

# **CATHEDRAL OF THE ASSUMPTION THURLES**

## **An Historical Outline**





*East Transept stained-glass windows*

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**THURLES 2005**



# FOREWORD

Céad míle fáilte go dtí Árd Eaglais Deastógála na Maighdine Beannaithe. Whether you come as a parishioner or a visitor since the recent renovations, I know that you would like to have a guidebook or souvenir of your visit.

On your way in you passed a statue. It is that of Archbishop Patrick Leahy whose vision and courage succeeded in providing the people of this Diocese with a truly magnificent Cathedral. The town itself has adopted the title of “The Cathedral Town” because of Dr. Leahy’s ambitious project in very difficult times not too long after the Great Famine.



Dr. Leahy did not live to see the Cathedral officially opened but he did manage to have the building almost completed before his death in 1875. He is buried under the Sanctuary between the Tabernacle of Giacomo Della Porta, pupil of Michaelangelo, in which he took so much pride, and the Altar which was, *“without exaggeration the finest from this to Rome”*, as he put it.

Dr. Leahy personally collected the funds for the project in every church throughout the Diocese. While admiring his courage and perseverance, one cannot fail to be impressed also by the generosity of his people at a time when money was very scarce. It can be truly said that this Cathedral was built from the pennies of the poor. It was their faith and devotion which made this splendid building possible.

In recent times the people of the Diocese have, in their turn, proved equally generous in enabling us to conserve and restore the legacy which the good people of the third quarter of the nineteenth century left us. They are proud to see the Mother Church of Cashel & Emly restored to its original splendour.

The most famous of all monumental inscriptions is that over the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul’s Cathedral, London. He had been the architect of St. Paul’s during the thirty-five years of its construction. He was buried there twelve years later. His son placed this inscription, *“Si monumentum requiris, circumspice”*, *“If you seek his memorial look around you”*. This inscription would not be out of place over the tomb of Archbishop Patrick Leahy.



When you enter the Cathedral, your attention will be caught by the Latin inscription on the chancel arch. It reads, "*Domine dilexi decorum domus tuae et locum habitationis gloriae tuae*", *I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of your house and the place where your glory dwells.*

These lines come from Psalm 26. It seems that these were originally the prayer of a pilgrim who had entered the Temple in Jerusalem to escape from his enemies who were making false accusations against him. He sought the safety and peace of God's House. You, as a visitor or worshipper, also seek the peace and tranquillity of the Lord's House. It is good to get away, even for a time, from the hustle and bustle, the noise and the clamour of our busy world. It is good to kneel or sit in the Lord's presence and be led by the beauty of the building and its furnishings, to communicate with the Lord in the Tabernacle. "*Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will refresh you*", Jesus invites us.

I am pleased to know that you will be able to have a memento to take with you in the form of this booklet. Could I leave you with a traditional prayer which our ancestors said when they entered the church. I have taken the liberty to adapt it to this setting:

Ag dul isteach san eaglais

Umhláim duitse, a Íosa Críost;  
Umhláim duitse, a Mhaighdean ghlórmhar;  
Umhláim duitse, a eaglais Dé;  
Umhláim duitse, a Árdeaglais na Deastógála.

My respects to you, Jesus Christ;  
My respects to you, glorious Virgin;  
My respects to you, church of God;  
My respects to you, Cathedral of the Assumption.

Le gach dea ghuí anois is amach anseo.

+ Dermot Clifford.

Most Rev. Dermot Clifford, DD,  
Archbishop of Cashel & Emly.



# MESSAGE FROM CATHEDRAL ADMINISTRATOR

Although from the neighbouring parish of Moyne/ Templetuohy I remember as a young boy attending Mass every Sunday at 7.00 a.m. in this Cathedral church. Having studied for the priesthood in St. Patrick's College, Thurles this Cathedral played an important part on my vocation journey as a place of prayer and liturgical celebration. Being appointed to the Cathedral Town in 1995 has again brought me into communication with the Mother Church of the Archdiocese of Cashel and Emly. This threefold influence was not planned but happened.



The huge project of restoration (2001-2004) at a cost of €2.1 million has highlighted the love, respect and pride that the people of Thurles parish and the Archdiocese have for this monument to the glory of God. The work of restoration also has a threefold connection. It links us with the past, with the vision of Archbishop Leahy in the building of a Cathedral worthy of the Archdiocese. In the present we are united with the care and protection of our inheritance. We are linked to the future as we hand on to the next generation what was ours to inherit and protect.

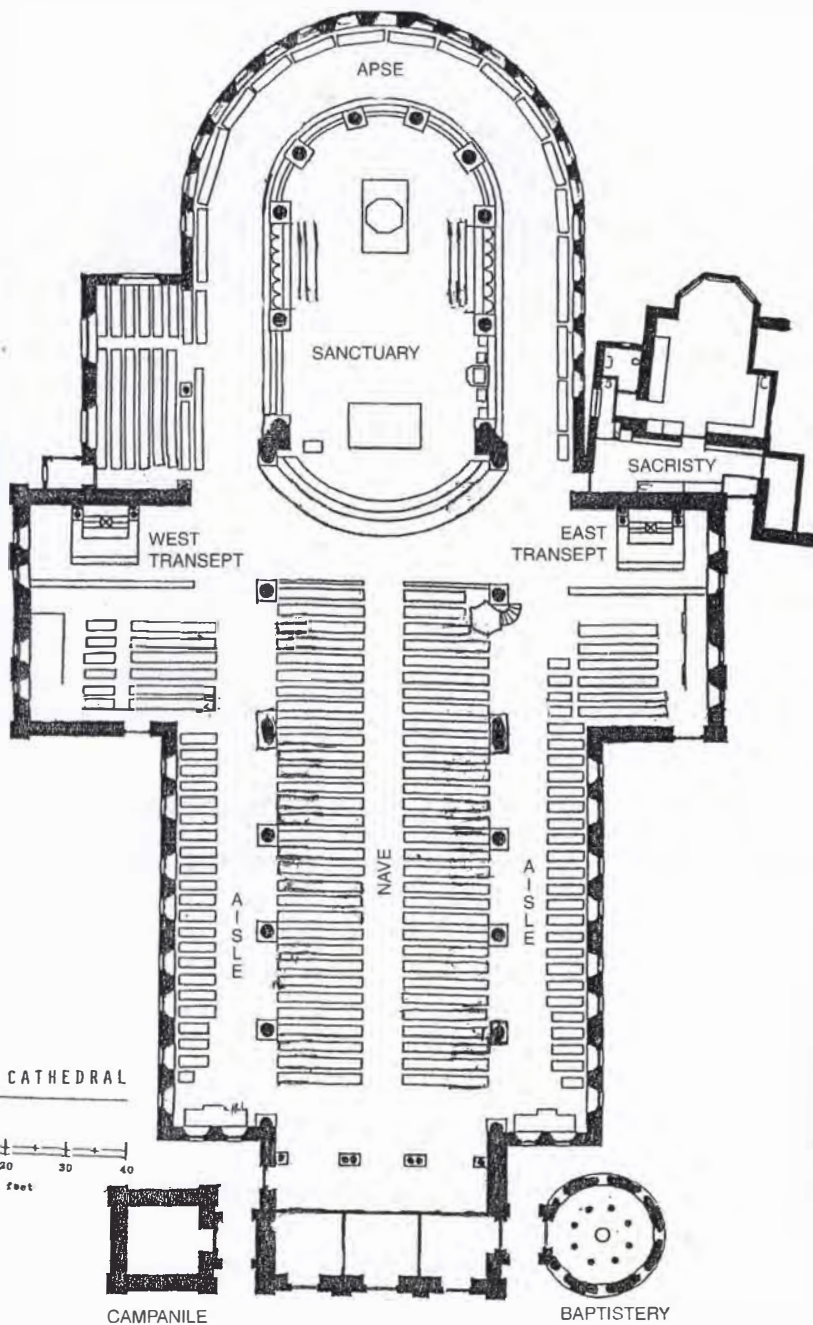
I hope, as you visit this beautiful Cathedral, that you will be in awe of its beauty, mindful of its history and aware of its Sacred Presence.

