



A tough year, but

By John Greene

The Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois, Colm O'Reilly, has reiterated his belief that Mass will be said again in St Mel's Cathedral by 2015. "We've been talking five years more or less from day one and I don't see any reason to move away from that to tell you the truth," said Bishop O'Reilly. "I don't think it's going to be 10 years, I would hate to think so. I think people would be rightly impatient at something that would last that long."

He understands there have been frustrations in Longford over a perceived lack of progress but he is certain that not one day has been wasted since the tragic events of December 25 last. "We're working hard, flat out, at this," he says. He is reminded of something Seamus Butler, chairman of the project committee, said earlier in the year about the initial stages of restoration work in the Cathedral: It's like an iceberg, 90 per cent of it will be unseen, but it's there.

It is a cold and wet November morning when we sit down in his office. Bishop O'Reilly reflects on a year which he sums up simply: "It has been tough." He continues: "People say to me that the burning of the Cathedral must have been the worst thing in your time as a bishop. It's not. The worst thing is the scandals that have been there – that's the most painful thing. The other doesn't compare."

"It has been a tough year from that point of view and if I could see two things while I'm still alive, one would be the Cathedral underway and that we [the Church] get back on a more even keel."

"I don't expect the effect of the scandals to be gone quickly at all but I'd like to think the road map for a better time is a little clearer

for us. And that's my hope.: It is his first major interview in some time and Bishop O'Reilly is keen to set the record straight on a lot of things. He knows there is unrest among people who have a lot of fears about the restoration of their beloved Cathedral: that progress on the restoration work is slow; over what plans are drawn up; over how the project will be financed; and over what his own involvement in the restoration will be.

As sheets of rain pound the office windows, he makes it clear that no subject is off limits. He is anxious that people trust that everything that can be done is being done.

"Stage one is over, the interior is safe – all that is done," he says. "Stage two is going to be largely something that won't be visible. It'll be the work of the design team and they will spend hours on drawings. It's my hope that we'll be able to ensure that we'll keep the public in the frame and that there will be an opportunity for people not just to be told what's happening but to say what they think. I would see that the architects would explain things, explain their vision, and that there will then be a period of consultation."

BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS...

ON THE FIRE

I have always compared it to watching a close friend on their deathbed. That's the sort of feeling I had about it, which was actually even stronger when the people started arriving for the normal 8 o'clock Mass and all these tear-stained faces appeared. It added to my sorrow in a way because I saw how grieved they were.



The grandeur of St. Mel's Cathedral is seen here in the beauty of the Sanctuary area which was the site of many celebrations since its remodelling in 1977. Incredibly this image of the Holy Family seen here on the left survived the fire. Our Lady's Altar on the right was made of Carrara marble, part of the original architecture and was erected between 1867 and 1870.

"I don't know how long it takes to do all the drawings and stuff but if you combine that with the consultation process you can talk about nine months without any doubt. There will be huge interest in it and I'd like to think myself that it would be wider than Longford town – it'll be a lot wider than that. And I would like to keep everybody well informed."

It has been a long year, no doubt about that, but as he reflects on what has been accomplished to date, he is happy that all is going as well as he could have hoped. He thinks back to Christmas morning as he stood outside the Cathedral and watched it burn and the torrent of emotions that were running through his head.

He thought it unlikely that any living person knew that building as well as he, or loved it as much as he. He had spent over 40 years around it, as a young curate, as ADM and then as bishop for over a quarter of a century. "It would be hard to be around there so long

and be involved in different phases of its existence, and big days and so on, without having a great affection for the building itself."

He remembers a sense of helplessness and despair washing over him at one point, and then being asked to do an interview for RTE. He agreed to it, reluctantly, and when he looks back now he sees that decision as a turning point for him.

"I'm glad I did that, because the question was posed to me, what did I think the future would hold for St Mel's Cathedral and I said 'It will be restored.'"

That was the first time the thought crystallised for him in that way, and it was from then that his energy began to shift.

"I think it was important that I said that. A close friend of mine wrote to me shortly after Christmas. He has a good turn of phrase and one line in his letter stayed with me: 'I was glad,' he said, 'that you spoke about restoration before the fire had finished its work.' The smoke



Bishop Colm O'Reilly is interviewed by Ciaran Mullooly for RTE News just hours after the fire at St. Mel's Cathedral on Christmas morning.



Monignor Pat Earley looks on in disbelief.

