



Cathedral FIRE ... PERSONAL STORIES

as told to Tiernan Dolan



PETER KEENAN (ALTAR SERVER)

I was really looking forward to serving Mass on Christmas Eve 2009 because it's such a major event in the church calendar. I was the only boy serving that night and thankfully everything went smoothly during the Mass. On Christmas morning I was faced with the terrible news. I was overcome

by sadness because of all the cherished memories I had of the Cathedral and that it had been part of Longford town for over a century. As I will have stopped serving before the end of 2010, and my last Mass will be in St Mels Centre, I can only hope that Longford's beloved Cathedral will be returned to its former glory.

PAURIC CULLEN (STATION OFFICER, LONGFORD FIRE STATION)

When I received the call there was disbelief on learning that the Cathedral was on fire. Then on arrival seeing the extent of the fire spread, along with the extreme weather conditions, was very traumatic, and then it being Christmas day. Battling against the elements and trying to save this historic building and county landmark was a call to duty never anticipated.



GERRY REILLY (SACRISTAN)

The phone goes at 5.30 am with the news that the Cathedral is on fire. No words can describe the feeling. Walking up St Mels Road all I could feel was the silence of the morning and the roar of the fire. To watch the fire for the next five hours was like watching a very close relative

or friend pass away. Since July 1999 I have lived my life to the spiritual beat of this precious building. To work in the Cathedral as Sacristan is just an honour and a privilege. The Cathedral at the moment stands silent but I know in the not too distant future, the Cathedral's spiritual heart will beat louder than ever before.

LARRY NOLAN (JNR.), CHAPEL STREET - WHO WAS FIRST TO SEE THE FIRE AND DIAL 999 (only one call was made)

I was getting back into bed in the early morning when I noticed what I thought were yellow flashing lights flickering outside. I pulled back the curtains and saw the flames pouring out of the right hand window, on the second storey of the Cathedral. Immediately I rang the Fire Brigade. But within seconds, every window on every storey was a mass of yellow flames. It was absolutely scary and I've spent 12 and a half years in the Brigade myself.



CORRINE Mc CORMACK BUSHELL (CHOIR MEMBER FOR OVER 20 YEARS)

My brother, Brendan, rang me before 8am and I was completely and utterly shocked. I was heartbroken-utterly devastated. What immediately came to mind was the magnificent sound

of the final piece of music played on the pipe organ by Fintan Farrelly, Tocatta by Windor. The sound of the organ lingers still. Later on that fateful morning, painfully aware that all our original music had been lost, I went searching for some copies at home. The first piece I picked up was "Our Own St Mel" written by the late Fr Tommie Devine and Sean Cahill and given to me by the late Philo Kelly. At 11.30 am Mass in the Temperance Hall, we sang this piece, as the smoke billowed. It was extremely emotional.

Christmas Day 2009

'They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed'

By Kitty Hughes

The merry rhythm of Christmas melodies jingled on the radio. The kettle was singing in tune and the toast popped. What was that on the radio...? 'Over to Mary Clare Greally at the scene of the fire in St Mel's Cathedral! The Cathedral on fire? Since early morning! People gathered in shock. We can see the flames from the studio window here!' Alarmed, I rushed to tell the awful, unbelievable news. 'We'll go to town and see what's wrong'. Quickly we wrapped up for it was freezing outside and the snow was hard packed. The countryside around Carriglass was like a Christmas card; skeletal trees wrapped in snow, lights twinkling in windows, a big snowman with balloons waved from a garden. As we rounded the bend at the Bishop's there, above the snowy rooftops and frosted trees, the dome of the Cathedral stood with a great pall of smoke like a hideous black fog alongside.

People were hurrying on foot towards the Cathedral. We joined them on the icy footpath. The smoke had an ominous red glow, the windows shattered, roof gone, flames licking and leaping menacingly inside, the smell of burning, people crying, hugging in disbelief.

An arm came around my shoulder, Fr Brendan. He was trembling from head to foot. They had to evacuate the Presbytery. People gathered round shaking hands, tears and looks of disbelief. The firemen continued to pour water through the broken windows. Flames leaped from where we knew the choir gallery was and the organ. On the

traffic island Fr Healy was surrounded by sympathisers; he seemed dazed yet he talked and greeted each of us by name in his gentle voice - 'early morning - at the rear of the Cathedral-couldn't control it'. All around, cameras were focussed on the flames and the smoke. Word went around that there would be Mass at 11.30 in the Temperance Hall. We walked back to the car ever staring back at the smoke still soaring skywards. Two children came pedalling unsteadily on new bikes up the footpath. Santa had come and their first cycle was to the Cathedral.

Home again still in disbelief. Some of the family went to Mass in Shroind. The rest of us decided to go back to Mass in the Temperance Hall. Now the crowd was greater, the cars less. It was like a scene in the 1940s, families hand in hand walking towards the crossing heavily coated and it seemed almost all were wearing black.

We walked on the road for it was closed to traffic by the Gardaí. The hoist of the fire engine hovered; we blessed ourselves as we passed the Cathedral, an RTE cameraman focussed on someone at the pedestrian crossing and the reporter held the mike for a comment. In the doorway of the hall ushers welcomed us and advised we go up to the front as there were plenty of seats. Strange the further up we went the more full it seemed, one seat at the front, thanks! grand!

Could this be real? I was facing the altar; a trestle table draped in two white cloths, an ornate chalice and lidded ciborium, blue tinted bowls and saucers filled with hosts, two glass jugs with wine and water and a single large candle. Over it a microphone craned awkwardly.

Looking up, members of the choir shivering with cold and shock were assembling on the stark black stage, distributing hymn sheets and whispering messages to each new arrival. Someone reached up a stool to Fintan and he sat at the keyboard.

Fr Tom came with Mass booklets and arranged them on the altar; Fr Padraig took the chairs for the priests and rearranged them for those who were standing. One blue chair remained near the altar. And still the people came, standing along the walls and up on the balcony they crowded. Then from a little alcove the priests entered with Bishop Colm. His face was a portrait of heartbreak, his voice trembling with emotion as he welcomed us to Mass and led us in prayer. 'This is like a death of a dear friend in our community, a great loss ... don't look down... hold up your heads God is with us... we must have faith and trust in God...'. We prayed together, the choir sang 'Glory to God, Glory... I closed my eyes remembering the glorious scenes of Christmas in St Mel's Cathedral; vestments and vessels shimmering in the warm lights, the tapestry with the angels almost alive trumpeting Glory to God, Christmas decorations intertwined with flowers, the Christmas tree with the words *rejoice, hope, and joy*, the crib cosy beside the candle shrines, people dressed in their best, relaxed and at home in God's house.

How sudden the change. How stark.

Two young students read the readings and Bishop Colm, a little more composed now, talked of Midnight Mass and the homily he had prepared - a story of the Nuns who had to flee their burning convent centuries ago and of the relic of that event that



The view from Ballinalee Road on Christmas morning 2009.