

Adrian O'Donovan's submission.

PRO Friends of St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh.

The Friends of St. Colman's Cathedral is a group who have great love and dedication to the faith, the Church and all its teachings. They love their Cathedral and do not wish to see it radically reconstructed. We are a local conservationist group based in Cobh, Co. Cork. Our main objective is to encourage the general public to take an active interest in the conservation of this great religious and cultural monument to the hopes and aspirations of past generations so as to ensure its integrity for future generations.

We do not and never have, opposed our Bishop or clergy in any way, however, we do oppose the proposed plans for the reordering of the cathedral as put forward by the Trustees of St. Colman's, and the subject of this appeal.

Over the years the Friends have been accused of being variously a "small, non-practicing, irrelevant" group who are "outside the church", and conversely a group of "traditionalists wedded to the Old Latin Mass". We are none of these, we are simply practicing Catholics. We have also at times been accused to giving people misleading and false information in our letters, but when this is challenged examples are never forthcoming. We have from the beginning to say only what we know to be true.

On 28th June 1998, Bishop Magee and the Cathedral Steering Committee called a public meeting in the Commodore Hotel, Cobh to unveil for the first time their plans for the reordering of St. Colman's. At this heated meeting it was made clear to the Trustees that any plans for the reordering of the Cathedral would be strongly opposed. People left that meeting very angry and upset and it was the talk of the town for many days to follow. The only consolation to the people was that their Bishop had given them a solemn undertaking, with his hand on his heart, that there would be no changes made to the sanctuary of the Cathedral without his first coming back to the people.

The small and poorly attended Station meetings which took place following the report of the Briefing Committee did not fulfil this promise, as they were meetings which simply told the people what was to happen, and neither Bishop John nor any other member of the Trustees- Mr. Tom Cavanagh, or Fr. Tim Fouhy - attended any of these meetings.

In August 1999 another public meeting was held at the Commodore Hotel in order to give the people of the town an opportunity to express their concerns about the proposals for the Cathedral. From that meeting the Friends' Committee was formed in order to represent the people and open discussions with relevant groups and to make known their continued opposition to the Trustees. The group took the name the Friends of St. Colman's Cathedral and their first task was to inform the Diocesan authorities that this group had been formed.

The Friends decided to conduct a door-to-door survey and signature campaign in Cobh. During the campaign they learned of the great upset, hurt and disappointment felt by the people. A petition sheet was drawn up which read:

“We, the parishioners of Cobh, would request Most Rev. Dr. John Magee, Bishop of Cloyne and his advisors, to refrain from the proposed reordering of St. Colman’s Cathedral, Cobh, Co. Cork.”

In Cobh we collected 5,250 signatures, from adults over 18th years of age, 150 people declined to sign the petition, which signifies that overwhelming majority of those interviewed opposed the changes. This figure has been confirmed by a recent small independent survey carried out in Sept. 05, in the town, when from 462 people asked their opinion on the plans, only 4 expressed their approval and 458 opposing them – again this is an overwhelming opposition.

In the autumn of 1999 the Friends requested a meeting with Bishop John and he referred them to the Steering committee. At this meeting Mr. Denis Murphy, chairman of the Briefing Committee agreed with the Friends that what they were saying about the opposition to the proposals had also come across at the Station meetings.

In January 2000, the Friends again asked for a meeting with the Bishop in order to present him with the collected signatures. They met with the bishop and one of his priests in a meeting at which Bishop John did most of the talking and never once referred to the collected signatures.

We informed him of the terrible hurt, anger and upset being caused to the people by these proposals. We also told him that we were defending him personally on every street corner and that he had no idea of the bad feeling towards him that was being engendered by these proposals. We presented the Bishop with a proposal for a new permanent altar to be situated where the present temporary altar now stands, and offered to help in the fundraising for this. Bishop John thanked us for coming, but said that any further meetings would be with the Steering committee, to which we replied that it was with him that we wished to discuss the issues with and not the Steering committee.

Subsequently it was implied in a Radio programme by Canon Denis Reidy that the signatures collected in Cobh were not really all that relevant as St. Colman's was the Cathedral church for the Diocese and not merely for Cobh. As a result the Friends went to all the major towns in the Diocese, Middleton, Mallow, Fermoy, Charleville, Kanturk, Mitchelstown, and Youghal, and conducted a similar survey and signature campaign as to that in Cobh. During the campaign in the Diocese the Friends were assisted by people from the different towns who said that they had seen what had

happened to their own churches and other places and they did not want to see radical changes happen in their beloved Cathedral.

18,874 signatures were collected over a few months. Thus the total number of signatures collected was 24,124. No signatures were collected at any other place outside the Diocese of Cloyne.

Here it is important to note that when these people were signing this petition, they may not have seen Prof. O'Neill's final, and more radical and destructive plans, but they were aware of the basic plan as exhibited in Cobh and the Diocese in 1999. The basic plan has not changed - merely the details. The fact that the current plan is far more destructive to the fabric of the Cathedral might explain the increase in opposition today.

We kept in touch with the people of Cobh and Diocese through the door-to-door distribution of our newsletters and through the medium of small of local newsletters, informing them of what was happening on the ground and also anything relevant to our cause, such as Cardinal Arinze speck in 2003 in America where he said.::

“Some people think that liturgical renewal means the removal of kneelers from church pews, the knocking down of altar rails or the positioning of the altar in the middle of the sitting area of the people. The Church has never said any such thing”.

