

Macron sets up fund to restore French churches in small communities



President Macron visited La Collégiale Notre-Dame church in Semur-en-Auxois, Burgundy, to launch the fund

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President Macron has launched a fund that he hopes will raise €200 million to save thousands of churches from falling into ruin, mostly in rural areas.

The fund will pay for the renovation of religious buildings in towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000.

The initiative comes amid concerns that although more than €840 million was raised to restore [Notre Dame cathedral](#) in Paris after the fire in 2019, little money is spent on village churches.

Up to 3,000 churches are in danger of falling into ruin, Macron said. Some believe the true figure could be as high as 5,000.

Macron made the announcement in Semur-en-Auxois in Burgundy, a small town of 4,200 inhabitants struggling to pay for the upkeep of its Gothic collegiate church.

Under a 1905 law that formally made France a secular state, the government can subsidise work on religious buildings only if they have national heritage status, which has been given to 10,500 of the country's 50,000 or so churches. The rest belong to local councils, many of which lack funds to ensure their maintenance or pay for restoration.

“These investments are unsustainable [for councils in small towns and villages],” said Macron. “That nourishes a feeling of indignation among a lot of councillors and inhabitants because there is an attachment to this heritage whether you believe [in God] or not.”



Macron was accompanied on the visit by his wife, Brigitte

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Stéphane Bern, Macron's former heritage adviser and a presenter of popular history documentaries, said: “This issue touches upon the national identity. People say, ‘You are building mosques but you are destroying churches’.”

Bern launched a French version of Britain's [National Lottery Heritage Fund](#) in 2018, since when it has raised a total of €230 million.

Macron said he hoped his fund would raise a further €200 million over four years. He said donations would be eligible for a 75 per cent tax deduction, up from 66 per cent at present. He also said that he wanted more churches, notably from the 19th and 20th centuries, to be given heritage status, which would mean they could receive state subsidies.

The announcement appeared to be an implicit criticism of Roselyne Bachelot, the former culture minister who said in a recent book that many 19th-century churches were architecturally uninteresting and should be knocked down.