



The Design Team members and Bishop Colm discuss model of Cathedral. Left to right Bishop Colm, Richard Hurley, Margaret Glupker, Ann Cuffe Fitzgerald, Peter Cox, Colm Redmond.



Pictured at St. Mel's Cathedral Open Day on September 18, 2011 are Corrine McCormack, Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Peter Cox.



Taking a closer look on Open Day, September 18, 2011.

# St. Mel's Cathedral Open Day



Some of the keen visitors view the fire damage at St. Mel's Cathedral.

■ TIERNAN DOLAN

Christmas morning 2009 is etched forever on the memories of Longford people. Following a beautiful and moving midnight Mass, when everything was Christmas card perfect, we woke from dreamland to a living, lasting nightmare. In temperatures of minus fifteen, dazed and bewildered parishioners watched in horror as yellow and orange flames shot skywards from the blazing inferno that was once their pride and joy. As stunned neighbours huddled together in shocked silence, tears of genuine sorrow flowed freely. One man summed it up for the rest of us "it's like watching the public passing of a dear friend".

On Sunday September 18th, we got a chance to view our dear friend and thousands of us availed of that opportunity. For 20 long months we passed the sad, boarded up shell and wondered what it must look like inside. Images were available on the parish website but still we yearned to see the real thing.

The fact that so many stood patiently in line was testament to how deeply the people felt about their Cathedral. Some friends chose not to visit, saying the experience would be too painful; they'd wait to see the finished product, a fully restored St. Mel's Cathedral.

Listening to comments as we lined up outside the side entrance, it was clear that many were nervous and anxious at the sight that lay ahead of them. Yet, they were determined to see. It really was like going to visit a dear friend in intensive care, following an horrific accident.

On signing a visitors' book, we were in. It took a few silent mesmerizing minutes to adjust my senses. It was the same but changed so utterly, totally. The scale even seemed different. We were led to the "top" of the Cathedral, where a now shattered altar stood.

What stuck me forcibly was the silence, punctuated by barely audible whispers. We were all in shock. The most common utterance seemed to be "Oh, my God". One middle aged lady wept openly as she pointed out to her friend where, for years, she used to sit during Mass. The spot was now a huge, gaping hole. Camera phones clicked and captured the images that would soon be sent to family and friends worldwide.

Eyes were strained as we tried to imagine what it did look like. The once beautiful, ornate, curved ceiling had been replaced by a cold, functional industrial roof. Amazingly, the centre aisle still stood, though on either side massive, deep holes stood open mouthed, having swallowed dozens of pews and large ancient oak beams.

A member of the choir stood beside me. She gazed open eyed as she surveyed the spot where the choir balcony once stood. Now two pillars stand awkwardly, nothing else remains. She turned and moved on, her head shaking slightly. Catching my eye, she whispered "it's just so awful, worse than I imagined" memories of celestial music ringing in her ears.

Many, especially the numerous children present marvelled at how some statues remained almost perfectly intact behind the altar.

Standing there, eyes strained, thoughts and memories whirling, the whole scene was surreal. It was our Cathedral but changed for ever. The



A young boy admires the model of Cathedral at the Open Day in September 2011.

scale and time frame of the reconstruction now appeared to be overwhelming.

Then, as if out of nowhere, a little girl broke the eerie silence. "Look Mammy, that bit wasn't even touched". All of us, stared in the direction of the young girl's finger. High above all of us, up over the pillars, a sample of the reconstruction plastering work stood out bright and bold, brilliantly and breathtakingly white against the black and darkened fire damaged brick work. Some work had been carried out on a small semi-circle window as well as some more delicate plaster work. The mother seemed to sigh a sigh of relief and hope which in turn trickled through all of us gathered there.

Suddenly, the patient in intensive care who came to visit, despite its tubes and machines, showed a definite sign of life if not a faint sign of recovery. Injured and sore, bruised and disfigured but not down and out. Seeing that restoration work did lighten the heavy, brooding atmosphere. It was like watching the dawn break after a long, difficult dark night.

As I exited the Cathedral into the Sunday afternoon light, I too felt a lightness in my step. The silence, horror and disbelief had been replaced by friendly chatter. As we headed home people were now in animated conversation, most of which went something like "At first, it was worse than I thought, it was really hard to look at but when you looked up and saw that a start had been made, it didn't feel as bad as when I first went in. It was definitely worth having an Open Day, definitely worth a look. And now we know, the Cathedral will be back again one day and it'll give us something big to look forward to."

Indeed!