



## A "WALK-THROUGH" THE REFURBISHED CHURCH

### INTRODUCTION

I am deeply grateful that the refurbishment of the church has been overwhelmingly well-received by you the parishioners. May it continue to be a place of welcome, worship, sanctuary and peace for many years to come. When we first started planning the project, we decided that everything in the church should reflect a *noble simplicity*, the words used to describe how we should celebrate Mass. Consequently, we have avoided excessive decoration, focused on the essentials and hopefully allowed the church to speak for itself. Every church in all its aspects should proclaim, so to speak, the message of Christ in all its depth. Hopefully, this "walk-through" will be a help in "reading" the church and a springboard to deeper reflection. Above all, the simplicity of the design is a call to a simplicity of life, spare, with little baggage, a reminder of what is truly necessary for the well-lived life. And this brings with it a true nobility based not on birth or position but on the new life won for us by Christ our Lord.

**THE ENTRANCE:** The great window has been opened up, the area has been enlarged and a glass wall installed. The function of the great window in churches is to let God's daylight flood the church, pointing to Christ the Light of the world and reminding us that we are children of the light whom the darkness can never overcome.

This area between the main door and the body of the church is traditionally known as *the narthex* and which we are calling the *gathering area*. It has two functions: Firstly, we pass through this area into the church as individuals and then leave after Mass having experienced more deeply our communion with each other as the Body of Christ. It is the place where we reach out to others in welcome and greeting, recognising each other as a brother and sister in Christ.

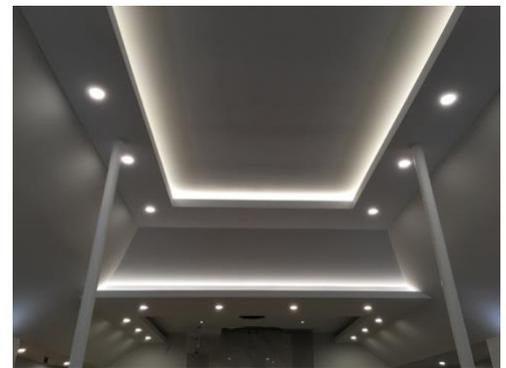
Secondly, this area is a threshold or liminal space-as we pass through we leave behind the secular and enter the sacred. When we depart from the church we are bringing the sacred in our bodies into the secular world.



**THE FLOORING:** The same flooring has been used throughout the building – from the gathering area, through the nave and side aisles to the sanctuary. This is to emphasise the unity and equality which all receive from God in Baptism. St Paul tells US that as a community we share in a variety of gifts, but we all celebrate "one faith, one Lord and one baptism". (Ephesians 4.5) Priest and people are brought together as one around Christ's altar of sacrifice and the table of His Body and Blood. We profess that in this unity, Christ is truly present among his people.



**THE CEILING:** This has been restored to its original vaulted style. The vaulted ceiling reflects the vault of heaven and reminds us of the words from the Letter to the Colossians: "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." (3.1-2) At every Mass we already participate in a real way in the everlasting banquet of eternal life, in communion *with* our blessed Lady and the angels and saints and all our dear ones who have gone before us, joining *with* them in an everlasting song of praise and worship to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The spaciousness created points to the boundless God "in whom we live, and move and have our being." (Acts of the Apostles 17.28)



The lower ceiling above the altar containing the light box nods to that part of church architecture



known as *the baldacchio* (sometimes called the *Ciborium*), the canopy built over to main altar to focus the attention of the congregation on the altar and the sacred action. Sometimes it is compared to the Jewish *Chutzpah*, the canopy under which couples are married. In this context the *baldacchino* emphasizes the place where the bridegroom (Jesus) encounters his bride (the Church) and pledges his everlasting love. It further links the sacrament of Matrimony with the Holy Eucharist.

**THE SANCTUARY:** The altar is a perfect square and reflects the square light box above. Together they evoke the four corners of the earth, the whole of which which has been sanctified and redeemed by Christ, the eternal Word of the Father who became flesh and made his dwelling among us and who has enabled us to glimpse already his glory. (cf John 1) The circle of light above the altar points to God without beginning or end, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As we gather to

celebrate the Eucharist around the altar, we experience the deep communion between God and our earth, the divine with the human, the Creator with the creature.

The altar and the lectern, also known as the Ambo, are made of the same granite in order to emphasize the unity of the table of the Lord's Body and Blood and the table of His Word. The Book of the Gospels is displayed on the *Ambo* to remind us that Christ is truly present in his proclaimed Word and that we are a holy people created and formed by this Word .

