

# Iconoclasm Comes to Ireland

## *Plans for Carlow Cathedral Cause Controversy*

By Brian Fallon

*The following account will be of particular interest to those in the United States who have become concerned about church renovations to know that this growing problem is not unique to America. The Irish Times story appeared on the January 16, 1997 edition of EWTN News Briefs. It is reprinted with permission.*

In the US, the 1978 statement of the bishops liturgy committee, *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (EACW), is invoked to justify radical renovation of Catholic Churches. This statement was never presented for vote to the entire bishops' conference, however, and both its principles and its authority has been seriously questioned during the past few years.

Last year a committee headed by Bishop Frank Rodimer of Paterson New Jersey was appointed to produce a new version of EACW, although it has been made clear that the intention is to strengthen the statement's authority, not to change its approach to church renovation.

Doctrinally, Vatican II opened the doors and windows of 20th-century Catholicism; the Catholic Church could never be the same again. Inevitably, its reforms in ritual and other fields brought controversy and a certain amount of discord, and the virtual loss of the Latin Mass, in particular, is still widely and bitterly mourned. Inside the past year, however, controversy in this country has again come to a head, this time over the alleged "wholesale destruction" of church interiors to conform with the new liturgical order.

Ironically, this controversy was partly triggered by some angry letters to this paper about the restoration of stone doorways at St. Canice's Cathedral in Kilkenny, which of course has been Protestant since the Reformation. More vocal and organised, however, have been the protests over the alterations proposed in Carlow Cathedral, which brought out groups of local people to demonstrate and have caused some angry exchanges in print and in private. There was a strong feeling that these changes were a clerical initiative alone and did not reflect lay opinion, which scarcely seems to have been consulted.

### **Destruction of churches "Cromwellian in its ferocity"**

That Carlow is not unique can be seen from a letter which appeared in *The Irish Times* last November 4 from T. Austin Dunphy, a respected Dublin architect who is a former chairman of the Architectural Committee of the National Heritage Council. Mr. Dunphy wrote that in his official capacity he had had "considerable and sad experience of this destruction, which is Cromwellian in its ferocity".

He listed other cases besides Carlow's-Pugin's superb Killarney Cathedral, St. Mary's Cathedral in Cork, St. McCartan's Cathedral in Monaghan, even Armagh itself. He also made it plain that he had found the bulk of the senior Irish clergy not only uncooperative from a preservationist viewpoint, but often angrily resentful of any possible interference with their prerogative.

Already coping with a storm of criticism about clerical sex abuse, anti-women stances, reactionary sexual views, doctrinal rigidity etc, the Catholic clergy may feel that this latest controversy is essentially another attempt to "get at them". Anti-clericalism, however, is plainly not the motive of the various responsible people who have been speaking their minds. In fact, there are strong indications that the inflexible attitudes now under attack are not shared by the Vatican itself.

### **Vatican: Preserve Catholic Heritage**

It seems that the Vatican has even tried to discourage this destruction, or mutilation, of church interiors throughout Europe. Italy in general has become very conservation-conscious, and the Baroque churches of Rome, Naples, and other cities are recognised as major attractions for the cultural tourist, religious traditions apart. The Vatican's official attitude is that while new churches should be built to accommodate the new order, existing buildings "built to the glory of God" by previous generations must be respected. Here in Ireland, however, the idea that 19th-century church buildings in themselves are an essential part of the nation's visual heritage is still a relatively novel one.

Catholic church architecture in Ireland began late by European standards, with some notable exceptions such as Cormac's Chapel at Cashel. For a number of reasons -- including economic and demographic ones -- we largely missed out on the wave of cathedral-building which swept Europe in the Gothic Middle Ages, though Ireland has plenty of abbeys - many or most of them, alas, in picturesque ruin. Today Dublin still has no proper Catholic cathedral as such, since Archbishop McQuaid's grandiose project to build one in Merrion Square is as dead as the League of Nations.

