

The History of Saint Mary's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Kingston, Ontario, 1843-1973

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The subject of this paper is the history of the foundation and construction of St. Mary's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kingston, Ontario. The cathedral is located on an area of raised ground among a number of other historic buildings in the city block enclosed by Clergy Street East, and Johnson, Brock and Barrie Streets. The foundations of the present structure were laid in the 1840's but the first Catholic Church, which was dedicated to St. Francis, was erected in 1747. When Fort Frontenac fell to the British in 1758 this church was abandoned and it gradually collapsed into ruins. For the next twenty years few people lived in the area. The in 1784 United Empire Loyalists and disbanded soldiers from several British regiments settled on the site of Kingston. At the request of Bishop Plessis the Sulpicians in Quebec sent a Father Bédard to minister to the Catholics. There was no church so he held services in a frame house owned by a Mr. Lesage. This building was located on a site at the corner of Queen and Bagot Streets. For the most part, however, there was no priest in the area and so the Catholics obtained permission to use St. George's Anglican church where the clergymen also baptized, married and buried them. Finally, in 1808, the Catholic community constructed a stone church dedicated to St. Joseph. It was built on a site at the corner of William and Bagot Streets, and the first incumbent was Father Remigius Gaulin.

Bishop Remigius Gaulin succeeded Bishop Alexander Macdonell in 1840, and it was he and his coadjutor, Bishop Patrick Phelan, who began construction of the cathedral from limestone quarried on the side, on July 23, 1843. The first rector was Father Patrick Dollard. There was also a Board of Trustees which consisted of M. Johnson, M. Forristale, I. Hopkins, H. Galvin, and G. Barker. The architect was G. Murray and the designer was J. Daly.

These men decided that the cost of construction should be financed primarily out of subscriptions. As the funds were collected the construction programme proceeded. After the walls had been erected, gas lighting was installed. Then in 1846 a tin roof was erected over the structure. It was now ready for divine services.

At first the interior of the church was very austere. The walls were not

decorated and the windows were of plain glass. There were no side altars and the main altar was a simple wooden structure intended for temporary use only. The church was modest in every respect except in size and expectations. It was a fine stone church built in the Gothic style with sixteen massive pillars in the interior. Certainly it dominated the skyline of Kingston. In the opinion of the writer of an article entitled "Kingston As It Is," which appeared in the *Kingston Herald* on April 5, 1848, there were:

Some dozen churches...in the city and one in progress of completion that will be an ornament to the city when finished. It is built of cut stone, Gothic style, reaching from Johnson to Brock Streets, 210 feet long and 88 feet wide supported by massive pillars, surmounted with spiral cut stone, towering heavenwards; its roof covered with tin, being elevated very high and occupying the highest ground in the city, presents a magnificent appearance.

The official consecration of the new cathedral occurred in 1848 when it also became a monument for Bishop Macdonell, whose mortal remains were brought from Edinburgh. A reporter described the event in the *Ottawa Advertiser* and the article was later reprinted in *The Argus*:

The large Roman Catholic Church underwent the ceremony of consecration last Sunday from the hands of Rt. Rev. Bishop Phelan assisted by a number of priests and others, characteristically attired for the occasion. A Band of music was in attendance and the tout ensemble of the imposing scene, apart from being a religious observance was highly attractive, and from its novelty here was witnessed by a great crowd of individuals of every sect. The church is yet unfinished, when so, it will be a great edifice.

From 1858 to 1875 Reverend E.J. Horan was the Bishop of Kingston. During his episcopate a permanent main altar and reredos were installed in St. Mary's. This was a highly ornamented altar with carved wooden design over which was an ornate baldachino. At the same time side altars were added. One was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin and the other to St. Joseph. The pews were installed before 1867 and during the 1870's a marble altar was erected to replace the ornamental wooden one, which had been dedicated to St. Joseph.

The advent of Bishop James Vincent Cleary in 1880 was the start of an extraordinary period of renovation, reconstruction and improvement in St. Mary's Cathedral. The first project was to repair four buttress pinnacles which had been blown down during a severe wind storm in November 1883, and the second was to create more pew accommodations.