The consecrated elements, the Real Presence of Christ, are reserved in the Tabernacle with the principal aim of being available to be given to those who are housebound or about to die. The Tabernacle is also a focus for private prayer and meditation. The ceramic wall into which the Tabernacle is inserted is plain and unadorned reminding us that the Trinity invites us to go beyond human images and words in our contemplation of the Triune God. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways" (Romans 11:33)

The Sanctuary Lamp, a more contemporary version of the traditional design, signals the Real Presence of Christ in the consecrated elements in the Tabernacle.



The chair is known as the Presidential Chair. Here the priest presides over the gathering "in the person of Christ" and so also is another manifestation of His Real Presence. As such, he teaches and sanctifies God's holy people and is a pastor to them, imitating Christ the Good Shepherd "who came not to be served but to serve." (Mark 10:45)



**THE BAPTISMAL FONT:** This is constructed of the same granite material as the altar and ambo, again symbolizing the profound unity between Baptism, Eucharist and the Word of the Lord. It has the traditional eight-sided shape, evoking the eighth day on which the Lord rose from the dead. The baptismal font can thus be seen both as womb and tomb from which the baptized person emerges into the new life of the Risen Christ, having died to the old.



**THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH:** The church is roughly cruciform in shape, the traditional pattern of so many churches. It invites us to reflect on St Paul's words: "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20) The nave itself, leading us from the door to the altar, is the Christian journey in miniature, our sacred pilgrimage in the Holy Spirit who constantly reminds us that "when the tent that we live in on earth is folded up, there is a house built by God for us, an everlasting home not made by human hands." (II Corinthians 5:1) Together we are the People

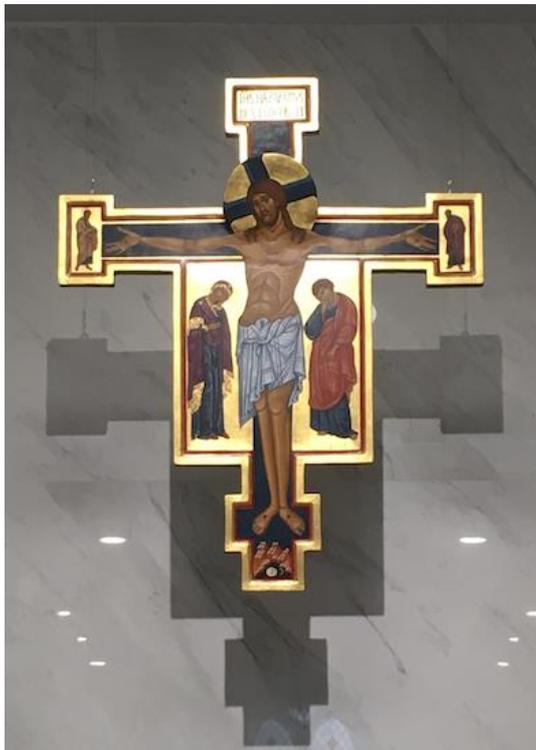
of God journeying towards our homeland in heaven.

The room separated by the folding doors has been decorated more warmly in order to be a comfortable place for meetings and prayer. When the doors are open, the baptismal font faces the room square on to make of it a Baptistry. When Mass has finished, the person to be baptized will process with family, friends and guests to this area where the baptism will take place.

*In this way the lay-out of the church discloses the four ways in which the Real Presence of Christ is manifested: in the consecrated elements of bread and wine, in the Word proclaimed, in the congregation assembled and in the person of the priest.*



**THE ICON OF THE CRUCIFIXION:** We know that Jesus was crucified at a place called Golgotha,



the place of the skull. In church tradition the place of the skull was the burial site of Adam. Symbolically, therefore, Jesus is being crucified directly over Adam's tomb. In the icon, the skull indicates that this tomb of death is being cracked open. In the death of Christ, a new humanity is being forged from the death of the old. Indeed, the skull symbolize the victory of Christ over death itself. And the victory over sin is symbolized as the blood of Jesus runs down off of the cross to cover and purify the skull and bones of Adam, representing all of sinful humanity. Mary and the Beloved Disciple stand at either side of the Cross, symbols in their different ways of the Church which flows from Christ's wounded side. At either end of the vertical beam are the figures of Saints Peter and Paul, the apostles to the Jews and the Gentiles.

