



AN TAISCE

The National Trust for Ireland
The Tailor Hall, Back Lane, Dublin

Statement by Ann Wilson, BDes, Mlitt, on the proposed reordering of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh

Background:

I am a lecturer in Art and Design history in Cork Institute of Technology, and I did a Masters degree by research with the building of Cobh Cathedral as its subject. Three papers were subsequently published from this thesis, most notably 'The Building of St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh', in *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies, Vol VII, 2004*. I have recently written a book on St Fin Barre's cathedral in Cork with Dr David Lawrence, an expert in stained glass, and this is due to be published by Four Courts Press later this year. St Fin Barre's, owned by the Anglican Church, is of course the other seriously significant Gothic Revival Cathedral, apart from Cobh, in this part of the country. My current doctoral research is a study of Seamus Murphy, the Cork sculptor, letterer, and church designer.

In 2002 I gave, on request, historical information to Professor O'Neill and directed him towards my thesis, since I had no particular objection in principle to a reordering which I assumed would be restrained, sensitive to the style of the church, and minimal. However, I was very shocked when I realised the extent of what he was intending to do, and even more so when I heard him justify it based on information which he got from my thesis, which I feel he misinterpreted, and, in his responses to appeals, misquoted and referenced inadequately.

I also sat on the Cloyne Historic Churches Advisory Committee, at the invitation of the Bishop, from its inauguration in July 2004. However, I felt it necessary to resign in October, as the other members of the Committee seemed to be very hostile if my viewpoint differed from theirs, and I was informed that the HCAC's function was not to discuss or question in any way Professor O'Neill's proposal for reordering Cobh Cathedral, but merely to recommend it to the planning authority. I therefore felt that the HCAC was established merely to rubberstamp proposals, and did not see the point in remaining on it. At the time I decided to pursue the matter no further, and respect the Church's control of its buildings, but as none of the issues raised in my resignation letter were subsequently addressed in any way by either the Bishop or the Committee, I felt that it was appropriate to at least indicate to people how this committee operated, especially since it has been mentioned in several submissions on behalf of the applicant as the body which recommended the present proposal.

My argument against the present proposal:

1. The cathedral is invaluable and unique from a socio-historical point of view – it contains a wealth of complex material evidence from a very significant and formative period in Irish history. The thousands of details of its exterior and interior fabric provide

enormously important information about Ireland, its people, and their cultural and religious values in the nineteenth century.

2. Cobh Cathedral was designed very specifically for the liturgical requirements of the time – long tunnel-like interior structure, transepts whose entrances are obscured by columns, and a great emphasis on a dramatic east end focussed on the high altar. It has been argued quite correctly in the applicant's response to appeals that this format was not the only interpretation of the liturgical requirements of the 19th century church, and Cardinal Newman's very different approach has been cited [the University Church in Dublin and Brompton Oratory], which resulted in more centrally-planned, classically-inspired buildings, which, like the classical churches in Italy, would be more easily converted to the style of interior now desired by the applicant. It is worth noting, however, that in the nineteenth century, as now, there was more than one interpretation of 'liturgical requirements', and, as now, more than one 'correct' type of building to satisfy them. It is also worth noting that the liturgical requirements of the time are not the same as those today [as also emphasised by the applicant], and that one thing we can be absolutely sure of is that, sooner or later, the liturgical requirements of the future will be completely different from those of today. In the meantime, if this proposal goes ahead, a valuable piece of Irish history will have been partly destroyed – in order to comply with a temporary fashion. 'Liturgical requirements' are being presented by the applicant as both timeless and non-subjective, and clearly they are neither.

3. Moving the main focus of the cathedral – ie the altar/sanctuary area – down to the crossing will result in visual chaos. The coherence of the design will be lost. Also, the fact that the nave pillars cross the transept openings makes it impractical to put the altar/central focus in the crossing.

I wish to emphasize at this point that I am not against Modernist architecture and design – some wonderful buildings have been designed in this style, but my argument is that you cannot turn an apple into an orange.

4. The present proposal **respects** neither the architectural coherence of the interior, nor its rich Neo-Gothic style, nor its irreplaceable fabric. It will create a visually confusing effect in a way which the applicant seems determined to make as permanent as possible - it will be impossible subsequently to return it to its original state.

5. A more temporary and easily reversible arrangement to conform to liturgical requirements would be more appropriate – and much less expensive. It is also important to produce one with more sympathy to the style and proportions of the building. Liturgical requirements have changed frequently in the past, and they also seem to vary according to whose opinion is sought. There is no reason to believe that they won't change again in the future, and, when they do, it is best that no permanent damage will have been done. We owe it to posterity, to future generations of Irish people, to protect buildings like this, especially when so many have already been irreparably damaged. Cobh Cathedral in my opinion is an extremely important Irish Gothic Revival structure, and should be respectfully and carefully preserved. **There must be a way of doing this while facilitating appropriate liturgical use.** In my opinion, the present proposal is unnecessarily and extensively damaging to the fabric and character of the building, and should on no account be implemented.