Bishop Cleary thought that the most feasible plan to create more space was to move the side altars. As for the exterior he recommended repairing the turrets and removing the truncated towers which had been erected when the cathedral was first constructed and replacing them with a single tower of a proper height. Finally, he suggested the installation of stained glass windows. He received the most ardent and earnest cooperation of the building committee which consisted of Dr. M. Sullivan, Michael Flanagan, Reverend P. A. Twohey and James Swift. The committee of four was deputed to draw up a list of names to constitute a Central Committee to cooperate with the Bishop in the implementing of this design and to procure the means to carry out the project.

As soon as the arrangements for financing had been completed, work began on renovations. First, new confessionals were installed. Work on the tower, however, was delayed because none of the tenders submitted to the committee by three Ottawa contractors and two from Kingston were satisfactory. Instead the committee called for tenders to install a new heating system at a cost of \$3,000 or less. This did not suit the contractors, and so on August 17, 1886, the committee asked the parishioners whether they were prepared to pay at least \$4,000 for this project. Apparently they approved and the committee soon after contracted with the firm of Frank Wheeler who installed a steam-heating system. By October of the same year the firm of Spencer and Sons of Montreal had installed stained glass windows at a cost of \$117 and the two altars of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph had been moved to the chantry chapels. Finally, the committee agreed to install additional pews so that 1,200 people could be seated in the cathedral. The cost of this project was paid for out of the church improvement fund.

All that remained now was to build a new tower and spire. For this purpose Bishop Cleary called in Joseph Connally, an experienced architect, who presented his report to a meeting of the parishioners on Sunday, December 30, 1888, and informed them the estimated cost of the work on the exterior would amount to about \$76,760. The parishioners authorized the committee to raze the temporary towers and to construct an entirely new tower from the ground up. Tenders were called and, at a meeting of November 4, 1889, the committee awarded the masonry work contract to George Newlands of Kingston, who proposed to use limestone quarried on Wolfé Island. George Cliff was awarded the contract for carpentry work. The contractors began work immediately and had completed the new tower by 1892. It is a pinnacled tower with a belfry and rises to a height of 242 feet from the ground to the base of the cross.

Bishop Cleary's task was not yet completed, however. During the early 1890's he arranged for the emplacement of the statuary in the Lourdes Shrine, the Calvary scene and the Pietà in the cathedral. At the same time he began and completed the construction of St. James Boanerges Chapel, which was

built to commemorate the elevation of the Kingston Diocese to a Metropolitan See. It is a charming little chapel with an exquisitely carved wooden main altar, intimate pews, effigies of former bishops and archbishops, and lovely stained glass windows.

The second Archbishop of Kingston, the most Reverend Charles Hugh Gauthier, installed the present pipe organ in 1905. In 1910 a beautiful main altar was donated to the Cathedral by Reverend Daniel O'Connell of Peterborough. The consecration of this beautiful, awe-inspiring marble and onyx altar imported from France was the occasion of the gathering of all the hierarchy in Ontario and a, capacity congregation of priests, nuns and lay people on Sunday, August 14, 1910.

In 1923 during the reign of Most Reverend Michael Joseph Spratt, the third Archbishop of Kingston, an imposing marble pulpit of great beauty was presented to the Cathedral by Mrs. William Casey. To enhance the beauty of the high altar, Archbishop Spratt had a tabernacle of exquisite workmanship installed. In 1938 the bishops' tombs in the crypt were remodelled and new tiles, sanctuary furniture, kneelers, and a fireproof floor in the nave were installed. Along with the installation of public address system, these renovations cost \$25,389. In 1949 a new bell was placed in the belfry and an entrance was constructed on the Clergy East Street side of the cathedral. A new roof was installed in 1952 and a new Baptistry in 1964.

The interior decoration, with the exception of the Cathedral Sanctuary, is as it was done in 1910 by Panzironi and then renewed by his sons in 1958. New Stations of the Cross were erected and stained glass windows were placed in the vestibule. The beautiful, imposing and effective lighting system was also installed at this time.