To all involved in the work of restoration and innovation and in the compilation of this brochure I say, míle buíochas.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Eugene Everard'. The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined.

Fr. Eugene Everard, Adm.

## INTERIOR PLAN OF CATHEDRAL





## Worship in early times

There is evidence of Christian worship in the Thurles area stretching back for a period of almost 1500 years. Early examples are the founding in 580 by St. Mochoemog of a monastery at Liathmore (Middle Piece) near Two Mile Borris and the subsequent founding of another monastic establishment at Derrynaflan, near Littleton, the site of the discovery of the Derrynaflan Hoard in 1980. Up to the Synod of Rathbreasail (possibly near Drom) in c. 1111, the Irish Church was largely organised on monastic grounds, with local churches often being served by monks from nearby monasteries. The reforms introduced by that Synod saw the Church take the shape more familiar to us today, with the introduction of parishes and dioceses staffed mostly by secular clergy.

The modern parish of Thurles is actually formed by the amalgamation of a number of medieval parishes, Thurles, Athnid, Rahealty and Shyane. The main church in Thurles was on the site of the present St. Mary's Church of Ireland (now incorporating the Famine and War Museums) and was also dedicated to Our Lady. As well as church ruins at Athnid, Rahealty, Shyane, Brittas and Rathmanna, there is also evidence of churches having been established at Cill Bhrighde (Abbey Road), Killinan and Kilrush west of



*Scene in a chapel at Thurles. From the Illustrated London News, August, 1848.*

the town and Coolaculla, Kilmilchon, Athloman, Kyle and Archerstown to the east. These are, most likely, monastic cells, which pre-date the secularisation of the Irish Church in Norman times. Finally, there are also two holy wells in Thurles parish. One is at Tobernaloo, off Seskin Lane, whilst the other is at Lady's Well near Thurles Golf Club. The latter was a well-known place of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. Indeed, on 8 July 1432, letters patent were issued by James, Earl of Ormond, Lord of the Liberty of Tipperary, to Richard O'Hedian, Archbishop of Cashel, granting safe conduct to all pilgrims who wished to visit Thurles on the Feast of the Assumption and over the three days immediately preceding and succeeding that feast.

At the time of the Reformation there were two churches in Thurles town, namely St. Mary's Parish Church and the Carmelite Priory. St. Mary's church, which had been under the stewardship of the Abbey of Owney (Abington) near Murroe, was secularised as a result of the dissolution of the monasteries. As a result, St. Mary's fell into disrepair and, despite being rebuilt in the interim, had been reduced to a roofless ruin by the 1780s. The church was rebuilt again in 1784-89, but by 1820 it had been replaced by the present structure.



The other early church in the town was at the Carmelite Priory. This was erected in Thurles by the Butlers of Ormond for the Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel (commonly known as the Carmelites). This Priory was erected on the east bank of the River Suir, on the site currently occupied by the Cathedral. The Priory flourished in the town until it was suppressed by King Henry VIII in 1540.

Very little is known about worship in Thurles in the first hundred years or so following the Reformation. This was a period of great political as well as religious change. The enforcement of anti-Catholic legislation in a particular area depended largely on

*Silver chalice dating from 1743.*

*Given to the Chapel by Mr James Murphy and his wife Elizabeth.*

the circumstances and the outlook of the local ruling families. This led to periods of sporadic and varying degrees of persecution, interspersed with considerable periods of tolerance, the worst excesses being experienced during the Cromwellian era, between the execution of King Charles I and the restoration of the monarchy under King Charles II. During periods of persecution, priests were sheltered by the people and celebrated Mass in isolated places (Mass rocks) or in safe houses. In times of tolerance, however, Mass could be celebrated openly by priests, though bishops were not so freely tolerated. With the restoration of Charles II, there began a period of relative tolerance, which saw the building of a number of small thatched "Mass-houses" throughout parts of the country, one of which is thought to have stood in the yard of what is now the 'Binn Lisin' public house on Cathedral Street.

## Mathew Chapel

The history of worship in Thurles in penal times was largely connected to the fortunes of the Butlers of Ormond and the Mathew family, who owned the town and a large tract of the surrounding area. James Butler, eldest son of the Earl of Ormond, was created Viscount Thurles in 1536, a title thereafter held by the eldest son of that family, pending succession to the Earldom. James was granted the property of the Carmelite Priory upon its dissolution. James' great grandson, Thomas, married Elizabeth Poyntz in 1608 and they took up residence in Thurles Castle. Following the death of Thomas in a shipwreck, Elizabeth Lady Thurles married George Mathew of Radyr and Llandaff, South Wales in 1620, as a result of which the Butler properties in Thurles passed into the Mathew family. The Mathews remained largely a Catholic family and became protectors and patrons of the Catholic clergy in the town during this period. Indeed, the Mathew family was instrumental in the building of a Catholic chapel on the site of the former Carmelite Priory in the town. This largely explains why the archbishops of Cashel transferred their residence to Thurles.

Archbishop William Burgatt (1669-1675) is thought to have resided in Thurles for part of his ministry, but it was not until the 1750s that the archbishops of what had by then become the Archdiocese of Cashel & Emly moved to the town on a permanent basis. The first such incumbent was Archbishop James Butler I (1757-1774). His successor, Archbishop James Butler II (1774-1791) was the author of the famous *Butler's Catechism*. In his *Visitation Book* Archbishop Butler I gives the following interesting account of the Mathew Chapel in 1759:

1759. Thurles Aug 8 & 9. In the care of R[nd] Michael Fihan, visited by G. Jam[es], Arbp of Casshel.

Rnd Michael Fihan exhibited a pixis of plate of a good fashion & inclosed in a turn'd box of wood with a corporal under it, the oil stocks of plate well replenish'd. A large tabernacle narrowly inspected into, the division of ye ciborium clean & neatly lined with scarlet silk, the division of ye remonstrance the same, which division has two boxes of relicks of the bones of holy martyrs brought from Rome by Dr. John Butler who exhi[bi]ted their proper authenticks sign'd & sealed by the then cardinal vicar of Rome, Gaudagni. He gave sd relicks to Dr. James, Archbp of Cassel. Sd tabernacle has good carved doors well hung with proper locks, & the keys well secured outside & gilt with gold leaf. Six brass candlesticks washd or what they call Freinch plate; also a large lamp of same kind. A brass branch. The sd tabernacle etc., the gift of Mrs. Margaret Matthew al[i] as Butler, bought in Paris for fifty pound, brought home & fixed at ye expence of the parish-enors & others – the names are enroled in the ordinarys papers.