The Crucifix is the most colored and decorated part of the church and it is so in order to draw our gaze and experience the Father's loving gaze on us. Moreover, as it hangs above the altar it points us to the once-and-for-all Sacrifice of Christ made present to us in the Eucharist.

Finally, the whole church building serves to remind us that we, the followers of the Lord, are "living stones, being built up as a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2.5) Whenever we enter this church, may we experience the peace that only God can give and bring that peace to our world.

### **Making an icon**

A panel of seasoned wood is selected, sanded and sealed with natural glue and covered with fine linen. Several layers of gesso are then applied. (Gesso is whiting or alabaster mixed with heated rabbit-skin glue.) This is sanded down to ivory smoothness to receive the lightly incised drawing, the gold and the colours (raw pigments mixed with white of egg).

## Symbolism

Symbolism is a means of seeing a deeper meaning behind the appearance. It means the gathering together of different levels of meaning to get the essence. The opposite of symbolism, (*sym* = 'together with') is diabolism (*die* = 'dividing against, scattering'). Symbolism is a representation that brings to light a hidden meaning.



In fact, every element in an icon brings to light a hidden meaning, simple yet profound. Even the basic materials of every icon have multilayered spiritual significance. The wood, with its linen covering, the egg used to mix the pigments, and *the gold*, together represent the natural world of matter: vegetable, animal and mineral, which are offered back to God in the work.

They also remind us of the passion, death and resurrection of our Divine Lord:

- the wood recalling the suffering on the cross,
- the linen reminding us of the shroud enwrapping His dead body,
- the egg being a symbol of the resurrection.



All the other components as well - the features, hands and clothes of the holy persons depicted in the icon, the landscape, the architecture and the colours - all of them have their individual interpretations, leading us to a different wealth of spiritual wisdom.

## Colours

- blue: eternity, infinity
- green: earth and humanity
- brown: humility
- red: royalty, exalted, dignity
- white: wisdom, innocence or invisibility
- gold: the symbol of light and holiness - the situation in which the holy person in the icon now lives.

## Perspective

In icons the illusion of distance and size in the perspective of Western art is reversed, so that as we go deeper into the icon, away from our own view point, our spiritual perspective widens, we have the capacity of spiritual growth.

## Doors

These are always visualised as open and often given irrational locations. God frequently sends us His invitations in unusual circumstances.

## Hills

Hills, so often mentioned in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, are always holy places – a place of ascent to God. In icons, to help this ascent the hills are stepped, and as a further help, each step is lighted for us. "The icon evokes a personal presence, and its symbolism shows this presence and the cosmic situation around it to be saturated with divine light." (St. Clement of Alexandria)

## Posture

The body is rendered with a gentle dignity befitting a temple of the Holy Spirit. The holy person is in the presence of God, yet turned towards us. As we pray he is very present to us not somewhere out in space. "The art of the icon is essentially a witness to an eternal presence, and each holy person like a sacrament of divine beauty." (St. Clement of Alexandria).

## Clothing

The folds of garments, rendered in rhythmic order, are in some way an image of the inner harmony of the soul and body of the weaver. They are 'vestments of Glory'.

### *Features and faces*

All faces in icons have a similarity of expression, reflecting the face of Christ within. As we look, it feels as if it is we ourselves who are being seen as the eyes in the icon look deep into our soul. The ears are unnaturally bent forward - listening. The mouth is closed - silent. The face of the saint is never in profile. The profile in icons is the beginning of absence. An icon is often referred to as matter and spirit. "An icon can be seen as a theological statement confirming the truth of the Incarnation whereby everything is open to sanctification and matter itself becomes a channel of grace by the Holy Spirit".

### **Prayer is part of the process**

All the above-mentioned contributes to the holiness that is imparted to the icon by the prayer of the iconographer when the work is begun and by his or her continuous contemplation as the work is in progress. Fasting, too, is strongly recommended. But, if there is any reason why they cannot fast from food, there is always an obligation to fast from noise and distraction. The atmosphere of silence is not merely negative - the absence of speech. It is also highly positive - an attitude of attentive listening to the voice of prayer in their hearts.

It takes time to achieve this, as it takes time to change the natural impatience to see the finished result. The iconographer work on peacefully, knowing that the process is a prayer that should not be rushed.

When it is finished, the icon is given a solemn consecration, anointed with the sacred oil used in the dedication of a church and sacred vessels.

The blessing remains alive and active, waiting to be claimed by anyone who comes in prayer before the icon, in which there reposes an energy, a Divine Force.