

The Sacred Art in Saint Mel's Cathedral

'Saint Mel's will rise again and live again as the centre of Catholic Life in the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois...'

DR RICHARD HURLEY FRIAR

The cathedral stood cold and empty, its windows blocked up, a metal industrial roof protecting the charred interior; its ignominy lay hidden in the inky darkness of a winter's night. Beyond the street lights and high wall, the silence of the playing fields, the tree tracery marked the line of the avenue and circled the college. Tall windows illuminated the car park as departing figures said their good-byes, while inside a team of cheerful volunteers gathered up the debris of the after meeting tea and cakes. Amidst the relaxed clamour and lights of the departing cars Richard shook my hand and wished me a cheerful good night as he calmly walked to join the Project Manager Niall Meagher for the drive back to Dublin.

It had been an excellent meeting; the lead architect for the restoration and renewal of Saint Mel's Cathedral Dr Richard Hurley had made the final illustrated presentation of his proposal for the renewal of the cathedral and the architect Colm Redmond of Fitzgerald Kavanagh and Partners had presented his proposal for the landscaping of the cathedral. Both presentations were well received. There was great optimism amongst all who attended the meeting that evening. It was a cordial coming together of the people of God, the volunteers, the professionals and the priesthood, under the warm guidance of Chairperson Seamus Butler. It was Thursday, 1 December 2011 and I had only recently joined the design team as Chairperson of the Sacred Art Procurement Sub-Committee at the invitation of Bishop Colm O'Reilly of Ardagh and Clonmacnois.



Baptismal Font by Tom Glendon.
Paschal Candleholder by Angela Godfrey, Mosaic by Laura O'Hagan

I was delighted at the opportunity to be working alongside Richard Hurley, with whom I had worked on the restoration and renewal of the Cathedral of St Mary and St Anne, Cork for the late Bishop Michael Murphy of Cork and Ross. Within less than a week my delight had turned to shock and sadness when news came of Richards's sudden unexpected death on Tuesday, 6 December 2011. He was 79 years of age, a fact that lay hidden behind the enthusiasm and energy with which he approached the cathedral project. 'I wish to leave something beautiful behind me.' These are the words he had spoken to the artist James Scanlon a short time earlier when discussing the restoration and

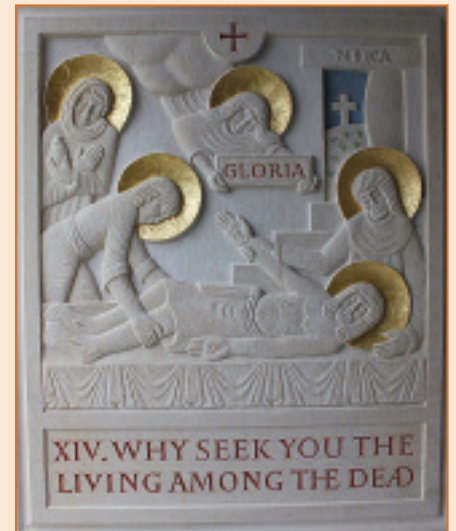
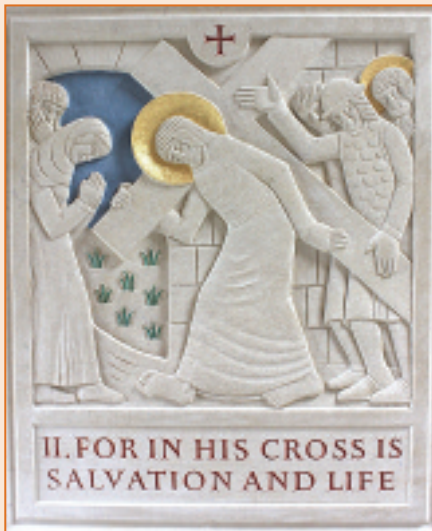
renewal of Saint Mel's Cathedral.

The Abbot of Saint Columba's Abbey Glenstal Dom Mark Patrick Hederman, OSB speaking at Richard's funeral Mass spoke of the winter solstice at Newgrange when a single ray of sunlight traces its way into the inner chamber and lights up a carved hollow in the central stone, 'the Architect designed the window to let the light shine through'.

