

Cllr. Sean O'Connor, Councillor with Cobh Town Council.
Observer submission to the Oral Hearing of An Bord Pleanála regarding St.
Colman's Cathedral, Cobh Co. Cork.

March 1st. 2006
Midleton Park Hotel, Midleton, Co. Cork

I was elected by the Cobh parishioners to the cathedral fundraising committee in March 1992 and to the bishop's briefing committee in December 1998. I am also an elected representative on Cobh Town Council and know something of the way this application was presented to the Cobh Town Council. I have had a unique opportunity to view the level of consultation that has taken place in relation to this development since 1992. I wish to share this insight with An Bord Pleanála and dispel the idea that extensive consultations have taken place before this planning application was made.

1.1 As a member of Cobh Town Council I would like to distance myself from the decision of Cobh Town Council to grant permission for re-ordering of the interior of St. Colman's cathedral.

The town council was in summer recess when the plans were submitted, and planning was granted before the council reconvened.

- The town council sat on the 11th of July 2005.
- The planning application was lodged on the 18th of July 2005
- The town council do not sit during the month of August
- Planning was granted on the 5th of Sept 05.
- The town council reconvened on the 12th of Sept 05.

Despite widespread public opposition to the plans among the people of Cobh no meaningful democratic discussion of the plans took place or could take place within Cobh Town Council.

1.2 On the 30th of August 2005 I submitted a proposal to Cobh Town Council signed by all 9 members of Cobh Town Council for a special meeting under section 140 of the Local Government Act 2001 which relates to a decision of a planning authority, section 34 (7)(A) of the Planning Authority 2000. It was proposed that the meeting be held on the 6th of September 2005.

On 1st of September 2005, I received the following reply from Mr Paraig Lynch Town Clerk:

"I refer to the above resolution and I enclose copy of legal advice received from the council's solicitors in this regard:

You will note that the legal advice states clearly that the proposal to adopt the resolution can only be dealt with at the ordinary monthly meeting of the council which is due to be held on Monday the 12th of September 05. Please note that the legal advice issued by the council's solicitors on the 26th July 2005, and circulated to each member of the council at that time, makes specific reference to the time restrictions imposed under section 140(6) of the 2001 act. Members should also note that in view of the requirements of section 34(8)(A) of the planning and development act 2000 the decision on the planning application which is the subject of the notice under section 140 will have been issued prior to the monthly meeting. Members should note that the reference in the final paragraph of the legal advise only relates to issues which will only arise when the resolution is being dealt with at the meeting of the council to be held on Monday 12th of September 2005".

1.3 Mr Heffernan's Decision was made prior to Mr. Deasy's holidays

Against the development proposed by the Trustees of St. Colman's Cathedral, 213 objections were submitted, including some from national and international expert groups. Mr Heffernan States that he read and considered only 140 objections. Those who lodged objections to the proposed development went to considerable lengths to lodge their objections and paid a fee to do so. Mr Heffernan says he based his decision on a vision he had.

The details outlined in Mr Heffernan's planning report raises another serious issue.

In his introduction 1.1. He states that "Denis Deasy the Town Architect is on holidays. I am acting for him at present. He was involved in a number of pre-planning consultations. Before he left I discussed the proposals and consultations with him. I understand that the views below accord generally with his opinions". It would appear from this statement that Mr Heffernan and Mr Deasy made a decision to grant planning before Mr Deasy went on holidays. They both discussed the proposals and the views expressed in the planning report correspond with Denis Deasy's opinions". It would appear that their decision was made prior to any of the 213 objections being lodged and no due account was taken of them.

2.1 The Restoration Project

- The restoration plans were launched at St. Mary's School Mallow by bishop Magee to the priests of the diocese on the 27th of January 1992. At that meeting, the co-operation of the Parish Priests of the diocese with fundraising efforts was requested and obtained. All of the Parishes of the diocese were taxed for a period of ten years. At this point, there was no specific mention of a plan to reorder the sanctuary and the restoration plan consisted of four phases.
- In March 1992 30 members of the parish of Cobh were elected to form a committee to co-ordinate fund raising for the Cathedral restoration fund.
- On the 25th of July 1992 plans and specifications for the reordering of the interior were submitted to the Heritage Council as part of an application for funding.
- This resulted in Mr Austin Dunphy of the Heritage Council paying a visit to St. Colman's cathedral in December 1994. He agreed with bishop Magee a list of items for the re-ordering of the interior of St. Colman's cathedral as a condition for receipt of a grant from the Heritage Council of £125,000.

