



## Bishop O'Reilly Announces Design Team for the Restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral

### BISHOP COLM O'REILLY

*If Christmas 2009 was one of the most painful days of my life as bishop, this is truly a hope-filled and joyful one*

On February 6th, the Feast Day of St. Mel, the patron saint of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois and the Cathedral in Longford, the media launch of the announcement of the Design Team for the restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral took place in Bishop's House, Longford.

Please see below the address by Bishop Colm O'Reilly and key points of the address made by Dr Richard Hurley.

Psalm 29 contains the following beautiful line: "Tears come with the night but joy comes with the dawn". The psalm does not mean literally that all sadness comes upon us at night time and all happiness with the coming of a new day. In biblical language darkness is disaster, light is deliverance. For the people of Longford at Christmas 2009 it was quite the opposite. In St. Mel's Cathedral we celebrated a joyful Midnight Mass; dawn revealed a Cathedral ruined by fire. The contrast between the happiness of the Mass at Night with the heart-break of Christmas Mass could not have been greater.

Today I believe we are taking an important step towards a new day when we will be able to reverse the disaster of Christmas 2009. The signing of contracts by Design Team and client for the restoration of our Cathedral marks a new dawn for us. If Christmas 2009 was one of the most painful days of my life as Bishop, this is truly a hope-filled and joyful one.

We have engaged two prestigious architectural firms which have formed an Alliance to plan and guide the restoration of our historic Cathedral. I am extremely pleased to have present at this Press Conference Dr Richard Hurley, our lead Design Architect and Mr Colm Redmond, architect from Fitzgerald, Kavanagh & Partners. We are convinced that these two men and their respective firms which have formed an Alliance can deliver a restored Cathedral which will not just be faithful to its original architectural splendour but also a place of worship which will be inspirational for a new time in the life of the Church in Ireland.

Up to this point the plans for restoration of the Cathedral have been handled by Mr Niall Meagher of Interactive Project Managers. This firm was chosen after a very careful search among those with the needed expertise for this key role. They in turn have led the process of identification of the entire Design Team. I welcome the Director of Interactive Project Managers, Ms Joan O'Connor, who, like Mr Meagher, is an architect.

Our Design Team can be assured of the full support of the hard working St. Mel's Cathedral Project Committee chaired by Mr Seamus Butler. This committee which has been meeting



Left to right, Aidan Kavanagh, Colm Redmond, Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Richard Hurley.

every second week for many months is attended by a representative of our insurers, Allianz, Mr Gerry O'Toole, Managing Director of OSG, the Loss Assessors, Mr Danny Donohoe and Tom Cleary, OSG.

In the current year, 2011, there is an immense task to be undertaken by the Design Team. I am convinced that few people in the general population fully appreciate what is involved in planning work. It is easy to see the product of a day's labour by, for instance, a bricklayer. It is not so in the case of days spent reaching a decision about how best to create a design for a church sanctuary. However, everything about how well the work of restoration is done will depend on how the Design Team completes the first phase of the work.

It is necessary at the present juncture in our journey towards restoration to invite a high de-

gree of interest in the design work to be undertaken, by all parishioners of Longford and all in the Diocese as well. It will shortly emerge, I can promise, that the Design Team will engage with the public about the big questions that we need to explore. At an early stage ideas about restoration will be put forward for discussion. It is my hope that this immense challenge that we face will offer us an important opportunity for renewal, not only renewal of a destroyed Cathedral but renewal of a sense of community and creation of an understanding of the purpose that a Cathedral fulfils.

At this significant moment it is impossible not to think of the Founder of St. Mel's Cathedral, Bishop William O'Higgins. He laid the foundation stone, taken from the ruins of the old medieval Cathedral at Ardagh, in 1840. That day, the 19th of May, was a great occasion in Longford

### Design Team

The Design Team comprises a number of professionals who are required to plan the very complex restoration of the Cathedral. They have been working all year within their various disciplines to survey, analyse and plan a restoration that will respect the heritage of the building, adapt it for our future worship and make it fit for purpose for generations to come.

**Project Managers:**  
Interactive Project Managers

**Architects:**  
Richard Hurley and Associates in association with Fitzgerald Kavanagh and Partners

**Structural Engineers:**  
Punch Consulting Engineers

**Mechanical and Electrical Engineering:**  
ARUP

**Building Fabric Consultants:**  
CARRIG

**Quantity Surveyors:**  
Brendan Merry and Partners

**Health & Safety:**  
Bruce Shaw Safety Management

with an estimated attendance of 20,000 people present. No one was to know on that joy-filled day that in seven years time all work would have ceased. In a country decimated by the Great Famine it had begun to look like a ruin, abandoned and overgrown by weeds. However, six years later it would be opened for worship and so it would remain until 2009.

I remember today that Bishop O'Higgins set out with confidence and, while he did not live to see his dream come true, another man was there to complete the work. Many times in history those who lay foundations never see the last phases of the work completed. We cannot predict with anything like certainty when the work we are undertaking will be completed. It is in faith that all of us must set out on the journey towards restoration of St. Mel's Cathedral knowing that we will not walk alone, for God is with us.

### Key Points

Dr Richard Hurley

- St. Mel's will rise again and live again as the centre of Catholic life in the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois.
- Sacred buildings are a faithful record of the mindset of the times in which they are built. Hence the changes from age to age reflecting man's relationship with God and the universe. Church buildings shape and influence our religious beliefs.
- While restoring the building is of the utmost importance, every step is being taken to reinstate the heritage of the building, it is ultimately an effective and forward looking liturgical environment which must be the primary consideration. If this can be achieved the Cathedral will live again.
- Part of our task in re-building St. Mel's is to make it a religious space of powerful resonance, respecting the past, living in the present and pointing towards the future. Our committed aim is to restore the Cathedral to its former architectural beauty, with a complementary contemporary liturgical intervention reflecting pastoral aspirations, supported by the arts which will make St. Mel's a worthy flagship of the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois and beyond.



Fr. Tom Healy, Administrator; explains some of the fire damage to national media at the press conference in February.