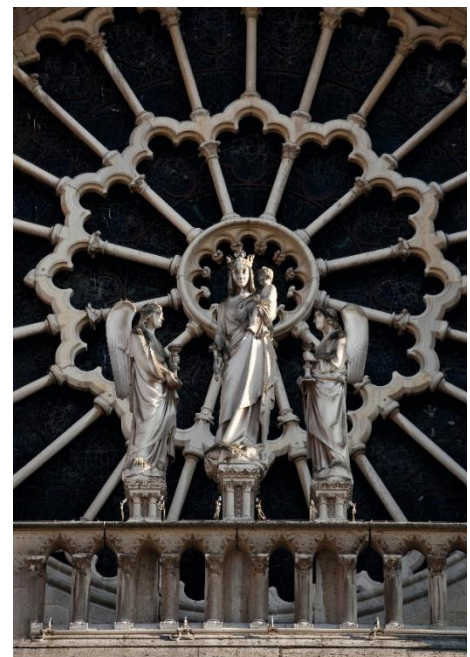
Like other elements of the facade, these statues suffered from mutilations during the Revolution, before being restored by Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century, who sometimes gave these figures the features of his contemporaries. Restored, they remain today witnesses of their time, both markers of faith and memory of history.



The upper galleries: Gallery of the Virgin, Galerie of the Chimeras

Above the Gallery of Kings stands the Gallery of the Virgin, built in the 13th century. It connects the two towers by a stone passage and welcomes, in the center, a monumental statue of Mary carrying the Child, placed just in front of the large rosette. This figure, destroyed during the Revolution and then recreated by Viollet-le-Duc, constitutes the true visual and spiritual heart of the facade : it recalls that Notre-Dame is dedicated to the Mother of God and that it is through her that Christ is presented to the world. This arrangement is not only aesthetic : it expresses a theology. Mary, the New Eve, is enthroned above Adam and Eve depicted at the lower portals. Thus, the vertical reading leads from original sin to redemptive motherhood, from fall to hope.

Even higher up, the Gallery of the Chimeras, added by Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century, introduces a fantastic universe. Medieval gargoyles, real rainwater pipes, coexist with chimeras invented from scratch. Dragons, monstrous birds, hybrid beasts, strange creatures : these figures do not date from the Middle Ages, but they have become emblematic of Notre-Dame. Viollet-le-Duc, nourished by the romantic imaginary and undoubtedly inspired by the novel of Victor Hugo, wanted to recreate a "dreamed" medieval atmosphere, in which the imaginary mingles with reality.



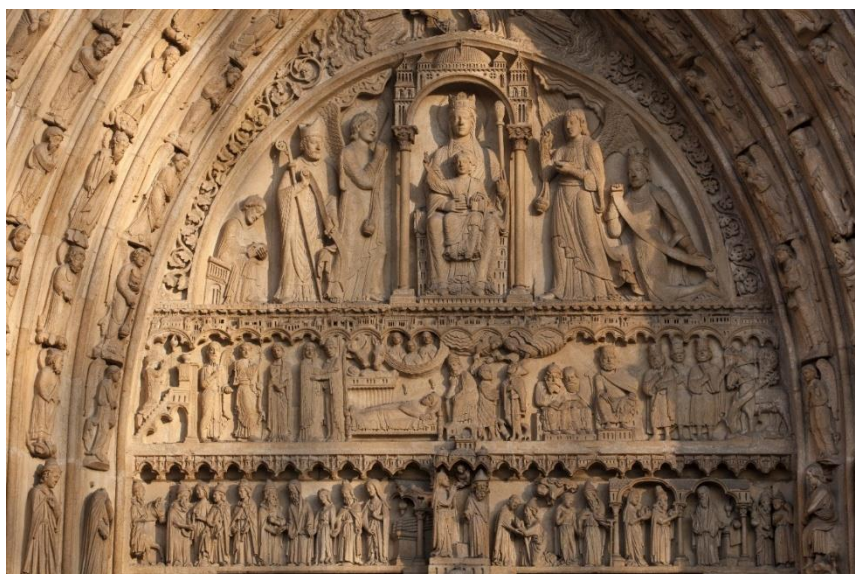
The most famous of these creatures is the "Stryge", leaning on his hand and observing Paris with melancholy. Having become a true icon thanks to photography and engraving, it is now part of the visual identity of the cathedral. More than just an ornament, it embodies the romantic atmosphere of the 19th century and recalls that each era projected on Notre-Dame its own dreams and fears.

THE THREE PORTALS

The Saint-Anne portal

The Saint-Anne portal, located on the right looking at the facade, is the oldest of the three. It incorporates many elements from the Romanesque cathedral dedicated to Saint Marie and Saint-Étienne, probably built at the end of the 11th or early 12th century. Built around 1140, this tympanum, most of the arches, the upper lintel and the statues-columns were dismantled and then integrated into the Gothic facade around 1220. The figures are more hieratic, their gestures sober, their massive proportions. The statues of the trumeau, including that of Saint Marcel slaying the dragon, destroyed during the Revolution, were restored in the 19th century by Viollet-le-Duc.