2.2 Conditions set by the Heritage Council for Grants

The cathedral authorities and the Heritage Council agreed that the following items were to be retained:

- a. The original altar and reredos complete with sanctuary etc,
The tabernacle safe may be moved if desired but a suitable feature should be designed to replace it
- b. The timber screens on either side of the Chancel
The screen on the north side containing the cathedra may be altered to allow a clearer view of the cathedral, alternatively the cathedra may be relocated.
- c. The screen of the south side of the chancel,
may be provided with a new door so as to provide far more convenient communication between the chancel and a possible Blessed Sacrament chapel immediately to the south of the chancel. The new door must be very carefully designed to fit in with the existing screen and might incorporate some of the existing joinery which will have to be removed to enable the new door to be formed.
- d. The stone screens behind the two timber screens referred to in (c.) above
- e. In designing the proposed Blessed Sacrament chapel. Armoured glass should be used to seal off the chapel so that it can be heated separately from the main cathedral. If the insertion of the armoured glass is sensitively detailed and carried out, the impact of the interior of the cathedral should be minimal. It has the additional advantage that it can be removed easily.
- f. The side altars together with there reredos should be retained in position although their use may be altered.

g. The floor of the chancel may be extended outwards to the nave to allow more space in the chancel for concelebrated masses. This will cause some circulation problems due to the raised level of the chancel floor relative to the adjoining floors. The council would like to be consulted when and if this work is carried out.

h. The existing marble altar rails and particularly the beautiful brass gates which form part of them are worthy of preservation. It is accepted that some alteration to these may be necessary, for instance if the chancel is moved forward as mentioned in (g) above and also to achieve the “open vista” from the nave to the altar. It would be a heritage council condition that at least a significant portion of the alter rail, say in front of the side altars, be kept in position, and the remainder and all of the gates be preserved and possibly used elsewhere in the cathedral.

i. The beautifully carved pulpit must also be kept and preserved. It may be moved if necessary but it must have an important site with the cathedral commensurate with its artistic and heritage importance. It would be very desirable if the pulpit could be used for its original purpose, i.e. to deliver the word of God, if it could be moved towards the re-ordered chancel, where this would be possible it would be ideal. Here again the council would wish to be involved.

j. The organ case and original console

k. The baptistery on the north side of the entrance screen is very fine and should be preserved intact, although minor alterations to allow for seating or screening could be considered.

l. The timber entrance screens, doors, coloured glass, etc. Should be retained.

m. The exterior of the original confession boxes as envisaged by the architect. The objective should be to accommodate all necessary liturgical changes with the least possible interference with the architectural quality and heritage value of this superb building.

2.3 The Heritage Council Grant

On the 15th of Sept 1995 Mr David Monks wrote to canon Dennis Reidy, stating that the Heritage Council had agreed in principle to provide a grant for St. Colman's cathedral subject to a number of conditions, including

- the signing of a covenant,
- The plans and specifications when the grant was sought in 1992
- And the list of items agreed when Mr Austin Dunphy visited St. Colman's cathedral in December 1994.

Subsequently, an indenture was made on the 16th of November 1995 between bishop Magee, the trustees (Bishop Magee, Mr. Tom Cavanagh and Fr. Tim Fouhy), the Cathedral Chapter and the Heritage Council. This covenant was registered in the registry of deeds Dublin at two minutes after three o'clock on the 31st day of January 1997, (Book 16. No. 242).

3.0 Public Meeting in Cobh

A public meeting was called for the 28th of June 1998 in the Commodore Hotel, Cobh. The town's people were under the impression that the meeting was to reflect on progress to date of the restoration plan and that information and consultation would take place on the next stage. Mr Tom Cavanagh of Fermoy was chairman. Also in attendance were bishop Magee, the cathedral chapter, the trustees, the full steering committee, clergy and religious and a few hundred people from the parish.

A number of speakers, from the top table, outlined the work that had been done and complimented all those who played a part - and deservedly so.

As no mention of re-ordering was made, I asked the chairman if each parishioner could receive a copy of the plans submitted to the Heritage Council. Canon Reidy stood up and asked me to withdraw my remarks and said "there are no plans". Bishop Magee stood up put his hand on his heart and said "there are no plans". People got very angry and a number of people asked bishop Magee about plans for the rails, the tabernacle, the pulpit and many other issues. They were not happy with the response and

wanted guarantees. The bishop agreed to retain the tabernacle in its present position. At this stage the meeting was totally out of order and in an effort to deflate the situation bishop Magee said he would set up a committee including a number of parishioners to help him come to a decision, and before he would make a decision he would come back to another public meeting in four months. Bishop Magee gave that solemn promise almost eight years ago in front of the trustees; the cathedral chapter, the steering committee and a few hundred parishioners. We are still waiting for him to honour his promise.

