

Fire engulfs Notre Dame cathedral in Paris



Paris, France, Apr 15, 2019 / 11:33 am (CNA).- Firefighters are working to bring a fire at Cathedrale Notre-Dame in Paris under control. The vault of the French cathedral has collapsed, but local officials say that they believe the main bell towers and historic front of the building can be saved.

The fire broke out shortly before 7pm local time, April 15. Multiple eyewitnesses shared photos and videos of the cathedral with visible plumes of smoke and flames across the cathedral's roof.

The historic spire of the cathedral, which stood 226 feet tall, fell shortly before 8pm.

The entire cathedral roof was seen to collapse while the fire continues to burn within the main structure.

Efforts by firefighters have been focused on the north belfry, with Paris' chief firefighter highlighting the risk to what remains of the structure if the main bell should fall through the tower.

Shortly after 11pm, news service AFP reported that firefighters have said that they now believe Notre-Dame's main structure can be "saved and preserved."

Archbishop Michel Aupetit of Paris said that "firefighters are still fighting to save the towers of Notre-Dame de Paris. The frame, the roof and the boom are consumed."

"Pray," the archbishop told the priests of Paris, he also invited them to ring church bells as a public invitation to prayer.

Unconfirmed reports indicate that the major religious and artistic treasures of the cathedral were removed as the fire began, including a relic of the crown of thorns.

As flames spread, locals reported burying debris from the fire falling in the immediate vicinity of the cathedral. By 9pm the fire was contained within the cathedral building itself.

Firefighters have cautioned that although the height of the flames appears has abated, the fire within the cathedral itself is not yet under control. Efforts were initially hampered by the height of the cathedral roof, which prevented emergency services from reaching the flames.

No announcement has yet been made concerning any injuries or fatalities resulting from the fire.

Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo issued a series of brief statements via Twitter saying that emergency responders are fighting to control the flames and appealing to local residents to keep the area clear to assist their efforts.

"There is no word strong enough to express my sorrow," Hidalgo said.

Outside the security cordon, Parisian Catholics have gathered in large crowds, kneeling to pray and singing devotional hymns to Our Lady.

Officials have not yet determined what caused the fire, which is still burning. Both the fire department and the office of the public prosecutor in Paris have confirmed that investigations into the origin and cause of the fire have been opened.

Built between the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, the landmark cathedral in the French capital is one of the most recognizable churches in the world, receiving more than 12 million visitors each year.

The cathedral was undergoing some restorative work at the time the fire broke out, though it is unknown if the fire originated in the area of the work.

The fire comes after several weeks of vandalism and arson attacks on church buildings across France.

French President Emmanuel Macron released a statement on Twitter expressing the "emotion" of "the whole nation."

Macron said his thoughts were with all Catholics and French citizens.

"Like all our compatriots, tonight I am sad to see a part of [all of] us burn."

Macron arrived at the scene of the fire at 9:20 pm, expressing his further shock at the damage as the fire continued to burn.

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the U.S. bishops' conference released a statement on behalf of the American hierarchy calling the fire "horrific."

"This particular cathedral is not only a majestic Church, it is also a world treasure. Noble in architecture and art, it has long been a symbol of the transcendent human spirit as well as our longing for God," DiNardo said.

"Our hearts go out to the archbishop and the people of Paris, and we pray for all the people of France, entrusting all to the prayers and intercession of the Mother of God, especially the firefighters battling the fire."

This is a developing story and is being updated.

One Twitter user shared a video taken by his roommate, Michael Norwich of Denver, CO, that shows the top of the cathedral engulfed in flame.

Source : Catholic News Agency