The Saint-Anne portal presents a complex iconographic program, largely inherited from the earlier Romanesque cathedral. The tympanum does not represent a narrative sequence of Saint Anne's life, but the Virgin in Majesty, throne of the Divine Wisdom, sitting and carrying the Child. She is framed by two figures : at right, a kneeling king taking the oath; on the left, a bishop standing, interpreted as receiving this commitment to protect the Church and the faith. This scene affirms the link between political authority, ecclesial authority, and the mystery of the Incarnation.



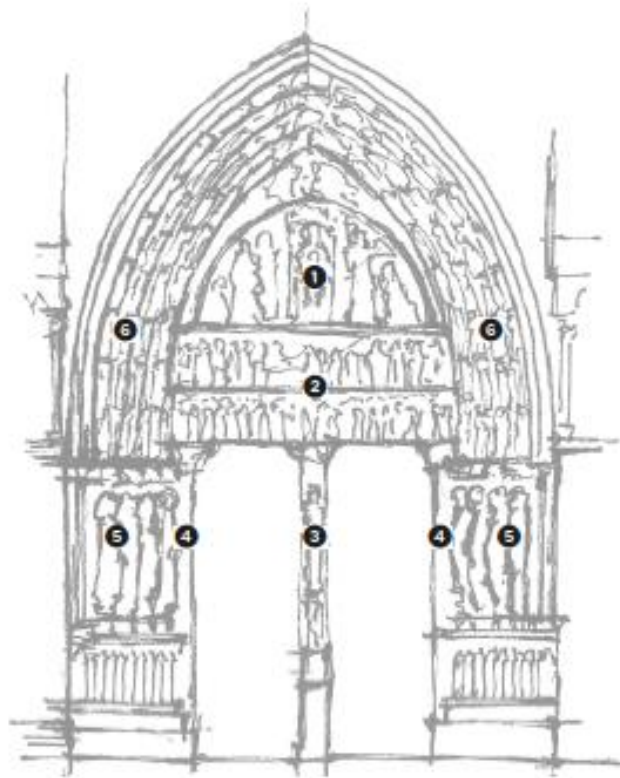
The lintels develop a narration of apocryphal inspiration. The lower lintel presents episodes

from the life of Anne and Joachim, parents of the Virgin, as well as the marriage of Mary to Joseph. The upper lintel shows the Nativity of the Virgin and other scenes from her childhood according to the apocryphal tradition without constituting a complete narrative cycle.

Around the doors, the windows welcome statues of prophets and kings announcing the coming of the Messiah, but also those of the apostles Peter and Paul, recognizable by their attributes, which recall the apostolic foundation of the Church. The arches, arranged in concentric arcs, deploy a celestial procession that converges towards the center of the portal. The trumeau depicts Saint Marcel, bishop of Paris in the fifth century, slaying a dragon, symbol of evil defeated by faith. The statue visible today is a reconstruction of the 19th century, carried out under the direction of Viollet-le-Duc. This scene, deeply rooted in local memory, associates universal salvation with the history of the capital.

On a spiritual level, the Saint-Anne portal celebrates the Virgin Mary as the throne of divine wisdom. She is the one who welcomes the Word and gives it to the world.

contemplating these scenes, the faithful medieval man understood that salvation is not an abstract idea, but a concrete story that passes through a woman, a family, a child.



1 Tympanus

Virgin in majesty. Like the queens in the Middle Ages, the Virgin and Child stands on a throne placed under a canopy and wears royal attributes: the crown and the scepter. She holds on her knees her son Jesus who blesses the faithful and presents the Book of the Law. This representation of the Virgin and Child is characteristic of the Romanesque style by a frontal, hieratic attitude.

The identities of the characters representing a bishop of Paris (left) and a king of France (right) remain unidentified to this day.

2 Lintel

Upper : the Annunciation (angel Gabriel and prophet Isaiah), the Visitation (Mary and Elizabeth), the Nativity, the Announcement to the shepherds, scene with Herod.

Lower : story of Anne and Joachim. Public life of the Virgin.

3 Mullion

Saint Marcel, bishop of Paris in the 5th century, slaying a dragon.

4. Jamb

5. Embrasures

On the left from the outside : a king, the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon, Saint Peter.

On the inner right : Saint Paul, King David, Bathsheba, a king.

6. Vaults

Angels, kings, prophets, elders of the Apocalypse.

The portal of the Virgin

The tympanum is read in three registers. In the lower register, kings and prophets are sitting on either side of the Temple containing the Ark of the Covenant; the great scrolls deployed on their knees carry the texts announcing the coming of the Messiah. This scene places Mary in the waiting for Israel and in the fulfillment of biblical promises.

In the median register, the Virgin on her deathbed, surrounded by the apostles who watch over her for three days. Christ then appears, reuniting his mother's soul with her body while that the angels are preparing to lift the shroud to take it to heaven. This scene from the various *Transitus Mariæ* corresponds to what the iconographic tradition named the Assumption of the Virgin.

In the upper register, Mary is crowned by an angel, while Christ entrusts her with the sceptre : she is thus recognized as Queen of Heaven and Mother of the Church.