12 months later Mr Cavanagh commented that it was one of the most traumatic experiences of his life.

3.1 The Briefing Committee

The Briefing Committee was formed. It was made up of 15 members: 3 were elected by the people of Cobh and 12 were nominated by bishop Magee and the religious.

The members of the briefing committee were: Mr Dennis Murphy (chairman), Sr Marcella Barry, Fr Gerry Casey, Mrs Catherine Fallon, Sr, Emmanuel Leonard, Monsignor D. O'Callaghan, Sean O'Connor, Monsignor James O'Donnell, Mrs Terry Pender, Fr Denis Reidy, Mr David Slattery, Mr Ken Thomson, Canon P. Twomey, Fr. Brendan Wrixon, Canon John Terry. The elected members were Mrs. Catherine Fallon, Sean O'Connor and Mrs. Terry Pender.

The first meeting took place in the bishop's residence on the 10th of December 1998. Bishop Magee informed the members that he had appointed Mr Denis Murphy to act as chairman because of his wide experience in chairing different groups. All members received bishop Magee's brief outlining his priorities for reordering.

3.2 Inaugural Meeting

At the inaugural meeting of the briefing committee Mr Ken Thomson sculptor and artist spoke of the importance of not disturbing the beautiful spiritual atmosphere of the cathedral.

Canon P. Twomey who served the parishioners for over 20 years had a great love for St. Colman's Cathedral stated that the requirements of Vatican 2 were ideal for new churches and cathedrals but they created problems for other buildings. He emphasised the physical constraints which the structure of the cathedral placed on any attempts to re-order it and urged a practical compromise.

Bishop Magee's Brief, circulated to the committee in 1998, was very similar to the list of items agreed with the Heritage Council in 1994. We also received a copy of the covenant entered into with the Heritage Council, but it had to be handed back after every meeting.

This was the first time it was acknowledged that a plan existed for the reordering of the Cathedral. It directly contradicted the statement made by bishop Magee and canon Reidy at the public meeting of 28 June 1998.

It became quite obvious from the first meeting that the purpose of the Briefing Committee was to rubber stamp bishop Magee's plans that he had agreed with the Heritage Council.

3.3 Expertise of the Briefing Committee

Bishop Magee in his brief asked the briefing committee "to consider how best the entire building can be arranged for liturgical use with regard to the norms of Vatican 2 and to note very carefully the limits which consideration for the architectural heritage of the building will impose on any change which is being considered". Bishop Magee also states in his brief that in order to assist him in arriving at a decision as to what is best for the cathedral he set about forming a briefing committee which would be representative of all interested parties and which would also have within it the expertise which would help it to arrive at an informed decision.

The expertise available came from: a dairy co-op executive, two house wife's, one bank porter, one sculptor, two religious sisters, one architect and seven clergy men.

I suggest the expertise he was in search of was one that would not ask too many questions and rubber stamp the plans he had already envisaged and agreed with the officers of the Heritage Council.

The question of a lack of professional expertise within the committee was pointed out in a letter published on 23 December 1999 by Monsignor James O'Brien of the diocese of Cloyne in the *Irish Independent*. Given the architectural importance of the cathedral, it was noticeable that nobody had been consulted from the Pugin Society or from the Victorian Society or other acknowledged experts in the field such as Mr. Jeremy Williams. It was also suggested that not only had the Briefing Committee not consulted such authorities to apprise themselves of the Cathedral's significance and architectural importance, it seems that most of the committee was unaware of these experts.

At the first meeting of the "briefing committee" Mr Slattery said and I quote "that Cobh cathedral was unique and required a unique solution". Mr Slattery said at a later presentation to the committee on the 9th of January 1999 that "St. Colman's cathedral is a building which is complete as the architect envisaged it".

I would like to draw to your attention to a publication by the heritage council dated the 7th of March 2000, entitled "Taking stock of our Ecclesiastical Heritage" "Stone work in Irish Churches".

Mr David Slattery is the author and in his introduction he states and I quote " there is no doubt that the church buildings in this country embody the finest collection of carved stone that any group of buildings does, and that collection of stone, doesn't simply only extend to the exteriors of the buildings but to the interiors as well. The quality of the carving in many areas is so fine and so particular that even if money were available it would be very difficult to match it today, and the costs involved now in attempting to complete repairs or replacement to the standards, which were achieved in eighteenth and nineteenth century church buildings is extremely difficult."

This is a very strong statement from a man whose professional advice has been available to bishop Magee since the commencement of the programme in 1991.

