

.Cardinal Ratzinger:

The Church does NOT require dismantled high altars

An Irish 'AD2000' reader - Bernard Caesar, a member of the group, Friends of Carlow Cathedral - has forwarded the following account of how Cardinal Ratzinger became involved over the question of whether the Church required the Carlow Cathedral high altar to be dismantled in line with the liturgical reforms of Vatican II.

Many of the faithful of Carlow, here in Ireland, were horrified at the end of 1994 to learn that our bishop, Msgr. Laurence Ryan, was planning radical renovations to the interior of the cathedral. The exquisitely beautiful high altar was to be removed, the Blessed Sacrament demoted to the side altar of Our Lady and the marble altar rails, the most magnificent in Ireland, removed.

Bishop Ryan insisted that these changes were mandated by the teaching of Vatican II and the post-Vatican II legislation, and that: "We are all part of a living, evolving Church and a living evolving liturgy." Six thousand members of the faithful in Carlow, an overwhelming majority, signed a petition protesting against the desecration of their cathedral, built with the pennies of their poor ancestors in the days following Catholic emancipation.

Michael Davies, President of Una Voce International, was invited to Carlow to address a public meeting on the Bishop's claim that the changes he proposed were mandatory. Msgr. Ryan was invited to the meeting but declined the offer. Mr. Davies made it clear that there is no mandatory Church legislation requiring a single change in a single sanctuary anywhere in the world. A vote was taken on the Bishop's proposals and the 400 plus faithful who packed the hall voted unanimously against the changes.

In a subsequent letter to a Carlow newspapers, Mr. Davies mentioned that he had asked His Eminence, Cardinal Ratzinger, in October 1995, whether the proposed changes in Carlow were mandatory, and the Cardinal confirmed that they were not. In his letter Mr. Davies stated, "Where a bishop orders such changes, he does so because he wishes to, and not because he has to." Bishop Ryan, apparently doubtful of Mr. Davies claim, wrote to Cardinal Ratzinger himself to see if this was the case.

When Cardinal's reply was received, the Bishop gave the impression that His Eminence had endorsed his plans, but despite repeated requests refused to make the letter public. Those opposed to the Cathedral renovations then asked the High Court to prevent implementation of the renovations. During the hearing the judge asked the Bishop to produce Cardinal Ratzinger's letter. This was then published in full in The Nationalist of

10th January 1997. The letter of 12th June 1996, which fully vindicates Mr. Davies' interpretation of Church teaching, reads as follows:

Thank you for your letter of April 18th in which you ask for a clarification of certain observations attributed to me by Mr. Michael Davies in a letter recently published by a local newspaper in your diocese. The context of those comments was a discussion of the Church's liturgical legislation in the period after the Second Vatican Council. I could not but acknowledge that in this legislation there exists no mandate, in the primary sense of the term as a command or order, to move the tabernacle from the high altar to another position in the church.

With respect to the placement of the tabernacle, the instruction *Inter oecumenici* (26.9.1964) par 95, which implemented the decisions of *Sacrosanctum concilium*, states quite clearly that the Blessed Sacrament be reserved on the high altar, a possibility envisaged also by *Eucharisticum mysterium* (25.5.67) par 54.

The fact that the postconciliar legislation of the Church does not impose architectural changes, while at the same time not excluding them, provides the diocesan bishop with the necessary latitude for making decisions in the light of the pastoral needs of his particular Church, taking into account also the situation in neighbouring diocese. It is certainly true that a great number of churches since the Second Vatican Council have been re-arranged; such changes, while inspired by the liturgical reform, cannot however be said to have been required by the legislation of the Church. In conclusion, it is the right and duty of the local bishop to decide on these questions and, having done so, to help the faithful come to an understanding of the reasons for his decision. Trusting that this explanation proves helpful to you in your particular circumstances and with an assurance of kind regards. I remain sincerely yours in Christ.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger.

Bishop Ryan has since relented in relation to the high altar, the tabernacle and the side altars. He has, however, removed the altar rails and made several other changes opposed by the vast majority of Carlow's faithful. An appeal to the Supreme Court of Ireland to order the Bishop to reverse these changes and restore the sanctuary to its original state will be heard shortly.

Acknowledgement to AD2000. October 1998.

[Taken from the Latin Mass Society's November 1998 Newsletter.]
