



much accomplished

Bishop O'Reilly speaks to John Greene



able for us. It is impossible to put a final figure on what it will be; all I know is that I am quite confident that our insurers will see us through this."

There will be fundraising to finish the Cathedral but he says that any money received will "be very carefully allocated and used only within limits so people can be certain it will be well used". Money has already started to come in from "charitable and kind people" who were touched by the horror of it all, and he will soon be asking the parishes to start making a contribution, once a year probably.

And on the subject of his own future, well it's just a matter of time before his successor is named. He won't be Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois when this work is finished – it is, "not in my hands". "When you cross the 75 mark you have to send in a letter of resignation, and my letter has gone in".

"I certainly would like to be around to see it finished – I hope that's not arrogant of me to think that way but I'd like to be around to see it finished and I'd feel very fulfilled if I was. I think I'm happy in a way that I've been able to press forward and be around for some of the significant steps that have been taken so far and that will be taken in the next while and when those are settled and all the consultation is underway I think it will be easier for someone else to come along and slot in and take up the running."

BISHOP COLM O'REILLY SPEAKS...

2010 – HIS YEAR

It has been tough. 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. For me personally the impact of it is far deeper. I say that advisedly. It's not off the top of my head I'm saying it that's how it is.

was still rising from the building behind my back as the journalist was talking to me. It was a sort of spontaneous statement and it came not from reasoning, but from the fact that I couldn't think otherwise. I think it probably was heartening for people, at least for local people here, to hear that at that time."

From those four simple yet powerful words - It Will Be Restored – began the process. The only delay, if you could call it that, was the initial wait as the Gardai investigated the scene. Once it was cleared, this was a matter of some relief to Bishop O'Reilly on two levels: firstly, work could now begin making the structure safe; and secondly, for much more personal reasons, as he had been greatly troubled by the possibility that the fire had been set deliberately.

"I remember announcing that it was not deliberate. We were still having Mass in the Temperance Hall at that stage and I mentioned this to the people and I said this had given me immense relief at which stage they all burst into applause which told me that those worries were high in the minds of people in Longford too."

From that point, he is emphatic that

there have been no delays. There have been countless meetings – an average of one every two weeks he reckons – and every step has been planned carefully. He is determined that he and the project committee will ensure there are no costly mistakes. They are, he says, devoting great attention to detail. "At an early stage, as soon as this committee was put together, we took back the decision making from just being merely ad hoc to a proper structured approach. That's important in the long run. I'd like to think it will stand up when it's analysed."

The policy is simple: he sees the restoration as needing the co-operation of a lot of organisations and he keeps all of them in the loop. So there's the Church, naturally, Longford County Council's planning and heritage sections, the Department of the Environment's heritage section and, of course, the congregation. "There are two huge issues which have to be balanced," he explains. "There's Liturgy and there's Conservation."

This, in essence, is the conflict between the Cathedral as a place of worship and its importance as a national treasure. Bishop O'Reilly says it "was

in a class apart in this country" as a building of importance but for liturgists, its function cannot be ignored. "Primarily it's a place of worship," he says, "it's not primarily a museum. So what you want to do is tread a fine line between the two. That's where the tricky bit is if you like at times."

He continues: "I want to have a Cathedral which is usable in the way that it was as a very suitable place for celebrating big liturgical occasions and restoration for me in the first instance is that. I think people would need to know that – that it's not just for nostalgic reasons that we want to put something back as it was, it's for better reasons, it's for artistic and liturgical reasons really." Over time too has come the realisation that in rebuilding St Mel's Cathedral there are improvements which can be made. "I keep telling people that when the Cathedral was started in 1840, things that we assume now are necessary weren't even thought about. There were no toilets in the Cathedral – there was an outdoor toilet for a long time when I came to Longford first."

He doesn't know to what degree things will be changed – modernised if you like – but he imagines there will

be differences. He points to the choir gallery as an example. When the new gallery was built, it was lowered considerably from its original position when moving it to a different part of the interior may have been a better option, albeit one that was not open to them

Amidst all the certainty, however, there is still plenty of uncertainty – chief among these is what the final cost of the restoration will be and who the bishop overseeing the remainder of it will be.

The Cathedral was insured with Allianz and Bishop O'Reilly says the company has not been found wanting since the morning of the fire. "Our insurers have been saying at all times that it's not appropriate to name sums of money because we don't know what the sums of money will be like. It's very hard to estimate the cost. The insurance company has been paying for stuff but there won't be a final settlement until the end of the process. There's probably about €1.5 million paid over – that's in terms of securing the site and we're also getting insurance for the temporary arrangements we have in place which is very valu-

