

My Dear People,

July 25<sup>th</sup> 2006

I write to you today concerning our much admired Diocesan Cathedral - St Colman's in Cobh. The Diocese had proposed changes to St. Colman's which involved replacing the present temporary plywood altar with a permanent altar, something worthy of the Cathedral, as well as extending the sanctuary so that the altar would be more visible to the congregation and so make it easier for people to experience full, active and conscious participation in the Mass. As you may be aware, An Bord Pleanala recently has refused planning permission for the proposed changes.

Whilst the An Bord Pleanala decision is of particular importance for our Diocese, the Irish Bishops, as a group, have also expressed their concern. The decision could have serious implications for all places of worship in the State that are also protected structures. It must be viewed in the context of the Constitutional right of every religious denomination "to manage its own affairs, own, acquire and administer property, movable or immovable" which is contained in *Article 44.2.5* of Bunreacht Na hÉireann.

In its decision, An Bord Pleanala accepted that changes in the sanctuary arose from liturgical requirements, but considered that this did not bind it to accept the particular design proposed. An Bord Pleanala believed that the changes proposed "would constitute an excessive intervention in the protected structure", but they did not give any guidelines as to what design would be acceptable.

As a result of An Bord Pleanala's decision, the situation concerning the temporary plywood altar still remains unresolved and needs to be addressed. The Diocese will initiate discussions with the planning authorities in an attempt to find a solution, which would be acceptable from both the liturgical and heritage points of view. I will keep you fully informed of the outcome of these discussions.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank you once again for your outstanding financial and moral support, which has enabled the undertaking of excellent work to conserve and preserve the fabric of the Cathedral building. Through your generosity €4,000,000 (four million euro) has already been spent on restoring the Cathedral. The excellence of the workmanship has brought praise from many quarters, including a European Architectural Heritage Award. Without your generous assistance this would not have been possible.

I appreciate that some members of the faithful may find it difficult to understand why it is necessary to continue with the process for the internal re-ordering of St. Colman's. I do so because of my concern, as your Bishop, that the present sanctuary layout of our beautiful and historic Cathedral does not satisfactorily meet the current liturgical requirements for a Diocesan Cathedral.

With every good wish and blessing,

+John Magee, Bishop of Cloyne