Under the tympanum, the lintels prolong the Marian discourse. The whole leads the gaze towards the glorification of the Virgin, from the ancient promises to her association to the glory of Christ.

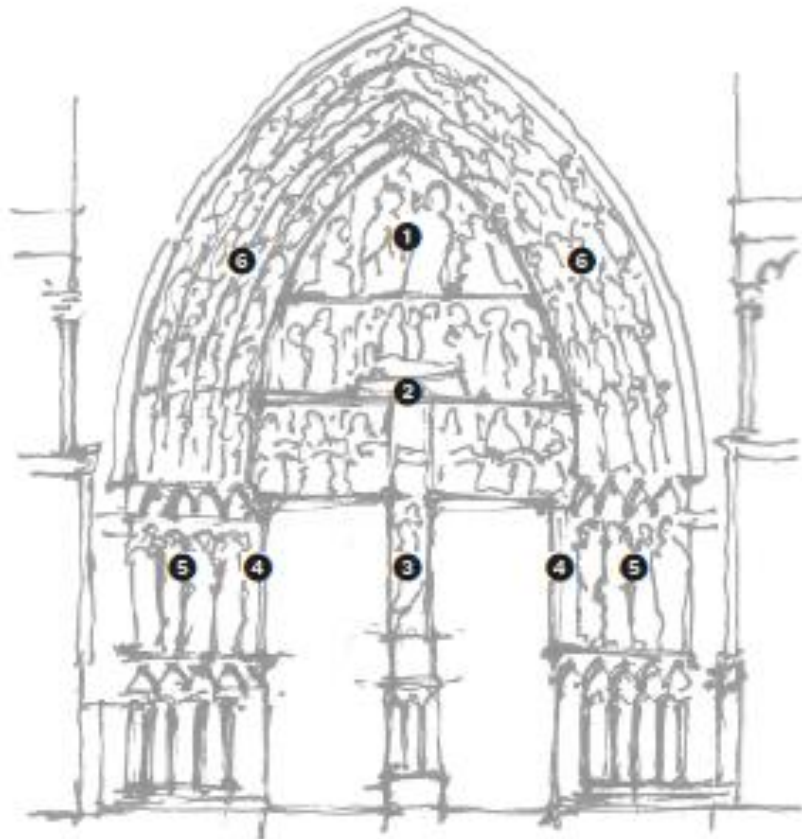


The embrasures welcome saints whose relics were kept in the cathedral choir. Saint-Denis, first bishop of Paris, and Saint Geneviève, protector of the city, frame the gate.

The central pier is occupied by a statue of the Virgin and Child. Mary is depicted standing there, holding his Son on the left arm and a lily in his hand right, according to the iconography of the Virgin with the lilies. The statue is a creation of the 19th century.

On the spiritual level, the Portal of the Virgin is a message of hope. Mary is given as a model : she believes, she hopes, she loves. Crowned in heaven, she manifests the glory promised to all believers.

On the sidewalls, are depicted the signs of the zodiac and the works of the months, evoking the timelessness of Christ's message..



1 Tympanus

Crowning of the Virgin Mary

2 Lintel

Upper : Dormition of the Virgin, Jesus and the 12 apostles, Saint Paul under a fig tree and Saint John under an olive tree.

Lower : three kings and three prophets bearing the Scriptures and meditating on the mystery of the Virgin. Heavenly Jerusalem under a canopy. A chest symbolizes the Ark of the Covenant, an image often associated with the Virgin Mary.

3 Mullion

Statue : Virgin and Child.

Base : Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, the temptation of Adam and original sin and the expulsion of the first men from the garden of Eden.

Left side : the four seasons.

Right side : the ages of life.

4 Jamb

The 12 months represented by the 12 astrological signs.

To the left from bottom to the top : Aquarius (January – man at his table), Pisces (February – traveler by the fire), Aries (March – peasant pruning the vine), Taurus (April – peasant observing his wheat), Gemini (May – hunter), Cancer (June – peasant with a haystack).

To the right from top to bottom : Leo (July – a peasant sharpening his scythe), Virgo (August – reaper), Libra (September – grape harvest), Scorpio (October – sowing), Sagittarius (November – swineherd), Capricorn (December – a peasant killing the pig).

5 Embrasures

On the left from the outside : the emperor Constantine, an angel, Saint Denis holding his head an angel.

