

Thursday 18th August 2005

OBJECTION TO PROPOSED' ALTERATIONS' TO HIGH ALTAR AREA, CHOIR AND CHANCEL AREA, REMOVAL OF ALTAR RAIL AND DESTRUCTION OF CROSS MOSAIC TILING BEHIND ALTAR RAIL. MOVING OF MASS ALTAR INTO CROSSING, REDUCTION OF ALTAR PREDELLA TO BOTH TRANSEPT ALTARS.

- 1.01 In Gothic Cathedrals both original and Gothic revival, the Altar and Chancel areas are traditionally located in the Chancel area east of the crossing. This arrangement had both symbolic and religious connotations which should be studied in more details before any change, or proposed change is made which would interfere with this symbolic arrangement.
- 1.02 For the reasons set out hereunder (Sections 2 – 4) we the undersigned, being architects with a particular knowledge of Gothic Revival Architecture, Ecclesiological Societies and of this building and its historical importance, formally object to the proposed destruction of a central iconic feature, indeed the kernel of the Cathedral's essence.
- 1.03 The imposition of neo renaissance forms within a Gothic Revival building is simply not acceptable, as any architect with the slightest knowledge of Revivalist architecture should be aware that the juxtaposition of these two styles within one space is architectural heresy. We refer back to the Revivalist Period (1840 – 1887) when there was a split among revivalist architects some, such as Sir. James Barry favouring renaissance style whilst other i.e. such as A.W. Pugin supported by Ruskin and others favoured the Gothic style particularly in relation to the sacred buildings.

This dispute is commonly known historically as the battle of the styles. We would question if this battle is ongoing? Due to the arrival of neo renaissance detailing at this late stage in a building designed by the son of perhaps the greatest advocate of the Gothic revival i.e. Augustus Pugin.

- 1.04 If this objection is not entertained by Cobh Town Council we intend to further our objection to the European Commission Heritage Section to prevent the present High Altar Choir and attendant areas being unnecessarily lost to posterity.

PRIMARY REASONS FOR OBJECTION

- 2.01 The complete obliteration of the mosaic behind the altar rail is unacceptable.

It being representative albeit in the horizontal dimension of the traditional "rood screen" which in Gothic Cathedrals separated the chancel area from the nave.

- 2.02 In St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh the entire plan form of the floor mosaics is a representation of the Crucifixion. The portion running north south at the west end of the nave represents the foot of the Cross. The nave mosaic represents the shaft and the mosaic behind the altar rail the arms of the Cross. The circular motif with the central Greek cross represents the head of Our Redeemer.
- 2.03 To interfere with this arrangement (which the proposed alterations do) i.e. remove the arms of the Cross destroys the whole motif and its symbolic message.

2.04 We are sure that it was not the deliberate intention of either Bishop Magee or His Architect to carry out such desecration, but they appear to have been unaware of the importance of this central iconic feature in the preparation of the proposed alterations.

2.05 The number of steps (5) from the arms of the Cross to the diagrammatic representation of the Saviour's head also has been religious and symbolic significance. This element is also lost if the proposed works are carried out.

The number of steps from the altar kneeler to the High Altar is 8. Five number steps presently lead to the choir followed by three to the High Altar platform. The symbolism of the Altar platform being 55.5 inches above the nave floor and its division including the communion kneeler into the number of steps 1, 5, 3. Again numbers of symbolic significance which will be lost if the proposed alterations are carried out.

2.06 The reduction in depth of the 'predella' (altar step) to the altars in the North and South Transepts appears arbitrary and unnecessary.

The existing 'Predella' allows space for the priest to stand upon when celebrating the Eucharist. The proposed attenuated Predella renders the altar unusable as there is insufficient space for the celebrant to comfortably stand upon.

There is no apparent reason for this work as under the proposed plan DRWG. Ref 350 pp7 there would appear to be sufficient space between the seating and an unattenuated Predella.

3.00 RECENT RESTORATIVE WORKS UNDERTAKEN TO ST. COLMAN'S CATHEDRAL, COBH, CO CORK (since Bishop Magee's Consecration as Bishop of Cloyne) AND CONTROVERSIAL PROPOSAL FOR 'RENEWAL' OF HIGH ALTAR CHANCEL AREA.

3.01 To date the restorative works carried out the Cathedral have been aimed at conserving the existing structure' and are laudable.

However, the proposal to carry out a total renewal of the Chancel Choir and High Altar areas, as it involves the destruction of the cross mosaic area behind the altar rail imposes a Neo Classical feature under the crossing and places the Mass Altar under the crossing which is symbolically incorrect, does not fall under the description of necessary conservation works, indeed it is a direct interference with the integral design of the Gothic Revival Cathedral and as such would constitute an unwelcome and ill considered imposed area never contemplated in the original design concept.

3.02 As St. Colman's Cobh is the sole remaining Irish Catholic Gothic Revival Cathedral retaining its High Altar (carved by Earley and Powell) in its original form, it is particularly important for historical reasons that it should be retained as is and listed.

3.03 The current simple Mass Altar which stands in front of the High Altar conforms with the recommendations of Vatican Council II.