The Bishop's brief notes that "the harmony and beauty of its [the Cathedral's] architecture, interior fittings and decoration make it a very difficult church to re-order in accordance with the second Vatican council". Dr. Nessa Roche, PHD architectural conservation advisor Duchas, the heritage service in a submission to an Board Planala said "we contend that Vatican 2 church legislation does not cover the

rearrangement of existing churches and liturgically inspired re-ordering is not in fact demanded anywhere in catholic legislation”.

The briefing committee held five meetings and considered six options. On Wednesday February 10th 1999 at 3.45 in the Commodore Hotel the members of the briefing committee met to discuss the options. The minutes of that meeting state: "Mr David Slattery dealt with the report of technical sub committee. The report addressed each of the areas which had been mentioned in the bishop's brief and recommended that option 5 would appear to be a possible solution. The chairman Denis Murphy then asked the members to individually express their views in relation to the extension of the Sanctuary as envisaged in option 5, most were in favour of it and felt it was a workable solution". No formal vote was taken on any of the 6 options.

3.4 No formal vote taken by the Briefing Committee

While Mr. Denis Murphy, chairman of the Briefing Committee, asked the members of the committee to indicate their opinions about the six proposals that had been presented to the Committee, he never returned to the Briefing Committee to take a formal vote recommending the proposed plans to the bishop.

4.1 Information Leaflet

In 2000 a leaflet was distributed to every house in the parish to dispel any fears and it was to clarify the following misconceptions. The “fears” were listed on one page and on the other page were listed “the facts”. On the front cover of the leaflet under the heading “Proposals for Reordering the Sanctuary of St Colman’s Cathedral” was a picture of the interior of the cathedral. Underneath the picture it says “Picture showing the proposed changes”. In the picture it shows six columns on the left side of the nave and on the right side three columns and the pulpit relocated inside the altar rails. This is the same leaflet that states “under the facts, pulpit remains” and it is signed by Fr. Gerry Casey.

4.2 The fears & Facts:

1) *Fear.* The pulpit could be removed.

Fact. Pulpit remains.

Would you consider this an accurate reply from someone who knew the contents of the heritage agreement and was a member of the briefing Committee.

In the briefing committee draft report it states that “in the liturgical context of the second Vatican council the following internal features in St. Colman’s cathedral need to be addressed.

- The pulpit while an element of great artistic beauty is seldom used, it also restricts visibility of the existing sanctuary from the side.

2) *Fear.* Altar rails would be removed.

Fact.

Of 100ft of altar rails presently used (including side gates) 86ft would remain in use for the distribution of Holy Communion. 14ft would be re-used elsewhere within the cathedral.

The double gates at the entrance to the sanctuary are 5ft wide, are they part of the fourteen feet? If they are it means that we are left with 9ft of marble altar rail to be re-used, if not then someone has added 5ft to one side of the cathedral.

3) *Fear.* Mosaic Floor could be dug up.

Fact. Flooring covered by extended sanctuary is protected.

This is the leaflet was intended to dispel any fears or concerns of the parishioners.

4.3 Informing the People of Cobh

In the bishops brief he states and I quote “When I undertook the cathedral restoration programme in 1992 it was decided that the work should be phased and that when the whole restoration was completed, consideration should be given to re-ordering the interior. This was announced to the people of the diocese and the people of Cobh at the time”.

The people of Cobh were not informed about re-ordering in 1992.

When the restoration plans were launched at a meeting of the priests of the diocese on the 27th of Jan 1992 in St. Mary's school in Mallow in a ten page report under the heading "looking forward". The priests of the diocese were informed in one line, and I quote "the report does not address the problem of re-ordering the cathedral to meet modern liturgical norm".

Are we to believe that in 1992 the people of Cobh were informed of the proposed re-ordering and at the same time the priests of the diocese were informed that the problem of re-ordering was yet to be addressed.

In 1992 the people of Cobh received a 2 page leaflet outlining the programme of restoration. It covered the task, the cost and how it was proposed to finance the project. The back page was taken up with an advertisement for bequests and covenants.

It set out the work in four phases,

Phase 5 was covered in one line "The Liturgical restoration is also envisaged".

This is the information the people of Cobh received 14 years ago. There is no mention of re-ordering in this document. It says *restoration*. It happened so long ago that people can not remember whether they had received the information or not. The church authorities knew that and at every opportunity, in the press and in the media, they used this uncertainty to defend their actions.

If the people were informed in 1992 why was there a total denial of any plans at the public meeting on the 28th June 1998?