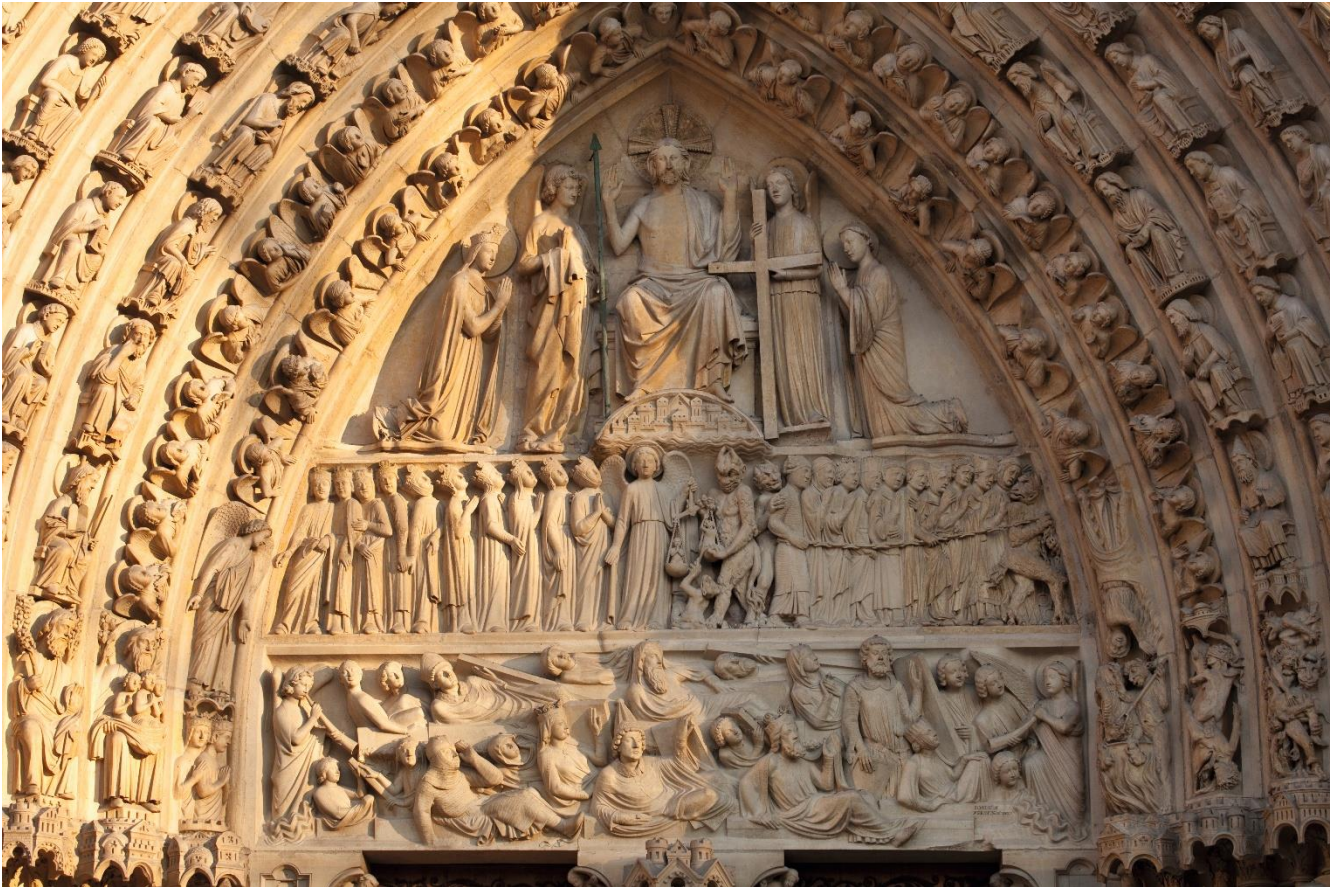
On the right from inside : Saint John the Baptist, Saint Stephen, Saint Genevieve, Pope Saint Sylvester.

6 Vaults

Heavenly Court. Angels holding censers and candles, patriarchs, kings, prophets

The Last Judgment portal

At the center of the western facade opens the largest of the portals : that of the Last Judgment. Designed around 1230–1240, it is the real stone catechesis of the facade. Its monumentality corresponds to its message : reminding every member of the faithful that all human life is ordained for an ultimate encounter with Christ, judge and savior.