### **Church-Building in Ireland**

As any schoolboy knows, the wave of church-building came after Catholic Emancipation and with the rise of a new middle class. The 19th century was the great age, or ages, of the powerful, energising, high-minded cleric: "J K L", Archbishop McHale, Cardinal Cullen *et alii*. Such men carried weight in the Vatican as well as at home, and no English or Anglo-Irish administration could afford to ignore them.

It was in fact the great age of proselytising for all the Christian religions, partly as a counter to 18th-century rationalism and "godless" French republicanism, and partly as a missionary drive to reach the impoverished, illiterate masses crowded into slums or subsisting in primitive bog cabins. Religion was seen as a vital element in giving these

underprivileged millions the basics of morality and self-discipline, not to mention some spark of self-respect. Preaching the Gospel meant more than Sunday sermons to the comfortably-off seated in well-furnished pews, it meant going among the masses and rousing them to "better themselves" in every sense.

The Great Famine, generally speaking, brought the church and the people closer together while driving the people and the landowning class farther apart. Massgoing on a large scale was one result, and big congregations in turn demanded more and larger churches. These "Famine churches" still litter the land, often built in bleak and barren sites because better ones could not be afforded or were not available, and many members of the landed or monied classes were hostile to having "Romish chapels" in their towns and villages. Catholic Emancipation might have been a legal fact, but the Church of Ireland remained the established, State church well into the second half of the century.

### **A Grinding Task**

The Catholic Church in Ireland was not rich, so raising the funds for these buildings was a grinding task. Lay people with money gave generously, the poor contributed their pennies, donations came from abroad, various fund-raising strategies and methods were adopted-occasionally verging on coercion. One thing is plain, however: the people themselves genuinely wanted these churches, and many of them gave freely what they could ill afford.

Stylistically, Irish ecclesiastical architecture is very mixed, even if Pugin established (in Maynooth, Killarney, etc) a neo-Gothic tradition which was carried on by his son and by Pugin's leading Irish follower, McCarthy. James Hogan, the greatest Neo-classical Irish sculptor of the period, found himself sadly underemployed in his homeland when he returned from his long stay in Rome. We tend to think of the mid-nineteenth century as the period of the Gothic Revival, but it was also the age of eclecticism, while NeoClassicism remained strong.

When they are not bare, forbidding and functional, Irish churches of this period tend to be triumphalist, ponderous and ornate-characteristic vices of the arriviste. Which is understandable enough, since it had to announce that it had indeed "arrived", after centuries in which Catholic cathedral-building had been prohibited officially in Britain and Ireland. (The very few exceptions, such as Waterford Cathedral, were lowkey and unobtrusive.)

### **Restoration or Renovation?**

The interiors of these 19th-century churches answered the ritual demands of their time, as Christian churches in all ages have done. After all, the concept is fairly recent that changing or "restoring" ecclesiastical buildings, either inside or out, is in itself reprehensible. Most of the older ones in Europe have changed with the times, sometimes repeatedly.

The artist Michelangelo almost certainly would have been enraged by Bernini's ornate baldacchino in St Peter's in Rome, which collides head-on with his own original classical design.

Many of the great Gothic buildings in France are in fact restorations, by Viollet-leDuc and others; many or most of the Gothic cathedrals in England have undergone constant interior changes, and Fischer von Erlach, the greatest Baroque architect in Austria, had no compunction about ravaging older churches to suit the demands of the CounterReformation.

Ours is a modern, historicist taste, which believes that the architect's or designer's original vision should always be preserved as far as possible and practicable. It is the product of a new kind of artistic and historical consciousness which arose in the 19th century and was typified by William Morris when he refused any further commissions to "restore" the interiors of old English churches. He lost business, but he also helped to create a precedent; Morris became one of the pioneers of modern preservationism.

More recently, the late Sir John Betjeman spent much time, energy, eloquence, abuse and wit campaigning against the widespread vandalism committed on Britain's ecclesiastical buildings -- usually on the initiative of the clergymen themselves.