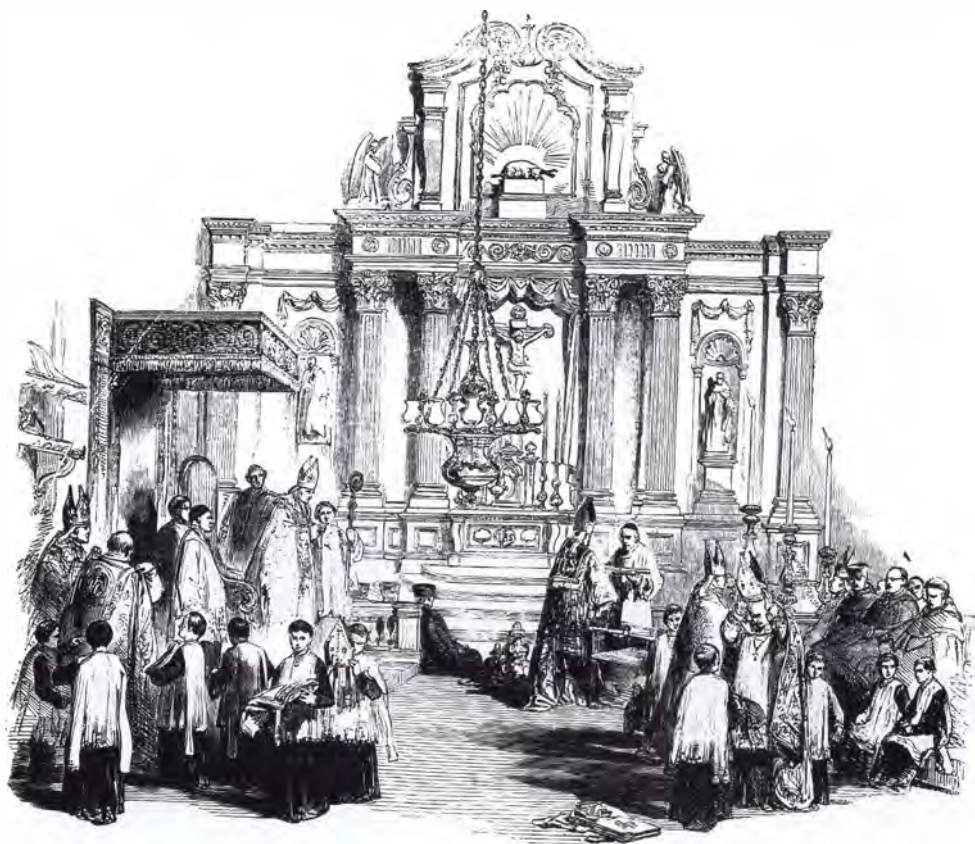
A right good stol & ritual, his own property. One charming alter stone, 13 inches square, marked thus IHS & another smaller with the same marks, 8 by 6 inches, a corner of which is broke off. Both the above are fixed on ye alters of the chapple. 2 small portable ones, a broken one not fit for use. Sd Rnd pastor has all ye constitutions, catechisms, prones etc. No debts of pious legacies, offices, Masses etc. He registers babtized.

## The Big Chapel

The last of the religious disabilities affecting Catholics were abrogated in 1793. This newly arrived religious toleration enabled Archbishop James Butler II's successor, Archbishop Thomas Bray (1792 – 1820), to replace the *Mathew Chapel* in 1807 with what became known as the *Big Chapel*. This building served as the parish church of Thurles until it was replaced by the present cathedral later in the century.

The *Big Chapel* was T-shaped and extended 120 feet from the front doors of the present cathedral. It was also 120 feet wide at the transepts. The building was 34 feet in height and had a 20-foot entrance porch. At its head stood the 100-foot high tower of the old





*Interior of Big Chapel, showing Bishops' robing during the Synod of Thurles (1850).  
From the Illustrated London News, Sept. 1850.*

Carmelite Priory. The present parish church in Drom is modelled on the *Big Chapel*, though the Drom structure was built to a smaller scale.

Unlike its ultimate successor, the *Big Chapel* had little to offer in the area of architectural merit. The façade was of cut stone, incorporating a bell arch in the gable. The façade also contained a clock, the gift of Archbishop Patrick Everard (1820-1821). This clock was later transferred to the present cathedral, until replaced by a four-faced mechanism by Archbishop Croke in 1895. The interior of the chapel was plain, with no interior seating, which can clearly be seen from an engraving in the **Illustrated London News** of August 1848. However, this lack of seating, together with galleried accommodation, ensured that the church, though half the size of the present cathedral,



could accommodate an equal number of worshippers. The chapel also had reserved accommodation for both the Ursuline and Presentation Sisters, whose convents adjoined it on either side.

Despite the primitive furnishing of the nave, the chancel of the *Big Chapel* was ornately fitted out with a wooden altar and reredos in the baroque style, over which stood a painting of the Last Supper. These can be seen in a further engraving from the **Illustrated London News** made at the time of the holding of the Synod of Thurles in August 1850. The side altars also had paintings hanging overhead, the Agony in the Garden being depicted on the epistle side and the Madonna and Child on the gospel side. A fine organ was installed by Archbishop Robert Laffan (1823-1833) in 1826 at a cost of £1,000. This was later transferred to the present cathedral and upgraded, having an extra manual fitted.

The total cost of the *Big Chapel* amounted to £10,000, a formidable sum in its day. It was dedicated to St. Patrick on 12 January 1809 and at that time was regarded as the finest Catholic church in Ireland.



*Cathedral interior c1910.*

## The Cathedral

When Dr. Patrick Leahy was appointed archbishop in 1857 the *Big Chapel* was the building which he inherited as his cathedral church. Contemporary documents are scarce but it appears from a diary kept by a priest of the diocese (Father James O'Carroll) that by 1862 Dr. Leahy was openly speaking of a new and more worthy cathedral for Thurles. We do not know precisely in what way he was dissatisfied with the *Big Chapel* but it is clear from surviving letters and sermons that he believed that the ancient metropolitan diocese, of which he was archbishop, was deserving of a new and truly impressive mother church. As country, Church and people slowly recovered from the catastrophe of the famine a wave of cathedral and church building had gripped the entire land.

The Cathedral of the Assumption, which replaced the *Big Chapel* owes its existence primarily to Dr. Patrick Leahy, Archbishop from 1857 until 1875. The architect chosen for the enterprise was James Joseph McCarthy (1817-1882). The project was a partnership, if sometimes an uneasy one, between the two men. A few remarks on their backgrounds may, therefore, be useful.

## Archbishop Leahy's Plan

In Fr. Christy O'Dwyer's fine biography of Dr. Leahy (M.A. thesis, Maynooth 1970) we meet a man of considerable intelligence and firmness of purpose. For present purposes two points, in particular, may be mentioned. Firstly, there was the building and engineering connection in his family. His father had been county surveyor for the West Riding of Cork and two of his brothers also became surveyors and followed careers which took them as far afield as Ottoman Turkey and South Africa. We can be sure that it was this family environment that provided the future archbishop with the confidence and decisiveness that he later demonstrated in his dealings with McCarthy.

A second factor to be borne in mind is Dr. Leahy's strong Italian leaning. Very much an ultramontanist, he wrote in



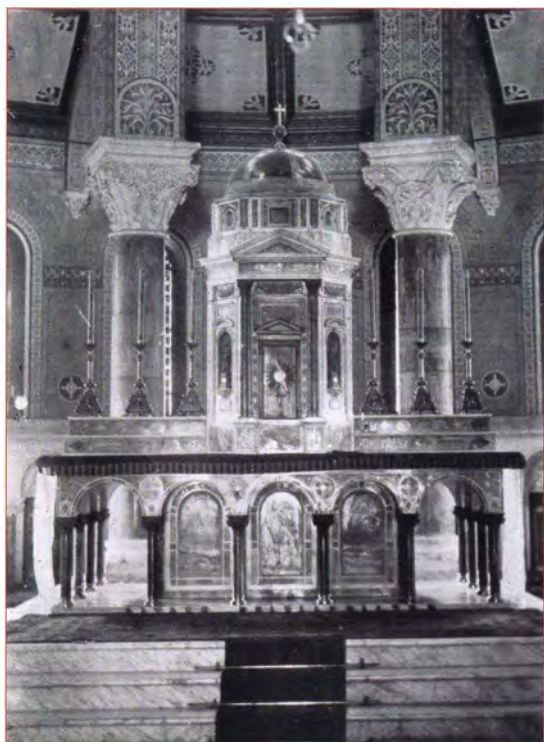
*The Most Rev. Patrick Leahy, D.D.,  
Archbishop of Cashel, 1857-1875.*

a letter of 1861 that he wished for “Roman usages... Roman chant, Roman ceremonies, Roman everything”. This, then, is the senior figure in the partnership: a confident, technically-knowledgeable and Italianist archbishop.