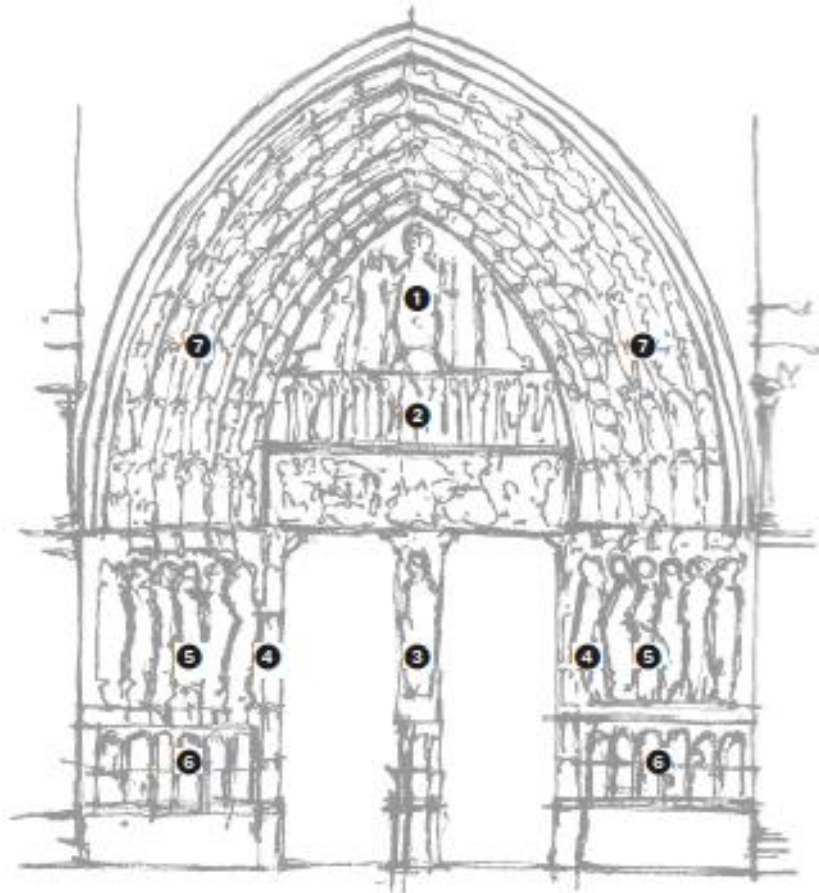


The tympanum can be read in three registers. At the very top, Christ in glory sits as judge, surrounded by the Virgin and Saint John who intercede for humanity. At his side, angels present the instruments of the Passion : cross, nails, lance, crown of thorns. In the intermediate register, the archangel Saint Michael weighs souls on a scale. A striking detail catches the attention : the damned are not chained by force, but hold their own chain, symbol of their voluntary attachment to sin. Hell is not an imposed fate, but the free choice to refuse God. The elect, they are led by smiling angels towards happiness, welcomed in the bosom of Abraham who carries on his knees the blessed souls. At the bottom, the lintels depict the resurrection of the dead: the tombs open, the bodies rise up, some radiant, others terrified. This is the direct echo of Christ's message : "The hour is coming when all who are in the tomb will hear his voice; those who have done good will be raised to life, and those who have done evil will be raised to judgment" (Jn 5:28-29).

The concentric vaults populated by angels, musicians, patriarchs, prophets and apostles unfold an ordered universe around Christ. They give the impression of an expanding sky, a true celestial court. The central trumeau carries a statue of Christ the Judge, blessing with his right hand and holding the Book of Life from the left. The one who crosses the portal literally passes under his gaze and under his judgment, as if to remind us that all human existence is placed under the light of eternity.

The breasts, adorned with virtues and vices, saints and fools, complete the lesson. They compose a true sculpted psychomachia, showing the spiritual combat that goes through every life. The faithful who entered the cathedral saw thus open before him a silent but powerful preaching, which complemented the word of the preachers on the forecourt.

On a spiritual level, the portal of the last judgment is a call to conversion and mercy. It is not a question of scaring, but of reminding us that life has a term and a purpose. The presence of Christ the Judge, surrounded by Mary and John who intercede, indicates that God's justice is never separated from his love. Before this portal, the believer is invited to responsibility, but also to hope : he who enters Notre-Dame crosses a threshold marked by the ultimate truth, that of a God who judges with justice, but whose mercy always precedes and accompanies judgment.



1 Tympanus

Christ judges with the Virgin and saint John. Angels hold the instruments of the Passion.

2 Lintel

Superior : weighing of souls by Saint Michael. To the left of Christ, the damned. To his right, the elect.
Lower: Resurrection of the dead.

3 Trumeau

Statue : Christ the teacher.
Base : the Liberal Arts – Music, Grammar, Astronomy, Philosophy, Medicine, Dialectics, Geometry.

4 Jamb

On the left : wise virgins.
On the right : crazy virgins.

5 Embrasures

On the left from the outside: Saints Bartholomew (knife), Simon (book). James the Minor (baton), Andrew (cross), John (chalice), Peter (keys). To the right from inside: Saints Paul (sword), James the Greater (shells), Thomas (ruler), Philip (cross), Jude (stake), Matthew (book).

6 Medallions

On the left at the top, from left to right : the Virtues. Humility (Columbus), Prudence (serpent), Purity (salamander), Charity (sheep), Hope (cross and banner), Faith (cross).
Left, bottom left, right : the Vices. Pride (man falling from a horse), Madness (wandering man), Injustice, Avarice, Despair, Impiety (man worshipping an idol).

At right, top right, left : the Virtues. Courage (lion), Patience (oxen), Gentleness (lamb), Peace (olive branch), Obedience (kneeling camel), Perseverance (crown).

On the right, bottom right to left : les Vices. Cowardice (a man fleeing from a lion), Anger (a woman beating a cleric), Harshness (a woman shoving a servant), Discord (a man and a woman who are drunk), Revolt (a man insulting a bishop), Inconstancy (a monk leaving the monastery).

7 Vaults

From the outside : 18 virgins, 18 martyrs, 16 doctors, 14 patriarchs and prophets. At the bottom left: Abraham receives the elect. *At the bottom right* : Hell and demons.

THE RESTAURATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

The Revolution and the destruction of the statues

The French Revolution, which broke out in 1789, radically changed the life of the cathedral. In 1793, at the height of the Reign of Terror, Notre-Dame was closed to worship and transformed into a "Temple of Reason", then into a "Temple of the Supreme Being". The catholic liturgy disappears, replaced by civic celebrations intended to exalt revolutionary values.

