

# Reviews

## **IRISH CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN THE ERA OF VATICAN II** by Richard Hurley, Dublin: *Dominican Publications* 2001, PP 132, £50.79.

This beautifully produced book is of as much theological interest as architectural; or, rather, given that the focus is on the new churches and the re-ordering of old ones in Ireland since the Second Vatican Council the two are inseparable.

The author, a practising architect in Dublin, with an international reputation, has been associated with well over 120 liturgical projects over the last thirty years. He has written and lectured extensively on the subject. He is currently chairman of the advisory committee on sacred art and architecture to the Irish Episcopal Conference. He is completely at home in the documents of Vatican II.

The initiative for change in church design came from within the profession, years before Vatican II: first at a symposium in 1955 organised by the Royal Institute of Architecture in Ireland; then in exhibitions of recent French church architecture (Maynooth, 1957) and of recent churches in Germany (touring Dublin, Belfast, Cork and Glenstal in 1962). Catholics in Ireland were, or could and should have been, far better prepared than most of us in the United Kingdom.

Richard Hurley allows, nonetheless, that many of the new churches built since the 1960s, particularly in the urban areas where growing population meant the demand was greatest, exhibit 'a lack of real quality'. As regards re-ordering old interiors, absence of leadership by bishops led 'in many instances' to projects of 'refurbishment' which have proved disastrous.

The elder Pugin (Welby, not Weleby), who died, it is easy to forget, as early as 1852, not quite 40 years of age, was immensely influential after Catholic Emancipation (1829), particularly through his disciple J.J. McCarthy (1817-1882).

The interior of Pugin's 'masterpiece', in Ireland, St Mary's Cathedral, Killarney, was reordered in 1970. This has been 'a bone of contention ever since', Hurley says; though the pictures of what it was like before and what it is like now, suggest that it is a great improvement, sensitively carried out, certainly much more so than some of Pugin's churches one has visited in England.

The one Puginesque church in Edinburgh, by the way, designed by James Gillespie Graham with the young Pugin's assistance (Pugin was only 27 when they started, Graham already 62), has been totally secularised inside. Renamed The Hub, it now houses the Edinburgh International Festival offices. Built as a Presbyterian church in the early 1840s, it was abandoned in 1984. It is stunningly sited, at the opening of the climb up to the Castle, with its beautifully detailed Gothic exterior

completely intact.

Pugin was not particularly happy with the Irish clergy: 'I see no progress of ecclesiastical ideas in Ireland. I think if possible they grow worse. It is quite useless to attempt to build true churches, the clergy have not the least idea of using them properly'.

The Gothic was followed by the Classic revival (Hurley picks out and admires St Mary's Dominican church, Pope's Quay, Cork), then the 'Hiberno-Romanesque' (mostly unsuccessful, he thinks, except for the Honan Chapel at University College, Cork).

Among the truly 'modern' churches, Hurley greatly admires Christ the King, Turner's Cross, Cork (1927), 'at least thirty years ahead of its time', 'a dramatic architectural accomplishment solely from the vision of its architect', Barry Byrne, who did not live to see it; and how or why the then Bishop of Cork ever employed him Hurley regards as an 'enigma'.

In the aftermath of Vatican II scores of churches were built. Some of the finest were designed by Liam McCormick, particularly in the wilds of Donegal and Kerry ('He was apparently in no need of philosophy, theology or liturgy, upon which to develop his art, instead he felt his way through the problem by manipulation of light and shade, form and materials').

Hurley greatly admires St Dominic's, Athy, Co. Kildare (John Thompson and Partners, 1965): 'a church of revolutionary appearance', which 'still owes its liturgical spirit to the Dominican Order'.

The Cathedral in Galway, dedicated in 1965, was commissioned in 1949. Again the architect, John J. Robinson, did not live to see it. He was not an admirer of modern architecture. According to Hurley: 'Galway was unlucky in so far as the cathedral was built at the wrong time and probably in the wrong place — the site of the old jail, not a very good starting point'. Designed in a 'hybrid Romanesque style', it 'has a gloomy presence in the city, being constructed of greenish grey Galway limestone'. 'Although impressive in its scale, Galway Cathedral proved to be a dead end', no match (Hurley thinks) for Liverpool Cathedral (the Anglican one!) or Westminster Cathedral. Nevertheless, as he notes, it will 'almost certainly become a listed building in the near future, and then it will be part of our heritage'.

Towards the end of the book, discussing post Vatican II refurbishments, the author riskily devotes two full pages and two photographs to his own 'major intervention' in the Cathedral of St Mary and St Anne, Cork. This was in 1995, redoing the 'very controversial reordering' of 1963. Hurley aimed at a 'restoration' which 'as far as possible respected the patrimony of the building's heritage', adding a new sunken baptismal area, for example, but also bringing back thirty carved oak statues by the famous Cork sculptor John Hogan, which 'went missing' in 1964 but were actually only dumped in the crypt.

With the author's dry asides and total lack of strident lamentation, though his views are never in doubt, this beautifully illustrated volume contains much that is well worth pondering.

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