Our second personality is J.J. McCarthy, the leading church architect in Ireland of the time. He was a disciple of the great Augustus Welby Pugin and secretary of the Irish Ecclesiological Society, a body which included several bishops among its members. Ecclesiology was the ideology behind the scholarly medieval revival in art and architecture in the nineteenth century. Briefly stated, it was a system of belief and feeling which held that the medieval was the finest period in Christianity’s history, a time when religion, art and society formed a great organic unity. The splendid cathedrals of that time, such as Chartres and Rheims, exemplified a truly Christian and sacred spirit, which the classical tradition could never emulate. It was further held that the revival of these medieval forms with reverence and scholarly correctness would, in some measure, create a new unity of religion, art and community.

Bearing McCarthy’s ecclesiology in mind we may be sure that a church he was called on to design would be in a revivalist gothic mode unless, of course, he was instructed otherwise by a strong-willed client. The reality is that the great majority of McCarthy’s churches are in this mode. Prior to the Thurles commission he had built St.Patrick’s Cathedral in Armagh (a design by another architect which he took over and altered). He was also responsible for St. Macartan’s in Monaghan, begun in 1861 and many years building. St.Macartan’s is a strong and imposing design and one of McCarthy’s finest buildings. Nearer home we find him building the parish church in Killenaule, begun in 1858. All these are in gothic style.

In the case of Thurles, although no documents concerning the matter survive, we may be reasonably confident that it was the archbishop who decided on the Italianate building. The choice of the cathedral complex at Pisa as model may also have been his. It provided an ecclesiologically sound medieval romanesque form and was, from the archbishop’s point of view, very Italian. Another church of McCarthy’s, St. Paul’s of the Cross in Dublin, begun in 1858, had its romanesque style dictated by his patrons there, the Passionist Fathers. But, of course, deciding on a medieval round-arched form also had a local imperative: the archbishop would have had in mind the fact that his own diocese held the finest ancient romanesque church in the country, Cormac’s Chapel on the Rock of Cashel. And the implication of Catholic continuity with the Church of that period could not be – and was not – far from his thinking.



*High Altar c. 1910*

## Contracts

This is by way of background. We must now steer by such facts as can be gathered, the first of which is the appointment of McCarthy as architect in 1865 and of Barry McMullen of Cork as builder. There were three contracts whereby McMullen undertook to “execute the several works required in conformity with the plans and specifications furnished by J.J. McCarthy, architect”. Two of these contracts are extant, the first for the façade and the third for the apse. Sadly, that for the main body of the church does not survive. The first, dated 18 July 1865, gives the following details of construction and cost:

	£
Façade	680
Campanile	2088
Baptistery	344
Chancel	398
Nun’s Choir	94
Minaret	240
Total	3844

Most of this work has to do with the front of the building. The sum allocated for the chancel is relatively small and does not refer to the very large apse we have today. At this point it probably represented a minor remodelling of the north end. The main work entailed a new gabled façade with the addition of the bell-tower, the biggest expenditure, and the baptistery. This first stage of building left the *Big Chapel* still intact except for the expanded and altered front. Probably the archbishop intended from the beginning a complete replacement of the chapel but later letters from McCarthy indicate that he was not initially aware of the scale of Dr. Leahy’s thinking.



## A new Cathedral

The foundation stone was laid in October 1865 when McMullen began the work outlined in this first contract. Our next important evidence is a letter from McCarthy, dated 1 June 1867, in which he writes: "I send by this post the ground plans of the Cathedral showing the additions now proposed". Aisles were to be added and a new roof constructed. In this letter McCarthy also puts forward three possible forms for the clerestory windows above the aisles. This effectively meant the replacement of the *Big Chapel* and the letter is especially interesting as it shows that the architect was not aware in 1865 that a completely new building was intended.

Between June 1867 and the beginning of 1868 the extant letters concern a dispute about McCarthy's fee as he realises that the archbishop now wants not only the effective replacement of the chapel by the addition of aisles but also the construction of a large new apse. It would be overstating matters to conclude that Dr. Leahy was his own architect and McCarthy little more than a provider of plans and elevations, but it is certainly the case that the archbishop was the dominant figure in the relationship.



*Interior, looking towards entrance.*



In November 1869 the third letter of contract was signed by McMullen. It reads: “I propose to execute the several works in building apse, taking down turret [a reference to the old Carmelite tower?] and end wall in conformity with the plans, for the sum of two thousand and ninety six pounds not including columns, glass and flooring”. As noted above the contract for the main body of the cathedral is not extant. Nonetheless the progress of the work can be broadly summarised: October 1865 to mid-1867 façade, campanile and baptistery; mid-1867 to late 1869 aisles, columned nave, roof; 1870 to late 1871 new transepts and apse.

By late 1871 the building was structurally complete. Work continued on the interior, furnishings and decoration. A good deal of documentation survives regarding suppliers. Alexander Colles supplied the sixteen major columns of eleven feet by two. Goodman of Cork provided six half-columns of the same dimensions, now in the nave. Mayer of

Munich did the rose window but Dr. Leahy disliked it. Much of the remaining glazing is by Thomas Naites of Newcastle. Michael Riordan executed much of the stone carving and the fine-corbelled heads supporting the shafts framing the clerestory were the work of Joseph O'Reilly. (Further details of the fittings and furnishings are given on page 25.)



*The pulpit was erected to the memory of Fr. Laurence Hayes in 1878. It is hexagonal and made of Sicilian marble. It has figures of the four Evangelists and Our Lord.*

## Tabernacle

The most interesting and beautiful object in the cathedral is without doubt the tabernacle. Dr. Leahy learned through contacts in Rome that the Jesuit Fathers there had decided to dispose of the tabernacle on the high altar of their head church, the Gesù. More or less immediately he determined to buy it. It was believed by the Jesuits to be the work of Andrea Pozzo who had designed a transept altar in the Gesù in the late seventeenth century. This attribution held for a century after its arrival in Thurles. Then in 1970, in the leading international art journal, **The Burlington Magazine**, the scholar Joseph Masheck concluded that it was earlier, probably before 1599, and the work of Giacomo della Porta, who had worked with Michelangelo at St. Peter's in the Vatican. Masheck's comment on Dr. Leahy's purchase is apt: "It required the intervention of a powerful and individual intelligence" to save this precious gem of the Roman baroque.

By the winter of 1871 the documents tell us that the flooring was being laid, and Colles was paid for the chancel steps. Giorgio Benzoni was paid in February 1872 for the transept altar statues and by August 1873 Telford and Telford had finished the organ restoration.

Before ending this section of our history we might perhaps remember, in the words of T.E. Hulme, that "old buildings were scaffolding once, and workmen whistling." In McMullen's worksheets we learn what these workmen earned: one and nine pence per day for a labourer, three shillings for quarrymen. Four shillings was the hire of a carthorse to bring limestone from Leugh. The weekly labour charge averaged about £16.



