



CATHEDRAL FIRE ... PERSONAL STORIES

as told to Tiernan Dolan

INGRID NEVIN (16 YRS)

I was still in bed when I was told. I just couldn't believe it. I had been at midnight Mass and the Cathedral had looked lovely on the night. The Bishop's sermon now sounded so ironic, as he spoke about a fire in a convent. I was shocked and sad. During our Transition Year in the convent, we had a guided tour of the Cathedral and we all had admired the Harry Clarke windows. It was really weird that the whole place was gone. It's still hard to believe.



ANON (80 YRS)

When I turned on the radio from bed, I thought it said it was St Mel's College and I thought the children will have an extra long Christmas holiday. Then when I heard the next News at 8 and realised it was the Cathedral and not the college, I turned over and cried my eyes out....



ANGELA GREER

Anita Hanley told me about it first when I was passing the Anvil. I had seen all the Guards but never thought in my life it could have been the Cathedral. Then when I saw it from Hughie Doyles, I cried my eyes out. Oh, I got such a shock. Sr Dorothy brought me up to the convent and I got 10

Mass there. Then I brought down baskets from the convent for the collection in the Temperance for Masses at 10.30 and 1 o'clock."Good thinking" said Fr Healy.

ROSE DOLAN, (AGED 7) from LONDON AND LONGFORD

I was sad when Daddy told me the news. I remember the side chapel was very fancy and that's where I used to light candles for Granny and Grandad when they were alive, that's when I was very young.



FR. TOM HEALY, ADM

As I look back to the early hours of last Christmas Day, my initial reaction was one of huge shock and sorrow that the beautiful building we've been used to all our lives was going up in smoke before our eyes.

At the beginning we hoped that the fire would stay contained at the rear but as the hours unfolded we watched helplessly as it spread and overcame the Cathedral. A lasting memory for me will be the people gathering united in a shared grief and even in the turmoil of that time speaking with determination of the will to see St. Mel's restored again. I recall too our impromptu celebration of Mass in the Temperance Hall which was a great focal point for us to gather as a community, to comfort each other, and to turn to the Lord in prayer for some kind of reassurance on such a special day for all Christian people. In the days and weeks after the fire we were overwhelmed by the messages of goodwill and support from all over the country and internationally. As will be outlined elsewhere in this publication, the task of setting up the alternative facilities was a project that took on great momentum in the succeeding weeks. We will be always grateful for the enormous expressions of goodwill that were so evident at that time and indeed since then.



Crowd looks on at blaze.

remains still in Nuns Island in Galway. It was the Offertory and Emer Barry sang 'O Holy Night' like an angel calling us from the desolation outside. At the altar Bishop Colm sat on the blue chair hands to his face, deep in thought. Spontaneous applause for Emer and the choir and we prayed together for all who had helped that morning; the Firemen and Gardaí, the neighbours and friends.

Now the priests were all gathered around the altar with the Bishop. Fr Brendan held the great Mass book and gently Bishop Colm guided each tearful priest through the Great Eucharistic Prayer.

The sign of peace was real and genuine, warm and tearful. Then ushers hastily worked an orderly queue for Holy Communion and all the while the choir sang the familiar hymns and carols including a lovely solo by Maurice Murphy.

Fr Padraig read a message of thanks from the priests for the heroic work done to try to save the Cathedral.

Then Bishop Colm bade us 'Go in Peace to celebrate Christmas with family and friends and a promise that we will together rebuild our beloved St Mel's Cathedral'. The Hall echoed with warm applause for him and the priests and our choir and then the congregation surged to shake their hands and assure them of our help and support.

Outside again strong hands helped less able avoid slipping on the icy footpath. The smell of burning lingered in the sharp frosty air. As we crossed the road the sound of something falling came from inside the Cathedral. A small flame flickered near the top of the front door mocking the fireman's hose. "It's all gone - it will take years to re build - the altar, the museum - it was so beautiful!"

Home via the cemetery for our traditional visit to the family graves. Snow swirled around us as we placed the holly wreath with its shiny leaves and red berries on the white snow. "God, if they were here now what would they say 'the Cathedral on fire, burned to the ground.'" Memories of my father and mother cycling from Esker to Midnight Mass and telling us of the wonder of it all next morning over breakfast.

Nine o'clock that night, all is calm under a starry sky. We drive again to Longford,

only three cars in the car park now. The fire brigade has left and a Garda car stands sentinel near the presbytery gate. A few people peeping through the railings. The smell of timber burning, a sudden thud from inside sends a shiver through me. No lights and strange, from the front in the moonlight the Cathedral didn't look any different at all!

But at the side, stained glass windows

were now gaping holes periscoped on the devastation we imagined was inside.

But there was no roof to shelter it from the icy chill though the dome stood tall. Let it be strong we prayed.

Silently we drove home. On the car radio a newsreader brought 'the bitter news' from Longford to late night listeners at home and away.



Interior view of St. Mel's Cathedral prior to the fire.