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At Notre-Dame: “I truly felt I was working for God”

As Notre-Dame de Paris reopens its doors this Sunday, 8 December, Antonin, a master stonemason, reflects on the profound experience of contributing to the restoration of this iconic cathedral.

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Antonin, you're a master stonemason. What does your job entail?

As a stonemason specializing in historic monuments, I primarily work on restoring ancient stones and engaging in artistic design projects. My clients are usually representatives of historic monuments or galleries that commission artistic works, like a coat of arms carved into stone, for example.

You were among nearly 2,000 artisans involved in the reconstruction of Notre-Dame. How did you become part of this project?

In January 2024, I was supposed to attend a training course for rope-access technicians, which ended up being canceled. This meant I had a much freer schedule than anticipated, and I informed some of my contacts. I had been approached three times about working on Notre-Dame's reconstruction, but I'd had to

decline those offers due to prior commitments.

On this fourth occasion, thankfully, I was able to accept and joined the project. It was the start of an incredible adventure: those two months were extraordinary. The atmosphere was fantastic, and I met amazing people from various trades. At times, there were up to 400 of us working on-site simultaneously. I had never seen such a clean and well-organized construction site.

What sets this project apart from others? What did it mean for you to contribute to this iconic building?

Notre-Dame is a unique place for Christians worldwide and a legendary site for artisans like me. Imagine watching the sunset from the top of Notre-Dame's spire, right in the heart of Paris...!

My emotions were heightened because, when I arrived at the site, I had been baptized only six months earlier, during the Easter Vigil Mass of 2023. From the moment I started working at Notre-Dame, I felt deeply moved. I was struck by the massive statue of Christ blessing the city with his hands bearing the wounds of the stigmata, which towers over the southern pediment where I worked. I truly felt I was rebuilding a structure for God, in God's presence.

Could you describe your specific tasks at Notre-Dame?

I worked on the southern pediment, above the large rose window. Our mission was to completely reconstruct two pinnacles, each eight meters high, located on either side of the smaller rose window above the main one. To do this, we had to dismantle them, renovate and pre-cut the stones on the ground. Each

piece was then lifted by crane and precisely placed by stonemasons, after which I would refine and carve the stones on-site. It was meticulous and passionate work: each stone had to be perfect.

How has your conversion influenced your work and your relationships with colleagues?

While waiting for the cranes to bring us new stones, I would sometimes take out my rosary. After all, we were working for our Lady! Some colleagues teased me good-naturedly, but a Madagascan coworker often defended me, saying, “Leave him be, he’s praying for us.” Praying the rosary on that southern pediment, following the sun’s path throughout the day, was incredible.

My conversion has profoundly impacted my work. Every morning, I pray to Saint Joseph, the patron saint of artisans. If I skip that prayer, I feel

that my work suffers. My faith also shapes how I interact with my colleagues. I openly share that I'm Catholic and try to convey my joy. I explain how knowing I'm not alone in facing life's challenges, with Someone always at my side, gives me strength to persevere.

I heard you recently discovered *The Way* by Saint Josemaría. Is there a passage that resonated with you?

For artisans like me, *The Way* is perfect. Unlike long texts that can be hard to digest, it offers short, direct phrases that speak to the heart... And sometimes put us back in our place. I devoured the book. It impacted me so much that I bought another copy to give to a friend I worked with.

Several of us — Catholic or non-Catholic — were struck by the first page of *The Way*, on which Saint Josemaría writes: “Don't say: ‘That's

the way I'm made... it's my character.' It's your lack of character: Be a man." That hit more than one of us hard!

The points in *The Way* about work particularly resonate with our world as stonemasons: doing our work well and seeking perfection in beauty. We find God in this pursuit. For someone like me, a stonemason who tends to work alone, discovering the Christian dimension of my work is a true gift. Now I know that the Lord is by my side, accompanying me along the way.

Saint Josemaría used to take students to the top of the Burgos Cathedral to admire the beauty of its craftsmanship for the glory of God. What does this inspire in you?

When working in churches, we encounter magnificent things that are invisible to people on the ground. What we accomplished on the

southern pediment is truly beautiful, but we didn't do it for people; we did it for God. There's something profoundly gratuitous about this.

I also had a powerful experience while carving the high altar of the Benedictine monastery church in Saint-Wandrille. As I worked, the monks were chanting their Liturgy of the Hours. My work became a prayer! I was truly happy.

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Human work with a divine dimension

“I used to enjoy climbing up the cathedral towers to get a close view of the ornamentation at the top, a veritable lacework of stone that must have been the result of very patient and laborious craftsmanship. As I chatted with the young men who accompanied me I used to point out

that none of the beauty of this work could be seen from below. To give them a material lesson in what I had been previously explaining to them, I would say: ‘This is God’s work, this is working for God! To finish your personal work perfectly, with all the beauty and exquisite refinement of this tracery stonework.’ Seeing it, my companions would understand that all the work we had seen was a prayer, a loving dialogue with God. The men who spent their energies there were quite aware that no one at street level could appreciate their efforts. Their work was for God alone. Now do you see how our professional work can bring us close to Our Lord? Do your job as those medieval stonemasons did theirs, and your work too will be *operatio Dei*, a human work with a divine substance and finish” (*Friends of God*, no. 65).

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