*The 16th century tabernacle,  
originally in the Gesù in Rome.*

## Completing the task

Dr Leahy died in 1875. His successor, Thomas Croke (1875 – 1902), inherited a cathedral that, though completed structurally, was unadorned. Croke appointed George Ashlin as architect. Ashlin had earlier done work for the Presentation Sisters in Thurles and in 1877 the fine church in Templemore was begun to his design. Little by way of documentation survives from Ashlin's work in Thurles. Our main evidence is his estimate of March 1877. In it he proposes a chancel arch and also plaster arches under the roofs of the aisles and ambulatory. These arches, as well as the pulpit, were to his own design. The hexagonal pulpit was erected in 1878 by P.J. O'Neill of Brunswick Street, Dublin. Ashlin's estimate also included the Episcopal Chair and the oak screens and stalls in the chancel. P. Beakey of Dublin was responsible for their construction and he also erected the six confessionals. In addition, Ashlin submitted drawings for a baldacchino to stand over the altar and tabernacle but this project was never undertaken. When Dr. Croke issued a balance sheet on 17 March 1880, his part of the work to date amounted to £9,425 19s 1d.



*The Most Rev. T. W. Croke, D.D.  
Archbishop of Cashel, 1875-1902.*

## The Cathedral since 1879

The cathedral was consecrated on Sunday 22 June 1879. Nineteen bishops attended in a mighty display of the Catholic Church resurgent. Dr. Leahy was now dead for four years, resting within the sanctuary of the church which he had created almost anew and in close proximity to his illustrious predecessors, James Butler I and II, Dr. Bray and Dr. Laffan. Thomas Croke was their worthy successor, yet another archbishop of vision, will and determination who lived through tumultuous times. He himself consecrated the building and the High Altar with prayers and holy oils. As the High Altar is double sided,



the front alone was blessed. Bishop Fitzgerald of Ross consecrated the Sacred Heart Altar and Dr. McCormack of Achonry, later Bishop of Galway, consecrated the Blessed Virgin Altar. Archbishop McCabe of Dublin preached the sermon, rejoicing that “the foundations of the temple of the Lord were laid”.

Dr. Croke’s most obvious contribution to the interior of the cathedral was the decorative paintwork, undertaken by Earley and Powell of Camden Street, Dublin that covered every inch of the interior walls and the ceiling of the nave and chancel. The **Freeman’s Journal** of 23 June 1879 described the decorative scheme: “Ornamental borderings are run around all the windows...The spandrel spaces are filled with medallions containing heads of the saints and emblems of the evangelists. The nave and transept ceilings are ornamented with bands, borderings, medallions and scrolls...Similar decorations are showered thick all over the arches and clerestory of the chancel, whose ceiling is a ground of heavenly blue studded with stars”. Only the walls of the aisles remained unadorned and these were left a plain pea-green. Dr. Croke then furnished the cathedral with pews and kneelers so that the faithful could enjoy a measure of comfort in their worship and wonder.

Further embellishment was added in 1877 with the arrival of the stained glass windows, presumably ordered by Leahy, and manufactured in Munich by Mayer and Co. Outside, Croke was responsible for laying a concrete yard, twenty feet wide, between the gates and the steps. The rest of the yard remained gravelled. In 1895, to mark the occasion of his Episcopal Silver Jubilee, Dr. Croke presented the cathedral clock, each face of which is five and a half feet in diameter. J. Smith and Sons of Derby manufactured the clock.

*Second Station of the Cross.*





*From the Ursuline  
Convent garden*



*St. Brigid, on the Pillar  
flanking the Sanctuary*



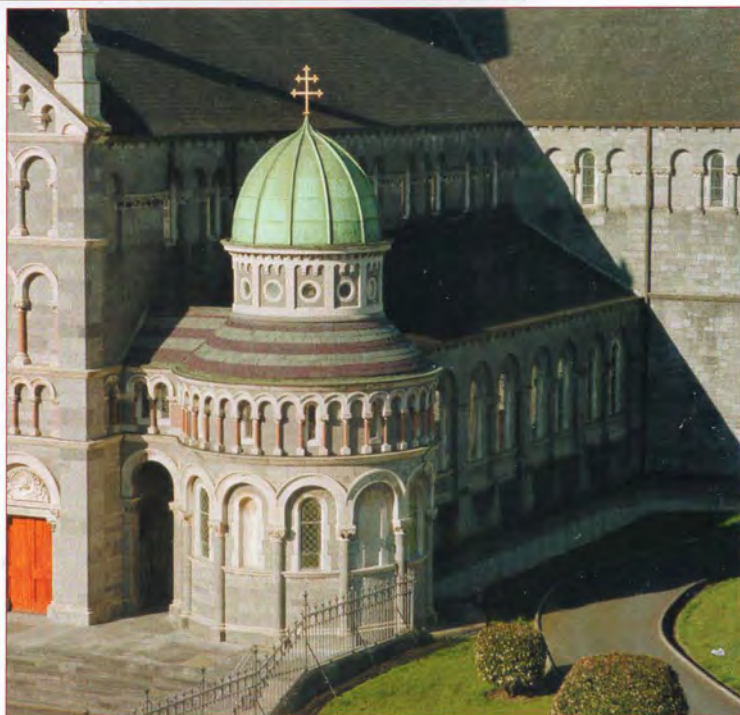


*Two holy water fonts in the entrance porch. They survive from the Big Chapel, where they served as the Baptismal font.*





*View of Sanctuary  
from new  
baptismal font.*



*Outside view of  
Baptistry*



*Crucifix*

*Our Lady of Sorrows  
in the nave.*





## Ongoing refurbishment

Croke's successor, Thomas Fennelly (1902 – 1913), a man known for his homely ways and a fund of anecdotes, spent an estimated £5,000 on decorations, improvements and repairs in his time as archbishop. He overhauled the organ, renovated the three circular windows in the mortuary chapel, added five ventilators to the roof, constructed the gangway from the tower into the interior of the roof, raised the sacristy floor and had all the exterior ironwork painted and repaired. In addition, in December 1911, Dr. Fennelly had the statue of Archbishop Leahy erected in the front yard. Professor Pietro Lazzerini executed the eight-foot statue of Sicilian marble at Carrara in Italy at a cost of £120. The pedestal of limestone was fashioned in Cashel by Mr. Best to the design of Ashlin. The pedestal cost £70. Those who remembered Dr. Leahy remarked that it was an admirable likeness of him.

During Dr. John Harty's long archiepiscopacy (1914 – 1946), the modern world reached Thurles. This was most obvious in the electrification of the town that was achieved in 1924. Throughout that year, the streets, many private houses and public buildings were wired for the new energy. Dr. Harty blessed the new power station and on Friday 21 November, the town, cathedral included, was lit by electricity where previously it had been gas lit. In 1927 the dome of the baptistery was re-covered with copper. In the same year, on 9 July, with radio the new wonder of the age, a writer of the **Tipperary Star** was amazed that, as Big Ben sounded midnight on the radio, the peal of the cathedral clock also rang out.

Outside, the cathedral yard was now improved by being tarred and rolled. Inside, marble slabs were inserted around the apse of the cathedral thanks to a gift of £900 from Mrs. O'Connor of Cashel. The slabs came from Italy and were the work of Mr. Coughlan of Dublin. The year 1935 saw the first major overhaul of the organ since it had been rebuilt for its transfer from the *Big Chapel* to the new cathedral. It was renovated to commemorate the Jubilee Year of Redemption 1934-1935. A Memorial Organ Fund was established to raise funds for a project which eventually cost £2,300. The contract went to Evans and Barr of Dublin who used materials which were almost entirely Irish. For the first time the organ would be totally controlled by electricity with pipes that were 90% new. Dr. Harty blessed the new organ on 7 July 1935 and there was special music composed and played by cathedral organist Herr Theo Verheggen.

