The Reconstruction Crusade: Rebuilding France's Catholic Churches after World War I, 1914-1939

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Abstract
Between 1918 and 1939, France rebuilt the nearly 4,000 Catholic churches of the Western Front that had been destroyed during the First World War. This thesis presents a cultural history of that process. While it examines technical and financial aspects of reconstruction, the thesis is primarily interested in how Catholics understood the cultural significance of church reconstruction through the shifting and porous contexts of war and peace during the interwar years. It considers how church reconstruction operated at multiple levels: material, conceptual, rhetorical, and ritual. In tracing the evolution of reconstruction efforts across the period—from wartime discourses about reconstruction to the final church reconstructions of the late 1930s—this thesis argues for a trajectory of radicalization. It finds that church reconstruction was initially part of a program for pragmatic post-war reconstruction and modest religious revival in France, but later became the centerpiece of a Catholic crusade for social conquest of domestic political opponents. The history of the reconstruction crusade reveals the persistence of wartime mentalities in French Catholic culture of the interwar period. This thesis ultimately presents the post-war reconstruction of Catholic heritage sites as a fraught process and suggests that conflict can paradoxically persist through the reconstruction of religious sites previously implicated in conflict.

Keywords
church reconstruction, france, catholicism, world war i, interwar period, cultural demobilization, cultural heritage, banlieue

Disciplines
Architectural History and Criticism | Arts and Humanities | Cultural History | European History | History | History of Religion

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THE RECONSTRUCTION CRUSADE: REBUILDING FRANCE’S CATHOLIC CHURCHES AFTER WORLD WAR I, 1914-1939

Leo Gearin

AN HONORS THESIS

in

History

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Introduction

The story of church reconstruction in post-World War I France is inextricable from the country’s modern religious history and its devastating experience of war from 1914-1918. An estimated 4,000 churches were damaged or destroyed during the war, then subsequently reconstructed between 1919 and 1939. French Catholics understood church reconstruction as profoundly meaningful—an affirmation of France’s Catholic heritage—in the wake of pre-war efforts to secularize French society. Indeed, the First World War seemed to constitute a turning point. The immense devastation of war permitted Catholics to imagine a new future for Catholicism in France.

In this thesis I argue that church reconstruction became an opportunity for Catholics to imagine and literally construct what they believed post-war France should be. The destruction of churches provoked national outrage and generated a sense of wartime cultural and spiritual unity—or sacred union—among oppositional groups in France. Catholics realized that the sacred union constituted an unstable wartime formulation of national cooperation in the face of a foreign enemy. They wanted to preserve this unity in peacetime and recognized that war-damaged churches sat at the center of it. Leaders of the French Church often tried to maintain the sacred union through the post-war work of church reconstruction: they envisioned reconstructed churches as its material manifestation. However, French Republicans and the Left in general lost interest in the sacred union as the post-war period progressed. They remained committed to the secularization of French society. Catholic conceptions of church reconstruction accordingly shifted, becoming increasingly radical as Catholics reckoned with the failure of cooperation as a vehicle for religious restoration. Ultimately, they reimagined their
work as a form of social conquest against a modern atheistic society: a kind of reconstruction crusade. At its core, this history is about memories of the past and visions of the future, suffering and healing, death and resurrection, unity and conflict.

The history of the secularization of modern French society is relevant in this context because Catholics were often trying to resist and reverse this process through the rhetorical, ritual, and material meanings that they invested in church reconstruction. It begins with the French Revolution, an anticlerical affair. Given the historical relationship between the French monarchy and Catholic Church, Republicans pursued a program of secularization from 1789 onwards.¹ The revolutionary dechristianization program involved the destruction of religious iconography, the substitution of civic cults in place of religious worship, and the abolition of Church privileges.² Subsequent monarchical restorations during the 19th century challenged secularization, as monarchs tended to sympathize with the Church.³ The establishment of the Third Republic in 1870, however, marked a significant change. The Third Republic’s secularization program was particularly robust. In the 1880s, the Republic passed a law to secularize public education in addition to other gradual moves towards a separation between church and state.⁴ To the dismay of Catholics, the passage of the 1905 Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State ultimately achieved complete secularization. Among other things, the law severed France’s diplomatic ties with the Vatican.⁵

² Cholvy and Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine*, vol. 1.
⁴ Cholvy and Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine*, vol. 3.
⁵ Cholvy and Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine*, vol. 3.
Catholics resisted the law of separation, which to them would not necessarily be as enduring as hindsight might suggest. The previous century’s reversals of secularization—in the form of monarchical restorations—offered inspiration for a revision of the law of separation. In *Religious History of Contemporary France*, historians Gerard Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire recognize that a climate of uncertainty around the law of separation—what it meant for the Church and whether it would last—sparked “a revolt by a party of Catholic people.” 6 Eleven departments in the west of France collected over 1 million signatures to refuse the separation. When the state conducted an inventory of churches in order to regulate property questions that the law of separation introduced, Catholics revolted. They constructed barricades at churches throughout France—in Paris and in the Catholic strongholds of the west and the north—and violently resisted the inventories. 7 The ensuing decade was a period of disunity and conflict between Catholics and the State. The separation was much a cultural matter as a legal one: Republican leaders of the Third Republic aimed to create a secular identity for France. Religious symbols were banned in most public spaces, the State transferred its ownership of *lieux de culte* (places of worship) to the administrative division of communes, 8 and municipal officials gained the ability to regulate the ringing of church bells. 9

However, war caused a shift. In August 1914, France mobilized its troops and entered the First World War against Germany and Austria-Hungary. In the past twenty years, historians have taken an interest in France’s wartime culture during this period. The First World War ushered in an unprecedented level of cultural mobilization that

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7 Cholvy and Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine*, vol. 3., 247.
8 A commune is an administrative division in France, like civil townships or municipalities.
produced what historian John Horne calls a “war culture.” He defines war cultures as “the visions developed by a wartime society of the conflict and of its outcome.” In *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, cultural historians Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau argue that French people of the World War I-era understood the conflict as a crusade or holy war. The authors frame their work as a response to a breach of understanding which prevents historians from fully understanding the culture of WWI France. A general societal disengagement from war since the 1950s, they assert, produced a distanced historiography which could not come to terms with the sense of obligation and commitment to sacrifice that defined wartime culture. Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker propose to fill this breach with their crusade thesis, which advances that a deeply adversarial culture emerged in WWI France. The French, they argue, imagined the war as an absolute conflict between their Christian civilization and the pagan Lutheran civilization of the Germans. This culture operated along an axis of humanity and inhumanity, identifying Germans with the latter. Perhaps the most crucial part of this culture is the concept of cultural representation, or the matrix of associations and images that structured perceptions and expressions of war experience. Notably, these associations and images assumed a particularly Christian valence.

Becker contends that the acute suffering of war produced a psychological atmosphere in which people identified their experiences with those of Christ. The First

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12 Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18 Understanding the Great War*.
World War introduced an unparalleled confrontation with mass death, physical destruction, and sacrifice to which France’s Catholic traditions responded, given their transcendent conceptions of suffering as a precursor to resurrection. Many French sought refuge in Catholic traditions and symbols. They envisioned France as a resolutely Catholic nation in opposition to the ‘unholy’ enemy. This phenomenon is perhaps most evident in the popularly adopted imitation of Christ narrative, which made meaning out of the inordinate suffering of war. A dominant cultural narrative emerged to frame France’s suffering as an imitation of Christ, and therefore glorious and meaningful.\textsuperscript{14} There was a tendency to characterize the German enemy as a violent, destructive Protestant, which served to define the war in Catholic terms.\textsuperscript{15} In this way, national wartime culture made use of Christian systems of representation.

The wartime restoration of an association between national and Catholic culture was significant given the cultural divorce that the 1905 law of separation engendered. The emergency climate of war generally facilitated rapprochement among disparate groups within France. Termed \textit{l'union sacrée} (the sacred union), this atmosphere of domestic entente is popularly misunderstood as connoting the wartime truce between the French Left and the government. It is true that the left agreed not to strike or to oppose the government during wartime, but our contemporary conception of this political truce as part of the sacred union is inaccurate. As the actual term denotes, French people living during this period understood the sacred union to mean a spiritually informed kind of wartime cooperation among Catholics and the state. Indeed, the sacred union was primarily a religious designation. Becker redefines the sacred union as less a political

\textsuperscript{14} Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, \textit{14-18 Understanding the Great War}; Becker, \textit{War and faith}.
\textsuperscript{15} Becker, \textit{War and faith}. 
truce and more a sense of spiritual connection among disparate groups in France. Catholics in particular believed that the wartime return to the altar—or the resurgence of religious feeling and identification with Catholic systems of representation—constituted this spiritual sacred union.¹⁶

Many scholars recognize that churches sat at the heart of wartime culture. Becker explains that above all else, the destruction of French churches brought people together in a spiritual sacred union defined in opposition to the German enemy. Ultimately, the French saw the German enemy as unholy and barbaric on account of the systematic church destruction attributed to him. In Reims on Fire: War and Reconciliation between France and Germany (2018), Thomas Gaehtgens traces French attitudes towards Germany across the World War I-era through the destruction and reconstruction of Reims Cathedral—which had become a symbol of French victimhood at the hands of German barbarity after its 1914 shelling.¹⁷ Emmanuelle Danchin more generally examines the cultural representation of destruction in WWI France in Le Temps des Ruines (2015). She contends that French propaganda instrumentalized representations of cultural destruction in a war of images against the Germans.¹⁸ Churches factor significantly in her monograph. Catholics interpreted national outrage at the destruction of churches as the purest manifestation of sacred union. Devastated churches also gave form to Catholic understandings of war as a divine punishment for Republican secularization.

¹⁶ Becker, War and faith.
¹⁷ Reims on Fire: War and Reconciliation between France and Germany (The Getty Research Institute: Los Angeles, 2018).
However, the term sacred union hides difference. If the people of France felt themselves united in a common crusade against the Germany enemy, they disagreed about its meaning and outcome. Republican France adopted Christian systems of representation in service of a secular conception of crusade. The idea of France as a Christian civilization could very well exist in a secular context. Catholics, however, held a different understanding of crusade—one with a clear religious valence. They imagined war as a divine punishment from God for the pre-war secularization of France and as an opportunity to bring the French back to their faith. In the context of war as divine punishment, crusade served a religious purpose: the act of mounting a crusade against the unholy enemy was understood as testament to the revival of religious faith. Ultimately, the key difference between secular and religious understandings of crusade lay in outcome. Catholics believed that war should engender lasting religious revival in France. This meant that the wartime sacred union should last into peacetime.

The survival of wartime culture in peacetime is of interest to scholars, especially in the case of interwar France. In recent years, cultural historians of modern France have endeavored to understand the demobilization of civilians in the wake of the First World War. John Horne first proposed the concept of cultural demobilization, which scholars in the field swiftly adopted, interrogated, and expanded. As Horne conceives of it, cultural demobilization is the process by which the values, attitudes, and mentalities of wartime culture dissipate and give way to peacetime culture. Since its proposal at the beginning of the century, the concept has undergone some revision, but generally remains true to its original spirit. Indeed, historians have largely presented cultural demobilization in post-

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19 Horne, “Demobilizing the Mind.”
World War I France as a top-down process which began in elite political and intellectual circles and uniformly took hold among a populace inexplicably disengaged from the culture of war.\textsuperscript{20}

In “Demobilizing the Mind: France and the Legacy of the Great War, 1919-1939,” Horne presents a general overview of the cultural demobilization process. He establishes war culture based on Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker’s crusade thesis and identifies “the abolition of the dehumanized enemy in opposition to the collective self of the nation” as the crux of cultural demobilization.\textsuperscript{21} It is precisely the war culture which Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker describe—the opposed cultural representations of barbarous German aggressors and pious French victims—that historians consider as the object of demobilization.

Horne locates the turning point of the demobilization process in the mid-1920s. The culture of war essentially remained intact during the early part of the decade and reached a final burst at the time of France’s occupation of the Ruhr in 1923.\textsuperscript{22} French opinion did not believe that Germany had admitted defeat or accepted its war guilt, so many French people thus continued to demonize the enemy. Yet, the signature of the Treaty of Locarno in 1925 signaled change. As a signatory to the treaty, Germany ostensibly committed itself to international peace, which spurred the dissipation of the inhuman German representation that defined French war culture. “War,” Horne declares, “was now seen as the real enemy and its horror was made explicit.”\textsuperscript{23} An explicit

\textsuperscript{20} Horne, “Demobilizing the Mind.”
\textsuperscript{21} Horne, “Demobilizing the Mind,” 107.
\textsuperscript{22} Horne, “Demobilizing the Mind,” 106.
\textsuperscript{23} Horne, “Demobilizing the Mind,” 107.
rejection of war culture occurred among schoolteachers, veterans, and pacifists. No longer did French culture consider Germany its hereditary enemy.

Horne presents a homogenous vision of the cultural demobilization process, tending to favor the perspectives of cultural elites. He does not consider the persistence of wartime Catholic culture after the armistice, which is a notable shortcoming. Indeed, Catholics sought to project the gains of wartime culture—the sacred union, religious revival—into the future. They aimed to reconstitute France through the experience of war. In *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914-1930*, Annette Becker acknowledges that Catholic systems of representation persisted in France at least until 1930. Commemorative remembrance of the war dead—ossuaries, *monuments aux morts*, the cenotaph to the Unknown Soldier—drew on the signs and symbols of Catholicism in order to make meaning out of otherwise incomprehensible mass death.24 She thus opens the opportunity to think about how Catholic war culture resisted general cultural demobilization. In this thesis, I focus on one aspect of Catholic war culture as it traverses the neat boundaries between war and peace: damaged churches.

Historians have not sufficiently considered the meaning of church destruction to Catholic culture. Both Danchin and Gaehtgens are interested in war-damaged churches as national symbols, which is justifiable considering the national outrage that coalesced around them during the war. However, the effect of this perspective is to link the meaning of churches to the dominant cultural narratives of France when they had particular resonance for Catholics. Danchin and Gaehtgens use the familiar narrative of

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24 Becker, *War and faith.*
general cultural demobilization to guide their work. It is for this reason that Danchin concludes her study with the year 1921. After this point, she notes that

> [t]he representations of ruins which, all throughout the war, had helped to mobilize the people and to consolidate them around the idea of a nation under siege—which ruins symbolized—ceded their place, at the armistice, to more positive images, which no longer so much evoked wounds or sadness as they did the resurgence and the rebuilding of the country.\(^{25}\)

In many ways, this is an accurate assessment. Catholics, for example, embraced church reconstruction throughout the war and especially after the armistice. But Danchin suggests that a unitary vision of national resurgence emerged in the post-war period. Catholics, however, understood church reconstruction as an opportunity to remake or reconstitute France according to their vision of religious revival which diverged significantly from the Republican status quo. The Catholic understanding of war as an opportunity for religious revival persisted. They wanted to maintain the spirit of sacred union that had taken shape around war-damaged churches. Thus, Catholics were still invoking in peacetime the very same representations that they had invoked during wartime. There is something to be said about how interwar Catholic culture did not follow the neat path of national demobilization that historians propose.

The history of French church reconstruction after the First World War has not yet been written, yet it is an opportunity to understand how experiences of war shaped interwar Catholic culture. This story begins during the war, when devastated churches assumed profound significance as part of the national narrative of French wartime experience. However, this was also a time of conflict because an influential contingent in France was advocating for the preservation of war ruins. At this moment, Catholics

registered the centrality of devastated churches to the atmosphere of sacred union, but they also remained committed to reconstruction. They began to articulate their visions of France’s future through early plans for church reconstruction. When the war ended, they continued to reimagine France through church reconstruction. But the meanings that Catholics attached to church reconstruction were never stable during the post-war period. They shifted in response to the political and cultural atmosphere of France, Europe, and the world. In this way, the notion of a reconstruction crusade to achieve the social conquest of Republican France took shape towards the end of the interwar period.
Chapter 1 Foundations of Church Reconstruction: The Wartime Discourse

In 1916, Monseigneur Henri Louis Odelin—president of a charity for the reconstruction of war-damaged churches—stated, “[t]here can be no question about reconstructing the churches.” Of course, Odelin’s statement responded to the disagreement about that very matter. Although church ruins assumed national significance as symbols of French suffering and martyrdom, and thus attained a general wartime cultural resonance around which the sacred union coalesced, there was no consensus about reconstruction. As early as 1914, when the first churches fell, two responses to the ruins emerged. A heterogenous group of cultural and political elites, all devotees to a wartime cult of ruins, advocated for the preservation of devastated churches. Upon visiting the ruins of Arras in 1915, members of the state commission de Réparation des dommages de guerre (commission for the repair of war damages) noted in a report, “[p]erhaps it would be good to choose some of these ruins and keep them intact for future generations. They will better understand what war is and won’t be allowed to overlook it.” The report proved enduring and influential in debates about the fate of war-damaged churches, as recurring entreaties to preserve damaged cathedrals show. Yet, France’s Catholic leaders entertained no alternative to reconstruction. During the war, clergy and laypeople alike prepared for the post-war reconstruction of their places of worship—in strict opposition to the elite cult of ruins.

This chapter examines wartime discourse about church reconstruction, starting with the cult of ruins espoused by French elites. I find that Catholics resisted the cult of  

ruins and understood war through a logic of resurrection that demanded church reconstruction. I then argue that Catholics envisioned the future of the Church in France through wartime discussions about church reconstruction. War introduced an opportunity for Catholics to rethink the role of organized religion in France, and church reconstruction became the material space to do this work. Reconstruction was thus in no way relegated to the post-war landscape of France, as people were already thinking about whether and how to accomplish it during the war. If we are to understand post-war church reconstruction, we must begin with the wartime debates that established its conceptual foundations. Indeed, war experience remained central to later discourses about church reconstruction. Catholics continued to invoke the wartime sacred union, of which damaged churches had become such a symbol, throughout the 1920s.

Images of destruction exerted significant power during the First World War. They abounded in the visual culture of wartime France, at once giving representation to wartime suffering and mounting a propaganda campaign against the German enemy. As historian Emmanuelle Danchin explains in *Le Temps des Ruines* (2015),

> Representations of ruins were instrumentalized from the beginning of the First World War. Bit by bit the ruins became the metaphor for the pain suffered by the French nation. It was through the repetition and accumulation of images of ruins, often accompanied by virulent captions, that civilians and military personnel could forge representations of war and devastation. It was through instrumentalization and personification that they became a symbol of suffering in which all could be represented.28

Scholars note that this visual culture produced a widespread fascination with physical destruction, sometimes referred to as a cult of ruins.29 The term suggests that people

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29 Danchin uses this term in *Le Temps des ruines*. For more on ruins in wartime visual culture see:
worshipped ruins, and to an extent they actually did. French intellectual elites often advocated for the preservation of ruins as sublime representations of national suffering. They also wanted to preserve evidence of German acts of destruction, for example in the notorious bombardment of the Cathedral of Reims. As scholars have explored, the French state established several government agencies to preserve physical traces and memories of ruins. One agency was tasked with photographing ruins, while others endeavored to take inventory of ruins that might be preserved as historic monuments after the war.

Many postcards and photographs of ruins circulated during wartime. Frequently, museums and cultural institutions in Paris organized exhibitions about wartime ruins: some showed photographs, while others actually displayed ruins culled from the Western Front. Danchin notes that the photographic exhibitions visited many high schools throughout France during the war.

As Nicole Hudgins notes, the World War I-era fascination with physical destruction finds its origins in centuries-old visual traditions. Ruins have occupied an
important position in French visual culture since at least the late 18th century. A reverence for antique ruins marked the Romantic era across the West, including France. French Republicanism had an affinity for ancient Rome: Republicans often invoked ancient Roman culture in order to inscribe their modern values into the ancient past. During the Paris Commune from 1870-71, early photojournalist Bruno Braquehais documented physical destruction. In several photographs, communards posed with ruins to signal their break with the recent imperial past under Napoleon III. Braquehais’s photograph of the toppled statue of Napoleon is especially salient: the communards stand upright while the statue lies horizontally in the orientational code for death. Representations of ruins in France have historically raised questions about what the nation should and should not be.

Hudgins also argues that picturing war ruins during WWI enabled the French to talk about death without showing bodies. She shows how people often anthropomorphized ruins in art and writing. Hudgins explains that French authors “used the language of wounds, and even murder, to describe destroyed property.” Meanwhile, photographs of ruins could offer a “coded way to talk about death and dismemberment.” Hudgins finds that religious ruins in particular emerged as a new photographic genre during the war. She notes that the language used to describe religious ruins often “obscured the recent, and heated, conflict between the Catholic Right and the anticlerical Left in France before the war.” Indeed, French people of all creeds and confessions expressed outrage at religious destruction. As I will show, religious ruins

33 Hudgins, “Art and Death in French Photographs of Ruins.”
34 Hudgins, “Art and Death in French Photographs of Ruins,” 61.
35 Hudgins, “Art and Death in French Photographs of Ruins,” 61.
36 Hudgins, “Art and Death in French Photographs of Ruins,” 62.
occupied a special role in WWI-era France. If, as Hudgins explains, ruins generally provided an opportunity for people to talk about death, then religious ruins as analogs for bodies endowed human death with transcendent meaning.  

Historians have not sufficiently considered the aesthetic codes that sustained the cult of ruins. After all, the valorization of ruins required a certain kind of seeing. In his essay “Modern War Imagery in Early Photography, Bernard Hüppauf finds that 18th-century picturesque aesthetics influenced photographic representations of destruction during WWI. As an aesthetic category, the picturesque sits alongside the sublime and the beautiful, yet differs in its 19th-century Romantic fascination with decline. It takes an interest in “uneven surfaces, disintegrating structures, amorphous scenes, bizarre effects of light and shade or decomposing sites.” Hüppauf writes that the “aesthetic nature of [early war photography’s] representation of battlefields…tend[s] to follow the conventional code of the picturesque.” He explains that the picturesque is an extra-moral, emotionally detached representational code: it finds aesthetic value, rather than moral significance, in destruction. As he contends, “it was the viewing convention of the picturesque that prepared the ground for the emotionally detached and extra-moral representation of a landscape of mass destruction and death” during WWI. Rather than

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37 Nicolas Padiou, “La destruction des églises de Meurthe-et-Moselle en 1914-1918”, Livraisons de l'histoire de l'architecture, 19 | 2010, 77-96. Padiou writes briefly on how the destroyed churches of the Meurthe-et-Moselle region were anthropomorphized, but like Hudgins he does not consider the meaning of this rhetorical move. In this chapter I build on his idea.


being charged with “emotion, historical meaning and morality,” images of destruction assumed amoral aesthetic significance.41

This approach to destruction subverted its moral implications, which is to say that representations of ruins could transcend the contemporary context of a gruesome war and bear aesthetic value. Although an aesthetic code of the sublime ultimately dominated WWI-era visual culture, the picturesque still remained foundational. The cult of ruins seems to have developed out of the picturesque code given their shared fascination with decline and destruction. The tendency to abstract destruction originated with the picturesque and influenced new notions of the sublime that developed during WWI. Ultimately, these terms overlap significantly, and the sublime has shifted in meaning over time. I introduce these terms because they contextualize the cult of ruins in aesthetic theory. Many French intellectuals who wanted to preserve ruins often described them in a way that abstracted the moral significance of destruction. Photographs of ruins followed the picturesque code, and written descriptions tended towards the sublime. This is all to say that aesthetic concerns drove many of the intellectuals who were committed to preserving ruins.

Although Hüppauf does not discuss them, representations of destroyed churches—more so than battlefields or razed villages—deploy the overlapping codes of the picturesque and the sublime. For all the indignation at the destruction of these sacred monuments—above all, the Cathedral of Reims—these visual codes aestheticized church ruins and abstracted human suffering as sublime sacrifice. French intellectuals even remarked that the cathedral’s destruction had rendered it all the more beautiful and

so insisted on leaving it in ruins. This may be the clearest example of the cult of ruins—an aesthetic valorization of destruction which sought the preservation of the evidence of destruction. In 1918, the budding French philosopher Georges Bataille penned an article in support of the preservation of Reims in its ruined state. He wrote:

Well, even in the torn and gutted webbing of its arches, it was still majestic, but since its gates were closed, its bells burst, it had ceased to give life. And I thought that even corpses cannot represent death as well as a broken church like Notre-Dame de Reims, utterly empty in its splendor. Truly, it was the disfigured grin of a skeleton, a grimace from gaping cracks where there had been a human face of living stone.

