News
Q&As



This is a view inside the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on Nov. 29. The cathedral is set to reopen in early December, with a planned weekend of ceremonies on Dec. 7 and 8, five years after the 2019 fire that ravaged the world heritage landmark. (OSV News/Stephane De Sakutin, pool via Reuters)



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Five years ago, one of the treasures of western civilization was nearly destroyed when Notre Dame Cathedral went up in flames. Now, as it reopens on Dec. 7-8, the world has been fixated on its gleaming new restoration.

While some 13 million people visited the beloved place of worship yearly before the fire, the Congregation of Xavières has a special history with the cathedral dating back to their founding.

In this Q&A, Xavière Sr. Anne-Marie Aitken tells Global Sisters Report why she is looking forward to returning to Notre Dame to pray and how after a long Advent, Notre Dame is now reborn.

***GSR*: Tell me a little about you. How did you decide to enter religious life?**

Aitken: My name is a Scottish name, but I live in Paris where I was born. My parents were Catholics, and I practiced my faith according to their way of life. Our house was opened to many neighbors and many people.



Xavière Sr. Anne-Marie Aitken (Courtesy of Anne-Marie Aitken)

When I was young, my mother was a catechist, she taught me religious education. When I was a student at the Sorbonne, I belonged to a Catholic chaplaincy, and I discovered more deeply the Bible, the prayer and how to be a Christian woman in a world where many people had no religion or didn't believe in God. I had the desire to make God known.

The idea to enter religious life appeared in my mind and in my heart. I met the Xavière sisters who have a strong spiritual life according to St. Ignatius of Loyola and who work among people with different jobs. I decided to join them when I was 22.

I know the Xavière community is near Notre Dame Cathedral. What was it like for it to be closed for five years? Did it feel as if something was missing?

When the fire took place, a great sorrow came to our souls. How could it be possible that Notre Dame could disappear? It's a part of Paris.

During the closure, nobody could enter and visit her. Another church, bigger than Notre Dame, was chosen to celebrate diocesan events and Masses: the churches of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois and Saint-Sulpice. But it was not the same!

Hoping for the reopening, we lived a very long Advent. But now Notre Dame is born again. I will attend a first Mass on Dec. 10. It's a great day for me and for all, Christians and non-Christians.

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For you personally, what does the reopening of Notre Dame mean from a spiritual perspective?

I like Notre Dame. There is a place in Paris where I can see her very clearly: it's when I cross the Austerlitz Bridge near Gare de Lyon, over the Seine River. I can contemplate the spire of Notre Dame, a real beauty which reaches the sky, taking us and Paris with her.

When I enter Notre Dame, a chill comes down my spine. It's so great and full of history. God is with us in this place, even if we don't know it!

The Xavière sisters love Notre Dame. In 1963, when the institute was recognized by Rome, a celebration took place in Notre Dame and every Xavière now publicly pronounces her perpetual vows there.

I love to pray in Notre Dame, staying near the statue with the child in her hands. I pray for the world and for the church and my prayer joins the prayer of many people.