During the reign of Archbishop O'Sullivan other improvements were made. One was of an emergency nature when, on a Sunday morning, a huge statue crashed to the floor of the Cathedral. A number of these statues had been placed in the arches in the upper spaces of the wall between the pillars, in the clerestory of the nave. As a result of this near tragedy all of the statues were removed and it was decided to call in the Panzeroni firm of New York for their expert guidance in filling the spaces with paintings which would harmonize with the decor of the Cathedral. Monsignor J. Carley, who was studying in Rome, purchased some oil paintings there, They depict various symbols of the Blessed Virgin. A decorative edging was installed around the platforms and concealed lighting illuminates each scene when the Cathedral is fully alight.

With the adoption of the reformed liturgy at the beginning of Lent in 1965, a temporary altar was installed in the Sanctuary near the railing to permit the celebration of Mass with the celebrant facing the people. It was decided as well that none of the objects of the Cathedral should be discarded while arrangements were being made to bring the physical setting of the

Cathedral Sanctuary into accordance with the requirements of the new liturgy. Accordingly the renovation of the Sanctuary and the Eucharistic Chapel was intentionally conservative as all the major components of the former chancel which had artistic merit were saved or embodied in the new setting. Although these renovations were not accepted either unanimously or joyfully at first, it is worth noting that criticism has diminished as tempers have mellowed with the passing of time.

The altar of French white marble was carefully dismantled. The sarcophagus and mensa were reassembled in a forward position in the Sanctuary area. The original altar was a beautiful structure, specially so because of its cast bronze architectural enrichments and its onyx columns. These excellent components were featured in the new altar. During the consecration of the latter the sacred relics were placed in the steps according to the very ancient custom of "under the altar." In this way the marble was not marred by carving out a sepulchre for the relics from the upper part of the altar. A marble predella was added to support four tall ornate candlesticks.

Directly behind the altar, in the middle of the apse, a throne was erected for the Archbishop. It is simple in design and is entirely in keeping with the Gothic style of the chancel. The diocesan shield was erected behind the throne. The woodwork at the rear of the apse was extended to provide a continuous wall to enclose that side of the sanctuary. A new credence table was fashioned out of marble from the old main altar, and the old tabernacle was encased in its base as an ambry for the Holy Oils. The communion railing was dismantled and sections of the old pulpit were used to construct a new ambo for the lay readers and priests. Happily, much of the original carving on the white marble was incorporated into the design of the ambo. The new baptistry was located in the St. Joseph Chapel and seats were placed in front of the ornate iron screen for the use of the priests, acolytes and the choir. At the same time a small organ was installed in a convenient location.

The Blessed Sacrament now reposes in a new gold tabernacle on the former altar of the St. Joseph Chapel. It is surmounted by the Last Supper panel which once stood above the old main altar. Indeed, the Eucharistic altar is strongly reminiscent of the original main altar because a great part of the latter was used in its construction.

The ceiling of the nave and the sanctuary impresses the onlooker with its grandeur. It is constructed of a series of rib-vaulted sections which rise majestically from the decorative clustered mouldings atop the capitals of the sixteen supporting columns. The richness of the interior is further enhanced by the decorations of the Panzeroni family of artists. Especially noteworthy is the use of Sienna marble and the gold rose shading of the Rosara. Altogether as the rays of the sun penetrate the stained glass windows the interior is radiant with different colours.

The fine workmanship and tasteful decoration of the cathedral impresses

the visitor with an overwhelming sense of simplicity and awe. Certainly it has not lost any of its charm as a result of the recent renovations. In its lengthy history many thousands have entered its doors to partake of the sacraments. Among these were some prominent churchmen. On September 29, 1938, for example, Cardinal Ildebrando Antoniutti was received canonically during the celebrations of the silver jubilee of the consecration of Archbishop M. J. O'Brien. On August 22, 1951, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, now Pope Paul VI, visited the cathedral. But no matter what the status of the visitor may be, the structure will remind him of the many clergymen and laymen who devoted their time and energies to the construction and decoration of the cathedral since the days of its foundation. It is in every sense a noble monument to the vigorous past and future life of Catholicism in the Archdiocese of Kingston.