

Breyer finds hope, optimism in Notre Dame rebuilding effort

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Notre Dame

Paris: His main job is to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court, but Justice Stephen Breyer also chairs the jury of the Pritzker Prize – the world's top honor in architecture.

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"I thought, my God, look at those flames," he said in a telephone interview on Tuesday, a day after the blaze caused extensive damage to one of the world's most iconic and beloved structures. "Oh, what can I say? There aren't words to capture that. There was a moment when it just seemed absolutely awful and irredeemable." He said he was deeply moved to see Parisians singing hymns in the streets: "Your heart went out to them."

But Breyer said he now feels a surge of optimism as he reads about the efforts already under way to rebuild the cathedral.

"That church is a religious treasure, a cultural treasure, and an architectural treasure that France has shared with the entire world," he said. "When I hear that so many in France and throughout the world will help to rebuild that beautiful creation, my spirits rise."

Breyer described the first time he discovered Notre Dame, as an 18-year-old exchange student in Paris, his first trip outside the country.

"It was to me like a Hollywood movie," he said of Paris. "It was just amazingly beautiful. We almost danced in the streets. The buildings were gray at that time, they hadn't been cleaned. And I remember our trip to see Notre Dame."

For him as for so many people, Breyer said, "it's not simply a symbol or a building in France – it's part of your life. And that's true across the world. It will be rebuilt, parts have been rebuilt before, and it's a good sign of human nature that we can get down to business and rebuild what seems to have been lost."

"The future is still there," he said. "It's not going to be a void at the center of Paris."

Breyer, 80, has a strong connection to France. He's a member of the country's Academie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, one of only 12 foreign associate members – a group that includes royalty and a former pope. (Thomas Jefferson was one of the very few American members.) He also speaks fluent French.

- AP