The facade then suffered heavy mutilations. The statues in the Gallery of Kings, wrongly interpreted as effigies of the kings of France, are decapitated and thrown to the ground, a symbol of the break with the Ancien Régime. The treasury is scattered, many of its precious pieces melted away, while the portals are hammered. The large bells were melted to make cannons, with the exception of the bourdon Emmanuel which escaped destruction.

After the fall of Robespierre in the summer of 1794, the churches were gradually returned to worship. At Notre-Dame, the recovery was first under the aegis of the Constitutional Church, separated from Rome, which had to share the premises with new revolutionary cults such as the theophilanthropes. On August 15, 1795, a solemn pontifical mass of reconciliation was celebrated there, and on August 15, 1797, a national council gathered in the cathedral about thirty bishops and sixty priests.

The cathedral, thus desecrated and mutilated, survived in a state of advanced dilapidation. It did not fully regain its liturgical function until the Concordat of 1801 : in 1802, Notre-Dame was returned to Catholic worship, but it still bore the scars of those years of vandalism. The facade, in particular, retains visible traces of this revolutionary destruction up to today.

Viollet-le-Duc : restoring, recreating, reinventing

In the 19th century, Notre-Dame is in a worrying state of disrepair. The mutilations of the Revolution, abandonment and lack of maintenance left the cathedral threatening ruin. Some even suggested it be demolished. It is the novel of Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), which changes the situation. The writer makes the cathedral a central figure and launches an alarm cry : "Paris must watch over its monuments." The popular success of the book provokes a wave of emotion and triggers a mobilization to save Notre-Dame.

In 1843, a contest was launched. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and Jean-Baptiste Lassus win the day with a project that is not limited to technical repair : the aim is to restore the building's medieval brilliance and give it a stylistic coherence. After the death of Lassus in 1857, Viollet-le-Duc led alone the project. His conception of restoration is famous :

« Restoring a building is not about maintaining it, repairing it or rebuilding it ; it is about restoring it to a complete state that may never have existed. »

Concretely, he recreated the Gallery of Kings destroyed during the Revolution, restored portals and mutilated sculptures, and invented the chimeras that adorn the upper balustrade, pure romantic creations. He also erected a new spire, even higher than the lost medieval one, reaching 93 meters (305 ft.), which became an emblem of Paris. It recomposes certain stained glass windows and consolidates weakened

structures.

Rediscovery of the heads in 1977

In 1977, during work in the basements of a mansion on the street de la Chaussée-d'Antin, workers brought to light an unexpected treasure : the heads of kings from Judah, mutilated and decapitated during the French Revolution. Buried there since 1793, they had escaped destruction. Now kept in the museum of Cluny, they have become one of the most valuable carved ensembles in the Gothic style French.

The contemporary construction site : 2019 fire and restoration

On April 15, 2019, a fire of unprecedented violence ravaged the framework of Notre-Dame, this "forest" of medieval oaks eight centuries old, and caused the collapse of the spire of Viollet-le-Duc. The whole world watches, in disbelief, the images of the flaming arrow falling into the nave. The fire destroys the roof and partially pierces the vaults, but the facade and the two towers resist, saving the essential at the cost of a considerable weakening.

Immediately, an exceptional mobilization is organized. That same evening, the President of the Republic set the goal of a reopening "in five years", and a national and international subscription was launched. Donations were pouring in from all over the world, showing the universal attachment to this monument. Providential act, the sixteen statues of the apostles that surrounded the spire had been placed a few days earlier for restoration : they escaped the fire and returned to their place in 2024.

The work that is about to begin is colossal. Under the leadership of the Public Establishment Rebâtir Notre-Dame de Paris, led first by General Jean-Louis Georgelin and then by Philippe Jost, it engages thousands of companions. Carpenters, stonemasons, master glassmakers, ironworkers and art restorers work together, mobilizing ancestral know-how.

The facade, too, is the subject of careful care : cleaned and consolidated, it regains its original whiteness and reveals again its sculpted details. In the medieval period, it was polychrome, as also reported by an Armenian bishop passing through Paris in the fifteenth century, a brilliant sign that Gothic stone was not thought in the only austerity of matter but in the alliance of light and colors.

THE FACADE AS CATECHESIS AND TESTIMONY

A sermon in stone : teaching faith

The facade is structured like a visual discourse. Thus, everyone relied on these images to nourish themselves. This pedagogy also involved familiar symbols. The cycle of months and works, represented in the western rosette and at the foot-rights of the portal of the Virgin, showed the craftsmen and the peasants that their labor had its place in the divine order. The virtues and vices sculpted at the bottom of the vents highlighted the moral choices of everyday life. The holy protectors of Paris recalled that faith was not only a distant story, but that it was rooted in the history of the city.

The facade did not seek to frighten but to form: by the contrast between elected officials and damned, between light and darkness, she awakened consciousness and invited to the conversion. Thus, from the outset, Notre-Dame de Paris was a permanent sermon.