I will now quote the bishop's final paragraph in his brief to the Briefing Committee (no. 6 above):

"A listening Process".

"Members, I look forward to hearing your considered recommendations. They will be a great help to me in arriving at a decision which will be put to the people of Cobh *before* any alterations are undertaken. I pray that you may be enlightened by the spirit as you undertake this most important task."

It makes for lovely reading, if only it was sincere.

I suggest that the following statement,

- “My decision will be put to the people of Cobh before any alterations are undertaken.”

Lacked sincerity and what eventually transpired was,

- a. *When I have already submitted the plans to Cobh Town Council I will announce the consultation process at all masses the following weekend.*

this turned out to be a total contradiction of his original statement.

With regard to any consultation concerning Professor O’Neill’s specific plans for the cathedral, McCutcheon Mulcahy’s report p.20, item 4.7 (b) states that the “*diocesan authorities carried out an extensive programme of public consultation on the proposed reordering involving a series of meetings in all five deaneries of the diocese as well as with the clergy and religious of the diocese. The proposed design was presented in the context of the liturgical requirements of the H[istorical]C[hurch]A[dvisory]C[ommission]. All participants were invited to submit written comments and of 159 who expressed an opinion, 109 were in favour, 42 against, mainly on liturgical grounds, and 8 had mixed views*”.

It should be noted that this consultation took place *after* the submission of plans to Cobh Town Council. The meetings were held in Cobh on July 18 and 19; Middleton 19 July; Fermoy 20 July; Kanturk 21 July; Macroom 22 July.

No opinion expressed could have influenced the evolution of the plans at that stage.

Concerning the number of written replies left after these consultations, the diocesan clerical magazine *Linkup* [Vol. 7, issue 4, September 2005] published the following figures: 103 written replies were left of which 66 were positive, 37 against, and 6 mixed views. A correction in the subsequent issue stated that “number [of written replies] was in fact 109. While difficult to reconcile these figures, it is clear that the general public

for the most part did not regard these sessions as in any sense a genuine process of consultation and ignored them.

5.1 In Summation

What is being proposed for St. Colman's cathedral is far more than a minor tampering. It is a fundamental redesigning and a direct interference with the integral design of the gothic revival cathedral, the sole remaining one.

The official website of St. Colman's cathedral states "the cathedral accommodates the celebration of all liturgies as envisaged by the revised rites of the Catholic Church"

St Colman's cathedral is the house of God, the house of the people of God, and it belongs to the worshipping community.

This application is derived from a private and personal position and not from the official public position of the Catholic Church as expressed in its *Code of Canon Law* and in the *General Instruction to the Roman Missal*.

In a booklet written by Fr O'Mahony (adm Cobh parish) entitled "The Treasures of the Church" he states that "the treasures of the church, as I understand it, are not owned by any one individual, but kept in trust for the faithful of the Catholic Church to be viewed by all peoples. Many of the religious kind are a cause for giving glory to God and a source of inspiration, to deepen our commitment to the faith, or to lead others towards it, more especially when many of these were presented as gifts, as tokens of respect or gratitude coming from the god inspired creativity of its own members".

St Colman's cathedral is one of the most noble and inspiring Catholic churches in Ireland and our heritage is a priceless legacy from generations past which is concrete evidence of the impressive capacity for design and skills our forefathers had.

The planning decision raises many serious issues.

An architect with no specialist expertise, his judgement was based as a general professional architect, who had a vision on how the finished work would look.

How could a stand in official with very limited expertise, on an architectural masterpiece, issue a decision in 5 days?

213 objections including a number from national and international expert groups: and 140 were read by Mr Heffernan.

I would like to put on record that I had no hand / act or part to play in Cobh Town Council's decision to grant planning permission for the reordering of St Colman's Cathedral. As a public representative elected by the people of Cobh I did my utmost to stop it.

Before ending my submission, I would like to thank the following groups;

An Bord Planala for giving the people of Cobh this opportunity to voice there objections.

I would like to thank the many priests who have been here over the past two days. Many of them have served in the parish of Cobh and can well appreciate the importance of the Cathedral in the lives of the people of Cobh. They will know how significant the Cathedral is for us. I appreciate their courage and congratulate them on their show of solidarity with us.

Second, as an elected member of Cobh Town Council, I would like to express a sincere word of thanks to the "Friends of St. Colman's Cathedral". They have done Trojan work throughout the whole process to ensure that Professor O'Neill's plans will not be imposed on future generations in Cobh.

The parishioners of Cobh have been treated with contempt and arrogance for the past 14 years and on their behalf I respectfully urge you to reject this planning application.



Cllr Sean O'Connor
PC