Even as recently as April 2004, Bishop Magee was still promising that the lay faithful would see the plans prior to their submission for planning; I quote “When the final details of his (Prof. O’Neill’s) design become available the project will be presented to the priest, religious and lay faithful of the dioceses and **SUBSEQUENTLY** to the planning process” [[Letter from Bishop Magee dated 26th April, 2004]]. This, as we now know, did not happen.

On the weekend of 10/11th July 2005 a letter was read out at all Masses informing the people that the plans were complete that they going to be submitted to Cobh Town Council for planning permission. The following weekend (16th/17th July) it was announced that there would be an opportunity to see the plans at meetings arranged for the coming week. The first meeting was scheduled for the evening of Monday 18th July **AFTER** the plans had been submitted. Therefore once again, the people were not being asked for their opinion, merely being presented with a fait accompli. As a result the meeting were poorly attended both in Cobh and around the Diocese; we know this because we attended all of them and spoke to the people there. Brian McCutcheon (p.20) says that only 159 people attended those meetings. *Link Up*, [[[Vol 7. Issue 5, Nov. 2005](#)]] the diocesan publication circulated to the clergy, claims that 109 attended the Cobh meeting. That leaves 50 people attending the meetings in the other towns of the diocese. [[In fact our figure was 69 for the number of people attending the meetings in the Diocese.]]

Once again the people were not going to have any input, they just had **to put up and shut up**. People were shocked and saddened that the Bishop had not come back to them and all trust was not gone.

St. Colman's has served the people of Cobh and the Diocese for over 100 years and we find it quite frankly insulting and absolutely ridiculous for anyone to suggest that it has been somehow inadequate for the last 40 years since Vatican II, for the purpose for which it was built. We have Christened our children; made our First Communion; Confirmation; been married in it ; we have buried our dead from it; we attend Mass daily or weekly; and now we are being told that the Cathedral does not suffice in its present form for such.

Do we not hear Mass properly? Should we go elsewhere? What's missing? The people of Cobh are not fools and we reject this idea out of hand. As Fr. Casey says on the Diocesan web site; **The Cathedral is in everyday use for worship and prayer. It accommodates the celebration of all liturgy as envisaged by the revised rites of the Catholic Church.**

Also, and with all due respect to our present clergy, it must be pointed out that, in five years or so, they will have moved on, and it is the people of Cobh who will be left with the result of this unwanted plan, should it go ahead. Likewise, none of the members of the various committees associated with these proposals (The Historic Churches Advisory Committee; The

Steering Committee; The Art & Architecture Committee) but maybe one or two, actually worship in Cobh Cathedral and it is totally unjust that they should impose this unnecessary and deeply unpopular reordering on us.

Late last year I met an elderly lady in Cobh Cathedral and she was in tears. I asked her what was wrong and she said that she was so upset about the plans for changing the cathedral. Many more people have expressed themselves to me in a similar way. I passed this on to the administrator who advised me to 'pray about it'. Sadly no one seems to care about the concerns of the people.

The Friends, like the people of Cobh, love their Cathedral and that is why we are still here today;

1, because of the love for our church.

2 preserve the living heritage of our faith;

3 try and see that the people's wishes are respected in this matter;

4, to try and stop this unnecessary destruction of what is an internationally recognised example of the architecture of its time and place, built with the pennies of our forefathers.

The only music we wish to hear in Cobh is the sound of the Bells and not the sound of the compressor and jackhammer digging up our mosaics and altar rails, where the Body of Christ has been administered for the past 100 years, with the greatest respect and reverence.

St. Colman's Cathedral in Cobh is more to the people of Cobh than just a church. It stands majestically high above the town imposing its strength and

beauty on every corner of the town and harbour. It is the first point of focus as you arrive or depart by sea. The people of Cobh are very proud of their cathedral as an architectural gem. Tourists and locals alike, when they visit, are overwhelmed by its great beauty and sacred character.

It is so much a part of our lives that until this plan was proposed, I suppose most of us took it for granted. But once we realised that anyone would want to tamper with OUR Cathedral, then the strength of feeling aroused, took us all by surprise. The Cathedral is part of all the great milestones in our lives, we love it with a passion, and many of us are proud to say that we have served in the Cathedral in one way or another. To think that anyone would destroy the interior merely for a personal preference is quite simply incredible.

The cost of this appeal to the Friends and thus the people of Cobh and the Diocese has been in the tens of thousands of Euros with more needed, because we have engaged the best professional help in Ireland as only the best will do for our Cathedral. No one will ever know the time and effort that the Friends and their supporters have put into this campaign. Do we want to be doing this? Certainly not.

Standing on street corners, begging, in all weathers; fundraising; being viewed wrongly as being in opposition to our clergy. This is foreign and repugnant to us. All we want to say to our bishop and priests: please listen to us; don't alienate your people from the church. I would like to thank An

Bord Pleanála for giving the Friends the opportunity, finally, to speak and explain our position, a thing we have been denied in practically every other arena.

We would ask you to turn down the planning decision granted for these plans since it is now clear that there is no authoritative liturgical requirement for them and therefore they are in breach of the 2000 Planning Act as a protected and listed building of significant architectural and historic importance both nationally and internationally. If we cannot protect St. Colman's then no other Catholic church or cathedral in Ireland is safe.