

Christmas of 2009 will never be forgotten for the misfortune that it brought but we are a people of hope and confidence. The local community has been united in loss but also in care for and support of each other. There has been a great outpouring of goodwill and support and a spirit of volunteerism that is deeply appreciated. The walls and steeple of the Cathedral still stand proudly and remind us that all is not lost. We are confident that in time we will achieve a worthy restoration that will again see St. Mel's Cathedral take its place as a beautiful centre for prayer for the people of our parish and diocese.

We will continue to update you on the restoration project through periodic Newsletters and through our Parish website www.longfordparish.com



Project Committee Members:
 Danny Donohoe, Tom Cleary
 Fr. Tom Healy, Seamus Butler,
 John Nugent, Fr. Sean Casey,
 Gerry O'Toole.

Restoration Reserve Fund

Since the fire at St. Mel's Cathedral we have been very much strengthened by the outpouring of goodwill and support that we have received from so many people. In response to people's generosity a separate account had been established in the name of 'Friends of St. Mel's Cathedral'.

If you wish to donate, you can do so:

By Post: to Friends of St. Mel's Cathedral,
 The Presbytery, St. Mel's Cathedral, Longford.

By Bank Transfer: to Bank of Ireland, Longford
 Sort Code: 90-17-73 Account No: 41420562

Please let us know you have made a donation as we would like to acknowledge your contribution. You can contact us at: friendsofstmels@eircom.net



Longford Parish Finance Committee

Pat Chapman, Mary Donlon,
 Francis Hanley,
 Fr. Tom Healy,
 Tom Mulligan, Evelyn Quinn

"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart, and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:14)

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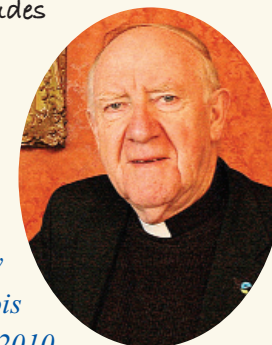
Faithful to the Past - Building for the Future

Messages of sympathy received following the destructive fire in St Mel's Cathedral continue to come. They include, in the great majority of cases, words of encouragement and often donations towards a restored and enhanced new building to replace what we have lost. A very recent and most welcome message of that kind, dated the 16th of February last, has come from the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. The message contains the following words:

"Be assured of my encouragement as you prepare the work of restoration. Trusting that the building will soon be restored as an expression of the holiness of the People of God who worship there, I pray that this Cathedral may always be a sign of their renewed spiritual commitment to the Lord."

The Holy Father begins his message by asking me to convey to the people of the entire Diocese that he is close to us in prayer "during this time of loss and trial". I am delighted to be able to do so and to say in addition that he sent gifts to us including a beautiful chalice and chasuble which I hope will be used in the celebration of the rededication ceremony of the restored St Mel's Cathedral one day. He also sent a donation "as a token of solidarity and encouragement to the people of the Diocese". He concludes his message by imparting his Blessing to us.

I find the kindness that Pope Benedict has shown very encouraging and supportive. I have every reason to believe that all of you will share that feeling.



+ Colm O'Reilly

Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois

March 2010



St. Mel's Cathedral has been the Mother Church of our Diocese since its foundation in 1840. It has long been recognised as one of the most beautiful and gracious Cathedrals in the country. We have been privileged to have inherited this wonderful building as a place of worship both for our Diocese and for Longford parish.

St. Mel's has always been much more than a building of great beauty. It has been the focal point for generations of people who have come to celebrate the key moments of life. So many of our Christian community have treasured memories of celebrating Baptisms, First Holy Communions, Confirmations and Wedding Days.

St. Mel's has also been a place of precious memories for the many families who have come there to bid farewell to their loved ones and lay them to rest.

Our Cathedral has been a particularly wonderful space in which to celebrate the highlights of the Church year. We have wonderful memories of celebrating the Easter and Christmas ceremonies over past years and have enjoyed the privilege of bringing the prayer of our parish to the country through the medium of radio and television on many occasions. We have also had great celebrations in St. Mel's on the occasion of its 150th anniversary in 1990 and in the Jubilee Year 2000.



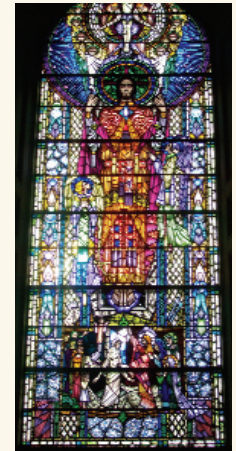
Our celebration of Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve last was a particularly beautiful liturgy, the memory of which lives on in the mind. That the following hours could bring such devastation is hard to believe. Fire broke out around 5 am on Christmas morning. It began at the rear of the building and the hope was that it might have been contained in that area. However that was not to be despite the best efforts of the fire services and as the hours passed by people began to gather in disbelief and in shock. The local community were shattered to have had to witness their beloved Cathedral succumb to flames on what should have been one of the most joyful days of the year.

A comprehensive investigation was undertaken by Garda and insurance forensic experts into the cause of the fire. It was established that the outbreak first arose in an old chimney flue at the rear of the Cathedral and unfortunately broke out into the sacristy through old inspection hatches located behind fitted units. It was concluded that the fire was entirely accidental in origin and could not have been foreseen.



In the midst of the shocking loss there has been some good news. The National Museum were able to recover over 200 pieces from the museum. The items have obviously suffered fire damage and are currently being assessed for restoration.

The two most prestigious stained glass windows in the Cathedral were from the Harry Clarke Studios. Amazingly these two windows were the ones least damaged and are repairable. They are a very important part of the stained glass heritage of the country. In addition, complete templates of all the other stained glass windows are available because of a comprehensive restoration project that was carried out in the mid 1990s.



The statues in the Cathedral were made of plaster and just three have survived, one of them being that of St. Mel. That the statue of our Patron Saint has survived is a beacon of hope for us as we look forward to the Cathedral's restoration.

A Project Committee, with local representation has been appointed to oversee the restoration of the Cathedral. So far the focus of the work has been to ensure the safety of the Cathedral, and the clearing out of the debris. A conservation architect is advising on the preservation of all that is salvageable and the National Museum has provided much help. A temporary roof will be installed so as to keep the building weatherproof.

At this stage we have designed a proposed "roadmap" for the restoration project which gives us some indication of the timeframe over which work will be completed. This draft plan would see the planning and design phase starting later this year, with building works commencing in early 2012 and a scheduled completion date of late 2014.

At this stage, it is impossible to estimate accurately the financial cost of the restoration. We hope, as we advance through the planning stages of the project in the coming months, that we may reach some understanding of the costs involved. From our initial discussions with our insurers, we are optimistic that our insurance cover will be adequate to cover the re-instatement of the Cathedral.

However the restoration affords us an opportunity to consider enhancing/upgrading the facilities at the Cathedral and we have set up a fund to cover these costs. This fund, held in the name of the Bishop, to be known as "Friends of St Mel's Cathedral – Restoration Reserve Fund" will be operated through a separate bank account and managed by Longford Parish Finance Committee.

We are currently accepting donations to this fund and we take this opportunity to thank those who have already contributed. We have taken the decision to hold off on any active fundraising until we have a clearer picture of our plans and relevant costs.