As words like “majestic” and “splendor” suggest, Bataille observed something delicious, and certainly sublime, in the cathedral’s devastation. His anthropomorphic descriptions of the cathedral were consistent with trends in WWI-era ruins culture. Since the representation of the dead human body was taboo in wartime France, then “picturing and talking about war ruins allowed Europeans to transfer the horror of mass slaughter onto less painful objects of attention.” Bataille was indeed interested in the best way to represent the unrepresentable. He wished to give expression to mass death, that which he could not achieve permissibly or successfully through a corpse. However, the ruined church could picture death in the sublime abstract. There is a way in which Bataille conflated the cultural achievement of constructing Reims with the human accomplishment of its sublime destruction. He implied that the destruction had further edified the great cathedral, as if the newly acquired valence of death elevated the monument to aesthetic sublimity. What truly

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42 Danchin, Le Temps des ruines; Gaehgtgens, Reims on Fire.
43 Gaehgtgens, Reims on Fire, 199-200.
45 Hudgins, “Art and Death in French Photographs of Ruins,” 60.
fascinated Bataille was the permissible image of death, this “disfigured grin of a skeleton, a grimace from gaping cracks where there had been a human face of living stone.” It seems that he had caught a glimpse of what could never be pictured during war, and he wished to preserve it.

Most often, though, ecclesiastical ruins represented the remnants of a barbarous German crime. In a war culture that interpreted the enemy as a satanic Vandal committed to the destruction of French civilization, church ruins constituted the ultimate proof. Photographs of ruined churches were axiomatically understood as representing German presence. General Gabriel Malleterre promoted the preservations of Reims “as an eternal indictment against the invaders” in 1915. In accord with Malleterre, French dramatist Henri Lavedan wrote that the cathedral would represent “a grim lesson always repeated, a living indictment, an arm of stone always outstretched.” There was no shortage of visual propaganda to match the association of cultural destruction with Germany.

As the general French populace understood them, church ruins were among the most powerful condemnations of German crimes. They garnered the most substantial outrage. As Hudgins notes, “rubble-filled churches and decapitated religious sculptures became some of the most favored images in French photo documentation and propaganda.” In offering proof of German vandalism, ecclesiastical ruins “became

46 Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 14-18 Understanding the Great War.
48 Gaehtgens, Reims on Fire, 189.
49 Gaehtgens, Reims on Fire, 188.
50 See images in Reims on Fire, for example on pg. 89.
51 Hudgins, “Art and Death in French Photographs of Ruins,” 62.
identified with French national identity.”

French cultural historian Annette Becker makes a congruent point in *La Guerre et la foi*: “It’s in fact the destruction of churches which above all unleashes passions. Everywhere from the Cathedral of Reims to the humble churches of the frontlines, the shells destroy, re-crucify Christ of the Calvary.”

Becker refers to the imitation of Christ or *imitatio Christi* narrative, which made meaning out of the inordinate suffering of war. Damaged churches were central to this narrative. If the French believed that the nation imitated Jesus Christ in its wartime suffering, then there existed no clearer proof than its ruined churches. In the photograph of a devastated church, they beheld the German enemy at its most unholy and the martyred French nation at its most divinely favored. In this way, war culture solidified the cult status of church ruins. The blasted altar was not to be a site of worship, rather its cinders would continue to stoke the fires of hatred in the hearts of the cult’s devotees.

State efforts to preserve devastated structures developed out of the cult of ruins. In 1915 the *commission de Réparation des dommages de guerre* (The Commission for the Reparation of War Damages) proposed a state program to preserve wartime ruins. That September, deputy of the North Jules-Louis Le Breton introduced a law to identify ruins for historical classification and preservation. It reads:

> Everywhere on the front, shells and fire have accumulated ruins, amassed rubble. Several of these ruins are suffused with military memories and constitute singularly moving and tragic pages of one of the most beautiful periods of our national history; we perceive there, better than in the work of the most powerful historian, the admirable valiance of our soldiers and the savage barbarity of German troops.

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52 Hudgins, “Art and Death in French Photographs of Ruins” 62.
55 Viltart, “Naissance d’un patrimoine,” 2.
The 1915 law established *La Commission des souvenirs et vestiges de guerre* (The Commission for memories and traces of war) to preserve the ruins described here. In 1917, the commission placed André Ventre—the head architect of the commission of historic monuments—at the helm of a mission to inspect and identify potential ruins for preservation. At this point, the commission was attached to the Ministry of War, likely so that it could gain access to the front and enjoy a military escort during its inventory work. When Ventre visited Arras in 1917, he slated the ruins of the Great Square, the cathedral, the cloisters, and the belltower for historic classification. He did this in the original spirit of the *commission de Réparation des dommages de guerre*, which had spawned the state movement for preserving ruins upon a 1915 visit to the same city.

By the time of Ventre’s inventory, however, it seemed more feasible to select sites like observation posts for preservation. The pragmatic shift disappointed Ventre because such sites did not “present a capital interest.” Ruined churches were certainly more captivating, as Ventre’s drawings suggest. He produced stylized renderings of the ruined cathedral of Arras (figure 1) and the abbey of neighboring Mont-Saint-Éloi (figure 2) to accompany the proposal. The drawings recall Bataille’s anthropomorphic description of Reims, for the ruins are sinewy. The thin strip of stone which spans the two towers of the abbey is taut and fleshy, like the flexed muscle of the human body. As Ventre depicts them, these ruins testify as living witnesses to France’s sacred suffering.

His other drawings—among them, an observation post carved into a battered tree trunk, a trench, and a German shelter—do not convey the same meaning.

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56 Viltart, “Naissance d’un patrimoine,” 5.
Figure 1, André Ventre, la cathédrale d’Arras, c. 1917.

from: Paul Léon, La renaissance des ruines, maisons, monuments (Paris: Laurens, 1918), 88.
Figure 2, André Ventre, the abbey of Mont Saint-Eloi, c. 1917.

Figure 3, Section Photographique de l’Armée, damaged statue of Saint Sebastian from the church of Bétheny, c. 1915.

Christian martyrdom took on national significance in wartime France. The art history review *L’art et les artistes* dedicated a 1917 edition titled “L’art assassiné” to the wartime destruction of French cultural heritage. The photos show ruins of an exclusively Christian character. On the first page appears an oval photograph of a statue of the Virgin Mary. All that remains is the head. Other images include a Pietà in which Mary is decapitated and Jesus quartered, a Crucifix with nothing but a dangling arm, and an angel whose wings have been blasted off. Particularly compelling is the damaged statue of Saint Sebastian (figure 3), a martyr who was bound to a tree and shot with arrows in the 3rd century according to Christian belief. Miraculously, the innumerable arrows are said to have done Sebastian no harm. In the photograph of the sculpture, though, modern warfare has accomplished Sebastian’s martyrdom. The saint is limbless, no doubt by the work of a shell. What’s more, shrapnel has riddled his torso with holes that perversely restore his arrow wounds. It is an image of France’s martyrdom layered on top of the original tale: Sebastian’s suffering becomes an analog for the nation at war.

But the Cathedral of Reims is the example par excellence of the phenomenon. As French novelist Camille Mauclair wrote in 1917,

> When the fire of Reims became known, nobody in France disassociated the motifs of anger and of distress, to separate the artistic catastrophe from religious profanation or historic violation: monarchists or republicans, believers or non-believers, artists or the sanctimonious, all felt, in the complexity of inextricable elements, that an immense satanic outrage had been done unto France of the present and past, that the eternal face of France had been struck—and on all the French cheeks appeared the burning redness.

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60 L’art Assassiné,” *L’art et les artistes*, 21.
Mauclair expressed the relationship between damaged churches and the sacred union, which has gone largely unrecognized in historiography. In testifying to the satanic nature of the German enemy, the wounded Cathedral of Reims united all French (monarchists, republicans, non-believers and believers) in a sacred union against that enemy. As Mauclair wrote, all French cheeks experienced the burn of the barbarian’s unholy destruction. This essential attachment to the nation’s churches, rooted in common opposition to the German enemy, was the very spirit of the sacred union. Becker states it clearly: “[p]atriotism during the war is inevitably ecumenic, the denunciation of a Germany without conscience and without culture, serves to reinforce the spiritual sacred union.” Damaged churches constituted a particularly popular form of denunciation—and given their religious character, they especially reinforced the sacred union.

Scholars have dedicated most of their attention to the Cathedral of Reims, but the many humble churches of the Western Front also structured French understandings of war experience. Mauclair was referring to “mutilated churches” in general when he said, “they are militant and victorious. They fought and won with us. Each of these things mark the degrees of a calvary, but also the stages of an epic return. Here there is no lugubrious and oppressive atmosphere of defeat to breathe in, but one of faith and of resurrection.” Mauclair believed that all the mutilated churches of France constituted a stage in the calvary of French war experience. He used the phrase “les degrés d’un

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61 Nicolas Padiou, “La destruction des églises de Meurthe-et-Moselle en 1914-1918.” In his article about the destruction of churches in the Meurthe-et-Moselle region, Nicolas Padiou largely considers the representation of church ruins in the context of a propaganda war, as proof of a German crime. I’ve culled several primary sources from his article, which I use in chapter 2 to argue that destroyed churches inflected the meaning and cultural salience of the sacred union.

62 Becker, War and faith, 22.


64 L’art Assassiné,” L’art et les artistes, 30.
calvaire,” meaning the degrees or stages of an intense experience of suffering—one that recalls the Crucifixion in its intensity of suffering.

Understood as one of the stages of the national wartime calvary, church destruction occupied a central position in the imitation of Christ narrative. This system of cultural representation appropriated the structure of the Stations of the Cross. As the stations progress, Christ’s suffering grows more intense: he is condemned to die, bears the Cross, falls thrice, is nailed to the Cross, dies, and is deposed. Yet, with each instance of suffering, Christ is brought nearer to resurrection. In describing France’s war experience as a calvary, the French grafted Christ’s experience onto the nation. Many people believed that France imitated Christ in its extended suffering, a crucial stage of which was the devastation of churches. When Mauclair stated that “each of these [stages] marks the degrees of a calvary, but also the stages of an epic return,” he was using Christ’s trial as a framework.

A particularly Christian way of understanding suffering thus became nationalized during the war through the image of the ruined church. There existed a sense that the churches of France were martyrs, which is to say that they had suffered for France with intention. Mauclair described the churches as like “the very pure bodies of martyrs.” They were pure in their obstinate faith and especially so in their brash invitation of sacrilegious brutalization. Becker explains the idea of martyrdom during war succinctly: “[d]eath, it’s also sacrifice, the death of the martyr who chooses this fate for himself, for his country.” The martyrdom attached to churches was another aspect of their humanization because it suggested that they could position themselves in harm’s way and

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65 L’art Assassiné,” L’art et les artistes, 30.
66 Becker, War and faith, 24.
choose to suffer like human bodies. A Catholic from Lyon discussed the designation of churches as martyrs:

    We called them by a beautiful name: ‘the martyred churches’; we were right because, like martyrs, they fell for our faith of which they were the symbol, and thus their destruction was a testimony, which is the essence of the martyr.67

The notion of destruction as testimony is telling. As martyrs, the churches were witnesses to the brutality of the destroyer. Yet, many people understood destruction as more than just proof of a German crime. In suffering destruction, the churches represented France as victim. Their martyrdom assumed national significance: the image of the ruined church stood for France as a nation, and everyone who constituted it. There were few symbols so unifying, so nationally representative, as the devastated church in World War I France. All cheeks burned red with the fire of sacrilege.

    The elevation of churches to national significance due to their wartime destruction was important to French Catholics. Anticlericalism had defined the pre-war religious history of the country.68 In 1905, Republicans sought the decoupling of French national identity from Catholicism through the Separation of Church and State. France was not to be a Catholic nation any longer. If there was to be any state religion, it was Republicanism, and the Pantheon—formerly the church of Saint Genevieve—the altar at which to worship the nation’s secular figures.

    Yet, by 1914 the Cathedral of Reims was once again the image of the French nation. On October 2, 1914, Le matin published an article titled “Qu’on respecte les ruines de Reims” on the front page of the journal. The author argued that the cathedral

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68 Cholvy and Hilaire, Histoire Religieuse De La France Contemporaine.
should not to be rebuilt because “it symbolized now and forever the unification of all religions in the country.” 69 “The religion of France,” the article continued, “has found its church: the ruins of Reims Cathedral…Can one imagine a more wonderful symbol of the country’s sacrifice?” 70 That a secular newspaper should promote a Catholic cathedral as a national symbol, and in fact position it at the center of a national religion of wartime patriotism, was significant. The Cathedral of Reims seemed to restore the place of Catholic tradition in French conceptions of national identity: the nation’s Pantheon shifted from the Republican monument in Paris back to Reims. If scholars typically treat the sacred union as a wartime political truce among Republicans, socialists, and Catholics, then that notion acquires nuance here. War had seemingly resurrected the nation’s Catholic spirit, as seen in the identification of all French with the suffering of churches. The sacred union was not merely political, but also spiritual and cultural.

Catholics recognized that the ruins of their churches constituted the foundation of the sacred union. In 1915, Maurice Barrès published an article titled “Les églises tombées au champ d’honneur,” which likened damaged churches to fallen soldiers:

We deplore a new pity of the churches of France, but this time glorious and no longer humiliating. We are opening a new chapter of the sacred union. 71

With this mention of the pity of the churches of France, Barrès referenced his 1914 book La grande pitié des églises de France. 72 Published prior to the outbreak of the First World War, La grand pitié considered the threat posed to France’s churches not by war,

69 Gaetgten, Reims on Fire, 188.
70 Gaetgten, Reims on Fire, 188.
but by the 1905 law of separation. With the separation of church and state, the latter had relinquished responsibility for *les lieux de culte*, or places of worship. Although the law of separation transferred ownership of churches from the state to the commune, thus giving local administrative divisions more control over the *lieux de culte*, it deprived them of critical funds. The result was a drain on the budget for church upkeep and restoration, leading Barrès to worry over the state of the nation’s churches. In anticipation of the war, Barrès wrote, “two teams attack our Lorraine; Prussians who destroy our language [and] sectarians who want to destroy our religion.”

But Barrès observed an important development by 1915, just one year after he published *La grande pitié*. The ruination of French churches had been accomplished, but it was glorious rather than humiliating in the context of war. No longer was the destruction a product of national rejection of Catholic heritage. Rather, it represented glorious Catholic sacrifices for the victory of France. The churches suffered *for* France rather than by the negligence of the state, instantiating a “new chapter of the sacred union.”

Starting anew, rebirth, resurrection—these were the tenets of Catholic attitudes regarding devastated churches. Whereas a fixation on the past attended the preservationist ethos of the cult of ruins, Catholics adhered to a logic of resurrection which guided their unyielding commitment to reconstruction. Despite the appeal of enduring monuments to the sacred union, France’s Catholics could not support efforts to preserve the ruins of their churches. They wanted to project the sacred union into France of the future rather than ossify it through war memorials. Catholics never converted to the cult of ruins—which depended on a valorization of destruction that they rejected when it came to their

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churches. Aesthetic codes facilitated an abstraction of the ruined subject and subversion of its immediate moral implications: devastated churches became symbols for national suffering in the abstract, and nobody’s suffering in the actual. Catholics did not participate in the necessary abstraction, thus positioning themselves beyond the cult of ruins. The image of a ruined church could never be purely aesthetic for them. For French people disassociated from the actual local event of destruction, the ruins might stand in for the unpictured and unpicturable bodies of the nation’s fallen soldiers. For Catholics, the destruction of a church was itself a tragedy because it deprived communities of their churches.

Catholics advocated for church reconstruction from the earliest days of the war, in opposition to the preservationist sensibilities of the cult of ruins. In 1915, a group of prominent Catholic leaders formed l’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées des régions envahies (The Charity for Aid to the Devastated Churches of the Invaded Regions). Its president, Monseigneur Odelin, was the director of the charities of the diocese of Paris. The presidents of honor included Cardinal Luçon, archbishop of Reims, and Cardinal Amette, archbishop of Paris. The general committee included several members of the Académie française, among them Maurice Barrès, French historian Georges Goyau, and writer Fernand Laudet. By 1916, all of the bishops of the devastated regions of northeastern France had expressed their support for the Œuvre, leading to their designation as committee members of honor. The bishops frequently delivered speeches at committee meetings and published articles in the Œuvre’s bulletin, of which the first edition appeared in June 1916.

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74 Hugh Clout, After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France After the Great War (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 238.
The Œuvre aimed to re-establish the infrastructure for religious worship in devastated regions so that “when, returning from their lamentable exodus, [and] people find their homes in ruins, it does not happen that the deprivation of religious consolation comes to be added to their moral and material distress.” The Œuvre initially intended to provide devastated communities with the objects and furniture necessary for worship and to issue grants for the construction of provisional structures. Although its members certainly advocated for the complete reconstruction of churches, they had not yet taken any steps to do so since war was still underway.

At this incipient stage in the Œuvre’s history, its leaders primarily demonstrated concern for the consolation of religious communities. That people might return to find their churches in ruins was a disturbing thought, considering the importance of religious worship in the regions of northeastern France. Cardinal Luçon of Reims, who had become a figure of national repute through his association with the beleaguered Cathedral of Reims, wrote a letter in favor of the Œuvre in 1916:

In the invaded dioceses, a certain number of churches have been burned, others robbed and devastated. Encouraged by the example of the Belgians and terrified by their stories, other times pressured by military or civil administrations, the populations emigrated in mass numbers. How many, upon returning, will find their homes burned, their furniture gone; since it is the habitual practice of enemies to pillage inhabited homes? So it must not be that...the deprivation of religious consolation comes to be added to moral and material distress. Touched by adversity, our populations have turned towards He who they see as the only one capable of...bringing a remedy to their pains...They will have enough to do to raise their homes and to reconstruct their churches, mustn’t it be that...during the reconstruction, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass be celebrated among them, if only in a barn, for the relief of the dead fallen on the battlefields and for the

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75 “But et fonctionnement de l’œuvre,” Bulletin de l’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées, No. 1 1916, i.
76 “But et fonctionnement de l’œuvre,” Bulletin de l’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées, No. 1 1916, i.
77 Gaehtgens, Reims on Fire, 184.
comfort of the survivors? This is the good deed that our charity has for its mission...It responds to a need as touching as it is real.\textsuperscript{78}

The religious consolation that Luçon imagined was perhaps so obvious to him and to his readers that he neglected to explain it in much detail. Barrès articulated a similar idea at the beginning of “Les églises tombées au champ d’honneur.” He recognized the role of the church—a transcendental space which narrows the separation between the living and the dead—in helping people to triumph over death. Since war was a traumatic experience of death and dying, people sought spiritual consolation during this time. But war had also cruelly deprived local communities of their churches. As Barrès lamented, “[t]his year, we have so many things to say to the dead!...But this year, the year of great death, the crowds are not going to gather!”\textsuperscript{79} Barrès noted that the harsh reality of the First World War only compounded this spiritual desolation: the bodies of so many fallen soldiers would not even return home. Obliterated by destructive technologies, they continued to dwell in the mud of the trenches, rising like the returning tides as the soil settled.\textsuperscript{80} Barrès registered this reality in stating “[w]e…abandon their bodies.” He explained that churches were especially important in these circumstances. Unable to commune directly with the physical remains of loved ones, people required a space to “meet [the] spirits” of the unretrieved fallen. He uncompromisingly concluded that “[t]he church is the site of

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Bulletin de l’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées}, No. 1 1916, 5-6.  
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Bulletin de l’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées}, No. 1 1916, 5-6.  
\textsuperscript{80} Dorothee Brantz frames the environments of World War I—the muddy trenches in particular—as having agency. She explores the relationship between the body and the environment, arguing for their conceptual unification based on their shared potential for complete annihilation by wartime technologies. Paul Fussell and Leonard Smith deal with narrative accounts written by WWI soldiers. As they show, many soldiers registered the potential for complete bodily annihilation and absorption into the muds of the trenches. Leonard Smith, \textit{The Embattled Self: French soldiers’ testimony of the Great War} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 61.  
these meetings.”

Church reconstruction was thus imperative for the consolation of the those who survived war.

It is understandable that Catholics contested the cult of ruins. How could they abstract the suffering implicit at sites of spiritual devastation? Mgr. Odelin, president of the Œuvre, spoke definitively: “[t]here can be no question about reconstructing the churches, not only because of the importance of the task…but because the buildings in question are legally property of the commune or of the State.” He made this statement in his 1916 report for the Œuvre’s bulletin. To be sure, Odelin did find something meaningful in the destruction of churches, remarking in that same report “[f]or pious souls, for restorative souls, the sight of the wounds inflicted on our churches by barbarity and religious hatred, make us think of the wounds of our Savior.” Yet, this does not lead him to advocate for their preservation. Quite the opposite, in fact. He believed that the French should tend to church ruins with the same compassion as people did the wounds of Christ.

Odelin’s invocation of Christ intimated his conviction that church ruins were bound for resurrection. The desire to offer religious consolation to the communities of the front was certainly an important motivation for church reconstruction, but Odelin’s statement suggests that Catholic thinking about the matter was more dynamic. This logic

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82 Christina Theodosiou argues that wartime ceremonies substituted for the rituals of mourning in France. Often, it was not possible to perform religious rituals for the bodies of the fallen because nothing remained of them, or because soldiers were buried on the front. The absence of bodies weighed heavily on families, who instead imagined the body in ceremonies of collective grief. Evidently, Catholics believed that churches needed to be reconstructed in order to facilitate communion between the living and the disappeared dead. Christina Theodosiou “La Mobilisation Des Morts : Culte Du Souvenir Et Culture De Guerre En France Pendant La Grande Guerre.” LISA (Caen, France) (Vol. X – n° 1, 2012): 51-68.
84 Bulletin de l’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées, No. 1 1916, 18.
of resurrection demands careful consideration. We have seen that such a logic generally structured national war culture. In following the structure of the Stations of the Cross, the concept of a calvary for the French nation expected resurrection to follow suffering. Yet, this notion of resurrection was generally Christian in form, not content. This is to say that many French people drew on Christian traditions to understand their war experience but envisioned a purely secular resurrection of the French Republic in its pre-war form. For Catholics, however, ideas of resurrection remained religious in nature: they anticipated a post-war religious revival. In fact, many Catholics imagined the war as “God’s penalty, which aimed to purify and bring faith back to a faithless people.”

People across France endeavored to understand why the nation been made to suffer such devastation. Becker identifies the most common response to the “why” of war among Catholics. As she explains, Catholics believed that

Nations, like the individuals which compose them, are punished by God who wants to make them recognize their sins and the necessity of atonement. These proud civilizations were certain that they could live without God and without war. God sent them the most barbarous of wars, conducted with the new weapons of this civilization so proud of its technical progress, and this war of progress led to more deaths of the most atrocious suffering caused by machine guns or gas.

According to this strain of thought, war was a divine blessing which offered the French an opportunity to atone for the crimes of the 1905 separation. In a 1916 letter to his parish, Cardinal Luçon of Reims expressed such beliefs: “[o]ne sought to secularize, laicize the order of public things, which is to say establish it beyond God and all religion. What is the result of this? The country was delivered into instability…Through the

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85 Becker, War and faith, 33.; Cholvy and Hilaire, Histoire Religieuse de la France Contemporaine, 267.
86 Becker, War and faith, 33.; Cholvy and Hilaire also raise this point: Histoire Religieuse de la France Contemporaine, 267.
current war God gives France notice to determine whether she wants to be saved or if she wants to be left to perish. If she wants to be saved, it is necessary that she return to Jesus Christ.”

For Catholics, then, the point of the war—in fact, the way to end the war—was religious revival in France. In this context, church destruction paradoxically assumed positive meaning, much like Christian conceptions of a martyr’s suffering. The martyr suffers because she refuses to renounce her faith, and so her suffering is signified as proof of the strongest faith—the sort for which she is willing to die. Similarly, Catholics interpreted church ruins as evidence of their committed reverence for God, that they should continue to fight for a French Catholic civilization against the onslaught of the pagan German enemy.

The conception of war as an act of punishment and opportunity for expiation meant that Catholic thinking required church reconstruction. At a 1917 Lyon assembly for the Œuvre, M. Jacquier implied that war was God’s punishment for France’s laicization:

It’s not with impunity that a people can chase God from their institutions and from their laws.

