



A parish united in



William Farrell Photography

Ready for the First Mass at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.



The Sanctuary at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.



Mass at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre during first weekend of use.

Eugene McGee chats to Fr. Tom Healy

In the list of titles in the Catholic clerical system not many people know exactly what an Adm is. The title stands for Administrator. In the diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnois there are only two Adms, who oversee the two largest parishes, Longford and Athlone. So when Fr. Tom Healy became Adm in Templemichael parish five and a half years ago most people saw him as a pastoral priest rather than an 'Administrator'. Then suddenly and without warning on December 25, 2009 he became a real administrator because he was the man who was faced with the direct responsibility of coping with the disastrous consequences of the gutting by fire of St. Mel's Cathedral. Fr. Healy therefore moved more to being a real administrator than just a pastoral priest in the public eye even though he continued carrying out his previous church duties.

'Well, this change of workload was literally thrust upon me when the fire occurred' said Fr. Tom. 'Suddenly I was dealing with the Fire Brigade, the Gardai, and the Insurance Company and most importantly, along with my colleagues, trying to provide a facility for Mass-goers because the fire had been a terrible traumatic time for them and indeed for myself and all the priests and staff of the Parish. We considered renting an empty commercial building, we thought about using the vacant Connolly Barracks but a few days after the fire we discovered the little chapel in St. Mel's College which was previously used by the boarders and then we were offered the use of the fine gymnasium in the college by the college Principal, Damian Cunningham.

The close proximity of the College to the Cathedral encouraged us to choose both buildings and extensive alterations and refurbishment saw us ending up with two excellent facilities. We called on the members of the Pastoral Council, the Temperance Hall Committee and the Finance Committee and after a lot of hard work carried out mainly by a small army of volunteers, the gym was transformed into a wonderful spacious temporary church for weekend ceremonies and the old college chapel was restored to its grandeur of 100 years ago for daily use'.

With the needs of the parish met by these developments it was time for Fr. Healy and Bishop Colm O'Reilly to face the daunting task of dealing with a completely destroyed magnificent Cathedral dating back to 1840. The insurance company, Allianz Insurance, was a huge help in signposting the way forward. A working Project Committee comprising the Bishop, Fr. Healy, Fr. Sean Casey, John Nugent and Seamus Butler was established and some order and method began to emerge helped by the appointment of the Project Managers.

Allianz took charge of all the emergency work in the short-term. The general idea at that time was to safeguard anything that could be saved; from the large pillars on both sides of the church



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Bishop Colm O'Reilly and Fr. Tom Healy.

to artefacts in the museum that had been damaged but could be restored. All that 'clearing out' and 'making safe' work went on for over six months and was largely completed by last July when the temporary roof was installed to protect the building from the elements.

Said Fr. Healy: 'The amount of clearing and making safe work that had to be done by the Hearty firm was extensive. The pillars for instance, had to be encased in steel to safeguard them. We are drawing close to the initial stage of plan-

ning our refurbished building with the appointment of the Architect's, Quantity Surveyors, Structural, and Mechanical & Electrical Engineers being imminent.

'It is important to explain to the people the sheer complexity of this operation. Passersby only see the outer shell of the Cathedral and on the surface it looks like not too much damage was done. Believe me that is not the case. The entire building inside was gutted from top to bottom with the appearance of the sound outer walls betraying the destruction inside and underneath and even visualizing what will have to be done is an enormous task.

'But on the other hand the rebuilding will open many exciting possibilities for its future use. Simple things like installing lifts, eliminating steps, etc. can be considered and of course more fundamental ideas will also be brought forward for consideration. Will the sanctuary remain as it was? Where will the organ and choir be located? Can the congregation be brought closer to the altar? I have no doubt there will be many exciting ideas and of course we in the Presbytery will welcome suggestions. And practical things like using solar power from the new roof to provide energy for heating, maybe landscaping the surrounding areas outside and such like will have to be considered. While retaining the traditions of the original building there are many other innovative ideas to think about,' he added.

Fr. Healy was at pains to point out that there will be consultation with the public at all times with Open Days and other forms of communication as the project starts developing. The Cathedral is of course a listed building so the Department of Heritage will also have a major part to play in what can or cannot be changed. Parts of the project may also



The Welcoming entrance at St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.