

Lerzy: Sainte-Benoîte church to rise from the ashes

In March 2014, the village of Lerzy saw part of its church go up in smoke. For the past year, the village has been working hard to bring it back to life, making countless appeals for support. And hopes to see work begin in 2016.

"The church is the heart of the village". Aline still remembers her various communions at Sainte-Benoîte de Lerzy, "where [she] was baptised nearly 89 years ago". A native of the commune, she saw a whole part of her history go up in smoke in March 2014.

On the evening of 11 March, a fire broke out in the church's roof structure, "following work by a roofer" during the day, explains Jérôme Langhendries, the mayor. "A simple "accident" that destroyed a large part of the building, sparing only the keep. Or almost. We realised that some of the beams were more affected than we thought, so the tower will soon be made safe."

Despite everything, the building has not lost most of its possessions. The stained glass windows on the north wall have retained some of their splendour. Some have suffered from the heat, "but that can be repaired". And the furniture has largely been preserved. "On the evening of the fire, a human chain was spontaneously formed to remove the statues," recalls the chief magistrate.

The church has always been a rallying point. Aline, Marie-Antoinette and Gabrielle, among the village's oldest residents, used to clean it regularly before the accident. "We were a small group, about eight people". They helped restore it in the 1990s, when it was repainted. For them, it was a chance to get together. "There was always a swallow to come to us," smiles Gabrielle.

"Now it's sad", the three residents lament. The bells have stopped ringing. "What hurt my heart was the burning of the Virgin and Child," says Aline.

But for over a year now, the village has been fighting to save its building. "From a misfortune, we're going to turn it into a source of wealth," says Jérôme Langhendries positively. Because the religious building has a lot going for it. "We're lucky enough to have the retired director of the Douai Conservatoire here. He told us that the church had exceptional acoustics.

"The aim is to keep this church alive".

A character that the mayor wants to preserve, so that it can once again host concerts. And exhibitions will once again be held in the refuge room in the dungeon, he assures us. It should even be given a second floor, as it was when it was built. "Of course, it's a place of worship, but the church has to live alongside it."

The building will also be reconnecting with its history. "We've had the preliminary design," explains the mayor. There were several proposals: either to rebuild the church exactly (or almost exactly) as it was before the fire, or "to put a roof over the nave and two over the aisles". The church was "set back" when it was extended in the 18th century. This will also enhance the eaves walls.

Finally, to comply with standards, an emergency exit and access for people with reduced mobility will be created.

"We're at the stage where we've applied for planning permission. The local authority has to wait for authorisation before issuing any invitations to tender. Above all, it has to find the necessary funding, as the work is estimated to cost €2.3 million, "excluding the architect and ancillary costs". Not an insignificant cost for a village of just 200 inhabitants...

An endowment fund was launched in September 2014, raising €14,000. At the same time, several associations are busy organising events to benefit the church. The local authority will also be making applications to the Département, the Région and the Communauté de communes de la Thiérache du Centre. "We hope that, given the exceptional nature of the project, they won't just meet basic criteria," says the mayor. There remains the question of insurance cover, the amount of which is still unknown, with each party passing the quid. Not to mention the administrative procedures to be carried out by elected representatives and staff unaccustomed to dealing with cases of this magnitude...

But nothing seems to be able to shake the movement. A new campaign will be launched to appeal for donations and legacies to the fund created. Work is due to start in 2016, with the building reopening to the public in 2018. Jérôme Langhendries wants to believe. And so do the residents. "To die, I'm waiting for a new church," says Aline.

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