Under the direction of Dr. Jeremiah Kinane (1946 – 1959), extensive work was undertaken on the cathedral 1948 – 1954. These repairs cost almost as much as the



*Our Lady's Altar*

original building and funds were raised from the people of the town. Many windows were in such a dangerous condition that it was thought that a bad storm could do considerable damage. All were removed and sent to Earley Studios in Dublin for re-leading. New stained glass was inserted into the upper windows of the transept gables. The windows lighting the nave and chancel and the lateral windows of the transepts were replaced in order to give more light to the church.



The problem of a gloomy interior was further tackled by painting over much of the old decoration. A colour scheme of cream and white with mauve borders was adopted, though a number of features from Croke's time were retained. The **Tipperary Star** assured its readers that it would "appear brighter by day". The lighting system was then overhauled. The old suspended light brackets were removed and new ceiling lights were installed with powerful bulbs, non-shadow casting, with floodlight effect, shining from silver reflectors. The electrical installation was renewed and modernised with a new amplification system introduced, with microphones on the high altar and pulpit and loudspeakers at various positions throughout the church.

## Centenary Renovation 1979

To mark the centenary year of 1979 and in consequence of liturgical changes introduced by the Second Vatican Council, Archbishop Thomas Morris (1960-1988) undertook a major refurbishment. The building was re-slatted, the interior painted, the floor carpeted, the lighting and heating improved. In the re-painting, many remaining decorative features were covered over, in the interest of modernism, simplicity, brightening the interior and reducing the cost of upkeep. The mortuary chapel floor was raised and was re-designated the Croke Memorial Chapel. Much timberwork had already been removed from the lower walls and replaced with a decorative mosaic. In the sanctuary, the altar was brought forward and a new plinth was erected for the magnificent tabernacle. The archbishop's chair was moved from the western side to the eastern side of the sanctuary and many of the choir stalls were dispensed with. The altar rails were removed from the front of the sanctuary and new curved steps were constructed leading onto the altar area.

Thus, in the course of every archiepiscopacy since the time of Archbishop Patrick Leahy himself, major work has been undertaken on the

*St. Patrick on the Pillar flanking the sanctuary.*



cathedral to variously improve, preserve and maintain what is, undoubtedly, one of the finest and probably the most unique cathedral in the country. The latest work of restoration, accomplished during the archiepiscopacy of Dr. Dermot Clifford, is the most extensive and fundamental of all, combining an overwhelming respect for the best elements of the nineteenth century edifice with a vision that will enhance the cathedral both as a place of worship and as a building well into the twenty-first century.

## **Recent Conservation and Restoration 2001-2004**

In undertaking the recent works, the design team and the building contractor faced three key challenges – to carry out remedial works to the building fabric; to redecorate so that the architecture of the interior would be enhanced through colour, pattern and light; and the sensitive introduction of modern facilities.



*Interior of Cathedral during renovation, 2001-4.*

## Building Repairs

The most urgent works related to the impact of rising damp and corrosive salts on the building fabric. A gravel-filled trench, with perforated drainage pipe, was installed to improve drainage around the perimeter of the cathedral. All areas of harmful cement-based plaster were replaced with a more compatible lime-based plaster. Salt-damaged stone around the marble niches on the left of the sacristy door was carefully repaired and replicated. The

disused heating vaults under the west side of the cathedral were inspected and two skips full of soot and other debris, which were contributing to the salt damage, were removed. A new and more efficient central heating boiler was installed. The heating design will maintain the cathedral at a constant minimum temperature all year round for twenty-four hours a day.

The stained glass windows throughout the building were individually assessed and locally repaired as necessary. The ventilation of the external storm glazing was improved, to reduce the build-up of heat on the building. All work to the stained glass was carried out in accordance with good conservation practice. The four lanterns from the entrance gates, which were found to be of copper, have been restored having been sent to Germany for re-glazing.



*The new Baptismal Font.*

## **Redecoration Of The Interior**

The re-introduction of a pattern on the ceiling of the cathedral was an essential element of the redecoration. The original intention was to paint subtle bands of a slightly darker colour onto the ceiling to echo the structural columns of the cathedral. However, once a scaffolding platform was erected, it became clear that much of the detail from the earlier patterns could be identified and recreated. This was one of the most exciting aspects of the project, as the character and richness of the decorated ceilings slowly reappeared week by week. Surviving elements of the earlier stencilled paintwork were carefully cleaned, without any over-painting.

It may surprise some to note that none of the stained glass was repainted or touched-up. The interior colour scheme was selected to introduce lighter colours, which highlight the stained glass in the transepts, around the sanctuary, and on the rose window. It was a great privilege to be able to study the detail of these windows at close range while the scaffolding was in place. It is intended to mount a photographic display of the transept windows at ground level, so that visitors to the cathedral can experience the richness of this important Irish stained glass at close range.

The cathedral was rewired as part of the work. The new lighting scheme was chosen to highlight the character of the cathedral interior, while also providing good quality reading light during church services. All of the lights operate on a number of pre-programmed scenes, which range from dramatic highlighting of the arches and tabernacle, to up-lighting of the ceiling, to strong down-lights during Mass.

## **The Introduction of Modern Facilities**

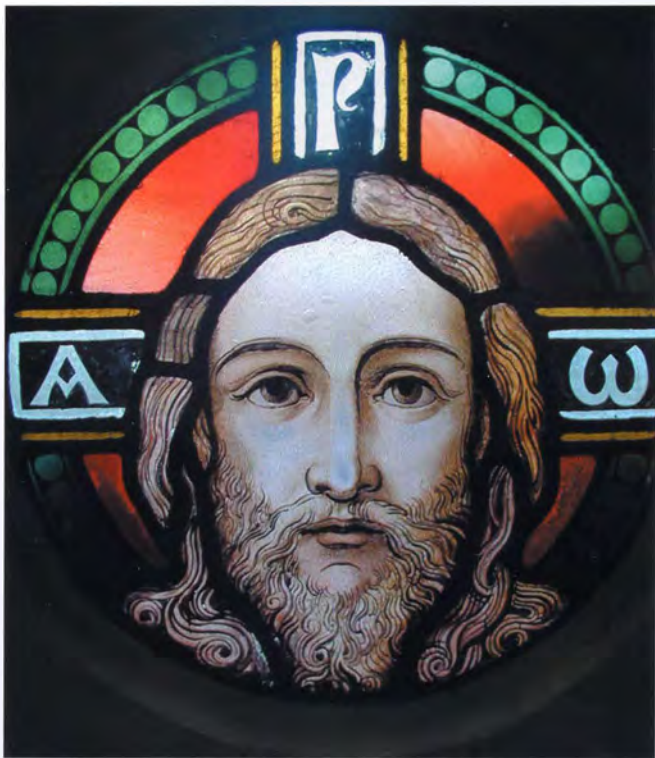
A new console, linked to the organ gallery, was installed in the body of the cathedral. The modern confession box on the west side of the church was replaced with a new accessible confessional. This utilises surviving elements of an earlier nineteenth century confession box, and closely matches the detailing of the other confessionals in the cathedral.

A new accessible toilet was installed in part of the former boiler house. This is accessible through the door in the west transept (opposite the Sacred Heart Altar). A new digital sound system was also introduced, so as to produce a more consistent sound with fewer speakers. An induction loop was installed for the hard-of-hearing.