The facade as a dialogue : between history, culture and spirituality

Over the centuries, the facade of Notre-Dame has largely exceeded its sole catechetical function. It has become a stony memory where the religious, political and cultural history of France intertwine. Royal processions, *Te Deum* celebrated after the victories, coronation of Napoleon I in 1804, national funerals, republican gatherings : the facade has always offered its setting to the memory of the nation. She is a mirror of France as much as a threshold towards the Kingdom of God.

The facade is therefore a place of dialogue: between faith and culture, between the Church and the nation, between believers and non-believers. It is not frozen, but alive. Each generation has read a different message : a call to conversion, a symbol of freedom, an emblem of resilience.

The Virgin Mary, key to reading and patroness of the cathedral

At the heart of the western facade, the figure of Mary stands out as a common thread. On the portal of the Virgin, located to the north, she first appears as Mother. She is the throne of divine Wisdom. In the eardrum, the Dormition, the Assumption, and the Coronation manifest its destiny of glory, announcing to every believer the hope of an elevation promised to humanity. Higher up, at the center of the facade, a monumental statue of the Virgin and Child. This omnipresence is not decorative: it is theological.

The western facade of Notre-Dame de Paris is much more than an entrance monumental. She is a threshold, a face, a proclamation. For more than eight centuries, it welcomes pilgrims, visitors, believers, curious, beauty seekers.

EDUCATIONAL AND SPIRITUAL APPROACHES

For a cultural reading

The facade of Notre-Dame is an exceptionally rich educational tool. It opens to the study of Gothic art — broken arch, elevation, rosette, galleries — but also to Christian

symbolism : passage from shadow to light, harmony of forms, Incarnation expressed by the circle and the square.

Each portal becomes a chapter, each statue a word, each scene a sentence. This interpretive work makes perceptible the way in which medieval builders have designed a true catechesis in images. Medieval art is not decorative, it is bearer of a message.

The approach can be multidisciplinary. In history, construction is placed in the Capetian and urban context of the thirteenth century. In literature, we study the role of Victor Hugo and romanticism in the rediscovery of the monument. In the history of religions, we address the symbolism of the Last Judgment, the Assumption or biblical figures. In the visual arts, we analyze composition, symmetries, and spiritual geometry.

For a spiritual reading

The facade of Notre-Dame is not only a monumental decoration : it remains a pulpit of stone that still speaks today. A priest or catechist guiding a group can stop in front of each gate to make the Word of God resonate. In front of the gate of the last judgment, the Gospel of Matthew naturally echoes : "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat..." (Mt 25:35). The sculpture of the weighing of souls then becomes a call to concrete charity and personal responsibility.

At the portal of the Virgin, the reading of the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38) shows how Mary's "yes" opens the whole history of salvation. The scene of his coronation reminds us that faith does not lead to resignation, but to the hope of a shared glory. The group can be invited to meditate on this path: believe, hope, love.

In front of the portal of Saint Anne, the emphasis can be placed on the transmission of faith : the Virgin is born of Anne and Joachim, Jesus is welcomed into a family, and the Incarnation takes place over generations. A time of sharing can invite young people to reflect : who taught them the faith ? How, in turn, can they become witnesses ?

The facade thus becomes a support for meditation and prayer. Each participant can choose a sculpted figure — a saint, an angel, a virtue — and ask themselves : what does it say to my life today ? This reading path transforms a cultural visit into a spiritual experience.

GLOSSARY

A

Amends : medieval judicial ritual, where a culprit had to confess his guilt publicly, often in his shirt and barefoot, in front of the church.

B

Balustrade : the small openwork stone barrier crowning the upper galleries.

Bourdon : largest bell in a church. At Notre-Dame, it is Emmanuel (13 tons), cast in

1681.

Buttress : external pillar used to support the vault thrust.

C

Catharism : medieval religious movement rejecting notably the Incarnation. The construction of Notre-Dame affirmed in response the Christian faith in God made man.

Cathedral : main church of a diocese, where the bishop sits. The word comes from "cathèdre," the episcopal chair.

Chimera : sculpted fantastic creature, without practical function. Those of Notre-Dame were created by Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century.

Cloister : place of life of the canons of the cathedral, immediate neighbor of Notre-Dame, disappeared after the Revolution.

D

Damned : sculpted figures of the Last Judgment, representing those who refuse God. At Notre-Dame, they themselves hold their chains, a sign of their voluntary attachment to sin.

E

Elevation : the vertical height of a building, which symbolically reflects the spiritual impulse.

F

Forecourt : place located in front of the facade, a space for civic, religious, and judicial gatherings.

G

Gallery of Kings : row of 28 statues representing the kings of Judah, ancestors of Christ, located above the portals.

Gargoyle : statue in the shape of an animal or a monster used as a gutter to evacuate rainwater.

L

Lintel : carved horizontal stone that surmounts the panels of a gate.

M

Mullion : central pillar of a gate, often adorned with a statue (at the Last Judgment, that of Christ the Judge).

N

Nave : the main part of a church, where the faithful gather.