I remembered the Abbot of Glenstal's words when, at 11.30 pm on 19 December 2014, Bishop Francis Duffy of Ardagh and Clonmacnois and Bishop Emeritus Colm O'Reilly opened the great South doors of the cathedral for the first time in five years and the sun shone through, lighting up the blue of Laura O'Hagan's living waters mosaic, the white of Tom Glendon's carved Carrara Baptismal Font and the silver of Angela Godfrey's polished stainless steel Paschal Candle Holder. I thanked God in

that moment, for all around me was the well-ordered world of a restored and renewed Cathedral ready to receive the people of God. Richard's wish had been fulfilled. At the time of his appointment he had stated: 'Our committed aim is to restore the Cathedral to its former architectural beauty, with a complementary contemporary liturgical intervention reflecting pastoral aspirations, supported by the arts which will make Saint Mel's a worthy flagship of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois and beyond.'

There is a great clarity in Richard's design of Sacred Spaces in historic buildings. He had the ability to bring out the pure essence of the original architecture, through the integrity of



Three of the Stations of the Cross by Ken Thompson

his liturgical design, his careful use of quality materials, and his recommendation of outstanding Irish and International artists and craftspeople to create worthy works of sacred art to enhance the dignified celebration of the sacraments.

All Richard's characteristic design virtues are evident in Saint Mel's. There is a powerful axial plan form, quality materials and a superb team of artists and craftspeople. His axial layout extends from the Gathering Place in the cathedral forecourt through the centre of the portico to the Place of Baptism, down the centre of the nave rising to the Place of the Eucharist on the first sanctuary level, rising and continuing through the centre of the second sanctuary level past the Ambo, the Celebrant's Chair and the Bishop's Cathedra and finally rising to the elevated Place Of The Reserved Sacrament in the apse.

Colm Redmond's design of the Gathering Place in the forecourt, with its bold bands of limestone pavement in a skewed geometric pattern, is far above the usual ubiquitous tarmac church car park. Here in this space the Easter Vigil Paschal fire will be lit, beneath Saint Patrick and Saint Mel on the tympanum of the cathedral portico overhead. Fitzgerald Kavanagh and Partners were already working in association with Richard on Saint Mel's at the time of his death and the appointment of Colm Redmond as lead architect was an obvious choice for continuity.

The Place of Initiation is marked by a mosaic by Laura O'Hagan. It is a swirling composition of turquoise, ultramarine, cobalt blue and aquamarine tesserae, symbolising the

waters of life flowing in and around the place of Baptism. Out of the pool of water at the centre of the mosaic a carved white marble column rises to support a large eight sided white Carrara marble font, carved and designed by Tom Glendon. The welcoming, generous proportions of Tom's font are to facilitate both infant and adult initiation into the community of Christ.

The austere beauty of Imogen Stuart's Sanctuary Cross marks the sacred nature of the sanctuary. The figure, sculpted by Imogen and cast in bronze by Leo Higgins, represents Christ triumphing over the Cross, his arms uplifted in hope, in triumph over death and despair. The focal point of the sacred spaces is the stark simplicity of the Altar of the Eucharist designed by Richard Hurley. He has placed it on a raised sanctuary on the central axis in the spiritual heart of the cathedral where the People of God can gather around in the joyful and dignified celebration of the liturgy. It is one single seven ton block of white Carrara marble carved by Tom Glendon. The Ambo is

also carved from a single block of white Carrara marble by Imogen Stuart with Philip O'Neill. The wings symbolically carry the proclamation of the Word of God to his people. It is a work of great simplicity, the dignity