## Main Features of the Cathedral

Thurles Cathedral has numerous notable features deserving special mention. The façade or front of the cathedral is modelled on the cathedral of Pisa in Italy. It is built from limestone interspersed with Portland stone and granite. Three arched doorways form the main entrance into the interior. In the tympana over the three main doorways, there are carved heads, the centre representing Our Lord, the side ones S.S. Peter and Paul. There are two statues one at each side of the main door, one of Our Lady and the other of St. Joseph. Three statues, eight and a half feet high and made from Portland stone, surmount the cornice. The centre one represents the Blessed Virgin Mary, the one on the baptistery side represents St. Patrick and the one nearest the bell tower represents St. Albert. There are statues, too, on the apexes of the transept gables: Our Lord, St. Peter holding the Keys and St. Paul with a sword on the east one. On the west gable, St. Augustine stands between St. Ursula, who has a crowned head, and St. Brigid holding a book with an oak branch.



*Jesus as Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End.  
In the centre of the rose-window.*

## The Campanile (Bell Tower)

On one side of the façade is the campanile, which can be seen for miles around. This massive edifice, which towers above every other building in the locality, is one hundred and twenty feet high and twenty-five square feet in area. The limestone walls of the campanile are ornamented with architectural features in keeping with the façade and baptistery. A feature of the tower is the clock which was presented to the people of Thurles by Archbishop Croke, on the occasion of his Silver Jubilee in 1895.

Another distinctive characteristic of the campanile are the bells. These were blessed by Dr. Leahy on 29 June 1868. Each bell in the eight-bell peal is dedicated to a particular saint or mystery. The inscription on the large bell, when translated from Latin, reads:

*Patrick Leahy, Archbishop of Cashel, caused us sisters to be made by John Murphy, A.D., 1867. I am to the honour of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary assumed into heaven.*

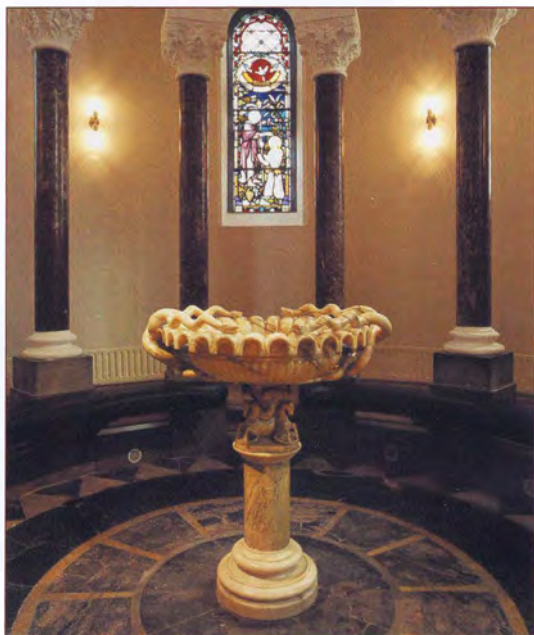
The other bells are dedicated to St. Patrick, St. Albert, St. Ailbe, St. Joseph, St. Augustine, St. Columba, St. Peter and St. Paul.

## The Baptistery

On the other side of the façade is the baptistery. This circular building is similar to Pisa Cathedral and other continental cathedrals as it is separate from the main building. The baptistery is byzantine in style and built from limestone quarried locally. The dome of the baptistery is of copper.

Internally the main feature of the baptistery is the baptismal font. It is unusual having once formed part of a fountain. This is indicated by the many water exits at the fluted edge.

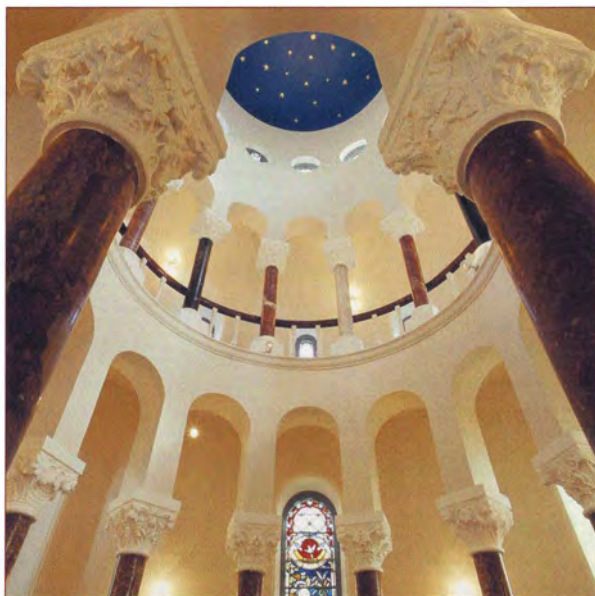
*Baptistery interior showing*



The basin is supported by three sea horses and it has four inter-twined serpents carved in relief above its upper rim.

A stained glass window in the baptistery appropriately depicts Christ's Baptism in the Jordan.

*Baptistery interior showing upper level and dome of starry sky.*



## The Archbishop Leahy Monument

This statue is situated in the forecourt of the cathedral and was erected in December 1911 as a memorial to Dr. Patrick Leahy. The statue, made from Sicilian marble by Professor Pietro Lazzarini at Carrara, shows the archbishop in episcopal dress. The limestone pedestal, seven feet high, was made by Mr. Best of Cashel. The designer was G.C. Ashlin of Dublin. The erection work was carried out by the 'Leahy Brothers of Thurles'. The inscription on the memorial reads:

*In commemoration of The Most Rev. Patrick Leahy, D.D.,  
Archbishop of Cashel & Emly  
By whom this Cathedral Church of the Assumption was erected.*

## The Altar and Tabernacle

Inside the cathedral one is immediately struck by the exquisite beauty of the altar and tabernacle. Up to the late 1970s the tabernacle rested on the altar. During the centenary renovations the altar was brought forward to its present position. At the same time a plinth was made for the tabernacle.

The tabernacle once adorned the Gesù, the famous Jesuit Church in Rome. It was bought by Dr. Leahy at the time when the Gesù was undergoing extensive repairs and alterations. The tabernacle was made in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was designed by Giacomo della Porta, one of the architects of St. Peter's and a pupil of Michelangelo.

The tabernacle is composed of many precious stones. Its doorway is adorned with a corinthian portico resting on two beautiful pillars of verde antico, two feet ten inches high and having bases and capitals of bronze. The door itself is made of bronze with a silver host in the centre bearing the letters, *I.H.S.* The doorway at the back is closed by a beautiful slab of oriental alabaster in which a large cross of lapis lazuli is inlaid. The tabernacle is six and a half feet high, eight feet if the dome is included.

The main altar is constructed from a variety of precious stones highly polished and carefully put together. The table of the altar is placed on a centrepiece of solid masonry, with a veneer of precious marbles. There are sixteen columns of three different kinds of stone with bronze bases and capitals. Since it was brought forward in 1979, its new position highlights its elegant beauty and this very large altar, eleven feet by seven feet, now dominates the cathedral.

## The Episcopal Chair

The word "cathedral" derives from the Greek "cathedra", meaning a chair. The episcopal chair signifies the bishop's teaching authority, and thus a cathedral is the church where the bishop has his chair, the principal church of a diocese. In Thurles we have a particularly fine example, carved in oak by Beakey of Dublin, to a design by George Ashlin. It is worth looking at in some detail.

The archbishop's coat of arms, on the upper part, includes a shield with two crossed keys, standing for the Archdiocese of Cashel. Above the shield are the mitre

*The Archbishop's Chair, made by Beakey  
of Dublin.*





and double-barred cross of an archbishop. The carved columns flanking the seat name the archbishops from the mid-sixteenth century down to Dr. Croke, who commissioned the throne. The earliest name is that of Edmund Butler (1525-1551), son of Piers Rua Butler, who had been Earl of Ormond until deposed by King Henry VIII. Edmund Butler features in both the Catholic and Church of Ireland succession lists. A little further on we find Darby (Dermot) O'Hurley, sent as archbishop to Ireland in 1583 and martyred in 1584. Then come the names of those who administered the diocese during a century of turmoil and persecution: David Kearney (1603-1624), Thomas Walsh (1626-1654), William Burgatt (1669-1695) and Edward Comerford (1697-1710).