He identified the reconstruction of churches as one way to repent, insisting that France must “return to God his temples.” Thus, we arrive at the absolute root of Catholic insulation from the cult of ruins and its instinct for preservation. To valorize ruins required not only the abstraction and moral subversion that Catholics resisted, but an equally incompatible fixation on death and the past. Was Georges Bataille’s proposal to

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preserve the ruins of Reims not rooted in a fascination with death and rejection of resurrection? He wished to freeze the cathedral in its skeletal state. Those who advocated for the ruins as an eternal indictment against Germans remained similarly fixated on death. Even proposals for the preservation of Reims’s ruins as a monument to the sacred union held little appeal. Such thinking inherently relegated the sacred union to the space of the past when Catholics understood it as the point of the war. Indeed, the sacred union was not merely a climate of wartime cooperation worth remembering, but actively maintaining at the very least. Catholics instead looked towards the future and understood church reconstruction as part of the overall resurrection of the Catholic faith in France. The cult of ruins lacked the logic of resurrection, and for this reason, as Odelin put it, there could be no question about reconstruction. It had to be accomplished.

Catholics largely envisioned the nature of post-war religious revival through their discussions of church reconstruction. Visions of the future varied, with some imagining a lasting wartime sacred union and others viewing the sacred union as a catalyst for a more complete restoration of the Catholic Church’s eminence in France. In a 1917 article, Barrès articulated the former view through a prescient invocation of the sacred union in the context of church destruction:

The German god flees with Hindenburg, leaving for us his loathsome traces. In his wake we will raise the God of our fathers with a redoubled affection. Our union comes about, believers and non-believers, around the principles that we learn and venerate in his temples.90

Barrès believed that the true sacred union would materialize through national commitment to the reconstruction of churches. If the people of France had truly returned

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to the Catholic faith, then they would not only express outrage at the destruction of churches. They would also use their newfound zeal to reconstruct the churches, and to remake France in the process.

Many Catholic leaders worried about the abandonment of religion. They recognized that the sacred union constituted an unstable formulation borne out of the emergency climate of war. Implicitly, this concern demonstrated that Catholics understood war as an important juncture in the trajectory of Catholicism in France. At the Lyon assembly, M. Jacquier wondered, “How…could Christian and French souls not feel the need to raise and to remake, in love and through love, the idiotic and savage ruins accumulated by the hatred of a people who dare claim to be at the head of civilization and think themselves selected by God to remake the world in their image?”91 His question expressed subtle anxiety about the survival of Catholicism in France since the world which the Germans envisioned was apparently one without Catholic churches.92 Jacquier suggested that those who did not support church reconstruction were complicit in the act of destruction, as they tacitly accepted German attempts to remake France. These concerns seem to have underlaid much of the Catholic effort to support reconstruction from the earliest days of the war.

Such anxiety often coexisted alongside a zealous commitment to religious revival. Jacquier fashioned the sacred union into something more radical and expectant. He described the burgeoning church reconstruction movement as “[a] new crusade [which] arises against the new barbarity that devastates and ruins.”93 The language of crusade and

91 “Discours de M. Jacquier,” Bulletin de l’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées, No. 5 1917, 12.
92 As part of their crusade thesis, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker argue that French people believed the Germans wanted to impose German civilization on Christian France.
conquest signals Jacquier’s anticipation of religious revival, a recovery of lost terrain for the French Church. As he explained, the charity was at once “an Œuvre of reparation [and] an Œuvre of resurrection. Through it, we want to repair the ruins of the past, but we also want to prepare the restorations of the future.”94 Jacquier made a subtle distinction between reparation and restoration, between an orientation towards the past and towards the future. Reconstruction was not just a matter of correcting the physical destruction of war, but of positioning this work to achieve a restoration of God in the institutions and laws of France. The ruins of the past were both the literal ruins of churches and the figurative ruins of the Christian social order. As such, Jacquier understood the work of reconstruction as both materially and socio-culturally restorative. It was the framework through which he imagined the religious revival to come.

Other prominent Catholic figures oriented the work of church reconstruction in a broader program for post-war reactionary policy, including de-secularization among other things. They imagined churches as fonts for the conservative social order in France. Church reconstruction would not just restore the Church to its immediate pre-war position. Many Catholics, like French novelist René Bazin, envisioned a more complete conservative restoration. He believed that the threat of paganization from the German enemy also needed to be addressed among the domestic populace of France:

France resisted, against the attack of her enemies and of her jealousies, the most cruel and long enterprises of paganization. She still has her soul. But this soul is not intact. Even after having vanquished the enemy, we will not be all of a sudden victorious and capable of a future that will refresh us, in becoming a society that is more healthy, more numerous, more united, more conscious of liberties. It will happen when universal submission to the law of work is better understood, when the public conscience be better formed and when the fraternal goodwill lasts into peace as it is in war. These things are too great for solely human means to achieve. So I believe that those here

who work to [reconstruct churches] in devastated villages show a perfect love for France.  

Bazin believed that France would achieve true victory not through the defeat of Germany, but through the establishment of a conservative agenda. In promoting universal submission to the law of work, Bazin clearly positioned himself against unions and workers’ rights. Otherwise, his conservative language is somewhat coded. Typical of conservatives at the time, he expressed concern about the health of French society and the birthrate in particular. Also, his wish for a France “more conscious of liberties”—liberties here meaning religious practice—was not a progressive entreaty. Catholics often appropriated such Republican language in order to resist secularism. Bazin recognized that his conservative agenda would be difficult to accomplish but identified church reconstruction as the panacea. He imagined that church reconstruction would engender a society in which people were faithful, procreative, and submissive. His article initially appeared in the Echo de Paris on July 4, 1915, and the Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées reprinted it in their debut bulletin in 1916. We might read Bazin’s article as more than just his personal philosophy, but a popular one that received endorsement from the leading charity for church reconstruction.

While Catholic leaders had decided in favor of church reconstruction, the matter regarding historic church monuments remained unsettled. The 1905 law of separation designated communes as the owners of their churches. As Odelin affirmed, it is unlikely

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that any commune would decide to preserve the ruins of the local church. Communes, however, did not own the historic monuments within them. Thus, the city of Reims did not own the Cathedral of Reims and technically could not make decisions regarding its reconstruction. The state, specifically the service for historic monuments, made separate decisions for damaged cathedrals classified as state monuments.

Nobody in the historic monuments service ever issued a formal decision or plan for the reconstruction of historic monuments. The clearest articulation of that decision arrived in the form of Paul Léon’s 1918 book *La Renaissance des ruines, maisons, monuments*. At the time, Léon was the head of the division of Architecture of the sub-secretary of Beaux-Arts and therefore an authority on the matter of post-war reconstruction. Léon ultimately settled the matter in favor of reconstruction. He first proposed an aesthetic theory of ruins, doubting the beauty which the cult of ruins indiscriminately ascribed to them:

> The monument transformed slowly over time keeps at least the beauty of its structure. On the contrary, bombarded monuments present an unformed mass, a lamentable chaos; that which remains in bits, torn to shreds by the hazards of the shell. Such ruins are more tragic than truly beautiful.  

Léon also offered pragmatic justification for reconstruction. He noted that ruins still required upkeep and insisted that natural processes would rapidly overtake and bury them, as they did in the ruined villages of the Oise and Aisne during the war. Léon then considered churches in particular, stating that “the maintenance of restoration of ruins depends a lot on their placement as well as the use of the monuments from which they come.”

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discussion. Léon affirmed that the commune would need to construct a new church on a different site if the ruins of the former church were preserved, which raised difficulties—for example, securing a new parcel of land. Yet, even if this was possible, Léon still found the preservation of church ruins unsatisfactory. He asked a question which needed no response given the Catholic logic of resurrection: “Can one believe that the inhabitants of Reims could stand the sight of the mutilated cathedral at the heart of their reborn village?”

There was only one case in which Léon supported preservation. Certain devastated churches, he wrote, “are not anything but white ghosts; their dress of stones in the wind, torn to bits like the fabric of a glorious flag… What new churches will be more evocative of the sadness, more tragic guardians of the tombs?” He mentioned the ruins of the abbey of Mont-Saint-Eloi in particular, which André Ventre sketched on his inventory trip to Arras in 1917. Yet, Léon generally recognized that churches are “indispensable to the life of the city.” He concluded: “[a]t the present hour, the choice of the vestiges de guerre must be limited in principle to the isolated witnesses whose preservation will not harm the work of general reconstruction.” Léon appeared sympathetic to the Catholic position, or at least to the needs of devastated communities. He was certainly suspicious of this cult of ruins, writing that “[o]ne exaggerates a bit the beauty of ruins. They are not all indistinctly beautiful.”

100 Paul Léon, *La renaissance des ruines*, 82.
102 Paul Léon, *La renaissance des ruines*, 83.
103 Paul Léon, *La renaissance des ruines*, 87.
104 Paul Léon, *La renaissance des ruines*, 78.
union as in a revulsion towards sudden human destruction. As such, his reasoning only incidentally aligned with Catholic thinking.

A united front in favor of church reconstruction emerged by the end of the war in November 1918. It included both commune-owned churches and state-owned historic monuments, respectively enjoying the support of L’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées and the French state. The tides of post-war reconstruction marginalized the cult of ruins according to much of Léon’s pragmatic reasoning. It simply was not feasible to preserve the ruins of war.

In the years that followed the war, Catholic charities and cooperatives would work towards rebuilding an estimated 3,500 damaged churches. They continued to draw on the conceptual frameworks that they developed during wartime discussions about church reconstruction. Throughout the war, this discourse had offered Catholics an opportunity to imagine their future position in France. Usually, they hoped for a lasting sacred union in which all French would rally before church ruins and raise them up in a grand affirmation of respect for the nation’s Catholic heritage. Yet, others took this one step further and imagined the sacred union as the first engagement in a Catholic reconquest of a modern pagan France. The lines between these interpretations were often difficult to distinguish, with the same people espousing both. Still, it can be said that the former dominated church reconstruction efforts in the immediate aftermath of war. The latter, however, would gain currency towards the end of the 1920s as domestic political developments encouraged a radical turn in conceptions of church reconstruction.
Chapter 2 Keeping the Union Sacred: Early Church Reconstruction Efforts

Figure 4, Consecration of the church of Ancerviller, the procession of relics, 20 November 1923. From La Semaine Religieuse du Diocèse de Nancy & de Toul, December 22, 1923 - n° 51 - p. 820.

Figure 5, Consecration of the church of Ancerviller, the procession of relics outside the church, 20 November 1923. From La Semaine Religieuse du Diocèse de Nancy & de Toul, December 22, 1923 - n° 51 - p. 820.
20 November 1923. In a small town in the Meurthe-et-Moselle department of northeastern France, people gathered to consecrate l’église Saint-Martin d’Ancerviller (the church of Saint Martin of Ancerviller). Located ninety kilometers from the German border in France’s Grand Est region, Ancerviller is a rural and remote commune. At the time of the consecration ceremony, its population numbered about 500 inhabitants. There is but one monument to speak of in Ancerviller: l’église Saint-Martin, the subject of the day’s consecration. Alongside spare pine trees strewn with tinsel for the holiday season, local inhabitants congregated in the muddy square in front of the church (figure 4). Yet for all its obscurity, the commune attracted notable figures on this day—among them, His Excellence the Monseigneur Bonaventura Cerretti, papal nuncio, who represented the Vatican at the ceremony. Cerretti led the procession of religious officials along wooden planks devised to rise above the mud and protect the ritual purity of the event (figure 5).

The presence of a papal representative suggests that this was no ordinary church consecration. Indeed, it was not. Perhaps it is more precise to call this ceremony a reconsecration, for Saint-Martin’s had been consecrated once before—after it was first constructed in the fifteenth century, as is conventional for newly erected churches. The First World War, however, disrupted the original sacred designation when a bombardment levelled the church in 1915. Photographs of the destruction show a skeletal structure that bears little resemblance to the church it once was. The church did not remain in this state of devastation for long, though. Swift reconstruction efforts produced the new church at which people gathered in 1923. It was to be the “first consecration of a church raised from the ruins of war,” over which the diocese of Nancy had the great
honor to preside. The diocese’s weekly religious bulletin recounted the ceremony. A lingering attachment to the wartime sacred union pervaded the transcribed speeches and narrative commentary. As the bulletin read,

Monseigneur Cerretti responded in being pleased to see the sacred union still living in Meurthe-et-Moselle and in noting its happy effects in all domains, but above all in that of reconstitution, as well as in the religious domain. “It’s this union, he says, that won the war; it’s this that will still yet win the peace. I raise my glass in honor of M. Millerand, the president of the French Republic.”

In the successful reconstruction of Saint-Martin’s—which necessitated collaboration among the French state, local municipal officials, the Catholic Church, and the people of France—Cerretti sensed the spirit of the sacred union. He was not alone in his interpretation of church reconstruction as an opportunity to prolong the sacred union, neither among attendees at the ceremony in Ancerviller, nor among those involved in church reconstruction efforts across France. It was a widespread cultural phenomenon during the 1920s, as I argue.

In the years that followed the consecration of Saint-Martin’s, Catholic charities and cooperatives worked towards reconstructing the thousands of churches that had sustained damage during the war. The diocese of Nancy consecrated its final reconstructed church in 1928. France did so in 1938. While church reconstruction efforts evolved over the course of the period that this thesis considers, they remained generally consistent up until the mid-1920s before domestic political trends caused a shift. This chapter examines the first period of reconstruction from about 1919-1924 and argues that the sacred union invigorated early efforts. Continuous with many pro-reconstruction

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positions articulated during wartime, Catholics generally understood their work as an opportunity to maintain the sacred union in France. The framework of the sacred union also informed the collaborative approach to church reconstruction in this period.

The source material in this chapter tends to represent the perspectives of elite Catholic figures. While this is a shortcoming, it is also significant in a historical sense. Catholic leaders—priests, bishops, and even prominent laypersons—led church reconstruction efforts. They were especially committed to maintaining the sacred union given their investment in the Catholic social order. It is less apparent whether common Catholics attempted to preserve the sacred union, and also whether they viewed reconstructed churches as particularly salient material manifestations of it. Catholic leaders often insisted on this point because they recognized that the sacred union was an unstable product of war’s emergency climate. The prominent Catholic figures that I discuss throughout this chapter explicitly reference the sacred union on numerous occasions, but this should not be taken as historical proof of its endurance into peacetime.

Rather, Catholic leaders were actively trying to construct an afterlife for the sacred union because they feared a resurgence of anticlericalism. In 1921, the diocese of Cambrai evaluated the state of anticlericalism in post-war France:

> It seems that the post-war period has rendered anticlericalism defunct in the sweet shroud of the Sacred Union. Yet this is an error: anticlericalism has only been stunned and disrupted for a moment.\(^{107}\)

It was precisely this concern about the instability of the sacred union in the face of more enduring anticlerical trends that drove Catholics to preserve it through church reconstruction. The sacred union simply no longer held the same import for the people of

France, especially Republicans and champions of secularism, after the armistice. It had originated as a wartime formulation, and so it became increasingly marginalized on the national stage without the context of the war. Although several Republican statesmen pursued a policy of religious appeasement in order to preserve a measure of cooperation between Catholics and the French state, they generally no longer felt the need for kinship with Catholics.  

As I will discuss in the next chapter, the French Left became a dominant force in French politics around 1924. The various parties of the left were united in their anticlerical position. They had no interest in maintaining the sacred union; in fact, the left wanted to pursue a more severe anticlerical agenda. At the same time, cultural elites in France rejected wartime culture and began to seek peace and reconciliation with the former German enemy. This eroded the sacred union, which depended on unified opposition to the unholy German.

Catholic leaders imagined church reconstruction as a form of sacred union maintenance: each church raised from ruins was a brick securely mortared in the foundation of the union. As Fernand Laudet explained, church reconstruction constituted a dazzling expression of sacred union between the state, the episcopate, and the people [and the] proud response of calumniated France to those who seek to propagate that this country, emptied of its beliefs and deprived of its birthright, no longer floats as the premier drop in the ocean of Christianity.

He presented church reconstruction as a bulwark against anticlericalism, which was evidently a concern for him in 1921. Here, Laudet explicitly named the sacred union at

the precise moment when it was beginning to fall out of fashion. He aimed to call
attention to it, to show that it still existed, and thus to construct an existence for it in
peacetime. The sacred union was no longer an organic cultural phenomenon, but rather
something that elite Catholics were working to construct. Throughout this chapter, I
consider a few ways in which Catholics performed this kind of constitutive work. This
included the national loan for church reconstruction, ritual ceremonies at reconstructed
churches, and the materiality of the sites.

The actual work of reconstruction began with the law of 17 April 1919, known
officially as la loi sur la réparation des dommages causés par les faits de la guerre (the
law on the reparation of damages caused by war). It established a legal framework for
realizing reparations. Article 12 addressed places of worship, stating: “[i]f it’s a matter of
civil or religious buildings, compensation consists of the sums necessary for the
reconstruction of a building presenting the same character, having the same importance,
the same purpose and offering the same guarantees of duration as the destroyed
building.” The article noted that interested parties could request an official damages
assessment to determine the amount of compensation granted. With respect to historic
monuments, the law also affirmed that the ministries of public education and fine arts
were committed to the preservation, consolidation, and eventual reconstruction of ruins.
Their ministerial budgets provided several subsidies and grants for historic monument
reconstruction. The law thus explicitly dedicated funds for historic monuments while
establishing a vague procedure for commune-owned churches.

111 Journal officiel de la République française, Lois et décrets, Journaux officiels, Paris, April 18 1919, p. 4052.
It follows that the reconstruction of historic cathedrals began earlier than that of commune-owned churches. In 1919, the service of historic monuments designated Henri Deneux, leader of wartime efforts to preserve Reims cathedral, as head architect for the reconstruction of Reims, and appointed Pierre Paquet, head architect of historic monuments in the Pas-de-Calais region, to lead the reconstruction of the cathedral of Arras. Given the complicated nature of cathedral restoration, these reconstruction projects lasted well into the 1930s. Early on in the process, Reims architect Max Sainsaulieu completed a thorough inventory of the cathedral’s damages. He prioritized structural stabilization and established a plan to construct a temporary roof and reinforce the towers, walls, vaulting, and buttresses of the cathedral. Restoration work on Reims proceeded without interruption until 1927, when the completion of the nave yielded a series of commemorative celebrations. Paul Decaux, an Arras architect under Paquet’s leadership, photographed the cathedral reconstruction sites that he directed between 1919 and 1934. Although the photographs are technical in nature, they indicate a turn away from ruins and towards reconstitution: scaffolding promised resurrection, and Decaux consistently favored hopeful vertical orientations over the mournful wartime horizontal shots of ruins (figures 6 and 7).

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Meanwhile, nearly four-thousand commune-owned churches remained in ruins.

The Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées had been raising funds to construct temporary places of worship since the early days of the war, but Catholics were beginning to seek a more permanent solution. In 1919, journalist François Veuillot published an article in support of the Œuvre in La Libre Parole, an antisemitic political newspaper run by ultraconservative Catholics. Veuillot praised the establishment of provisional church structures, for they attracted exiled populations who would otherwise hesitate to return to their devastated lands. As he put it, “[o]ù Dieu reste encore absent, l’homme hésite à revenir.” Yet, Veuillot anticipated a more permanent solution to the

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ruins. He stated that the Œuvre must “re-establish God among the people,” that which temporary places of worship could not alone accomplish. Although he spoke in favor of temporary aid, he did not prefer it. Veuillot expected the Œuvre to re-orient its efforts towards permanent reconstruction.

He was not alone. Many Catholic leaders envisioned France’s post-war landscape as an opportunity to consolidate gains from war, certainly to prevent their dissolution, and perhaps even to extend them. They treated church reconstruction as an opportunity to

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accomplish this work. Abbot Thellier de Poncheville appealed for swift reconstruction work in order to preserve “the old Christian atavism” of the French people. Before the war, he wrote, “[w]e called the Champagne region pouilleuse: the word relates above all to sand, but maybe we could also draw some symbolic interpretations from it, for the souls of the champenoise are just as dry.” He explained that the once faithless Champagne region experienced a transformation through war, citing a man who learned to appreciate the beauty of his local cathedral through the experience of war. Catholic leaders believed that the war had revived the region’s ancestral connection to religion—the “atavism” which Thellier de Poncheville mentioned, as though piety was a genetic trait lost to the modern world—which might just as soon disappear again unless reconstruction began immediately.

Catholics leaders of the immediate post-war period shared this anxiety about the waning of recently renewed faith. Above all, they worried that the sacred union might dissolve without the unifying context of war, which is to say that they would lose the cultural position which war had restored to them. In 1921, Monseigneur Julien of Arras—“l’évêque de reconstruction”—addressed Catholic anxiety about maintaining the sacred union. He believed that church reconstruction would serve this purpose given the cultural and spiritual attachment to churches that had developed among the French during wartime. Julien also described church reconstruction as “a new step in the great work of

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religious reconstitution that we seek.”

In using the phrase “religious reconstitution,” Julien signaled his conviction that the sacred union of war would permanently restructure the sociocultural landscape of France. Julien delivered a telling call to arms: “[P]riests of France, we will make religion bloom again atop the ruins…to ‘win the peace’ in the furrows after having won the war in the trenches.” Indeed, the sacred union needed to be won in peace as it was in war, still on the ruins of churches—yet this time, through their resurrection.

The pressure to reconstruct commune-owned churches was mounting. But the law of 17 April 1919 had not established a clear procedure for acquiring state funds to accomplish this work. As small administrative divisions often located in rural areas that had been completely devastated during the war, many communes lacked the administrative capacity to follow state procedures. People naturally expected *l’Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées* to take the lead in permanent reconstruction, yet this wasn’t so simple. Since communes owned the churches, a private national charity like the *Œuvre* could not legally assume responsibility for reconstruction even though it was best equipped to do so. The French state responded to this problem, which concerned all manners of reconstruction work, with the law of 15 August 1920. The law provided for the creation of cooperative groups—or, groups “constituted between persons entitled to compensation for the reparation of property damages or their successors in virtue of the law of 19 April 1919”—to accomplish reconstruction. The law also articulated pecuniary advantages for cooperatives and an option for similar cooperatives to group themselves in

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a union of common interest. In order to qualify for pecuniary advantages, the cooperatives needed to follow certain parameters regarding the persons permitted to participate in the cooperative society. The convention stipulated that the cooperative “may be formed among victims of one or several communes or their successors.” The law used the legal term sinistré to mean victims of damages who were entitled to compensation, thus defining the category of cooperative members at its broadest. Essentially, every inhabitant of a commune was a victim of the destruction of civil or religious buildings given their public character. The formation of cooperatives was thus open to those members of communes most interested in completing reconstruction work.

It followed that cooperative societies for the reconstruction of churches developed along diocesan lines, for the leaders of Catholic dioceses were eager to revive their churches. The diocese of Nancy emerged at the helm of this work and constituted a cooperative society in 1921. As director of the diocese’s Œuvres sociales, canon Paul Fiel Thouvenin established L’Œuvre de la Coopérative de la Reconstruction des Églises du Diocèse de Nancy et de Toul (The Cooperative Charity for the Reconstruction of the Churches of the Diocese of Nancy and Toul). Nancy had experienced particularly brutal devastation, with 90% of its churches suffering damage over the course of the war. The culture of national sacrifice was accordingly strong in the region, and it invigorated local expectations for a swift state-supported church reconstruction effort. In 1919, Bishop Charles-Joseph-Eugène Ruch of Nancy articulated this expectation:

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122 Paul Fiel, L’Œuvre de la Coopérative de la Reconstruction des Églises du Diocèse de Nancy et de Toul (Nancy: Ancienne Imprimerie Vagner, 1927), 7-9. Also: Within a month of their constitution, the cooperative societies needed to submit a duplicate of the constitutive act to the departmental justice of the peace and prefecture. In addition, the law required that the cooperative society publish an excerpt of the constitutive act in a local newspaper.

123 Journal officiel de la République française. Lois et décrets (version papier numérisée) n° 0109 du 20/04/1919, p. 3.
Over the course of the years of the war…our churches were also wounded, mutilated, struck down in the field of honor, and too often, like [soldiers], mortally attacked, noble victims of a barbary, which combined voluntary sacrilege with brutal destruction. It’s not without emotion that we direct our piety and our pity on these great and holy casualties of the war; we were at the front of martyrdom, we would also like to be at the front in reconstruction.\(^{124}\)

Ruch nuanced the logic of resurrection. If Catholics already believed that their churches were bound for resurrection, they now expected the government to facilitate that resurrection in honor of their commitment to the national war effort. Ruch framed this work as a national duty. What’s more, the Catholic conception of suffering would lose its meaning without the promise of resurrection. Ruch took great pain to detail the suffering of the churches of Nancy, recalling their wounds, mutilations, and deaths. The speech functioned as an incantation to conjure resurrection through repetition and recollection. He continued to use the grammar of Catholic war culture—holy casualties, martyrdom, piety—so as not to permit a denigration of the transcendent meaning of church destruction, or a dissolution of the spiritual sacred union.

Ruch’s entreaty for the primacy of church reconstruction did not materialize. Early reconstruction work prioritized agricultural, industrial, and domicile devastation.\(^{125}\)

Fearing the postponement of ecclesiastical reconstruction, Thouvenin established the cooperative of the diocese of Nancy.\(^{126}\) The cooperative exaggerated its origin story in a printed bulletin, suggesting that Thouvenin ingeniously devised the diocesan cooperative when the municipality failed to prioritize church reconstruction.\(^{127}\) There is no mention of

\(^{124}\) Fiel, *L’Œuvre de la Coopérative de la Reconstruction des Églises du Diocèse de Nancy et de Toul*, 6


the law of August 15, 1920, which in fact conceived of cooperative societies. Nonetheless, the municipal government of Nancy had shirked its responsibility to repair places of worship. This was a blow to any anticipation of a prolonged sacred union, that church reconstruction should fall entirely to ecclesiastical authorities at the inaction of municipal ones. Ultimately, diocesan cooperatives pursued the sacred union by other means. Notably and to be discussed later, they did so through a collaborative, grassroots approach to reconstruction that both drew on and reproduced the sacred union.

The other dioceses followed Nancy’s lead in establishing cooperatives. This discussion predominantly took place in elite Catholic circles. Although the law’s definition of sinistré meant that anyone could participate in cooperatives, it was ultimately the Catholic leaders of each diocese that took the lead. Fernand Laudet, vice-president of L’Œuvre de secours aux églises devastées, called a meeting of the bishops of devastated dioceses in late March 1921 to promote Thouvenin’s approach. He hoped that the other communes would adopt Thouvenin’s model and commence permanent reconstruction efforts within the year. On 8 April 1921, the Œuvre convened another meeting of the bishops. Henri-Constant Groussau, a political figure and major opponent of the 1905 law of separation, attended. He insisted that church reconstruction based on Thouvenin’s model was the sole possible means of accomplishing the task. Thouvenin also delivered a lecture at the meeting, likely about his own experience leading a cooperative society. Unsurprisingly, the attendees concurred and accepted Thouvenin’s cooperative as the model for church reconstruction in every diocese. Thouvenin even agreed to receive delegates from each diocese and help them to initiate the constitution

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for their cooperatives. In 1921, the dioceses of Arras, Lille, Reims, and Amiens formed their societies. By 1922, so too had the dioceses of Ardennes, Beauvais, Cambrai, Chalons, Metz, Soissons, Strasbourg, and Verdun.

The law of 15 August 1920 afforded cooperatives the opportunity to federate based on common interest. Given the collaborative nature of the constitution process for the diocesan cooperatives, a general union had already begun to take shape. The bishops promptly decided to federate and to pursue a collective loan. In fact, the primary purpose of the common federation was so that the dioceses could undertake a collective loan in order to raise funds for reconstruction.130 Individual dioceses might struggle, and in fact compete, to secure and fulfill state loans. A federation would centralize that effort and lend a capable administrative organ to small diocesan cooperatives. On November 11, 1921, a national commission established the Groupement des sociétés coopératives approuvées de reconstruction des églises de France (Association of cooperative societies approved for the reconstruction of the churches of France) under the direction of Marcel Bourgeois and François Deshoulières.131 The latter man was an integral committee member of the Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées. The Groupement assumed the form of an anonymous society “of which the cooperatives would be actionaries.”132

As the state stipulated in the law of 15 August 1920, cooperatives that received approval were entitled to grants and subsidies. The Groupement did indeed receive approval, just as the Cooperative of Nancy had. Yet, this did not immediately settle the

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130 Fiel, L’Œuvre de la Coopérative de la Reconstruction des Églises du Diocèse de Nancy et de Toul, 15-17.
132 Letter from Marcel Bourgeois to Cardinal Dubois, November 14, 1921, Archives historiques du diocèse de Paris, Serie 4 C 1, 4.
money matter. When Thouvenin first established his cooperative in 1921, he immediately encountered persistent financial difficulties. Functionally bankrupt in the wake of war, the French state lacked funds to support the hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of reconstruction work in the country’s devastated regions. Many advocates of church reconstruction blamed Germany—which had defaulted on reparation payments as early as 1920—for the postponement of their work. In the interest of maintaining the appearance of the sacred union, they hesitated to blame the French state. However, the state chose to allocate funds to war pensions, relief, and economic reconstruction over church reconstruction.133 Where the sacred union seemed to fray, Catholics did not wish to pull on loosened threads. It was more useful for their purposes to continue blaming the Germans for the interminable devastation of churches. Church reconstruction could only be a site of sacred union as long as the French state, Church, and civil society collaborated to achieve it. Catholics thus went to great lengths to construct an atmosphere of cooperation around the loan process, at reconstruction ceremonies, and through the materiality of the churches themselves. Notably, Catholics never publicly expressed the difficulties associated with church destruction—of which there were many. Perhaps the cult of the sacred union explains this silence. Any articulation of strife testified to the failure of the sacred union and should thus be left unsaid.

Private French money offered the best recourse for reconstruction. Thouvenin understood as much and opened a public loan subscription in April 1921, promptly raising 360,000 francs, including a 25,000 francs contribution from Pope Benedict XV.134 Yet, Thouvenin had estimated the cost of repairing damages at 50 million francs. The

cooperative pursued the remainder of the estimated cost through an appeal to public
credit. In essence, this entailed a loan guaranteed by the French state: the public would
subscribe to it, and the state would pay individuals back with 6% interest in the time of a
few years.\footnote{Fiel, \textit{L'Œuvre de la Coopérative de la Reconstruction des Églises du Diocèse de Nancy et de Toul}, 12-13.} The Nancy cooperative’s efforts to meet the remaining cost of damages
coincided with the \textit{Groupement}’s initial efforts to launch a loan. The \textit{Groupement}
followed Thouvenin’s lead in securing a provisional certificate of debt from the state, as
this had been established as the most reliable method of financing reconstruction work. In
early 1922, the \textit{Groupement} launched \textit{L'emprunt des églises dévastées}, which generally
mimicked the Nancy cooperative’s loan with its provisions for 6% interest paid back on
borrowed sums.\footnote{Loan notice by \textit{Groupement des sociétés cooperatives approuvées de reconstruction des églises
dévastées de France}, Archives historiques du diocèse de Paris, Serie 4 C 1, 4.}

The loan system was a pragmatic response to the French state’s bankruptcy, but
Catholics represented it as a manifestation of the sacred union. In appeals for public
credit, both the Nancy Cooperative and the \textit{Groupement} invoked its spirit. The Nancy
Cooperative published a notice to open its first loan in July 1921. It appeared in a
regional newspaper:

\begin{quote}
The diocese of Nancy in particular suffered from war: without counting the
mobilized ecclesiastics, who died for France, eleven priests were shot by
the Germans; four died in German jails, or following mistreatment; others
were imprisoned, or taken into captivity. The churches, these schools of the
soul, were burned or destroyed by shells…millions are needed to rebuild all
of our churches.\footnote{Fiel, \textit{L'Œuvre de la Coopérative de la Reconstruction des Églises du Diocèse de Nancy et de Toul}, 13.}
\end{quote}

Much like Ruch’s speech, the loan notice emphasized the diocese’s wartime sacrifice for
France. It deftly played on the culture of impossible debt that weighed like lead on
survivors of war. Catholics invested their lives in the national cause, the notice suggested, so they deserved support in the reconstruction of their churches. The notice also established a poetic analogy between valiant Catholics and their churches. In this brief compendium of suffering, church destruction constitutes an extension of the outrages committed against priests. While it was impossible to resurrect the bodies of those who died for France, this limitation did not apply to the “schools of the soul.” With this didactic designation, the notice implied that churches cultivated a particular constitution that drove the faithful to sacrifice themselves for the nation. It thus framed church reconstruction as an opportunity to pay an impossible debt to the fallen: survivors could ostensibly honor the fallen by supporting the reconstruction of the churches that fashioned their souls. By this logic, the reconstructed church became a sign of appreciation for Catholic France. Indeed, it was Catholic France for which the ecclesiastics died, and so it was a Catholic France that survivors ought to engender on their behalf—through subscription to the loan.

Attempts to maintain the sacred union were frequently rhetorical in nature. Catholic leaders used written materials like loan appeals to document the convivial nature of their work and declare its products as sites of perpetual sacred union. Both the Nancy Cooperative and the Groupement aimed to preserve the sacred union by representing and recording it on the few occasions when it materialized. To an extent, cultural phenomena like the sacred union depend on naming. The sacred union of course existed in its unnamed amorphous state, when the French nation embraced Catholic systems of

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138 Many scholars have examined the culture of debt in interwar France. See the section on mourning in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, 14-18: Understanding the Great War (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 175-225.
representation during the war. But Catholics recognized that the sacred union was an emergency wartime formulation requiring post-war reinforcement, hence the many rhetorical references that they made to it during this period. Indeed, naming, to call something what it is and to point out its existence, is a technique to which people almost instinctively turn when they worry about that thing’s disappearance.\textsuperscript{139}

In an appeal for loan subscribers, the diocese of Nancy claimed that the pious, the barely practicing, and the atheistic were all united in their commitment to church reconstruction. Whether the diocese could really assert this is unclear. It is more productive to interpret the claim in the context of Catholic interests, such as constructing an afterlife for the sacred union. As the loan notice concluded,

\begin{quote}
Everyone wants risen in all parishes the church, which proclaims and transmits, from generations to generations, the notions of honor, justice, goodwill, and charity which characterize Catholic France.\textsuperscript{140}
\end{quote}

Catholic leaders proclaimed churches as the font of civic values—honor, justice, goodwill, and charity—which were salient in the aftermath of war given their association with victory: they recalled the dutiful soldier, the ascetic soldier-priest, and above all the divinely favored French nation. Through the notice, Catholic leaders encouraged a dual investment—financial and spiritual—in the churches of Nancy. In addition to the monetary contribution which it requested, the notice presented Catholic churches as spaces for all French, regardless of confession or strength of faith, to develop and safeguard the civic values which underwrote French victory. Not only did this appeal encourage potential loaners to subscribe, but it pursued their subsequent spiritual investment in the reconstructed edifice through a secular presentation of Christian values.

\textsuperscript{139} Susan Sontag, \textit{Regarding the Pain of Others} (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2003), 87.
\textsuperscript{140} Fiel, \textit{L’Œuvre de la Coopérative de la Reconstruction des Églises du Diocèse de Nancy et de Toul}, 13.
Catholics often presented Christian values as French values and vice-versa, which made churches both the symbol and the font of national culture. The effect was to reinforce the wartime association between France and Christianity, which is to say that Christian France simply became France and no distinction needed to be drawn between national and religious culture. Through this participatory approach to church reconstruction, Catholic leaders aimed to project France’s Christian identity into the future. As they imagined, the churches would be sites of intergenerational transmission for “the notions…which characterize Christian France.”

In promising to remake churches into national sites, loan appeals employed a logic of participatory reconstruction. The church could be a national site—both civic and religious—only if the nation came together to reconstruct it. Loan contributors participated in the national signification of churches precisely through subscription. According to this logic, subscribers comprised the reconstructed church—especially in the sense of the church as not just a building, but a parish or community space—which reveals the latent purpose of the loan: to promote subscription to the sacred union. In the 1922 “Appeal from Bishops of Invaded Dioceses in Favor of the Loan for the Reconstruction of Devastated Churches,” several illustrations invoke the sacred union (figure 8). At right, a rooster crows before the ruins of a church as if to call the nation to action in their reconstruction. It is unmistakably a Gallic rooster, the unofficial national symbol of France. The rooster speaks for the bishops, identifying Catholic leaders with a Republican symbol to represent reconstruction as patriotic duty. Accordingly, the rehabilitated church on the other side of the printed appeal becomes a national symbol. Indeed, the crowing bird comes home to roost on the belltower’s cross as though to
consecrate the church as a site of national culture. It is a clear visual expression of the sacred union. Much like the Nancy cooperative’s appeal, this image insisted on the “eminently patriotic character”\textsuperscript{141} of the churches and attempted to construct a lasting sacred union through more than just a one-time financial contribution. It entreated readers to answer the call of the rooster and imagined the resulting future France in the form of the rooster-cross standard of the sacred union.

\textsuperscript{141} Appel des évêques des diocèses envahis en faveur de l’emprunt pour la reconstruction des églises devastées, Archives historiques du diocèse de Paris, Serie 4 C 1, 4.
In war, churches provided evidence of German barbarity and French victimhood.

But in peace, they became signs of France’s enduring Christian character—in no small part because Catholics frequently presented successful fulfillment of reconstruction loans as such. The Nancy Cooperative boasted that the people of France met its request for 15 million francs in just 6 weeks, calling it “a veritable plebiscite in favor of the
reconstruction of churches.”\textsuperscript{142} The use of the word ‘plebiscite’ is crucial here, not only because it suggests widespread support, but also because it invokes Republican political processes. It is as if to say that Republican France voted in favor of the Church. Abbot G. Gillet similarly leveraged the public’s fulfillment of the Groupement’s loan as “a point in favor of…the vitality of Christian France.”\textsuperscript{143}

Catholics also positioned church reconstruction to disavow German propaganda. The Germans claimed that the French only began to care for their churches once they could exploit them for propagandistic purposes.\textsuperscript{144} The French state had, after all, renounced ownership of churches in 1905. In response, Fernand Laudet sought to present church reconstruction as proof of French faithfulness, whereas the preservation of ruins might suggest a disingenuous masquerade of propagandistic piety. As Laudet explained,

\begin{quote}
This rapid reconstruction due to private initiative will not only be a relief for the finances of the country and a protection against unemployment, but also the proudest of responses to the self-serving lies of our enemies. Before this freely accomplished gesture, in full accord between the state, the episcopate, and the people, German propaganda will be less able to represent us as a nation without beliefs and certain neutrals will less easily lend them an ear.\textsuperscript{145}
\end{quote}

For Laudet, reconstructed churches still existed within the matrix of wartime culture. They had simply become part of a different propaganda war, now as evidence of earnest French piety in the face of German claims to the contrary. Reconstructed churches constituted double proof: of the perpetual sacred union and of enduring German machinations, which reinforced each other. After all, unified opposition to the German

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{142} Fiel, \textit{L'Œuvre de la Coopérative de la Reconstruction des Églises du Diocèse de Nancy et de Toul}, 14.
\textsuperscript{144} Gaehtgens, \textit{Reims on Fire}.
\textsuperscript{145} Fernand Laudet, Article on church reconstruction, \textit{Bulletin de L’Œuvre de Secours aux églises devastées} No. 19, August 1922, 6-8.
\end{flushright}
enemy had invigorated the sacred union. It is little wonder why Laudet suggested that the Germans were still waging a kind of war against the French. He framed church reconstruction as a national effort to dispel the enemy’s propaganda and thus aimed to unite the French in a national Catholic identity.

Within a few months of the publication of Laudet’s article, Cardinal Luçon delivered a speech at the Œuvre’s April 28 general assembly. It is a remarkable address. Luçon interpreted French and German identities along the axis of church treatment: the French as réparateurs, the Germans as déstructeurs. He even located the outcome of war—French victory, German defeat—along this axis. The Germans, Luçon wrote, melted parts of the churches down into engines of death and destruction; such was their identity as déstructeurs. He continued, “God [did] not want to give definitive victory to machines established with the bronze of his temples and so “the war finished by the defeat of those who had demolished our churches, stolen our church bells, pillaged our altars of their chalices, of their ornaments, of their bronze, and of their sacred linens.” Luçon implied that the Germans lost the war precisely on account of their identity as church déstructeurs. Later, he established French identity on the opposite side of the axis as réparateurs. He stated:

Between these two peoples, one whose soldiers devastate our churches…the other whose women hasten with such love to reconstitute the furniture of our temples, the finery of our altars, there is no doubt as to which side would receive divine preference when it’s a matter of granting victory.

146 “Discours de S.E. le Cardinal Luçon,” Bulletin de L’Œuvre de Secours aux églises devastées No. 18, April 1922, 15.
To be French was to be réparateur of the nation’s churches. Luçon associated care for devastated churches with French identity and, much like Laudet, invoked the image of the German brute to do so. He also attributed French victory to God’s divine favor, which was significant in the context of a 1922 speech to advocate for church reconstruction. If God condemned the Germans to defeat as déstructeurs, then he granted victory to the French in anticipation of their work as réparateurs, or out of a conviction that the French spirit was inclined to repair rather than to destroy. The French, then, needed to prove themselves worthy of God’s divine favor through reconstruction. With this insinuation, Luçon revisited the foundational ideas of Catholic war culture: that the point of war was church reconstruction, read sacred union maintenance and religious revival.

Much of the evidence we have encountered thus far is discursive in nature. Such attempts to frame church reconstruction as a national effort dealt mostly with a symbolic notion of church reconstruction rather than its actual—physical, material—implementation. Now, I would like to return to the illustration of the reconstructed church which appeared on the Groupement’s loan notice (figure 8). It certainly envisioned reconstruction as national work and projected the sacred union into the future. But it also signified the reconstructed church as a French monument. The illustration participated in the cultural construction of reconstructed churches as national, rather than purely Catholic, sites. It evinces an interest in the structure itself, the one that exists beyond the printed notice, and it is that to which I now turn.

Catholics often positioned the physical ritual space of the reconstructed church at the center of their religious revival efforts. Through ritual, Cardinal Luçon wished to preserve wartime associations between the ruined cathedral of Reims and the nation. In
his letter to the parish of 11 December 1920, he recalled the cathedral’s wartime
signification as the “Grande Mutilée de la Guerre” and as the “center of homages and
prayers in favor of soldiers who died in service of the nation.”\textsuperscript{150} Luçon spared no
opportunity to assert the cathedral’s representative power, writing that “it was the symbol
of the wrongly invaded Nation; the cathedral murdered but still standing; it was also the
sacred emblem of France murdered, but still alive.”\textsuperscript{151} While Luçon ultimately dismissed
the project to preserve the cathedral’s ruins (“Il faut laisser à Dieu ce qui est à Dieu. Il
faut conserver la Cathédrale à la destination pour laquelle elle a été construite”\textsuperscript{152}), he
sought to preserve its spirit. As he explained,

[our \textit{Œuvre} will be the realization of the same idea, in another form:
without removing the cathedral from its sacred state, we will make it the
monument of our heroes!\textsuperscript{153}]

In using the term \textit{Œuvre}, signifying work or project, Luçon referred to a broader
reconstruction program that he imagined for the cathedral. He proposed six articles to
achieve this work. The first article articulated the general role of the cathedral as “a
center for homages in remembrance of the Dead of the Great War and for prayers for the
rest of their souls.”\textsuperscript{154} He envisioned Reims as the pre-eminent site of national
ceremonies to honor France’s fallen soldiers. As such, the other articles stipulated a daily
mass dedicated to the war dead—“celebrated for the renovation of Christian France every
Sunday”\textsuperscript{155}—and an annual memorial service on Armistice Day. In dedicating Catholic

\textsuperscript{150} “Communications de l’Archevêque,” \textit{Bulletin du Diocèse de Reims} No. 25, December 11, 1920, p. 196.
\textsuperscript{152} “Communications de l’Archevêque,” \textit{Bulletin du Diocèse de Reims}, 196.
\textsuperscript{153} “Communications de l’Archevêque,” \textit{Bulletin du Diocèse de Reims}, 196.
\textsuperscript{154} “Communications de l’Archevêque,” \textit{Bulletin du Diocèse de Reims} No. 26, December 25, 1920, p. 204.
\textsuperscript{155} “Communications de l’Archevêque,” \textit{Bulletin du Diocèse de Reims}, 204.
rituals to national war remembrance infrastructure, Luçon fashioned the cathedral as a
“sanctuary for the French nation.”\textsuperscript{156}

Luçon balanced his earnest wish to offer religious consolation to the grieving
people of France with his aim to achieve religious revival. He likely perceived a
relationship between the two goals. Many Catholic leaders believed that a return to the
altar was necessary for healing in the wake of mass death, and they also understood the
widespread need for spiritual healing as an opportunity to preserve the sacred union.
Luçon’s proposal to establish the cathedral as a national pilgrimage site is illustrative of
this phenomenon. As he explained,

\begin{quote}
[B]ecause our soldiers, in spilling their blood for the France of today, 
dreamed of a France of tomorrow that they wished would be more beautiful, 
stronger, and more faithful to religious traditions… perhaps when the 
cathedral will be entirely restored to worship, a pilgrimage movement could 
be created. It would offer France’s Catholics the opportunity to come to 
pray for their dead at the very center of the theater of war, and at the same 
time to revive, before the national baptistery, their declarations of fidelity 
to Christ, the friend of the French.\textsuperscript{157}
\end{quote}

Luçon invoked the sacrifice of fallen soldiers to prescribe a more faithful France. In
keeping with the spirit of his 1916 letter to the parish, he affirmed that religious revival
was the point of war. It was in service of this France, a Catholic France, that soldiers
sacrificed their lives, and so Luçon implied that those who survived war could honor the
sacrifice of the fallen soldier by faithfully observing religious traditions. But he also
believed that this would offer survivors religious consolation, an opportunity for healing.
What follows is Luçon’s conception of the restored cathedral as a pilgrimage site. He
proposed that Catholics pray for their dead at the cathedral, this “center of the theater of

\textsuperscript{156} “Communications de l’Archevêque,” \textit{Bulletin du Diocèse de Reims}, 204.
\textsuperscript{157} “Communications de l’Archevêque,” \textit{Bulletin du Diocèse de Reims}, 203.
war.” Luçon wanted to preserve Reims’s status as national Pantheon for the war dead to offer religious consolation to the “families of all of France which lost one of their members.” The idea of religious revival is closely tied to spiritual healing in this case. Luçon certainly understood a relationship between the two, for it would be through seeking consolation at Reims that the French would renew their faith. Luçon specifically framed the pilgrimage as an opportunity for Catholics to pray for their dead and ritually renew their fidelity to Christ. He referred to the cathedral as the “national baptistery” and thus a ritual site for rebirth in the Catholic faith.

Catholic leaders of this period often tried to exert their will through ritual practice. For example, the commemorative masses at the Cathedral of Reims situated the war dead in a national Pantheon accessible only through religious ritual. Consecration ceremonies for commune-owned churches also served to ritually project the sacred union into the future, especially in the diocese of Nancy. Thus, we return to Saint Martin’s of Ancerviller, the very first church reconstructed in France. During the ceremony, Catholic leaders dedicated the church to the sacred union and directed attendees to worship that union. Catholics have dedicated many churches to the cult of the Virgin Mary, for example, which is to say that they worship God through their concentrated veneration of Mary. Our Lady of Reims, Lourdes, Amiens, Chartres all serve the cult of the Virgin. Saint Martin’s of Ancerviller came to serve the cult of the sacred union: it directed worshippers to venerate God through a commitment to the union.

Papal Nuncio Cerretti opened the ceremony with a speech. He identified the successful and collaborative reconstruction of the church among religious officials,

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municipal officials, the state, and the public as proof of a still living sacred union. “It’s this union,” he remarked, “that won the war; it’s this that will the peace.” For many Catholic leaders, ‘winning the peace’ functioned as a euphemism for expressing desires to maintain the sacred union. The phrase implied a certain porosity between war and peace. Peace, like war, must be won, making peace a logical extension of war. Catholics had an interest in perpetuating wartime culture, for it truly was the lifeblood that sustained their cultural restoration in the aftermath of the separation of church and state. Accordingly, Cerretti subtly invoked the former German enemy: in reconstructing its churches, he claimed, France “destroys the prejudices and errors engendered by the propaganda of our former enemies.” Laudet had articulated an identical sentiment in 1922. Reconstruction proved that the French were earnestly faithful, not just so for propagandistic purposes. By extension, Cerretti and Laudet represented the sacred union as not merely a consequence of wartime emergency, but rather a reawakened French atavistic attachment to Catholicism.

The papal nuncio and bishop repeatedly signified Saint Martin’s as a symbol of the sacred union throughout the ceremony. With the concluding responsive—a recitation of the patriotic Latin Tu es Petrus et le Domine, salvam fac Rempublicam, an entreaty for God to save the French Republic—they instructed attendees to dedicate themselves to the cult of the sacred union. It is a versicle and response adapted from the original monarchical Domine salvum face regem. The minister said “O Lord, do thou preserve our Republic.” Mass attendees responded, “And do Thou mercifully hear us in the day in

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which we call upon Thee.” Responsives target listeners and aim to influence them by encouraging verbal affirmations of commitment to articulated causes. In this instantiation, the *salvam fac Republican* dedicated Christian ritual to the state and required that those present at mass participate in the act. In this way, the church functioned as a space to remember and worship the sacred union, with the intention of reproducing it in French society more broadly. The bishop of Nancy, for example, linked the consecration ceremony to the overall “religious reconstitution” of the country.\(^{162}\)

Of course, churches function as ritual spaces through their materiality. Questions of sacred union maintenance thus engaged the technical and artistic aspects of reconstruction. Marcel Bourgeois, director of the *Groupement*, interpreted reconstruction as an opportunity to invigorate France’s defunct and uninspired religious art movement, and so he ultimately devised a technical committee to ensure the competence of the head architects.\(^{163}\) Meanwhile, French architect Edmond Douillet responded to the apparent artistic problem. He identified church reconstruction as the crossroads “of the question of religious art of our time.”\(^{164}\) “Reconstruction of more than 1,500 churches in 12 dioceses,” he wrote, “is a good opportunity to renew our religious and national architecture.”\(^{165}\) In his view, the modern world and its rejection of tradition were responsible for the creation of a “deracinated art.”\(^{166}\) Douillet did not champion any one architectural style, but rather identified strong “faith, piety, zeal, and spirit” as necessary for a renewal of religious architecture in France.\(^{167}\)

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values, Douillet intimated his belief that artistic renewal was linked to religious renewal. As he wrote,

The veritable sacred union must be here, not only a union of reason but of the heart and of the ideal, necessary for the development of this social and collective art which is Architecture. \(^{168}\)

In a material sense, the church would be a manifestation of sacred union. Douillet explained that spiritual or cultural sacred union—a union of heart and ideal—was a necessary precursor to a formidable religious architecture. It is significant that he believed the true sacred union to be fundamentally architectural, because while the union of heart and ideal was prerequisite, the sacred union would ultimately be located in the architecture that it produced. This is to say that elite Catholics often believed the sacred union to be material above all else: a physical presence in the lives of French people. Architecture always colonizes, for it as a material imposition of human will. People act on their world and each other through the architecture that they produce. \(^{169}\) Churches constituted the crux of Catholic efforts to maintain the sacred union for this very reason. As material sites, churches could make the intangible sacred union real and present.

The stained-glass windows at the church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in Fey-en-Haye served this purpose. Designed around 1923 by *art nouveau* artist Jacques Gruber, the windows are replete with explicit visual analogies evoking the sacred union (figure 9). Two windows in the narthex represent a single scene: the 1923 inauguration of the *Croix-des-Carmes* monument at the original site of the village of Fey-en-Haye, which was razed during the war and reconstructed at a new site. In the left window, prime

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minister Raymond Poincaré delivers a speech. His arm is outstretched as though to salute the monument. A general, a statesman, and a religious official sit alongside Poincaré, while an ensemble of French flags dominates the background. In the right window, the monumental Croix-des-Carmes appears as Poincaré’s twin. At its base, a crowd assembles to hear Poincaré’s speech. A few members of the crowd come into focus in the foreground, notably a soldier wearing his horizon blue uniform. The stained-glass scene clearly thematizes the sacred union, for it depicts a ceremony at once patriotic and religious. It establishes a parallel between Poincaré and the monumental cross, which in fact seem to salute each other. Poincaré vests the authority of the state in the overtly Catholic monument, and God legitimates the statesman. Notably, a religious official enjoys a privileged position at the side of statesmen, while a billowing French flag in the opposite window counterbalances him.
Figure 9 Jacques Gruber, Stained glass windows commemorating the inauguration of the Croix-des-Carmes monument, 1923. Photograph from Patrimoine de Lorraine.
The windows constitute a double commemoration. The depicted scene is of course a commemorative event. Dedicated to the soldiers who died in local military engagements, the *Croix-des-Carmes* is a war memorial at which people gathered to honor and remember sacrifice. The act of rendering the scene in stained glass is commemorative as well, what historian Nicolas Padiou calls a mise-en-abyme of commemoration. Padiou attributes this metatheatrical representation to the “dangerous surfeit of memory” in Meurthe-of-Moselle, by which disappeared villages like Fey-en-Haye were reconstructed at new geographic locations. As he claims, it’s as “if the importance of the military engagements which unfolded in these regions and the too heavy weight of history had made it impossible for survivors to reinstall themselves” at the site of their original villages.

However, Padiou does not treat the windows as a compositional whole: he is only interested in the cropped image of the *Croix-des-Carmes* in the right window. As such, he fails to notice the sacred union thematization of the windows and thus the metatheatrical commemorative purpose that they serve. Indeed, the windows commemorate a commemorative event as a manifestation of sacred union. In this way, they express that anxious desire to name—or in this case visually preserve—a thing at risk of disappearance. That this representation should appear in a religious space is particularly significant, for the spatial context not only preserves the depicted item, but also models it and promotes it as though gospel. The stained-glass windows at Fey-en-Haye are constitutive through their materiality.

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Catholics had always understood the sacred union as an unstable formulation that required active preservation. When Maurice Barrès imagined church reconstruction as the true site of the sacred union in 1917, he laid the conceptual foundation for its post-war execution. Indeed, the notion that church reconstruction could sustain the sacred union ultimately dominated the early post-war period. It is no coincidence that Catholics identified church reconstruction with the sacred union given the wartime significance of church destruction. Although leaders of reconstruction rooted their loan appeals in the spirit of the sacred union, they did not merely seek to exploit wartime sympathy for financial gain. Their broader goal was to endow reconstructed churches with national character through a participatory church reconstruction process. The physical church spaces served this end, as Cardinal Luçon’s proposal, consecration ceremonies, and religious architecture demonstrate.
Chapter 3 Forgetting and Remembering Church Destruction

The destruction of churches was central to the French Catholic experience of the First World War. It endowed wartime suffering with significance and promised post-war religious revival. But church destruction began to fade from memory by the mid-1920s. This trend was part of a broader transition to a culture of peace and reconciliation. The French Left rose to power around 1924 and espoused a politics of reconciliation that marginalized memories of wartime devastation, including church destruction. Many cultural, political, and intellectual elites criticized French wartime culture, and in particular the tendency to attribute wholesale blame for war to the German enemy. However, given the importance of church destruction to the Catholic milieu, many Catholics pursued a program of remembrance activism with the Cathedral of Reims at its center. This chapter charts the unraveling of the sacred union through conflict over memory of church destruction. I consider the discourse of universal heritage that emerged out of international pacifist culture to supplant the hostile wartime associations between the cathedral and the German enemy. I argue that the 1927 reconstruction ceremonies at the Cathedral of Reims constituted a crucial turning point in this history. I also claim that Catholics clung to wartime representations of the cathedral not only to preserve the sacred union, but also to make meaning of suffering.

Initially, the sacred union displayed resilience. Catholics were not alone in their dedication to it; many Republicans and state officials also saw value in the preservation of amiable relations between Church and State. In 1921, this reciprocal commitment to the sacred union surfaced at a church reconstruction ceremony in the diocese of Nancy.

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Edmond Duponteil, prefect of the Meurthe-et-Moselle department, placed the first stone of a church to commence its reconstruction. He offered a few words to accompany his gesture:

> When a building is completed, we place a bouquet of flowers. Well, for the reconstruction of our village, we are going to place the bouquet in placing the first stone of its church. And this stone, I will place it with profound emotion and infinite respect, in the name of the French Republic, guardian refuge of liberties and beliefs.\(^{173}\)

Duponteil, a secular municipal functionary, subverted the anticlerical bent of Republicanism by implying the inclusion of Catholicism among the liberties and beliefs of which the Republic was guardian. He also drew a comparison between the typical commemorative bouquet and the first stone of the church. This detail suggests that the rest of the village had already been reconstructed save for the church. But most significantly, Duponteil allowed the church to assume commemorative significance: if the bouquet is meant to joyously mark the end of reconstruction, then the church as bouquet constituted the center of the reconstructed village. The church’s reconstruction became something of an analog for the reconstruction of the entire village, its first stone the bouquet and all the other stones like the material analogies for the components of the community that had managed to re-establish itself.

Historians Gérard Cholvy and Yves-Marie Hilaire broadly survey the state of the sacred union in post-war France, noting that “certain aggressive displays of irreligion [began] to fall out of fashion.”\(^{174}\) They describe the five-year period from 1919-1924 as one of accord: Catholics were part of the parliamentary majority which supported


governments of the center-right, and moderate Republicans pursued religious pacification.\textsuperscript{175} In fact, Republican statesmen initiated rapprochement with the Vatican after having severed diplomatic relations between the two in 1905. However, initial attempts at religious pacification swiftly gave way to discord. Given their understanding of war as divine punishment for secularization—which Republicans could not accept—Catholics sought the delaicization of French laws, which Republicans again could not accept. Republican ideas of pacification and reconciliation between the Church and State did not afford opportunities for Catholics to reverse the laws of separation. Evidently, Catholics and Republicans diverged fundamentally in their understandings of the sacred union. Republicans aimed to appease Catholics without ceding any ground on laicization, while Catholics held laicization responsible for war and anticipated its rollback according to the logic of resurrection.

Between 1924 and 1927, the sacred union unraveled across the political and cultural stage of France. This chapter ultimately locates its undoing in the conflict over memory of church destruction, which begins with the victory of the Cartel des Gauches (Cartel of the Left) in the general parliamentary election of 1924. These elections were characterized by an “awakening of the left which mounted an anti-nationalist and pacifist offensive against the German politics of Poincaré and an anticlerical offensive against the politics of religious appeasement.”\textsuperscript{176} Various political parties of the French left—radicals, socialists, communists—united against Catholics. According to Cholvy and Hilaire, “anticlericalism was the cement of entente between radicals and socialists.”\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{175} Cholvy and Hilaire, \textit{Histoire Contemporaine Religieuse}, 272.
\textsuperscript{176} Cholvy and Hilaire, \textit{Histoire Contemporaine Religieuse}, 282.
\textsuperscript{177} Cholvy and Hilaire, \textit{Histoire Contemporaine Religieuse}, 282.
After all, not a few Catholics imagined the sacred union as a catalyst for Catholic social victory in post-war France. In response to this threat, the disparate parties of the left realized the necessity of engaging in upcoming elections. The Left believed that laicism was central to the healthy functioning of the Republican state. Their platform was explicitly anticlerical: they wanted to reintroduce the dispersion of religious congregations, suppress diplomatic relations with the Vatican, and introduce laic legislation in France’s recently regained provinces of Alsace and Lorraine.178

Benefiting from divisions among the right and center parties, the Cartel des gauches won an absolute majority in the elections. As the cartel’s leader, radical socialist politician Edouard Herriot served as prime minister for the parliamentary government. On 17 June 1924, just two days after his instatement as prime minister, Herriot announced the implementation of the three points of the cartel’s program. Catholics perceived his gesture as an attack on the Church’s recently elevated position in France, especially considering the abatement of anticlericalism between 1914 and 1924. Yet, it was precisely the partial cultural, political and social restoration of the Catholic position in post-war France that engendered a renewed anticlericalism on the part of the Cartel des gauches. The Catholic logic of resurrection seemingly did not account for France’s shifting political landscape, or for the agency of anticlerical actors who challenged its logic. Either way, the cartel worked to unravel any vestiges of wartime cooperation between the Church and State, and the Church and secular society.

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In September 1924, the bishops of France penned a letter to Herriot insisting that he reconsider his anticlerical program. They considered it a serious threat. As they declared,

The war marked a happy drawing together of the Church and the State for all Frenchmen, in their sufferings and dangers, it was a tragic test, an eloquent lesson of fraternal concord...It is in the interest of the country that these results, which were applauded by all good Frenchmen and by people abroad who are our most sincere and disinterested friends, be preserved.179

The bishops stated their wish for the preservation of the sacred union in the clearest of terms. The letter also recalled the violent anticlericalism of the French Revolution, which dispossessed the Church of power and property: “[w]hat mortification and what sadness, if we behold again those lamentable days in which war against the religious congregations invaded our homes, forcing the congregations to disperse or to seek asylum in a foreign land! Those days should not be revived!”180 Although they feared such a future, the bishops invoked the specter of civil war. Indeed, the Catholic and royalist population of the Vendée had mounted a counter-revolution against the nascent French Republic in 1793, leading to brutal civil war in the region. “We do not seek war,”181 the bishops insisted, yet they suggested that Herriot’s actions might engender conflict, nonetheless. After all, they warned that his anticlerical measures constituted “serious threats to internal peace.” To be sure, France was nowhere near the brink of civil war during the mid-1920s. But the letter does demonstrate that Catholic leaders were interpreting contemporary events in the context of historical resistance to anticlericalism.

180 “Cardinals urge Herriot,” 8.
181 “Cardinals urge Herriot,” 8.
Catholics often located wartime church destruction in the longer history of French anticlericalism. At the time of Herriot’s instatement as prime minister, memory of historical anticlericalism surged. Catholics perceived their religion under attack by a Cartel des gauches belonging to a long lineage of anticlerics stretching back to the French Revolution, when Republicans instituted a general policy of dechristianization. In the preface to writer Henry Bordeaux’s 1923 novel *The Glorious Misery of Priests*, Cardinal Luçon articulated his perception of the relationship French anticlericalism and World War I and its aftermath. He first considered the 1905 law of separation, which deprived the priest of “fixed, appropriate, and assured housing.” The resulting tribulations of the priest were trying, he declared; often, the priest relied on the local parish for housing, or was lodged impossibly far away from the church. “The war still came to aggravate this state of things,” Luçon continued, suggesting that the First World War worsened the plight of the priest produced by anticlericalism. He listed the enemy’s devastations and depredations, among them the burning and pillaging of holy items and above all the destruction of churches and priest housing. Implicitly, Luçon drew a parallel between the French anticleric and the German enemy, for they performed the same destructive work. This association would grow stronger in the 1930s as Catholic leaders pursued a policy of domestic social conquest through a radicalized program of church reconstruction.

Conflict between the left and Catholics was multivalent: it also revolved around pacifism and reconciliation. Whereas previous prime minister Raymond Poincaré pursued

183 Luçon, Preface, viii.
a virulently anti-German politics, Herriot and the left favored political reconciliation with Germany. Many figures on the French Left doubted that a durable peace could be established through the Treaty of Versailles. Article 231 of the treaty, popularly known as the war guilt clause, attributed full responsibility for war to Germany. French radical Pacifists believed that article 231 constituted the basis of unjust reparation claims on Germany and wanted France to abandon it. Peace, they claimed, would remain impossible under the terms of the treaty: unjust reparations gave the Germans a reason to resent the French and thus preserved the enmity of war. French socialists seemed to share this sentiment, but they did not dare propose the abandonment of article 231. Instead, and as Horne notes, the public language of politics and diplomacy changed “to one of peace and reconciliation.” Such was the root of the left’s exteriority and opposition to the sacred union. There was a correlation between the cartel’s anticlericalism and its commitment to political reconciliation. Strong anti-German sentiment sustained the sacred union, but the more conciliatory left did not share in it. The cartel was thus disposed to a correlated anticlerical and conciliatory politics that doubly eroded the sacred union in both its political and socio-cultural spiritual form. The left’s turn towards reconciliation was concomitant with a broader cultural turn in that same direction.

Several historians argue that a culture of pacifism and reconciliation took hold in post-war France through a process of cultural demobilization. As Horne asserts, “[f]or

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the war culture to be dismantled, the enemy had to admit defeat and make amends and a
new war had to be made impossible.”¹⁸⁸ Initially, Germany contested the terms of the
Treaty of Versailles. The German state also defaulted on loan payments, to which the
French responded with the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923—an episode which “amounted
to a final burst of the war culture for many French.”¹⁸⁹ The 1925 Treaty of Locarno,
however, caused a shift. German leaders signed the treaty, thus committing the nation to
the shared project of peace in Western Europe. Since this was a German admission of
opposition to war, French wartime culture could finally demobilize. What followed was
“[t]he abolition of the dehumanized enemy defined in opposition to the collective self of
the nation,” a shift which constituted the basis of the cultures of pacifism and
reconciliation in interwar France.¹⁹⁰

Wartime culture swiftly became unpopular, especially among intellectual,
cultural, and political elites of the left. Many of them ascribed German atrocities to
French propaganda and thus identified the crux of war culture as a war-mongering lie.
The pacifist critique expressed a strong distrust of the veracity of German atrocity
accounts and claimed “that the war crimes of which the Germans stood accused were no
worse than the atrocities committed by Allied soldiers.”¹⁹¹ Indeed, pacifists structured
their activism based on the notion of war as enemy of all humanity. They understood
atrocities as “part of the inherent awfulness of war” and did not believe that any one

¹⁹¹ Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 367.
nation had a greater capacity for them than the next.\textsuperscript{192} The militant pacifist Georges Demartial dismissed the atrocity of Reims Cathedral: “[i]t is abominable moral cowardice to attribute the atrocity of this war to Germany, since the atrocity is inherent in war itself.”\textsuperscript{193} A bitter elitism, dismissive of the lived experiences of many French, pervaded many pacifist critiques. The novelist Victor Margueritte wrote in 1925:

> For the ignorant, which is to say for the three-quarters of this sheeplike mass which is public opinion, our contemporaries live in their prejudices like snails in their shells. They know nothing of the past, and nearly everything that they know about the present, they interpret through so many deformations and lies that their semi-blindness is worse than their blindness.\textsuperscript{194}

Such was the sorry intellectual state of those who trusted the veracity of German atrocity account, according to some pacifists. Author Charles Fraval concurred with Margueritte, writing that “only imbeciles, simpletons, fanatics, governments, and the press throw on Germany the responsibility for a barbarity that was at the time universal.”\textsuperscript{195}

Fabricated German atrocities, pacifists argued, formed the crux of a French propaganda campaign that made war possible. In fact, pacifists promoted propaganda as the explanation for war. How could the rational European community have descended into such brutal violence for more than four years? Horne states that “propaganda was the established explanation that made it possible to at the same time expose the factual falsity that had deformed understanding of events and the falsity of values that had rendered people complicit in the imperialism and chauvinism of their leaders.”\textsuperscript{196} Thus, the pacifist

\textsuperscript{192} Horne and Kramer, \textit{German Atrocities}, 367.
\textsuperscript{193} Horne and Kramer, \textit{German Atrocities}, 367.
\textsuperscript{194} \textit{Vers la Paix: Appel aux Consciences; avec un avantpropos de Victor Margueritte} (Paris: A. Delpeuch, 1925), 5.
\textsuperscript{196} Horne, “‘Propagande’ et ‘Verité’ dans la Grande Guerre,” 79.
critique dispensed with any significance attributed to the conflict. It asserted that even soldiers were tricked into fighting for a false cause dependent on fabricated atrocity accounts.\textsuperscript{197} The idea of a meaningless war gradually gained currency as the dominant cultural narrative among intellectuals and political activists in post-war France.\textsuperscript{198}

The post-war propaganda explanation, however, directly challenged the Catholic conception of war. Catholics understood war as an inherently meaningful divine punishment, the point of which was to bring about religious revival in France. Their systems of representation made meaning out of suffering. If state propaganda was responsible for war, as pacifists now posited, then war was \textit{not} a divine punishment heralding religious revival. Death, suffering, and sacrifice all lose their transcendent meaning according to the meaningless vision of war. In particular, the rehabilitation of the image of the Lutheran German brute disrupted the logic of resurrection. Pacifists were relativizing German culpability by insisting on universal responsibility for war, so there was no longer an unholy other against which to define the collective identity of the French nation. The sacred union could not survive without the existence of an inhuman German enemy, who was now cast aside as a manifestation of wartime propaganda. The turn away from Catholic systems of representation and meaning making was also itself a rebuke of the sacred union, perhaps most perceptible at the site of its birth: the devastated churches of France.

\textsuperscript{197} Horne, “‘Propagande’ et ‘Verité’ dans la Grande Guerre,” 79.
\textsuperscript{198} Horne, “‘Propagande’ et ‘Verité’ dans la Grande Guerre,” 79.
Indeed, the Left’s refusal of Catholic understandings of war reshaped memory of church destruction. In universalizing the destruction of Reims Cathedral, Georges Demartial disrupted a principal node in the network of cultural representations that produced the sacred union. The Left worked directly against Catholic efforts to preserve the sacred union through their pacifist discourse: it was no longer appropriate to attribute wholesale blame to the German enemy, nor to linger on the devastations of war unless one was to universalize them. Catholics of course resisted these cultural trends. They insisted on remembering the devastations as a way to make meaning of war experience. Essentially, the enemy responsible for the atrocity of church destruction had to be an unholy figure if that destruction was to assume divine significance.

The conciliatory slant of the French Left encouraged an overall forgetting of wartime devastation that implicated church destruction. As Fernand Laudet lamented in 1924,

[w]here are the days when we quivered with horror at the stories of the crimes of Gerbeviller, there were general Klausz had ordered the destruction of all that which was living, there where the tabernacle of the church was shot and where the dead were doused in gasoline[?]199

As he implied, the left did not so much directly target and reframe memory of church destruction as it facilitated its forgetting. Demartial’s commentary about Reims is a rare example; he perhaps chose Reims as a particularly notorious site of German atrocity, not because he wanted to revise the memory of church destruction in particular. Laudet understood the forgetting of church destruction as part of a general cultural trend, for he situated the fusillade of the church tabernacle alongside other alleged German crimes. He held the left and pacifists responsible for the shift, demonstrating an awareness of the

ways in which culture was transforming based on political context. This awareness is evident in his direct engagement with and refutation of the pacifist position. In a series of articles about the duty to remember German atrocities, he criticized pacifists for universalizing war responsibility. Laudet maintained that the devastation of the First World War was a particularly German pathology, “war according to William II” as he put it.²⁰⁰ Ultimately, Laudet did not accept pacifism’s universalization of war responsibility because it was important for him to remember German responsibility.

A new discourse of peace began to develop around reconstructed churches at this historical juncture. The universalized atrocity of church destruction became an opportunity for certain groups to articulate a notion of cultural heritage that accorded with the pacifist position. Demartial’s treatment of Reims as a universal atrocity, rather than a uniquely German one, emblematized this shift. If all the world was responsible for the destruction of Reims, then conversely all the world was responsible for not destroying Reims in the future. This implied that abstention from war was a universal responsibility because all belligerents were equally culpable, and that Reims was the property of all humanity. The concept of universal heritage first emerged among elites in the United States. Pacifists used the concept to frame cultural heritage sites with “outstanding universal value” as collective property in order to erode the nationalistic divisions that drive war, and which are often articulated precisely through particularized interpretations of cultural heritage.²⁰¹

The United States played a central role in promoting a notion of universal heritage centered around the Cathedral of Reims. American financier John D. Rockefeller Jr., for example, donated $1 million to the reconstruction of Reims Cathedral. His interest in the cathedral likely originated in response to French wartime propaganda. Before the United States entered the war in 1917, the French state mounted a propaganda campaign to generate American support for the Allied war effort. Their appeals often invoked the image of a lawless German brute defined by his destruction of the cathedral. They proved successful, as the iconic American “Destroy this Mad Brute” poster demonstrates in its adoption of the savage German trope (figure 10). Although Americans like Rockefeller developed an attachment to the cathedral in response to French propaganda, wartime enmity became increasingly unpopular as pacifism took hold in the post-war period. On May 3, 1924, Rockefeller wrote a letter to President of the French Republic Raymond Poincaré in which he grounded his motivation for financing the reconstruction of Reims in a notion of universal heritage. He wrote, “these are not only national but international treasures, for which France is trustee; their influence on the art of the world will always be full of inspiration.” The language of wartime culture was entirely absent from his letter; he never mentioned the cathedral’s wartime destruction, let alone the perpetrator. Although he expressed an appreciation for the “fine spirit…high courage…and devotion” of the French people, Rockefeller rejected French Catholic

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204 Rockefeller Letter, see above notation.
visions of restored churches. He neither invoked their destruction as an analog for
Catholic suffering nor treated them as national sites of sacred union.

Figure 10, Harry Hopps, Destroy this Made Brute Poster, 1918, digital file from original print no. 457a, Library of Congress.

Americans consistently described Reims as a universal heritage site throughout
this period, as did the broader international community of preservationists. Living in the
United States at the time, Russian philosopher and artist Nicholas Roerich proposed an
international treaty—the Roerich Pact—to safeguard cultural heritage in 1929. The pact
encouraged the people of the world to commit themselves to the humanitarian project of heritage preservation. To be sure, Roerich’s proposal worked within the structures of war: he entreated belligerents to prioritize cultural protection over military necessity during conflict. Yet, his formulation of universal heritage was itself a pacifist concept because it rejected national and cultural difference. For Roerich, the pact was part of an effort to create peace through the construction of universal culture. He cited the destruction of Reims as his inspiration:

> We deplore the loss….of the unreplaceable loveliness of the Cathedral of Rheims…We do not, however, wish to inscribe above it words of enmity; let us simply say, ‘Destroyed by human errors, and recreated by human hope.’ Nevertheless, errors in this or any other form may be repeated, and other precious milestones of human achievement can be destroyed.

Roerich only went so far as to blame “human errors” for the destruction of the cathedral. Likewise, he interpreted its reconstruction as the accomplishment of all humanity. His descriptions of the cathedral as universal heritage served to universalize war responsibility. An international coalition of supporters—American, Japanese, Norwegian, French, and Polish—also referenced the Cathedral of Reims in their written expressions of support for the pact. Thus, the international cultural heritage protection movement reinterpreted the cathedral as collective property, a symbol of the peace and reconciliation that was possible through universal culture. Of course, notions of the universal hinged on a European standard. Roerich was universalizing a European ideal of cultural achievement, so Reims was only understood as universal within the context of a Euro-American civilizations model. Despite its eurocentrism, this notion of universal

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heritage still introduced an alternative way to remember Reims: as ‘universal’ rather than French property.

The French Left appropriated the discourse of universal heritage, substituting it for the void in memory of destruction that emerged as a result of their conciliatory politics. It was a discourse that came from without, and as such it enabled the left to talk about the Cathedral of Reims in a way that had not been made available to them through French culture. Forgetting was thus no longer their only option; they could frame Reims Cathedral in a way that aligned with their commitment to peace. Yet, the left’s introduction of a universal heritage discourse to French culture ultimately brought conflict over the memory of church destruction into the open. The left was not merely forgetting but articulating a positive challenge to Catholic thinking. The effect of this was to create an arena of public spectacle for the dissolution of the sacred union.

Competing memories of church destruction collided at Reims Cathedral in 1927. The architects tasked with its reconstruction completed the nave early that year. This was a significant achievement, so both the state and the church organized ceremonies to celebrate the event in May. The civil inauguration occurred first, on May 12th. Herriot, former prime minister and leader of the Cartel des gauches, presided over the ceremony as Minister of Education and Fine Arts. His role in the cathedral’s inauguration was a sharp about-face: less than three years prior, Herriot proposed an anticlerical program to preserve secularism. In 1927, however, Herriot was no longer in a position to contest so blatantly the nation’s Catholic constituency. Owing to intraparty conflict and monetary crisis which confronted the Cartel in 1926, Raymond Poincaré defeated Herriot and
assumed the premiership as leader of a new center-right government. In fact, Poincaré nominated Herriot to serve as Minister of Education and Fine Arts, so Herriot was indebted to a conservative prime minister for his seat.

At first consideration, Herriot’s inaugural speech for the partly reconstructed cathedral should have earned no ire. He expressed respect for the Catholic experience of war and even described the cathedral’s destruction in detail, which was a marked departure from the pacifist Left’s forgetting tendency. As the French daily newspaper *L’Excelsior* reported, “Herriot affirmed that the government is aware of its duties to the spiritual riches of France. Then he emotionally evoked the tragic passion of the Reims basilica: the fire of September 1914, the bombardment of February 1915, the crash shot of February 1917.” Herriot even appealed to the sacred union. About the cathedral’s destruction, he stated, “French of all confessions, of all opinions, felt these wounds as if they had attacked the most precious of human beings.” That the anticlerical Herriot uttered these words should have pleased Catholics, whose early reconstruction work sought to preserve precisely this element of shared national outrage at church destruction. At certain points in the speech, Herriot slipped into the verbiage of Catholic bishops at reconstruction ceremonies. When he commended the “spontaneous and brotherly collaboration for this reconstruction,” Herriot might have been mistaken for Cardinal Luçon or Fernand Laudet.

But Herriot ultimately resolved his nearly pro-Catholic appeals in the peaceful discourse of universal heritage. Towards the end of the speech, he offered a reinterpretation of the cathedral’s symbolic meaning:

Even in the aftermath of the days when she experienced this violence, [the cathedral] does not want this generous France to crown its efforts with words of anger or defiance. She offers her hands in goodwill towards all people, towards all the beings that breathe, like her, to work safely towards works of civilization or of love. She knows that threat and imprudence survive still in the world. But her past inscribed on her stones, her frequent trials, her numerous sadesses have taught her that there is vanity and barbarity in all forms of hatred. She does not ask for anything but to serve the will of peace.211

In the last few lines, Herriot subtly addressed Germanophobia. Hatred of the Germany enemy, he suggested, was as barbarous as the destruction of the cathedral. He was firm in his conclusion: the cathedral asked for neither revenge against the Germans, nor for a sacred union that would engender religious revival, nor for a revision of France’s laic laws. Reims begged for peace, meaning uncontested acceptance of the laic status quo.

Catholic responses to Herriot’s speech ranged from suspicion to outrage. The national Catholic newspaper La Croix expressed appreciation for his gesture, but reminded readers that Herriot was simultaneously trying to “sap Christian tradition from national teaching”212 as Minister of Education. In an article titled “Herriot makes a laic visit to the cathedral,” the ultraconservative Action Française newspaper expressed what it understood as an inherent contradiction between Herriot’s politics and his presence at the cathedral.213 Another Action Française article articulated a more substantial position against Herriot: titled “False piety of a sincere antipatriot,” it gets to the heart of Catholic

211 “M. Édouard Herriot Préside l’Inauguration Civile,” 1.
213 “M. Herriot fait une visite laïque à la cathédrale, L’Action Française, May 12, 1927, 1.
outrage at Herriot’s inaugural speech. The anonymous article labeled the speech a “bad counterfeit” and noted that Herriot failed to salute ecclesiastical authorities.

Resentment and sarcasm intermingled in the author’s main criticism:

Do you know how, twice, Herriot designated and named the perpetrator of the bombardment of Reims? He calls it war. This entity is solely at fault: ‘Here is the living body that the…shell dismembered! The savage barbarity of war [destroyed the cathedral.]’

But of Germany not a word. Of the conscious, systematic and perfectly willing act by which William II waged war on our [cathedral]…a war equally attributable to aggressors as to assailed, to invaders as to invaded. Herriot says it’s the fault of war.

Despite Herriot’s nod to France’s Catholic heritage, to the wartime martyrdom of the people of Reims, and to the sacred union, his failure to name the German destroyer was unacceptable to Catholics. His attempts at domestic political reconciliation—whether genuine or politically expedient—counted for nothing in the face of such a grievous error. That Herriot should so dismissively “strip the evils of war of their national and personal character” was unconscionable, perhaps because he threatened to unravel Catholic systems of meaning. Thus, the refusal to invoke German responsibility was tantamount to altogether forgetting the cathedral’s destruction. Neither did it help that Herriot was the face of anticlericalism in France; Catholics were wont to distrust him.

The Cathedral of Reims was no longer a site of sacred union, but rather the arena for domestic conflict. How ironic that this unifying wartime symbol should collapse at the very moment when one of France’s most anticlerical figures actually invoked the sacred union. Yet, Herriot’s understanding of the sacred union was evidently devoid of

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214 “Fausse piété d’un antipatriote sincere,” L’Action Française, May 12, 1927, 1.
215 “Fausse piété.”
216 “Fausse piété.”
217 “Fausse piété.”
all the meaning with which Catholics invested it. On May 26\textsuperscript{th}, the Catholic celebration at Reims directly contradicted Herriot’s speech delivered just two weeks prior. Various speakers attributed responsibility for the cathedral’s destruction to the German army. \textit{La Croix} openly criticized Mayor Paul Marchandeau of Reims, who abstained from the mass and banned local inhabitants from performing a collective chant at it. The author suggested that Marchandeau was worried about granting the mass too much civic power, for it would be “dangerous for his Republic.”\textsuperscript{218}

Cardinal Luçon made no grand overture for peace at the celebration. The language of universal heritage was conspicuously absent from his discourse. Speaking from the pulpit with animated urgency (figure 11), Luçon described the cathedral as the “[m]onument of the faith of our fathers, august sanctuary of our most sacred glories, masterpiece of Christian art, noble victim of barbarism, which will last forever among us as the emblem of our country murdered and bloodied by the war but still standing and more sublime than ever.”\textsuperscript{219} He insisted on the cathedral’s status as a national monument to wartime suffering. Herriot had acknowledged the recent history of destruction as being indelibly “inscribed on [the cathedral’s stones,”\textsuperscript{220} but he did not foreground it in the way Luçon did out of commitment to a more pacifist interpretation. Luçon’s metaphors were keyed to an increasingly aggressive notion of religious revival. What was this France, “more sublime than ever,” of which the cathedral was an emblem?

It was a more faithful one, according to Luçon. He revisited the Catholic logic of war which stipulated that God granted France the ability to vanquish the enemy when the

\textsuperscript{218} “La Résurrection de la Cathédrale de Reims, \textit{La Croix}, May 28, 1927.
\textsuperscript{219} Discours de S.E. le cardinal Luçon in \textit{Inauguration des nefs de la cathédrale de Reims, [suivi de] Discours et résumé des fêtes du 26 mai 1927} (Reims: Matot Braine, 1927), 11.
\textsuperscript{220} “M. Édouard Herriot Préside l’Inauguration Civile,” 1.
French promised to be his “faithful servants.”¹²²¹ Luçon concluded his speech with a desperate appeal for the manifestation of that promise:

> Come back, come back, people of France, to the faith of your fathers, and be loyal to the alliance established by them with Christ in the cathedral of your baptism. It’s the only mark of gratitude worthy of him and worthy of you. Return to God the place which belongs to him in your private life, in your family life, in your national life.²²²²

The cardinal’s shift in attitude is unmistakable. He demanded that all people of France restore the Church to its former eminence in all spheres of life. Previously, Luçon had addressed primarily practicing Catholics. His 1921 plan to establish the cathedral as a pilgrimage site, for example, envisioned Catholics as its audience and entreated them to renew their faith on an individual basis. But by 1927, he was vying for a complete restoration of the Christian social order in France. Luçon’s speech followed from more radical strains of Catholic thought. In fact, his vision of religious revival seemed to bring those latent radical notions to the fore: Rene Bazin’s and Jacquier’s wartime ideas about restoring the Catholic Church to its former eminence, which had deferred to more moderate conceptions of sacred union in the early post-war years, now found purchase again.

²²¹ *Discours de S.E. le cardinal Luçon*, 12.
²²²² *Discours de S.E. le cardinal Luçon*, 12.
Catholic remembrance activism proliferated in response to Herriot’s failure to name the Germans at Reims. In 1928, Luçon recorded his testimony of the cathedral’s destruction at the University of Paris. He produced at least 5 double-sided discs worth of
recorded material specifically for the *Archives de la parole* (Speech archives) at the Sorbonne. Luçon, 85-years-old at the time of recording, wished to preserve his memory of Reims before he died. This was an attempt to construct an archive according to his vision of the past in the hopes that it would engender the future that he desired. Today, Luçon’s testimony is held at the National Library of France and is available for listening online. As a historical artifact, it is interesting both in terms of its content and its relationship to the archive. Luçon has a way of acting through the recordings, of extending his presence into our present: when I listen, I pay witness to the act of German destruction that he diligently recounts even though I recognize that his testimony is not fact. Whereas Herriot generalized the perpetrator of the cathedral’s destruction as war, Luçon insists on Germany responsibility. He claimed that the Germans purposely targeted the cathedral in their bombardment of the city of Reims, which is a matter that historians still disagree on today. Luçon used the technology of the archive to create witnesses to a past that he feared was fading from memory.

Luçon’s recorded testimony worked in tandem with another project of remembrance activism. Not long after the May 1927 ceremonies, the Society of Friends of the Cathedral of Reims published a photo album titled *Reims au lendemain de la guerre: la Cathédrale mutilée, La ville dévastée* (Reims in the wake of war: the mutilated cathedral, the devastated city). In order, its materials include a handwritten note by Cardinal Luçon, an introduction by Georges Charbonneaux of the Society of Friends, and 127 20-inch photographic plates captured by Pierre Anthony-Thouret during the war.

Although a masterpiece of war photography, the album has received little scholarly

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attention. Art historian Thomas Gaehtgens briefly analyzes several photographs in his monograph about the cathedral’s destruction and reconstruction.²²⁴

The prefacing materials frame the album as an attempt to preserve a certain memory of destruction. “For those who beheld the destruction, it was seared into their memory,” Luçon wrote, but “[f]or those who have not seen it in person, these photos allow for that.”²²⁵ He asserted the inherent veracity of the photographic image, as a uniquely pure kind of representation that would permit future generations of France to contemplate “the true image” of destruction.²²⁶ “With an incontestable authority, [the photos] tell history,” he insisted.²²⁷ Today, we instinctively know this to be untrue: no representation is unmediated by human perception. A photograph can undergo all manner of manipulation, not to mention the subjectivity inherent in the act of shooting an image. Yet, Luçon touted photography as a medium that transcended mediated representation and facilitated confrontation with the highest concentration of truth possible.

Charbonneaux clarified what that truth should be. In his introductory remarks following Luçon’s handwritten note, he affirmed that the Germans targeted the cathedral. He ascribed a measure of systematic intention to the destruction, writing that the Germans exacted their revenge on the cathedral any time they experienced a failure in the battlefield. But as he lamented, “[t]ime passes, forgetting comes!”²²⁸ It was thus necessary, he continued, to convey “what German barbarity had done to a city of peaceful

²²⁴ Gaehtgens, Reims on Fire, 177-186.
²²⁶ Luçon, “Preface” in Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre, 1.
²²⁷ Luçon, “Preface” in Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre, 1.
²²⁸ Georges Charbonneaux, “Introduction” in Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre, 8.
people” through the photo album.\textsuperscript{229} He transitioned into a discussion of materiality and archival preservation:

Many reproductions of the ruins of Reims were made on inferior paper, so they are now at risk of disappearing, and people are forgetting what happened. We have aimed to reproduce them on excellent papers of which the preservation is assured. Our dearest wish is that this album takes its place in the libraries of all the great cities of France and abroad so that in the centuries to come, there remains a witness to the systematic annihilation that the enemy pursued.\textsuperscript{230}

The society’s wish seems to have materialized. Today, the libraries at the University of Pennsylvania, Princeton, Brown, and Columbia as well as the New York Public Library system all have a copy of the album. The paper is indeed of enduring quality. Despite being nearly 100 years old, the copy at the University of Pennsylvania shows few signs of deterioration. It is, like Luçon’s recordings, a projection of a certain past into the future.

As such, the album was a rehearsal of past suffering in the present, the effect of which was to reject the reconciliation and forgetting that the future seemed to hold. Catholics were living in a present without future, one stunted by the irresolution of a traumatic past that should have brought religious revival. The possibility of future is predicated on a past in which trauma has been resolved, which is to say that future meant turning memory into history. In order to achieve that translation, Catholics needed to repeat traumatic wartime memories in the present through their remembrance activism.

Charbonneaux’s concluding thought—that there must remain “a witness to the systematic annihilation that the enemy pursued”—is unforgiving and apparently nationalistic. In his insistence on the enemy’s “systematic annihilation,” he refused

\textsuperscript{229} Georges Charbonneaux, “Introduction” in Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre, 8.

\textsuperscript{230} Georges Charbonneaux, “Introduction” in Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre, 8.
pacifist’s culture conciliatory tendency. Many scholars, like John Horne, understand the persistence of memory at the local level in nationalistic terms. The implication is that the devastated regions of the former Western Front were more nationalistic than the rest of France, which can be attributed to their direct experience of war and invasion. I will therefore argue that the persistence of memory in these regions, specifically among Catholics with respect to church destruction, was first and foremost a matter of experience that generated heightened nationalism among the population.

In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag contends that war photography, when instrumentalized as a memory tool by survivors, does more than just recall death and devastation: it invokes the miracle of survival. Her claim generally applies to Catholic cultural representations, including photography, in interwar France. Historians who study this period have ascribed the Catholic fixation on WWI’s destruction to strong nationalist sentiments—as in, a particularly fervent hatred of the former German enemy among this milieu—but Sontag’s framework suggests that there is another valence to the surfeit of memory. Consider a priest’s speech at the 1926 consecration of a reconstructed church in Longwy-Haut:

Of the four sieges that the village of Longy experienced in the time of one century, that of 1914 was the most murderous and the most destructive. In the universal devastation, the church was not spared: the tower mutilated, the walls chipped, the altars reduced to dust, the organ annihilated, the bells burned, immense desolation reigned in the holy place. The enemy still wanted to add to the horrors of the bombardment, in burning the church benches, in mutilating the Stations of the Cross, in piercing a statue of the Virgin with bullets, a relic that we piously conserve, on the first night of the occupation.

231 Georges Charbonneaux, “Introduction” in Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre, 8.
232 Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 383, 400.
233 Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 87.
234 “Consécration des autels majeurs à Hussigny et à Longwy-Haut,” La semaine religieuse du diocèse de Nancy et de Toul, August 14, 1926, 523.
The priest condemned the German enemy and evoked the devastations of war, yet in the context of resurrection. The German enemy is important to the narrative as the perpetrator—the enactor of suffering and martyrdom—but the narrative does not dwell on or foreground the event of destruction. The priest uttered these words during a ceremony that celebrated the completed reconstruction of the once-devastated church. Thus, he did not merely recall death, failure, and victimization, but rather invoked the miracle of survival and resurrection.

Similarly, the photographs in the *Reims au lendemain de la guerre* album convey a miraculous narrative of survival. Across the 127 photos, the cathedral stands as a compass which makes meaning of the experience of wartime suffering. The unyielding Catholic memory of church destruction was less about a purely nationalistic hatred of the enemy and more about maintaining the logic of resurrection—which did depend on the dehumanized concept of the German, but with the purpose of endowing Catholic war experience with transcendent meaning in a culture that threatened to render it meaningless in the noble pursuit of peace.

The first four sections of the photo album offer documentary evidence of the destruction. Among the 70 photos, an image of Cardinal Luçon standing amidst the rubble is particularly striking (figure 12). But it is not until the final section, containing 50 photos, that the album coalesces into a narrative. This section marks a shift from photos representing the cathedral’s destruction to ones representing the destruction of the

See also:
entire city of Reims. Here, the cathedral emerges as a compass. The looming towers orient the unrecognizable ruins in an equally unintelligible urban landscape. Yet, the compositional function of the cathedral as compass is more than a matter of form: as Thouret uses the cathedral to anchor disarticulated ruins in the picture plane, he also alludes to its symbolic function. Plate 79 foregrounds a mass of ruined buildings, while an optically pure cathedral rises in the background (figure 13). The ruins in the foreground deform the viewer’s spatial perception: an incessant, illegible maze of ruins produces a foreshortening of the plane. The eye struggles to cut through them in the articulation of dimensionality, perhaps because impossible walls confront it at every step. Wartime destruction reduced structures to their facades, and so we see facades through facades in a way that situates them within each other. Curiously, though, the deformation of space does not pose significant problems. Thouret has made the cathedral his subject, although it is situated in the background. As it emerges against the horizon, the cathedral makes sense of the spatial confusion. Its reduced size, owing to distance, is enough to rationalize space. But more than that, the cathedral makes meaning of the foregrounded ruins. Held at such a distance, the cathedral disavows its wounds. It transforms the photograph into a representation of the miracle of survival and the promise of resurrection. Wartime suffering resolves itself in the transcendence that the cathedral offers.
Figure 12, Pierre Anthony-Thouret, Cardinal Luçon (left) and unidentified figure (right) standing in the rubble of the Cathedral of Reims, Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre: La Cathédrale Mutilée. La Ville Dévastée (Paris: Éditions J. Budry, 1928), Plate 38, photo taken c. 1918.
The compositional and spiritual resolution that the cathedral offers in plate 79 recurs throughout the album. A similar meaning making technique is evident in plates 73, 75-77, 80, 82, 86, 89, and 98. While some photos—plates 92 and 97, for example—thematize the illegibility of destruction and the search for meaning, they do so within the broader narrative framework of transcendence. Indeed, plates 92 (figure 14) and 97
(figure 15) do not exist in isolation; their disarticulation only means in the context of the photo narrative of which they are a part. The figure surrounded by rubble in plate 92 faces a defamiliarized scene, so devastated that the editors of the album have inserted a cue: in the bottom corner appears a photo of the street prior to its destruction. The editor thus implies the figure’s search for sense and meaning, which later photographs resolve. Plate 101 (figure 16), for example, situates the viewer within a decrepit foreground. Three archways frame our view of the background. The largest of them contains the cathedral; it is bathed in such concentrated light so as to appear otherworldly. Like so many other photographs in the album, plate 101 interprets ruins in light of the cathedral with the effect of giving wartime suffering spiritual significance. To this end, the photo album does not forget the cathedral’s destruction. The final plate offers two shots of the cathedral under siege (figure 17). They are familiar images which connote the German destroyer. As evidence of the barbarity which performed the destruction, plumes of smoke obscure the cathedral in the bottom image. While the point of the album is to make positive meaning of wartime experience, it does depend on the notion of a demonic German enemy to mobilize Catholic representational systems.
Figure 14. Pierre Anthony-Thouret, Ruins of the house of musicians, Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre: La Cathédrale Mutilée. La Ville Dévastée (Paris: Éditions J. Budry, 1928), Plate 92, photo taken c. 1918.
Figure 15, Pierre Anthony-Thouret, ruins of la rue de Mars, Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre: La Cathédrale Mutilée. La Ville Dévastée (Paris: Éditions J. Budry, 1928), Plate 97, photo taken c. 1918.
Figure 16. Pierre Anthony-Thouret, the cathedral seen through the ogival arch of the Cordelier convent. Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre: La Cathédrale Mutilée. La Ville Dévastée (Paris: Éditions J. Budry, 1928), Plate 101, photo taken c. 1918.
Figure 17. Pierre Anthony-Thouret, the cathedral of Reims on fire, Reims Au Lendemain De La Guerre: La Cathédrale Mutilée. La Ville Dévastée (Paris: Éditions J. Budry, 1928), Plate 127, photo taken c. 1914.
The photo album resonated with members of the local community in Reims. The Society of Friends of Old Reims, an association committed to the preservation of the city’s cultural patrimony, promoted the album in their annual bulletin:

Ten years have passed since the war, our ruins are nearly repaired, and already the memory of our misery fades: some even seem to know not that for four years the Germans bombarded Reims, burned City Hall and the cathedral, the Palace of Justice and the general hospital, destroyed 9,000 houses and killed 1,300 civilians: but the knowing photographs which were selected nearly at random among thousands by M. Charbonneaux eternally accuse and condemn German barbarity. Remember your return to Reims: your street was obstructed by debris that sometimes climbed to the height of the first floor; at the site of the house that you were searching for, there was a hole: the fire had done its work….It’s all this that the album evokes for us, for the generations that follow us, for the foreigner who distrusts us.²³⁵

The Society of Friends lamented the disappearance of Reims’s destruction from the historical record. Evidently, survivors had symbolically mapped their own harrowing wartime experiences onto the city’s monumental destruction. The storied martyrdom of Reims allowed individuals to make meaning of their suffering: they could insert personal experience into the broader narrative and understand it in relation to the Cathedral of Reims. As this excerpt suggests, the consolation for the death and destruction that the people of Reims suffered was remembrance, or the translation of personal memory and experience into history. While the historicization of the personal might have validated their experiences, it was about more than that. The photo album reproduced a familiar logic: it linked general destruction and suffering to the cathedral in an effort to transcendentalize suffering. In 1927, Luçon begged the people of France to return to the Catholic faith so as to fulfill the promise of the logic of resurrection, or the expectation

that war would inspire a popular return to religion in France. The cathedral in the album
functioned similarly, as it symbolized the anticipated resurrection of Catholic France.

There was evidently a significant gap between the end of the war and Luçon’s still
awaited religious revival. At the time of his speech, nine years had passed since the
armistice. He and other Catholics certainly must have wondered why the people of
France had not yet returned to the faith of their fathers. The Catholic remembrance
activism that emerged in the wake of the 1927 ceremonies at Reims ultimately ushered in
a more aggressive approach to religious revival, perhaps as a response to the reticence.
Luçon and others, including local inhabitants of Reims, obsessively rehearsed the
cathedral’s destruction starting in 1927. The trauma rehearsal was rooted in irreconcilable
visions of past, present, and future. The anticipated Catholic future had not yet
materialized, so war could not be put to rest. Catholics thus remained fixated on the
past—the cathedral’s destruction—as a means of rejecting the unsatisfactory present and
the future to which it cruelly gestured. There could be no future which did not adhere to
the logic of resurrection, as it would render experience meaningless. It was this
imperative that underlay the turn towards more radical conceptions of religious revival
given the sacred union’s failure.
By 1927, church reconstruction was coming to a close. The diocesan cooperatives had nearly completed their work. There remained churches to be reconstructed, but the successful fundraising effort of the early 1920s ensured they would be completed within the time of a few years. For all intents and purposes, the *Œuvre de secours aux églises devastées* should have disassembled. As Laudet wrote in 1923, “[t]his *Œuvre* is a charity of war; so it’s a charity that will end and that hopefully is destined to end. Since, anyways, we must hope that one day there will no longer be any more devastated regions and that this day will come as soon as possible.”

But when that day arrived in 1927, Laudet changed his tune. In an address to the *Œuvre*’s members Laudet declared, “[f]riends of devastated and reconstructed churches, we are all too proud to have been enrolled for twelve years in this crusade to not continue.” A shift had taken place to inspire Laudet’s renewed commitment to a lasting reconstruction crusade. His original logic, which depended on the finitude of devastated regions, no longer held true. The *banlieue rouge*—Paris’s ring of communist leaning, working class suburbs—constituted a comparable wasteland in Catholic thinking. Indeed, Catholics understood the spread of communism in the outskirts of Paris as an extension of the German enemy’s sacrilegious war. Never mind that World War I had come from without while the new war was coming from within: Catholics understood these conflicts as religious in nature before anything else. Thus, there was an apparent continuity

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between the Lutheran German who aimed to destroy Catholic France and the French communist whose atheism threatened to do the same.

Laudet’s declaration testified to a shift in Catholic culture. Despite concerted Catholic efforts to preserve it, the sacred union lost ground without the unifying emergency climate of wartime. Broader French cultural trends towards reconciliation ultimately marginalized memories of church reconstruction. As the French Left pursued an anticlerical agenda and communism gained a foothold in the suburbs of Paris, many conservative Catholics felt that war had returned to the domestic stage. Thus, Catholic political culture took a turn: its leaders pursued religious revival through frameworks of conquest which radicalized church reconstruction efforts. While I locate the immediate root of the radical turn in contemporaneous political developments, I ultimately trace it back to the terms of a war culture which promised religious revival according to an unyielding logic. Indeed, the logic of resurrection gave church reconstruction the full weight of its conceptual force. With the sacred union defunct, its unyielding logic directed Catholics to pursue religious revival through more radical means. The very dissolution of the sacred union pointed to the impossibility of cooperation. Accordingly, Catholics began to reinterpret church reconstruction—their familiar vessel for materializing visions of the future—within the wartime frameworks of conquest and crusade.

By the late 1920s, charities for the reconstruction of churches framed their work as a crusade against internal enemies and the modern secular world. Conceptually and operationally, efforts to reconstruct war-damaged churches on the former front (la zone rouge) and to construct new churches in the communist suburbs of Paris (la banlieue
The close association between reconstruction and new construction, as well as between the former Western Front and the Parisian banlieue, represents the process of cultural radicalization that punctuates the story of post-war French church reconstruction. Catholics lent wartime concepts of the German enemy and the warfront to compatriots and their suburbs, demonstrating post-war persistence, utility, and malleability of these concepts. Although Catholics had articulated and pursued their visions of post-war France through church reconstruction since the start of the war, the reconstruction crusade ultimately generated the most significant material implementation that we have encountered thus far. This final chapter considers the development and impact of the reconstruction crusade across the period of about 1926-1939. It begins with a discussion of the radicalization of Catholic culture before turning to the resulting reconstruction crusade through which Catholics aimed to achieve social conquest.

With the sacred union defunct, radical rhetoric largely replaced the language of cooperation in Catholic culture. The apparent dissolution of the sacred union signaled the failure of cooperation as a means of achieving Catholic restoration of any kind. Thus, it pointed to alternate strains of thought. Radical theories of religious revival had been present in Catholic discourse during the war, but the notion of a sacred union marginalized them during the early post-war years. That is, until the sacred union failed. This was evident in conflict over remembrance at the Reims Cathedral mass in May 1927, and especially in Cardinal Luçon’s speech which demanded that people restore the Catholic social order in all spheres of life. But this did not constitute a mechanistic rhetorical substitution. Rather, the radical framework gradually became dominant. The
very failure of the sacred union suggested the necessity of a more aggressive approach, as the people of France had not rallied back to the Catholic faith as many Catholics had expected.

Significantly, the radical turn in Catholic culture coincided with the growing influence of communist ideology in interwar France. Catholics, who almost exclusively identified themselves as conservatives, broadly defined their political opponents as people on the left of the political spectrum. Indeed, the French Left had represented the anticlerical position since 1789. But Catholics of the interwar period resisted communism in particular, given its ideological displacement of organized religion in favor of atheism. Communism was gaining popularity in and around Paris during the mid-to-late 1920s. The Communist party had won many seats in the Parisian banlieue in the same 1924 election from which the Cartel des gauches emerged victorious. Working class people, for whom communist ideology held a particular appeal, historically dominated these industrial suburbs, which came to be known as la banlieue rouge (the red suburbs).

The notion of a ceinture rouge (red belt) coterminous with the red suburbs first developed in 1925. Contemporaries of both progressive and reactionary factions also interchangeably referred to the constellation of communist suburbs as la zone rouge (the red zone) and la banlieue rouge. For communists, the term was empowering and connoted a coalition of revolutionary proletarians encircling the bourgeoisie enclave of Paris. French conservatives also mobilized the phrase, but negatively in order to signify a belt of communists strangling the beacon of French civilization. Communists and their reactionary opponents converged in their understanding of la banlieue rouge as an atheist vanguard. French poet Louis Aragon, a member of the Communist party, “defined the
zone partly in terms of opposition to organized region.” He contrasted the “proletarian space” of the banlieue rouge with the Sacré-Cœur basilica at the edge of Paris. It was just beyond the basilica that the banlieue rouge began. The area’s geographic exteriority to an iconic religious monument thus assumed an ideological and symbolic valence with particular resonance for Catholics.

Secular French writers from this period evoked comparisons between the former war front and the banlieue. According to historian James Cannon, novelist Albert Crémieux “imagined the zone as both the cradle and the grave of communist uprising whose cataclysmic fate evoked the bloodbath of the trenches.” In Crémieux’s novel Le Grand Soir, a revolutionary leader confuses his banlieue surroundings with the trenches of the First World War in his last moments of life. Other authors compared the poor ragpickers of the banlieue to soldiers, and their shanties to trenches. On a stroll in the banlieue, proletarian writer Eugène Debit remarked that its “new shanties…recall[ed] the front.” These writers often sympathized with the people of the banlieue. Cannon argues that the banlieue rouge became a site of counter-memory for communists. As he explains, “[t]he squalor and poverty of the zone were potent reminders of the misery of the trenches…politically, it served to condemn bourgeois militarism while strengthening proletarian militancy.”

Catholics, on the other hand, understood the space of the banlieue in different terms. They agreed on its shared physical likeness with the landscape of the Western

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Front—in hospitable, muddy, dilapidated—but otherwise framed the banlieue as a spiritually devastated wasteland inhabited by internal enemies. Several Catholic thinkers explicitly connected French communists to the Germans. As one priest wrote about the banlieue rouge in 1931, “[t]he Germans did not pass through here, rather combisme did.”243 *Combisme* connotes a kind of secularism embodied by Emile Combes, principal architect of the 1905 law of separation. The priest continued: “there was a physical invasion of the barbarian, today there is an invasion of barbarous ideas.”244 He understood the *banlieue rouge* as an ideological warzone on account of the perceived anti-Catholic continuity between Germans, who invaded physically and French communists, who invaded ideologically. In fact, he ominously claimed that “the battlefield is always present” whether in wartime or peacetime.245

Catholics increasingly appealed for aid to the spiritually devastated *banlieue rouge* in the *Œuvre’s* bulletin. Archbishop Louis-Ernest Dubois of the diocese of Paris declared that the state of spiritual devastation in suburbs like Kremlin-Bicêtre and Bagnolet was enormous. Churches were few and far between; many towns lacked them. Catholics estimated that of the 4 million people living in the outskirts of Paris, only about one-half were baptized. They often described the settlements in the *banlieue rouge* as dangerous irreligious agglomerations. Dubois begged for support of a region “devastated by the demon, devastated by false ideas, devastated by the enemies of France and of the Church.”246 His rhetoric was familiar: with references to devastation, demons, and

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enemies, he conjured the popular image of a war front which suffered sacrilegious destruction. Many French described the devastated lands of northeastern France—suffused with the ruins of churches and unexploded ordnance alike—in such terms. Yet, Dubois merely found this image rhetorically useful and was not actually referring to the former Western Front. In fact, he spoke here about his own diocese—specifically, la banlieue rouge. He pleaded that the Œuvre “continue its action, its devotion, and its zeal in regard to the churches of the banlieue,” that region devastated by domestic enemies.

No doubt due to such entreaties from prominent Catholics like Archbishop Dubois, the Œuvre de secours aux églises devastées began articulating its work as a social crusade against ‘pagan’ ideology in France. At an assembly meeting for the Œuvre, Fernand Laudet announced, “[p]aganism is at our doors and I insist on this word: paganism.”247 Catholics borrowed this language from wartime culture to describe a domestic enemy who they now readily associated with the German enemy. By the late 1920s, the pagan had become a familiar concept for inflecting the Catholic cause with divine righteousness.

From 1927 onwards, radical views of conquest and crusade seeped into Catholic rhetoric about church reconstruction in direct proportion to the rise of communism in the suburbs of Paris. Many Catholics involved in the reconstruction effort lived in Paris, so they were especially aware of the communist presence in the banlieue. Cardinal Dubois, whose diocese included the banlieue rouge, was president of honor for the Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées. But the specter of communism even inflected the views of those who resided in the northeastern region of the country. During a conference for the

Œuvre in 1927, Joseph Tissier, the bishop of Châlons, promoted church reconstruction as an opportunity for personal purification in the face of the soul-corrupting “skepticism, naturalism, and paganism” of the modern world, by which he certainly meant atheistic communism. Tissier ultimately reinterpreted the charity’s mission as one of social conquest:

We search everywhere for a way to make peace, we resort to thousands of initiatives that do away with war….But what can we do to avoid a war between classes?...The joy of our rural populations when the church was reconstructed, they re-entered the rebuilt sanctuary…All the families were there, in a touching communion of thought, which does not always last, but which did the most good to all and to each on this day. [The church] unites…instead of separating. [The Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées, which better than all the modern utopians, guarantees in our sanctuaries this equality of classes so desired, this equality which one only finds at the foot of the cross…and I say that here it’s a work of eminently social conquest. All around you, in society, you are like the fairies of Christian and social restoration.

As he used the term “social conquest,” Tissier meant pacification: an enforced peace that would restore the Christian social order. He insisted that reconstructed churches could offer the same equality that communism promised. Indeed, the class equality of which modern utopians dreamed could be found in the church, which ostensibly made all people equal before God. But the equality that Tissier imagined was necessarily one divorced from the material reality that communism centered. Perhaps Tissier earnestly believed that one could find equality through spirituality, but he was operating according to a framework that considered the church a sacred space insulated from material conditions. Ultimately, Tissier was more interested in Christian restoration than in equality. His goal

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was the social pacification, through Christianization, of pagan communists. Notably, Tissier’s desire for peace was not at odds with his promotion of social conquest, as social conquest was the means by which Catholics intended to impose their desired peace. War and peace, or war and conquest, were not opposite concepts in this case.\textsuperscript{251}

The notion of social conquest was central to the emergence of a reconstruction crusade. A few months after Tissier’s speech, the \textit{Œuvre’s} leaders declared that “the reconstructed churches and their gospel of love and care bring people back to Christian civilization…against the doctrines of communism which speak only of destruction.” They explicitly articulated their work as a crusade against communism. Numerous examples of this kind of rhetoric abound in the historical record from the late 1920s.\textsuperscript{252} A desire to restore the Christian social order in France united them; Catholics sought \textit{reconstitution} through reconstruction. Catholics frequently employed the word \textit{reconstitution} during this period, and it was not merely a synonym for reconstruction. They used the word \textit{reconstruction} in the context of the physical reparation of buildings, but \textit{reconstitution} in reference to abstract concepts like the reconstitution of Christian France. \textit{Reconstitution} connotes reorganization and, in this case, the remaking of France as a Catholic nation. The reconstruction crusade, as Catholics had come to conceive of church reconstruction, was at the center of the campaign for reconstitution.

In theory, the reconstruction crusade largely targeted French communists given their atheism. Yet, the work of reconstruction took place in northeastern France—the site

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{251} Chris Cuomo, “War is Not Just an Event: Reflections on the Significance of Everyday Violence” \textit{Hypatia} vol. 11 no. 4 (Fall 1996): 30-45. Cuomo destabilizes the neat war/peace dichotomy throughout this article.
  \item \textsuperscript{252} Fernand Laudet explicitly framed the charity’s work as a crusade, and another Catholic figure stated that church reconstruction served to “recreate France as she was created.” Pierre L’Hermite echoed Tissier’s sentiments, claiming that “[i]f we have churches, we will have souls, if we have souls, we will have social peace and maybe international peace.”
\end{itemize}
of the former Western Front—where communism was scarcely prevalent. Evidently, there was a limit to how much church reconstruction in northeastern France could accomplish the goals of a crusade. The enemy which it targeted was concentrated elsewhere after all, in the suburbs of Paris.

The Œuvre accordingly redirected its efforts to the banlieue rouge, which many contemporaries alternately termed la zone rouge (the red zone). Although this thesis uses the term banlieue rouge in reference to the communist suburbs of Paris for continuity’s sake, la zone rouge necessitates investigation as a term laden with wartime significance. The designation originated in the immediate aftermath of the First World War to describe the devastated regions of northeastern France. So suffused was this geographic zone with unexploded ordnance that the French government forbade resettlement there, terming it “la zone rouge.” Although demining work has significantly reduced the size of the zone, certain parts of it still remain dangerous today.253 As Catholics used it in reference to the communist suburbs, la zone rouge carried a range of associations—wartime destruction, spiritual devastation, red communism—mapped over each other. The widespread use of the term in reference to the banlieue rouge offers further proof of the war framework within which Catholics were operating towards the end of the decade. As a designation which implied devastation, la zone rouge also necessarily demanded reconstruction.

Before Parisians called the area circling Paris la zone rouge or la banlieue rouge, they knew it simply as “la zone.” It was initially a fortified military zone for the French Army. But after France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the army abandoned the fortifications.254 The military withdrawal from the zone opened it up to

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254 Cannon, The Paris Zone.
settlement by poor Parisians, who constructed shanties that ultimately came to comprise France’s largest bidonville, or slum. The French state embarked on a modern urbanization project in the zone during the interwar period, which included the construction of public housing in place of shanties as well as parks and even luxury housing. The state equipped the zone with many modern amenities. All of this struck fear in the hearts of Catholics because they believed that modern urbanization schemes were by nature irreligious.

Lhande, a Catholic missionary and writer, was the first person to pursue systematized church construction in the banlieue rouge. He referred to the state’s urbanization program for the zone as a “regime of modern war,”256 the dangers of which the state could not have anticipated but had nonetheless come to bear. Lhande commended the state’s humanitarian work but insisted that it must cease.257 He claimed that modern public housing projects in the banlieue created a danger both immediate and flagrant, particularly because these suburbs had been constructed without religion. He recounted his visit to an unnamed suburb, where he encountered stunning fixtures of modern life: boiler rooms, electric ventilators, and swimming pools. Lhande described the banlieue rouge as disturbingly modern, perhaps even uncivilized in its modernity:

What struck us, it was the impression that we were, in that moment, introduced into a completely new world, a world which was organized beyond us and next to us, so that we could not understand its rapid and profound evolution. None of the conductors of this strong social machine seemed to have ever had relationships with us. They ignored us, and we ignored them. They constructed the system without us, and they well expected to sustain it without us.

255 Cannon, The Paris Zone.
No religious concern penetrated the home of the subalterns. They rely, for all the philosophy of the party, on their managers. They are the executors. They have plainly accepted their task: they execute it punctually, without concerning themselves with the connection of the fraction of their work to the whole of the program. This concerns their managers. They are not exalted, they are not fanatic; they are excellent workers…but one feels that their attachment to the party is such that, when the day comes, they will blindly and logically accept all their wants…It’s a strong army…it’s a formidable army.258

Believing the millions of inhabitants of the banlieue rouge to be impressionable workers, Lhande worried that communist ideology would mobilize them against Paris and the civilization that it represented. In his view, modern urbanization schemes threatened the Catholic social order by encouraging a materialist worldview; indeed, he found worker housing outrageously luxurious. Lhande interpreted communism’s substitution of the material for the spiritual as a false remedy for the social problems of the banlieue, not only ineffective but also threatening. Modern urbanization, he noted, was not sufficient to durably achieve the work of “social pacification,” and it could not supplement the benefits of the “religious civilization of the masses.”259

The subservient collectivist tendency that he observed among the workers during his visit only compounded his fear of violent revolution.

Lhande proposed a program of religious urbanization to subvert the process of modern urbanization unfolding in the banlieue. As he announced, “this immense zone where there unfolds a string of inexpensive housing projects…poses all of a sudden before our fearful eyes a complex problem: the evangelization of the worker masses.”260

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260 Lhande, “Un problème vital,” 18. As he said, “After having examined this conception of the popular city equipped by charities of urbanization, of civilization, or material assistance and of a certain moral education, but laic, one acquires the absolute conviction that such methods only have a limited influence on the spirit and soul of the people…something else is needed here: the civilizing and moralizing action of the
Lhande treated the *banlieue rouge* as an ideological warzone between communism and organized religion. The task was thus a matter of socially pacifying, or conquering, the masses that resided there. Modern urbanization, he observed, was preaching the gospel of communism. He devised religious urbanization as the necessary alternative.²⁶¹ Whereas modern urbanization steered the people of the banlieue away from tradition, Lhande’s program for religious urbanization aimed to preserve it. His was an anti-modern urbanization scheme, one which attempted to cleave urbanization from its usual association with progress and modernity. Religious urbanization, which here means the inclusion of churches in design plans, would ensure that the city was constructed within—rather than exterior to—the Christian social order.

The *Œuvre*’s assemblies and bulletins supported the redirection of the church reconstruction movement to the banlieue rouge. Of course, they provided an opportunity for Catholics to share their concerns and ideas—as Lhande did in 1930 when he spoke to the *Œuvre*’s members about his plan for religious urbanization in the *banlieue rouge*. But the *Œuvre*’s reconstruction work also modeled a successful intervention for those who aimed to Christianize the suburbs. Efforts to construct new churches in the banlieue developed directly out of the *Œuvre*’s work, which envisioned church reconstruction as an opportunity to achieve social conquest and crusade in France. The nascent suburban construction program clearly shared a conceptual foundation with the *Œuvre*, but there was also operational overlap between the two. Many individuals involved in the *Œuvre* migrated to the banlieue-oriented movement, chief among them the archbishop of the

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diocese of Paris. Cardinal Dubois explicitly entreated the members of the Œuvre to redirect their work to the banlieue; he wished to repurpose the wartime charity for his own devastated lands. When Dubois died in 1929, Jean Verdier assumed the archbishopric of Paris. Cardinal Verdier shared his predecessor’s commitment to the Christianization of the banlieue. He ultimately founded the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal (Œuvre for the Cardinal’s Construction Sites) in 1931, which was essentially the banlieue equivalent of the Œuvre de secours aux églises devastées. Given that Père Lhande delivered his speech about the banlieue rouge to the Œuvre de secours in 1930, of which Cardinal Verdier was a part, and that Verdier established the Œuvre des Chantiers the next year, it seems that the Œuvre de secours played a significant role in the extension of the reconstruction crusade to the banlieue—if only as a socio-cultural association that facilitated communication among Catholics.

From its inception, the Œuvre de secours aux églises devastées maintained a clear relationship with its offspring, the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal. In 1931, Fernand Laudet announced the Œuvre de secours aux églises devastées’s support for Verdier’s effort. In fact, Laudet cited Lhande’s 1930 speech as the catalyst for his commitment to church construction in the banlieue. Laudet acknowledged the “absolute necessity of the evangelization of the working masses” in the face of the apparent “dangers of the belt of misery.” He thus encouraged members of the Œuvre de secours aux églises devastées to donate to the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal. When Cardinal Verdier launched a bulletin called Le Christ dans la Banlieue in 1932, Laudet agreed to handle the list of

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subscribers given his almost 20 years’ worth of experience executing the Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées bulletin.

The Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées sincerely believed that church construction in the banlieue was continuous with reconstruction in the devastated regions. In 1931, Laudet published a series of photos in his bulletin with captions that blurred the lines between construction and reconstruction, banlieue and devastated region, and foreign and domestic enemy. The captions are playful but telling in what they signify. “Is it a project of reconstruction for a devastated church, or a project for a church of the banlieue of Paris?” reads one caption for the image of a newly built church (figure 18). Likewise, a photo of devastation is captioned, “Are we in the devastated region or in the zone of Paris?” The photo, showing skeletal trees, shanties, and a barren foreground, could at once picture the banlieue or the former Western Front (figure 19). Laudet never revealed the setting, for it truly did not matter: the different regions, and the church (re)construction work occurring in them, were indistinguishable on account of the conceptual unity which the reconstruction crusade offered. The notion of a concerted effort to reconstitute France as Catholic, to conquer a French society that had rejected the
Catholic social order in favor of modernity, resolved the differences between construction and reconstruction.

Figure 18, “Is it a reconstruction project for a devastated church or a church project for the banlieue of Paris?”, published 1931 in Bulletin de L’Œuvre de Secours aux églises devastées No. 35, June 1931.
Likewise, the *Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal* embraced its lineage. Drawing on the *Œuvre de secours aux églises devastées* model, Verdier launched a loan for 20 million francs in 1932. He issued a letter appealing for subscribers to support the construction of new churches in the diocese of Paris.263 “This loan,” he wrote, “has a double purpose”264:

> Through it we wish to serve two equally sacred interests. We want to give to the worker a salary instead of alms, and to ensure the normal exercise of the cult for the 2 million inhabitants [of the banlieue], for whom the distance or the insufficiency of the church renders religious practice morally impossible.

We are entirely confident that the enthusiastic response that you gave, some years ago, to the appeal for the loan for devastated churches, will be renewed today. It’s a matter of giving work to our workers and of

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263 Letter from Cardinal Verdier announcing the issuing of a loan for the construction of new churches in the diocese of Paris, Archives historiques du diocèse de Paris, Serie 4 C 1, 4: p. 3.
264 Letter from Cardinal Verdier, Serie 4 C 1, 4: p. 3.
multiplying in our Parisian banlieue the houses of moral life and of social peace.  

Verdier published another letter one month later, in May 1932:

More than 2 million inhabitants cannot, at this hour, regularly receive religious aid, alas thus becoming easy prey for the enemies of our faith and of the social order itself!...Yes, our churches assure, in the best manner that there may be, social peace and the stability of our religious and civil institutions.

But while the banlieue rouge was particular to France, conflict between communism and religion was not. In addition to the Œuvre de secours aux églises dévastées, the Pope Pius XI’s anti-communist and anti-modern position likely influenced Cardinal Verdier’s church construction effort. As historian John Pollard notes, Pope Pius XI is known as the “pope of Catholic Action.” During his pontificate, he established the Catholic Action movement to resist the Church’s various opponents, including “Protestantism, freemasonry and anti-clericalism, and by the end of the 1930s, the neo-pagan influences of German National Socialism.” But Pollard states that “the most dangerous enemy was perceived to be Communism, so one of Catholic Action’s major tasks was to combat that menace wherever it reared its head.” Pius XI first developed Catholic Action in the Italian context as a way to achieve the Christian restoration of society in a Catholic sense: it established a model for Catholic activism among laypeople.

Giuseppe Pizzardo, an Italian Cardinal, served as general ecclesiastical assistant for Catholic Action. He played a significant role in developing and directing the 

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265 Letter from Cardinal Verdier, Serie 4 C 1, 4: p. 3.
organization, and ultimately in extending it to the universal Church. As secretary for the Pontifical Commission on Communism, Pizzardo was closely acquainted with communism as a global threat to not just Italy, but the universal Church. Pollard argues that “[t]he pope would eventually become concerned by the threat posed by all three totalitarian dictatorships, but that posed by atheistic Soviet Communism was worldwide.”

The totalitarian ideologies of Europe—Soviet Communism, Italian Fascism, and German National Socialism—all espoused secularism and anti-clericalism, to which Pius XI and Pizzardo responded by promoting the Italian model of Catholic Action throughout the world. Pius XI intended for Catholic Action groups to “prepare the spiritual reconquest of the modern world by Catholicism,” for he believed that the secularism and anti-clericalism pursued by totalitarian powers had engendered moral decline and decadence.

Although Pius XI was especially worried about the spread of communism in the United States, Canada, and Australia, he also directed some attention to France. In fact, France was the first country outside of Italy to adopt the Catholic Action model. In 1930, Pizzardo delivered a lecture titled “L’Action Catholique et la Hierarchie” (Catholic Action and the Hierarchy) at the French Seminary in Rome to an audience including Cardinal Verdier. By 1932, the Catholic Church of France had set up a national secretariat for *Action Catholique Française* in order to integrate various French lay activist groups into the Church’s hierarchy. Verdier seems to have subscribed to the principles of Catholic Action—as in, reconquest of the modern world by Catholicism—in

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his approach to church construction in the banlieue. Although the conceptual basis of the
reconstruction crusade emerged from French wartime culture—for example, the
particularly French equation of the devastated regions of the former Western Front with
the banlieue rouge—the anti-communist position in which it was rooted was a
transnational phenomenon during the interwar period. As the reconstruction crusade
progressed throughout the 1930s, it became increasingly linked to the international
Church’s anti-communist position. The Vatican notably took great interest in the work of
church (re)construction in France, integrating it into its transnational Catholic Action
movement.

Using funds raised through the loan, Cardinal Verdier constructed about 110
churches in the banlieue between 1932 and 1940. Throughout this period, the Œuvre des
Chantiers du Cardinal published several maps representing their efforts in Paris and its
suburbs. A “religious map of the Paris region” from the earlier years of the decade charts
the limits of the diocese, old parishes, new parishes, and land acquired for churches or
chapels (figure 20). It overlays the region with striated patterns of varying intensity to
signify population growth by commune: the more densely striated, the higher the
population increase. Later maps, like “Les Chantiers du Cardinal” from 1938, represent
each newly constructed church with a numbered dot (figure 21). The act of mapping
church construction onto the banlieue carried certain colonial implications of a kind of
missionary work that aimed to conquer. The maps literally pictured the banlieue as an
empty zone whose burgeoning population needed to be civilized through
Christianization. In fact, the representational genre of the map invariably defamiliarizes
the banlieue. Conceptually, the geographically proximal suburbs become uncharted
territory, or territory in the process of being charted. Across the maps, Paris is always represented as a singular unit, in contrast to the fragmented banlieue. This visual dichotomy between the incorporated city and the unincorporated banlieue presents Paris as a civilized center under siege, yet which extends itself into the uncivilized banlieue through churches. Essentially, the map visualizes religious conquest according to a colonial framework. The implication, of course, is that Catholics applied colonial thinking to the domestic context.

Figure 20, Edited by La Vie Catholique, Religious Map of the Region of Paris, 1930, Archives historiques du diocèse de Paris, Serie 4 C 1, 6.
Indeed, members of the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal often used colonial missionary language to frame their work. Colonial rhetoric intersected with the rhetoric of war in nuanced ways: the imagined banlieue rouge was at once a wartime and colonial wasteland necessitating a Christianization program that would both pacify and civilize its inhabitants. In one report, Fernand Laudet described the banlieue as a “swampy wilderness.”

He thanked Cardinal Verdier for this civilizing work: “[t]hrough you, the

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toll of bells has recommenced in the trenches of the banlieue, and, on these uncultivated lands…you have learned to create.”274 In one sense, Catholics understood the banlieue as an ideological warzone, as Laudet’s use of the phrase “trenches of the banlieue” suggests. But these lands were also seen as uncultivated and primitive because the enemy that lived there was atheistic and thus uncivilized. Paul-Louis Touzé, director of the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal, directly compared the church construction work in the banlieue to Catholic missionary work in colonial situations. In so doing, he intimated a belief that the people of the banlieue, on account of their communistic atheism, were akin to colonial subjects and thus deserved violent treatment reserved for racial others. The Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal thus operated according to a social domination ethos inflected by concepts of war and colony.

If any single stylistic quality unites the churches constructed in the banlieue, it is the prominent belltower. Each issue of the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal bulletin included a list of the recently completed churches, sometimes with short descriptions and photographs. The editor consistently emphasized the church belltowers on account of their domineering presence. About Saint Pierre de Chaillot in the 16th arrondissement of Paris—not part of the banlieue but located towards the periphery of the city—he wrote, “the belltower, imposing through its mass, dominates the entire neighborhood.”275 The belltower was and remains the highest point in the area to this day: it extends far above the generally even height level of other buildings. The Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal did not give belltowers this meaning after the fact of construction. Its leaders

intentionally designed churches with tall belltowers in order to dominate the urban landscape. Touzé wrote a telling spread about belltowers in a 1934 issue of the Œuvre’s bulletin:

Immense digits which tirelessly show us Heaven; they reside in our villages, the guardians of the ideal, and they insert into the life of the often down to earth field worker a bit of poetry, charm, also a living respect of all that which the Church of Jesus Christ represents among men….They constitute the artistic richness of the country and the last bastion against the internal enemy….So that through our care others are born, many others, which solidly structure, embody… the soul, the faith, and the traditions of our race!276

Touze’s emphasis on belltowers as bastions against internal enemies reveals the material reality of the reconstruction crusade. Violence is not merely discursive in this case, but materially manifest through a kind of architectural colonization. Conceptions of the banlieue as a devastated region and as colonial wasteland were not just a way of thinking, of imagining the banlieue and its inhabitants. They underwrote the physical construction of about 110 churches around the periphery of Paris. Indeed, conceptual categories restructured the urban landscape in a significant way. Whereas people of the banlieue had previously been able to walk long distances without encountering a church, as Verdier noted, they now always existed in the shadow of tall belltowers. People felt the presence of the churches: many unemployed inhabitants of the area found work in church construction, so they actively participated in the religious urbanization of the banlieue.

Of the approximately 110 churches that the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal constructed in the banlieue during the 1930s, one in particular stands out: Notre-Dame-des-Missions d’Épinay-sur-Seine (Our Lady of the Missions of Épinay-sur-Seine). In

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1931, the organizers of the Catholic pavilion for the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris commissioned the architect Paul Tournon to design a church that would glorify Catholic missionary work in French colonies (figure 22). The façade combined various disparate styles: it references a Chinese pagoda, Buddhist statuary, and African design. Twelve murals decorate the church’s interior, each of them depicting the conquest and Christianization of different regions throughout the world. Among them feature Algeria, Canada, and Indochina. When the colonial exhibition ended, Notre-Dame-des-Missions was slated for destruction. Cardinal Verdier, however, mounted a campaign to preserve this monument to Catholic missionary work and French colonization. He launched a national loan to reconstruct the church, this time with more durable materials, in the suburbs of Paris. In 1934, the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal celebrated the reopening of Notre-Dame-des-Missions in Épinay-sur-Seine (figure 23). That a church originally constructed for the missionary pavilion at a colonial exposition could be repurposed for the banlieue testifies to Catholic perceptions of the latter as a colonial space.
Figure 22. The Church of Our Lady of the Missions in its original location at the 1931 International Colonial Exposition in Paris. Scan de CPA Éditions Braun.

Figure 23. The Church of Our Lady of the Missions reconstructed in Épinay-sur-Seine, c. 1934. Archives départementales de Seine Saint Denis online.
Catholics involved in the (re)construction crusade frequently invoked discourses of peace, which is perhaps unusual given the inherently violent conceptual frameworks that inflected their work. Yet, their notion of peace was predicated on the pacification, or subjugation, of opponents. We might think of this in terms of the imposition of a certain peace through violence: peace as a form of domination over those who threaten to disrupt the social order. As Historian John Horne considers peace in the context of World War I,

Paradoxical as it may seem, peace in ‘total’ conflicts is not the opposite of war but rather its culmination. If war cultures depict the enemy as totally evil and the struggle as one for moral, ideological and even physical survival, compromise peace is nearly impossible. Peace means forcing the vanquished to accept the victor’s ideology.  

Catholics brought this understanding of peace to their ideological conflict with communists and anticlerics at home. Laudet remarked, for example, that the people of the banlieue needed to be Christianized in order to bring peace to all. Georges Chevrot, abbot of a church in the 7th arrondissement of Paris, claimed that “peace cannot be re-established among men unless they accept the Gospel.” Thus peace could come only through religious conquest, demonstrating the adherence of Catholics to a brutalized conception of peace.

Catholics held modernity responsible for war and social unrest. Cardinal Verdier attributed the First World War to modern technological progress, citing the advanced destructive capacity of chemical weapons and aerial bombardment. He believed that unemployment in the banlieue shared the same root causes of technological progress and materialism. Verdier expressed significant concern about unemployment, not

necessarily from a moral or ethical standpoint, but because it could engender revolution against the capitalist order. In a comic strip that Verdier published in the Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal bulletin, he wondered, “[i]sn’t [church construction] better than the construction of barricades?” He thus promoted his church construction program as an opportunity for employment. Catholics likewise vilified the modern nation state on account of its disruption of the supranational power of the Catholic Church. Chevrot, for example, advocated supranational religious conquest as the solution to war: “[i]f peace is to become the normal condition of nations, it is through us the disciples of Christ throughout the land….If you pray to God you cannot have nationalist Gods between nations.”

In positioning banlieue church construction as a tool of religious conquest with universal dimensions, Cardinal Verdier followed Pius XI’s model. The Vatican sent a letter of support for l’Œuvre des Chantiers du Cardinal to Verdier in 1936. The following year, Verdier published a short book titled L’Église devant le monde moderne (The Church before the modern world). He wrote about various threats confronting the Church: individualism, socialism, economic liberalism, imperialist nationalism. Communistic atheism was perhaps Verdier’s greatest concern, though. He explicitly endorsed Pius XI’s Catholic Action: “[w]ithout a doubt all centuries have known detractors of God, but today atheism penetrates the human masses…The world has returned to paganism, we must reconquer it.” Verdier cited his work in the banlieue as

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a tool for the religious renovation of France and concluded by connecting it to the
international Catholic Church’s effort to reconquer the world. Although Verdier
concentrated his efforts in the peripheral region of Paris, he very much understood it as a
part of Pius XI’s universal crusade.

The feeling was mutual. The pontifical pavilion (Vatican pavilion) at the 1937
Exposition Internationale des Artes et Techniques Dans la Vie Moderne (International
exposition for arts and technology of modern life) included an installation about French
church reconstruction. While other countries used the pavilions to boast their
modernity,—the architect of the Finnish pavilion shockingly designed an avant-garde
building out of wood, Finland’s traditional export—the pontifical pavilion displayed the
Catholic Church’s efforts at defeating the modern world. Among them featured l’Œuvre
des Chantiers du Cardinal. The guide for the pavilion described the installation (figure 24):

In the place of honor, at the back of the hall, a relief map of the diocese of
Paris, showing the placement of one-hundred chantiers du Cardinal…This enterprise of the chantiers du Cardinal is understandably so popular that
we don’t need to accentuate it here. It imposes admiration on itself, and by
the apostolic ardor of which it testifies in the banlieue rouge which
envelops Paris, and by the merciful and social opportunity of an effort
against unemployment, and by the immense Catholic generosity which
allowed, in a few years, and in years so difficult, the construction of so
many churches.
The entire top of this wall is occupied by a huge map of the devastated
regions, which gives some feeling for the effort accomplished for the
reconstruction of churches: 4,024 were destroyed, resurrected, and
restored to worship.

For the Vatican too, then, church reconstruction in the devastated regions was
conceptually linked to church construction in the banlieue. In representing these efforts at

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283 Verdier, L’Église devant le monde modern, 36-39, 46.
the pontifical pavilion, the Vatican endorsed and even claimed ownership of them. Pius XI very much wanted to associate the Vatican with the French Church’s anti-communist crusade.

The reconstruction crusade culminated in a 1938 ceremony to celebrate the completed reconstruction of the Cathedral of Reims. The ceremony lasted for two days, from July 9-10, and included a pontifical mass, a procession of relics, various speeches, an illumination ceremony, and a play about the cathedral. Pope Pius XI designated Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard, the archbishop of Reims who succeeded Luçon after his death in 1930, as his personal representative for the ceremony. Scholars have described the event as eminently pacific given the numerous references made to peace throughout the celebration. Art historian Thomas Gaehtgens claims that the consecration of the

Figure 24, Map of the chantiers du Cardinal at the pontifical pavilion for the 1937 Exposition internationale in Paris, Guide du Pavillon Pontifical (Paris: Art sacré, 1937), 20.
cathedral was intended to convey a message of international peace.\textsuperscript{285} He adds, “in many newspaper accounts of the consecration, there is no mention of Germany or its army, even in the descriptions of the artillery strikes and the destruction of Reims.”\textsuperscript{286} Gaehtgens suggests that the discourse of pacifism had finally triumphed: Catholics were now using the language of peace, rather than of war, to describe the Cathedral of Reims. He also insists that the spirit of the sacred union was very much present at the ceremony, noting that “[i]n an era when the separation of church and state was no longer being discussed, the cathedral could at least symbolically remain a presence with a special status.”\textsuperscript{287}

Yet, this assessment is not faithful to the actual content of the speeches which Catholics delivered at the ceremony. Notably, Gaehtgens only consults the direct text of the speeches insofar as journalistic reports at the time selectively quote from them. It is true that several journalists invoked peace and sacred union in their articles about the ceremony. A New York Times article included a short excerpt from Cardinal Suhard’s speech:

What do these stones tell us? That this monument once more rebuilt is by its nature and vocation durable and eternal because it symbolizes a country that is the champion of all measured liberties and trustee of the peace of the world.\textsuperscript{288}

As it stands alone, this excerpt seems generally pacific. But Catholic conceptions of peace, engaging notions of conquest and pacification, were actually quite violent. What’s more, the phrase “champion of all measured liberties” carries a charged valence in its

\textsuperscript{285} Gaehtgens, \textit{Reims on Fire}, 210-216.
\textsuperscript{286} Gaehtgens, \textit{Reims on Fire}, 213.
\textsuperscript{287} Gaehtgens, \textit{Reims on Fire}, 212.
allusion to religious tolerance—a principle which, Catholics claimed, the 1905 law of separation had in fact transgressed. Gaehtgens’s assessment that this ceremony occurred “in an era when the separation of church and state was no longer being discussed” ultimately does not stand, or it elides important nuances in Catholic culture at the time. Perhaps by the late 1930s Catholics were no longer directly contesting France’s secular order, but this is not at all to say that they had accepted it. As I’ve argued, Catholic culture had actually radicalized significantly: the prominent Catholics discussed throughout this chapter committed themselves to social pacification and crusade. The reconstruction crusade implicitly targeted the separation of church and state as a facet of immoral and atheistic modern life. Ultimately, Gaehtgens misinterprets the meaning of the 1938 ceremony at Reims without the context of the reconstruction crusade. The sacred union, as journalists understood it, was a fossilized relic of war uncovered at the ceremony, rather than a general cultural phenomenon in 1930s France.
Figure 25, Illuminated Cathedral of Reims foregrounded by statue of Joan of Arc, Le Petit Journal, July 10, 1938, No. 27568, p. 1.
Although journalists foregrounded the pacific nature of the ceremony in their written reports, visual tropes of conquest persisted. A striking photograph of the illuminated cathedral appeared on *Le Petit Journal’s* front page the day following the ceremony (figure 25). It is an image of conquest: the equestrian statue of Joan of Arc imbues the cathedral with the spirit of crusade. Speeches delivered at the ceremony consistently coincided with the broader reconstruction crusade. Cardinal Suhard praised Pius XI for his commitment to the Christianization of the world and promised that France would fulfill her duty to accomplish that mission.\(^{289}\) Evidently, the Cathedral of Reims—once the monument par excellence of the sacred union—had become the centerpiece of the reconstruction crusade in France and beyond. Another speaker announced that the resurrected cathedral could now help France achieve its civilizing mission. He described the cathedral as “the living symbol of [France’s] resurrection” as a Catholic nation, and even cited its reconstruction as proof “that the resurrection of France is near.”\(^{290}\) As he spoke of resurrection, he did not mean the reconstruction of France after the devastation of war because this had already been accomplished. Reims was actually one of the very last major structures to be reconstructed in France. Rather, he meant resurrection in the particularly religious sense of the word—that the true religious spirit of the nation would be resurrected.

Indeed, Catholics maintained faith in the logic of resurrection despite the challenge of atheistic communism. They saw the signs of resurrection in everything, even in communism itself. Cardinal Suhard insisted that “those who have resolved to construct


\(^{290}\) *Inauguration officielle de la cathédrale de Reims*, 1921.
the city beyond religion or against it, logically feel the need to create one, and to relate all acts of their life, social or individual to mysticism. But this mysticism, because it came from a brain voluntarily closed to any idea which goes beyond the material, is raised but two meters out of the ground. It is impotent like the fragile creatures that birthed it.”

Suhard used the term mysticism to signify communist ideology as a sort of atheistic ideological substitution for organized religion. He believed that people—even the communist-leaning inhabitants of the banlieue—could not help but to slouch towards spirituality. Other Catholics observed that even “internal enemies, the enemies of Christian France” used the language of the Church in service of their causes. Gillet stated that those French who claimed to be influenced by another ideal, a modern or atheistic one, still invoked the enduring language of the Church when they proclaimed their commitment to peace, justice, and love for all. He concluded that “Christian influence survives even when the world seems to have lost its Christian sense.” Such was the inviolable power of the logic of resurrection, which governed not only church reconstruction in interwar France, but Catholic culture more broadly. It was in their adherence to the logic that Catholics believed the reconstitution of Catholic France was always underway, even when the Church faced formidable challenges.

292 Inauguration officielle de la cathédrale de Reims, 1921.
Conclusion

Between 1918 and 1939, France rebuilt the nearly 4,000 Catholic churches that had been destroyed or damaged during the First World War. The ceremony for the reconstruction of Reims in 1938 amounted to a ritualized celebration of two decades of church reconstruction. But church reconstruction turned out to be a much broader category of thinking and action. By the 1930s, the reconstruction of most commune-owned, local churches on the former Western Front was complete. Yet the work of reconstruction did not halt here: rather, Catholics undertook a parallel project of church construction in the Parisian banlieue in the decade leading up to the First World War. Conceptually, this new church construction program constituted a form of reconstruction as it followed directly from initial reconstruction efforts and also served the Catholic mission to reconstitute France. This thesis has traced the development of church reconstruction efforts across a twenty-five-year period including the war itself. I found that Catholics initially used church reconstruction to preserve the spirit of wartime sacred union in France, but ultimately radicalized their approach when the sacred union proved irredeemable according to the terms of a peace culture which sought reconciliation with the former German enemy. I explained how and why this radicalization occurred, concluding with a chapter about the reconstruction crusade.

Although post-war church reconstruction might seem like a narrow topic, it speaks to important trends in post-war French Catholic culture. Historiography does not recognize that Catholics constituted a significant group of dissenters from the dominant post-war peace culture. A few historians have acknowledged that the regions of the former Western Front reserved wartime hatred for the Germans and stubbornly preserved
memory of wartime suffering, but they do not connect this to the broader Catholic context. Catholics clung to wartime culture—in the form of the meanings attached to church reconstruction—because it benefited them significantly. In one sense, the emergency climate of war and in particular the unity that emerged in opposition to the German enemy led to a temporary restoration of Catholic culture to the national stage. Catholics wanted to preserve the memory of national suffering and unity through church reconstruction. But as I argued in chapter three, political concerns alone did not motivate Catholics. In order for their suffering to remain personally meaningful according to Catholic systems of representation, they needed to remember the German enemy. Political, personal, and spiritual concerns intermingled in the enduring Catholic adherence to the terms of wartime culture.

This is to say that war persisted in peacetime, at least in a cultural sense. The armistice that brought a formal end to the conflict in 1918 could obviously not snuff out the lasting impact of war on culture. War changed how Catholics envisioned their present and future position in France, with church reconstruction representing these visions throughout the interwar period. It makes sense that churches sat at the heart of the interwar Catholic imaginary given that these material sites of religious presence gained even more salience through wartime destruction. As I have shown, church reconstruction functioned at multiple levels: material, conceptual, rhetorical, ritual. The ideas that Catholics held about church reconstruction—as a manifestation of lasting sacred union—rhymed with their participatory national approaches to this work as well as with the design and representation of these material sites. The stained-glass window of the church at Fey-en-Haye and the Gallic rooster cross standard that appears on the 1922 loan appeal
are representative of a broader conceptual approach to church reconstruction in which the true goal of reconstruction was sacred union. The interaction between the conceptual and material recurs throughout this history. When Catholics turned to the Parisian banlieue in the 1930s, their notions of social conquest and religious revival took the material form of churches designed with imposing belltowers and at regular spatial intervals throughout the banlieue, not to mention the convictions that underwrote the relocation of the mission church designed for the 1931 colonial exposition to the banlieue.

A particularly interesting finding from this thesis is indeed the radicalization of church reconstruction efforts that occurred at the end of the 1920s, as it carries several implications for the study of cultural history in the wake of war. In my thesis, I proposed the concept of the logic of resurrection to explain the operative framework structuring wartime and post-war Catholic thinking. Wartime discourse about sacrifice and suffering produced among Catholics an expectation of resurrection: the resurrection of Catholic France. The promises of war thus outstripped the war itself, for victory over the Germans was only an intermediary victory according to this logic. Implicit in the idea of irredeemable war is the fact that war would necessarily outlast immediate victory. From the beginning, then, war was set up to endure. When church reconstruction turned inwardly to achieve social conquest in the Parisian banlieue, this was entirely consistent with the terms of French wartime culture. The belligerent rhetoric that Catholics employed to frame their work as an extension of war tells us so.

One might conclude that the expectations that arise in order to justify the suffering of war can outstrip the comparably meager gains of victory in a way that preserves wartime culture and attitudes. This was certainly the case for French Catholics
in interwar France. A comparative case study can be found in the reconstruction of religious heritage sites after the Bosnian War (1992-1995). Destroyed as part of ethnic cleansing campaigns during the war, the reconstructed sites were later instrumentalized to continue playing out the issues of war in a civic context. The Catholic community of Mostar rebuilt a Catholic church with a much larger belltower, further entrenching the ethnic segregation of the city that had been accomplished through war. The minarets of several mosques were also rebuilt larger in size. This is to say that religious buildings, when destroyed during conflicts with a strong ethnoreligious dimension, often remain sites of wartime culture in peacetime. As people have targeted cultural heritage sites during conflict throughout history and continue to do so today, the findings of this thesis prove useful. The central implication is that war can paradoxically persist through the reconstruction of religious sites, and thus that cultural demobilization remains elusive for certain groups. Scholars across disciplines often herald reconstruction as the path to healing and recovery because it effaces the physical traces of war. My thesis presents a more nuanced view of cultural demobilization by demonstrating that reconstruction is a fraught process. It also shows that the overall demobilization process is contested and nuanced, as French Catholics never embraced it even though they belonged to a nation victorious in war.


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