It is in no way obtrusive and reflects well the simple table at which the Last Supper was taken (the celebration of which each Mass re-enacts). The fact that the Priest celebrating the Mass stands directly over the centre of the present mosaic cross on the Sanctuary floor appears to us to be entirely correct as it represents the union of Our Lord Jesus Christ with his people at the moment of Consecration.

3.04 Bishop Magee, at the meeting with a committee representing the laity held at the Commodore Hotel, Cobh, publicly stated that he would not initiate any major changes with the Cathedral without the assent of the laity.

- 3.05 Despite the fact that a multitude of the laity of the dioceses especially the people of Cobh have stated their opposition to the proposed alterations and to this purpose raised a petition signed by in excess of 24,000 people that such works not be carried out, this petition having been presented to the Bishop through the Committee, Bishop Magee would appear to be determined to push through the proposals against their wishes, in contravention to his earlier promise not to do so.
- 3.06 Cobh Town Council have also debated this issue, albeit inconclusively, yet some Members (Also being members of the laity of the Diocese) have expressed their personal dissatisfaction with the Bishop's stance on this matter.
- 3.07 At a late stage, having failed to gain the assent of the laity of the Diocese to his proposals, the Bishop set up a two day 'Discussion Seminar'. This event which took place on Tuesday and Wednesday was announced at Masses only on the previous Sunday. The purpose of this would appear to be giving a last chance to the laity to fall in line with the Bishop's wishes. Cathal O'Neill, Architect for the Project, defended the proposed alterations at this belated 'seminar'. We are unaware of any published work by Prof. Cathal O'Neill which

would indicate that he is a recognised authority on Gothic Revival Ecclesiastical Architecture or of the Cobh Cathedral Competition of 1867.

Surprisingly the general laity were excluded from the first day of this viewing/seminar/discussion. Viewing by the general laity was confined to the second day. It could be construed from this that the general laity of the Diocese of Cloyne are viewed as second class laity by their Lord Bishop.

- 3.08 This proposal as currently envisioned calls to mind the "remedial works" carried out at Augustus Pugin's Killarney Cathedral (spire by George Ashlin) in the 1970's. Here the internal plasterwork was stripped exposing the rough stonework. A.W. Pugin had originally intended the entire interior plasterwork to be finished with murals. The altar was removed and replaced by a "modern" altar under the crossing.

The misplaced 'barbarism' conducted at Killarney, a product of 'unenlightenment' amongst both the Church authorities and Architects of that time should not be repeated. In a Society which considers itself to be more visually aware than it was in those "dark days" for Ireland's reputation by the International Architectural Community.

4.01 A CATHEDRAL WITH A HISTORY OF CONTENTION

Subsequent to the original design competition of 1867, the competition committee under the influence of the then Bishop Keane announced the winning entry to be that submitted by E.W. Pugin, George Ashlin partnership, (George Ashlin being E.W. Pugin's brother-in-law). Many of the competitors including J.J. McCarthy and Goldie had objected to the composition of the adjudication committee before the competition as they considered that it would be biased. The only competitors who did not object to the composition of the committee were Pugin & Ashlin. The winning competition entry submitted by Pugin & Ashlin featured a centrally located spire on the west front.

- 4.02 Another unsuccessful entry was submitted by J.J. McCarthy a prominent ecclesiastical architect of the period. This design featured a single offset spire on the west front to the south of the nave.
- 4.03 Shortly after the competition the partnership of E.W. Pugin & George Ashlin was dissolved, (although Pugin continued to cooperate with George Ashlin solely on this project until his death). The practice became known as Ashlin & Coleman to whom the present Cathedral is attributed.

- 4.04 Before construction began, the original competition design was amended. This revised design closely resembled the original competition design as submitted by J.J. McCarthy, featuring an offset spire to the west front south of the nave.
- 4.05 An objection was lodged by J.J. McCarthy that his competition design had been plagiarised and he threatened litigation. J.J. McCarthy's objection was supported by other entrants to the competition and a number of other prominent architects of the day. There ensued a running feud between J.J. McCarthy and E.W. Pugin until the latter's death.

The construction costs overran the original budget (£25,000) and monies ran out. The contentious spire remained uncompleted until 1915.

Sincerely,

JOHN O'MAHONY SRIBA

ALDA TIGHE B.ARCH RIBA

c.c. Bishop John Magee, Bishop of Cloyne.

Thursday 18th August 2005

Bishop John Magee,
Bishop's Residence,
Bishops Road,
Cobh,
County Cork.

Dear Bishop,

Find enclosed objection lodged with Cobh Town Council with addendum (Section 5), your eyes only.

Sincerely,

JOHN O'MAHONY SRIBA

ALDA TIGHE B.ARCH RIBA

Encls/ 6 pgs.

APPEAL TO REASON ON BEHALF OF THE LAITY OF THE DIOCESE OF CLOYNE

- 5.0 As set out in Section IV above St. Colman's Cathedral has had a history of dissention. We ask you Bishop to bring this unhappy history to a joyous and unifying conclusion.

This may be achieved by:-

- (a) The abandonment of the proposed 'destructive work' and the realisation of your previous promises to the laity of the Diocese of Cloyne.

(b) Using the monies just saved to
unfortunate and impecunious of your flock.

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