On the right-hand column are the names of the three Butler archbishops: Christopher Butler (1712-1757), James Butler I (1750-1774) and James Butler II (1773-1791). On the right-hand column we also find the names of the nineteenth-century archbishops: James Bray (1792-1820), Patrick Everard (1820-21), Robert Laffan (1823-1833), Michael Slattery (1834-57), Patrick Leahy (1857-75) and Thomas Croke (1875-1902).

## **The Sacred Heart Altar**

The altar in the west transept dedicated to the Sacred Heart is planned on the same lines as the main altar. It is made of white marble inlaid with precious stones and is supported



*Sacred Heart Altar*

with six marble pillars in front and two at each side. The main feature of the altar is the tabernacle. The letters *I.H.S.* on its door and the fish on the sides are worked in lapis lazuli and malachite. The entablature rests on two slender fluted columns of giallo antico and the dome on six others.

The large statue of the Sacred Heart in Parian marble is the work of the famous Italian sculptor Benzoni. It was purchased by Dr. Leahy for two hundred pounds. A massive canopy of Caen stone carved and adorned with inlays of highly polished marble overhangs the altar and the statue. It rests on two pillars and two half pillars of Sicilian marble.

## **Our Lady's Altar**

This altar in the east transept resembles the Sacred Heart Altar in its panels, pillars and arcading. The tabernacle, made of statuary marble, is inlaid with lapis lazuli, agate and other precious stones. The two pillars flanking the tabernacle and the six supporting the dome are of tinted onyx. They are miniature representations of the famous columns supporting the canopy over the main altar of St. Paul's Basilica outside the Walls in Rome.

The large statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary is by the same sculptor as that of the Sacred Heart. The canopy is exactly similar to the one which overhangs the Sacred Heart Altar.

## **The Pillars**

The interior is divided into the nave, aisles, west and east transepts, apse, sanctuary and the Croke Chapel. Two rows of pillars which divide the nave from the aisles are made from Cork marble, the bases and capitals are of Caen stone and they rest on large plinths of limestone which were quarried in Leugh, near Thurles. The pillars around the apse are two of Cork, two of Kilkenny black, two of Galway green and two of Sicilian white marble.

## **The Windows**

The stained glass windows of the cathedral portray figures from the Old and New Testaments, Christ, Our Lady and the Saints. One window which stands out is the Rose Window which is situated at the front of the building. It was designed by Mayer and Co., Munich.



*The Aumbry containing the Holy Oils.*

## **New Baptismal Font and Aumbry**

These are situated in the north transept of the Cathedral. They are the work of Mark Ryan, liturgical designer. They are made of cast bronze mounted on Portland stone. The new font was necessary to accommodate the large numbers attending christening ceremonies and its presence in the cathedral building is a constant reminder to all visitors of our faith journey.

The Aumbry contains the holy oils – Catechumens; Chrism; Infirmorum; that are used in the celebration of the sacraments of Baptism, Anointing of the Sick, Ordination and Confirmation.

## Blessed Sacrament Chapel

The former mortuary chapel and later the Croke chapel is the Blessed Sacrament Chapel since 1997. As part of the recent restoration project Mark Ryan was commissioned to design a new repository for the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Linking with the Aumbry and new Baptismal Font we see his use of cast bronze mounted on Portland stone. His design is inspired by the story of the 'Burning Bush; in Exodus 3; 1-6. From the middle of the bush Yahweh spoke to Moses and declared himself to be "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". It was here that Moses accepted God's call to free his people from slavery in Egypt.

Today, in this 'holy place' as we listen to and pray in the Divine Presence, we are reminded of our calling, our mission as followers of Jesus Christ and we will be strengthened for the journey ahead.



*The new repository for the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.*



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*Interior view of the refurbished Sanctuary.*

# **CATHEDRAL OF THE ASSUMPTION THURLES**

## **Restoration 2001 - 2004**

### **Design Team:**

Architects:	Bluett & O'Donoghue - Michael O'Boyle
Electrical & Mechanical Engineers:	Don O'Malley & Partners - John Moloney
Quantity Surveyors:	Sheppard & Cantillon
Paint Consultant:	Mary McGrath
Organ Restoration:	Stephen Adams
Plaster & Stone Advisor:	Jason Bolton
Liturgical Artist:	Mark Ryan
Cathedral Bells:	John Smith & Sons (Ireland)

### **Contractors:**

Main Contractor:	Clancy Construction Ltd. Foreman: John Armstrong
Sub-Contractors:	Michael Corbett – Electrical George Mason – Mechanical Anthony Forde & Son – Painters Richard Kimball – ARIA Stained Glass Rainey – Steeple jacks Star Systems – Sound Equipment RT Communications Celtic Copper & Brass Ltd. Richard Linstead – Ironmongery F.C.G. Surveys Hanafin Furniture

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## **Booklet Production Team:**

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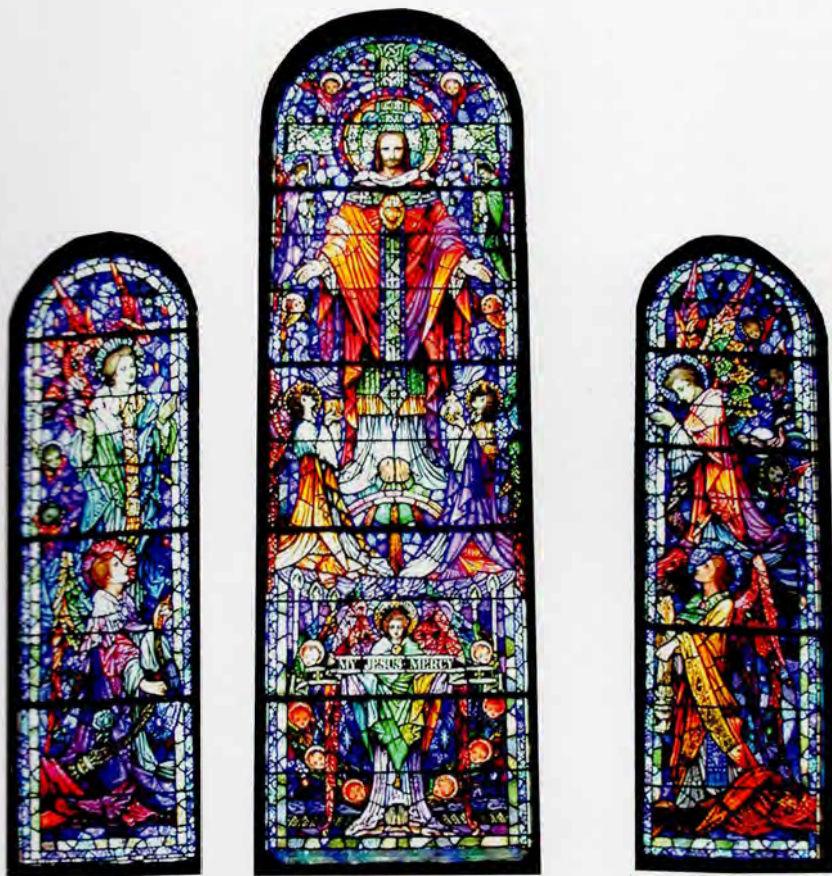
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*West Transept stained-glass windows*



*Stained glass window in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel*