



Defiance built the Cathedral and defiance can restore it

The symbol of the indestructible Irish spirit that was St Mel's will be again, writes John Greene (Sunday Independent, December 27th, 2009)

AS PEOPLE stepped out into the freezing temperatures late on Thursday the talk was of one of the most memorable nights in the long history of St Mel's Cathedral.

The traditional Midnight Mass had just been celebrated and many in the packed congregation commented afterwards that they couldn't remember a more poignant ceremony, adorned by the Cathedral Choir and the organ-playing of Fintan Farrelly.

Bishop Colm O'Reilly, too, had struck a chord with them. He is unquestionably one of the country's most understated and low-key bishops, who has overseen the Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois with quiet efficiency for 26 years, far from the glare of

local and national media.

But on Christmas Eve he held the congregation spellbound with a moving homily on the darkness facing the Church. Few present could recall a time when his oratory had been so captivating.

At the heart of his sermon was a story about an attack on a convent nearby, at what's now known as Bethlehem Bay on the banks of the Shannon, on Christmas morning 1642. The convent was burned to the ground.

Only hours later, Bishop O'Reilly stood outside the walls of St Mel's Cathedral watching in tears as flames raged inside it.

Word began to spread around Longford town from 7am on Christmas morning of a fire at the Cathedral and people began to flock to the scene.

As morning light arrived it was immediately clear to those who had gathered that the scale of this disaster was beyond their worst fears.

St Mel's Cathedral, and every single thing inside it, would be destroyed.

As one onlooker said, the historical life of

Longford would be lost, in a town where so little has been preserved. Yesterday morning, when 8am Mass would normally have been celebrated there, priests and parishioners stood and wept openly.

To the outside world this is the sad destruction of one of the country's best known places of worship. (Last year, St Mel's was one of the most-visited 'free' tourist attractions in Ireland.)

To the people of Longford it is so much more than that.

It is about more than religion too. Built either side of the Famine in the 1840s, anyone who grew up in Longford became aware of its history from an early age, about how thousands of people in the diocese's 41 parishes had literally contributed their last ha'penny to its construction and about how its opening in 1856 was a symbol of hope to an impoverished nation.

Its influence on life in Longford goes beyond being simply the seat of the diocese. My mother grew up in its shadow, and pretty much every milestone in her life -- from oc-

casions of great joy to times of grief -- was enacted in or around it. On Christmas morning she was one of those who stood and watched in shock and distress, her emotion barely contained, as the horror unfolded.

I was baptised there, made my Communion and Confirmation there, I was an altar boy there, and I was married there.

For 13 years I walked past it going to school, its car park was the pick-up point when we went to football games and its gates were a meeting point for me and my friends.

Modelled on a church in Paris, and containing priceless artefacts and historical documents that can never be replaced, St Mel's Cathedral was a monument to the Irish spirit, and to the people of a small county.

After 153 years, this building is not done yet. It's construction was an act of defiance in times of enormous hardship and Bishop O'Reilly has pledged to restore it.

My uncle phoned me last night having just visited the scene again. "It struck me as I stood there," he said, "that there was a noble defiance about it; its story is not done yet."