Neuve-Notre-Dame (street) : pierced by Maurice de Sully, it opened up in the Middle Ages a direct view of the western facade.

P

Pointed arch : a characteristic element of Gothic architecture; its pointed shape distributes weight and increases elevation.

Portal : a large monumental door of a cathedral, surmounted by a carved tympanum and surrounded by statues.

R

Rosette : large circular stained glass window inserted in a stone frame. At Notre-Dame, the western rosette (9.60 m in diameter) (31 ft.) symbolizes the Christian cosmos.

S

Spire : slender tower of wood and lead placed above the transept crossing. That of Viollet-le-Duc (93 m) collapsed in 2019 and has been rebuilt identically.

Splay : sloped surface framing a portal, often decorated with statues of saints or prophets.

Stone book : an expression designating the facade as a catechetical and visual support for the faithful of the Middle Ages.

Stryge : la plus célèbre des chimères de Notre-Dame, appuyée sur sa main, observant Paris avec mélancolie.

Synagogue (allégorie) : statue représentant Israël dans l'iconographie médiévale. À Notre-Dame, elle est figurée les yeux bandés, tenant une lance brisée.

T

Transept : the transverse arm that crosses the nave, forming a Latin cross.

Tympanum : partie sculptée en demi-cercle ou ogive au-dessus des portails, représentant des scènes bibliques.

V

Vault : a concentric carved arch that frames the tympanum of a portal.

Verticality : architectural principle of the Gothic, which directs the gaze and mind towards the sky.

Viollet-le-Duc (Eugène) : architect of the 19th century who restored Notre-Dame and added to it the spire and the chimeras.

W

Western facade : main facade of a cathedral, facing west, often the most monumental and richly decorated.

MEDITATIONS

The portal of the Last Judgment – Mercy at the heart of judgment

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne of glory... Then the king will say to those on his right hand: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Mt 25,31-34)

"Two loves have built two cities: self-love to the point of contempt for God has built the earthly city; the love of God to the point of contempt has built the heavenly city." (La Cité de Dieu, XIV, 28, saint Augustin)

Meditation proposal : what love is building my inner city? Self-love, or the love of God and neighbor?

The portal of the Virgin – Mary, model of hope

"My soul proclaims the Lord, exults my spirit in God my Saviour." (Lk 1:46-47)

"In dangers, anxieties, doubts, think of Mary, invoke Mary. That his name does not leave your lips, that he does not leave your heart." (Homily on the Angel Gabriel, II, 17, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux)

Meditation proposal : as the Parisians entrusted their city to Marie, everyone can entrust her with their path: she learns to say "yes" and to walk in hope.

St. Anne's Portal – The faith passed down from generation to generation

"What we have heard and learned, what our fathers told us, we will not hide from their sons; we will repeat it in the age that is coming." (Ps 78:3-4)

"Faith is strengthened when it is given." (Redemptoris Missio, 2, John Paul II)

Meditation proposal : before Saint-Anne and the Holy Family, remember that faith is not a private possession, but a living transmission, an inheritance to be offered.

The Western Rosette – The Light of Christ at the Heart of the World

"The city does not need the sun or the moon to illuminate it: the glory of God enlightens it, and his torch is the Lamb." (Rev 21,23)

"You are the light, and in you there is no darkness" (Prayer of praise, St. Francis of Assisi)

Meditation proposal : the rosette, a perfect circle inscribed in the square of the world, invites us to look at the cosmos in the light of Christ.

Towers and verticality – The soul's impulse towards God

"Let us lift up our hearts!" (Liturgy of the Mass, cf.

"Every man who is born and dies, everything that passes by, every ray that shines, is reflected in this facade, as in an eternal mirror." (Notre-Dame de Paris, 1831, Victor Hugo)

Looking up at the towers is already lifting one's soul. Notre-Dame is not only made of stone: she is a mirror of eternity.

[The Virgin in the center of the facade – Mary, key to reading](#)

"Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let all things come to me according to your word." (Lk 1,38)

"In an instant my heart was touched, and I believed." (Conversion à Notre-Dame, Noël 1886, Paul Claudel)

Meditation proposal : Mary, in the center of the facade, at the heart of faith, invites us to let ourselves be approached by God, freely, simply.

Practical information

Schedule :

Monday to Friday from 8:00 am to 7:00 pm, last entry at 6:30 pm.

Nocturnal on Thursdays until 10:00 p.m., last entry at 9:30 p.m.

On Saturdays and Sundays, the cathedral is open from 8:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Opening hours may vary depending on particular celebrations.

For more information, refer to the website.

Reservation :

The registration of pilgrimages and cultural groups is necessary for the proper functioning of the cathedral and takes place on the booking platform of the cathedral.

Only tour guides (professional card), teachers in front of their students can speak inside the cathedral for a guided tour. Speaking inside the cathedral is subject to the rental of the cathedral's audiophones to respect silence.

Address : 6 parvis Notre Dame, Pl. Jean Paul II - 75004 Paris.

Access : Metro 4 (Cité station); RER Lines B and C (Saint Michel Station – Notre Dame)
Bus 21, 38, 47, 85.