Betjeman was also one of the most vocal spokesmen for the Victorian Revival-a phenomenon which has scarcely come to Ireland at all. It is only recently, and rather grudgingly, that the hybrid architecture of the 19th century has been acknowledged to have its own merits. Even now, probably only a limited number of architects, pundits or academics would be prepared to make a strong stand on behalf of more than a very few of our Catholic churches, for decades regarded as the nadir of taste-a mixture of clerical triumphalism and populist kitsch.

In England, the attitude to NeoGothic is very different. The buildings designed by the great mid-Victorian architects, Street, Butterfield, Pearson, Burges etc, are mostly preserved intact, including their splendid churches. Burges, of course, was also the architect of St. Fin Barre's Cathedral in Cork, which has been conscientiously maintained by the Church of Ireland. By contrast, St Mary's Cathedral in the same city has suffered particularly badly, including the sidelining of numerous statues by Hogan.

Two notable exceptions to the trail of devastation have been the restoration of Pugin's Cathedral Church of St. Aidan's in Ferns, Co Wexford, carried out under Bishop Comiskey, and the program for restoring St. Colman's Cathedral at Cobh, a masterpiece by the younger Pugin and his partner, Ashlin. Both Bishop Comiskey and the Bishop of Cloyne, Dr John Magee, signed documents in advance promising to respect the existing artwork, and were grant-aided accordingly by the National Heritage Council on those terms. So far, they appear to be the only senior clerics to have signed such undertakings.

### **Carlow Cathedral Conflict a Test Case?**

Meanwhile, Carlow Cathedral may well prove to be an important precedent and test case. A High Court injunction has been granted against the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, Dr. Ryan, forbidding him (for the present at least) to carry out alterations which would involve scrapping the altar rails and the wooden pulpit, a masterwork of carving from Bruges (there had been talk of giving it to a local convent).

Elsewhere, however, some fine altars and their furnishings have already been replaced by what one architectural expert describes as "wretched tables". There is a growing feeling that such activities should be brought within the scope of the Planning Acts.

Of course, it would be quite unhistorical to describe the Irish clergy en masse as cultural philistines; Loughrea Cathedral was a showpiece for Irish arts and crafts early in the century, and a little later the church was the chief patron of the great Harry Clarke. More recently, respected modern artists have worked for churches, including Oisimn Kelly, George Campbell, Imogen Stuart and Patrick Pye, as well as some talented architects.

Curiously enough, the contemptuous attitude towards the 19th century seems to have been fuelled partly by trendy cultural "modernisers" among the clergy, who honestly believed that the recent past was an embarrassment to be got rid of and forgotten. And Dublin, which should have set an example and a precedent, has in fact been particularly ruthless with its own churches and their interiors; it is in no position to point a finger at "the provinces".

Meanwhile, certain lay people involved in the Carlow protest stress that they are not motivated by anti-clericalism, and that most of them have in fact a solid respect for their bishop. A head-on confrontation was not at all what they aimed at originally. They have no argument with anybody about faith and morals; they are rather traditional believers who are in "the habit of receiving Communion at the altar rails".

### **"Openness" to Tradition May Halt Destruction**

Both sides in the Carlow dispute have sought the advice of the Heritage Council -- the protesters on the one hand, the Bishop and the cathedral administrator on the other.

The Heritage Council itself believes in persuasion rather than coercion, and it hopes that a new openness on the whole issue of ecclesiastical architecture will enter the debate following a seminar it has arranged for Kilkenny Castle on February 5. Meanwhile, it has also prepared a working document on the subject which covers not only buildings, but portable items such as chalices, altar furnishings etc.

The working group which produced this document was chaired by Father Tomas S Caoimh, C.C. of Ballyferriter in Co Kerry, who is also chairman of the council's museums committee. Father S. Caoimh is an ardent believer in preservationism, but he also believes that to make church buildings subject to rigid planning laws is not the best

solution. He points instead to the example of Britain, where the various Churches "regulate their own affairs", list and look after their historic buildings carefully, and are grant-aided but not leaned on by the State. It seems not only an ecumenically sound solution, but one which makes good sense.

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