Art glass window by Fr Kim En Joong OP and Wilhelm Derix Studios



Ambo by Imogen Stuart
with Ruffatti organ in the background



Ambo by Imogen Stuart
with west transept in the background

of its presence enhancing the liturgy of the Word. All the white Carrara marble used in the sacred artworks of St Mel's Cathedral was supplied by Alex Bernardi of Carrara and it all comes from the same quarry that supplied the marble to Michelangelo for the Pieta in St Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The Cathedra has a beautiful curved shell-like presence; pilgrim's shell or hand of God. Its oak staves radiate upwards in a welcoming Pentecost flame. There is a generosity in its form that expresses the kindly pastoral care and teaching role of Bishop Francis Duffy of Ardagh and Clonmacnois serving his people in today's world. Its enlightened sculptor Angela Godfrey chose to work with furniture designer Rodney Forss and the furniture maker William Hall. Her matching celebrant's chair is simpler in design, expressing the presence of Christ amongst his people. Angela has carved a phoenix into the back panel, representing

rebirth, the redemption of the soul after death.

The sculptor Imogen Stuart and the silversmith Vicki Donovan worked together on the design of the Tabernacle. It is an outstanding work of sacred art and silver craftsmanship featuring images of the Evangelists and the Last Supper, with a steeply pitched roof based on the Shrine of Saint Manchan. The bronze Tabernacle Screen is an abstract design, based on the reflective upper surface of a deep flowing river, an imagery that connects it with Laura O'Hagan's baptismal mosaic. Designed by Vicki Donovan the patinated bronze finish is an excellent foil for the repoussé silverwork of the Tabernacle.

The polished stainless steel Paschal Candleholder and Sanctuary Candlesticks have all been designed by Angela Godfrey working with Eddie Norris.

The design of the Aumbry and the Evangelarium are by Colm Redmond,

working with the sculptor Tom Glendon who sculpted the white Carrara marble bases, and Vicki and Denise Donovan who have designed and wrought the silver screens within the glass boxes of the Aumbry, holding the three Jerpoint Glass Aumbry vessels, and the Evangelarium holding the Book of Sacred Scripture.

The Processional Cross is designed and executed by the icon writer Fr David O'Riordan PP. It features a traditional icon image of the Crucifixion of Christ in the centre, flanked by his Mother and Saint John on either side of the Cross.

Each of the fourteen carved solid Bath-stone stations of The Way of the Cross built into the cathedral walls represents a deeply spiritual, artistic pilgrimage of love, turmoil and strenuous effort for the sculptor Ken Thompson and his son Matthew. A child with hands raised in horror looks directly out at us from the third station, scandalised by Christ's first



Cathedra by Angela Godfrey; Tabernacle by Imogen Stuart and Vicki Donovan on column by Tom Glendon; Screen by Vicki Donovan



The aumbry designed by Colm Redmond, Vicki and Denise Donovan and Tom Glendon

fall. We know this child from a thousand media images where he or she stares in dis-belief from images of war, violence and natural disaster. 'He was despised, a man of sorrows'. The traditional titles are replaced by selected texts, a collaboration between Bishop Emeritus Colm O'Reilly and the artist Ken Thompson. These are fourteen exceptional works of sacred art.

The delicate silk-like waves of colour that fall from the arched heads of the east side aisle windows are the work of Father Kim En Joong OP in Paris. He takes his inspiration from the browns and greens of the flat midland landscape and the wide skies above the Shannon, also from contemplating the twelfth and thirteenth century stained glass windows in Chartres. The son of a calligrapher there is an oriental mystique in his images. He chose Derix Studios in Taunusstein in Germany to create his windows. He has a simple mission: *'I want my work to be like a good tree bearing fruit to sustain peace in the world.'*

The artist James Scanlon works slowly and methodically, using traditional stained glass techniques, each window a masterpiece of colour and light. He understands the power of the western light as the sun descends from its midday zenith. He is noted for the intensity of colour and the manner in which he draws that colour out of the glass. His inspiration for the St Mel's windows comes from the sky-reflecting waters of the Shannon, darkened blue/grey by storm clouds and illuminated brightly by shafts of sunlight. Due to the slowness of his creative process it will be sometime in the future before all the windows to the west will be complete

During the month following Christmas 2014 forty thousand people entered the cathedral and marvelled at the beauty, many were moved to tears. Richard Hurley has indeed left something of great beauty behind him.

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