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Renewability of liturgical spaces

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Renewability of Liturgical Spaces

The response of people to particular liturgical spaces, and their understanding of what is suitable, is very diverse. There are particular churches that are under great demand for weddings because they will look good in the photos and look like a ‘real church’. Churches are still being built that do not echo the reforms of the past half century and respond to a particular taste rather than the requirements of the liturgy. Communities still struggle with churches built before the reforming period that are difficult to renovate and difficult to adjust to contemporary liturgical norms so the renewability of liturgical spaces is an issue faced by many communities.

Recent travels through the Geraldton Diocese in Western Australia brought some of these difficulties to light in the works of Mons John Cyril Hawes. Hawes worked as a priest and architect in the diocese from 1916 to 1929 following his studies and ordination in Rome. Bishop William Bernard Kelly encouraged him to join him in his vast diocese, the largest in Western Australia with an area of 1,318,310 square kilometres.\(^1\) Not only vast in area, but very underdeveloped, with hot dry summers to which an Englishman would find acclimatisation difficult. However, Hawes built architectural gems throughout the area and designed many more for other places in Australia while continuing to also work as a priest in vast parishes.

Once such ‘gem’ is the parish church of Our Lady of Mt Carmel and Sts Peter and Paul in Mullewa. Mullewa is just over 90km east of Geraldton and in spring is in the heart of wildflower country.

\[\text{Mullewa Catholic Church} \]
\[\text{Photo: Angela McCarthy, 2011}\]

\(^1\) Further details can be obtained from the Diocesan website - http://www.geraldtondiocese.org.au
Hawes chose to use a Romanesque style for this church, much of which he built himself out of the local rock with the help of local people, “somewhat after that of the churches of southern France at the period when Romanesque was in a state of transition to the Gothic.” It took seven years to build and the “farmers carted in all the stone but we could not afford to pay the then current wage of nine pounds a week to a mason so I set to work myself with the assistance of one paid labourer only.” Hawes believed that a “church, even the smallest, should be of a monumental character. Solidity is more important than ornamentation.”

To the smallest detail, there is evidence of Hawes’ strict adherence to liturgical requirements and an engagement with ancient and beautiful symbols developed over the centuries. The sanctuary is covered by a cupola which can be seen in the external view in the image above. The lantern effect from the glassed panels in the top of the dome lights the sanctuary area. There is a similar dome above the baptistery. The light draws the people towards the sanctuary and maintains the focus on the altar. The original high altar remains as Hawes’ designed it but a free standing altar has been added to accommodate the liturgical change from the Second Vatican Council. There is sufficient room in the sanctuary for this change but it does make it a little cramped. The church was originally built to accommodate around 200 people but an extension was needed and so a further transept was very tastefully built on the northern side in 1962. The people in the extension cannot be viewed from the original nave so it separates the community and requires the priest to move his attention between the two naves. This is not ideal but serves the accommodation needs.

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2 John Cyril Hawes, *Souvenir of the Church of Our Lady of Mt Carmel and S.S. Peter & Paul, Mullewa Western Australia*, 2nd Ed. c. 1930s, n.p.
3 John Cyril Hawes, typed transcription of Hawes’ journal, Bishop’s House archives, Geraldton.
4 Hawes, *Souvenir of the Church of Our Lady of Mt Carmel and S.S. Peter & Paul, Mullewa Western Australia*, n.p.
Hawes achieved his desired monumental effect in this liturgical space and the echoes of ancient worship spaces from Europe, but the stone belongs to the land and anchors the building and the community in the environment of the Mullewa landscape. Further to this achievement he has been able to maintain a human scale that keeps an intimacy for a small community. The only real difficulty in this space became evident at the distribution of communion. There are no side aisles and so the movement of people was chaotic when I attended Mass during our visit to the region. The original inclusion of the altar rails remains as the community did not want to disturb Hawes’ design and craftsmanship and yet, if they were removed it would make the communion distribution less awkward. Therein lies the dilemma for such a special space, to change or not to change?

The Church of St Lawrence at Bluff Point in Geraldton fared differently to the gem in Mullewa. Its foundation stone was laid in 1937 by Bishop James Patrick O’Collins. It had common features with the Romanesque style giving the appropriate monumental characteristic that Hawes preferred as well as a “liturgical fitness” that he felt so important. In 1970 the whole nave was demolished (amid determined opposition) to make way for extensions that could not be done easily and tastefully as at Mullewa. The needs of the growing parish and the liturgical changes meant that an extension was necessary. The photo below shows Hawes’ model.

It was a small church suitable for the size of the community but this was not adequate

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years later. The result was “a sorry-looking hybrid and we can only imagine what Hawes might have said”. The photo below shows what it looks like today. The bell tower and cupola over the original sanctuary remain as well as the sacristy but the entire nave was demolished. The extension does not comfortably blend with the nature of Hawes’ original building.

The interior seems to eradicate Hawes’ influence altogether. There is a screen wall that negates the value of the lantern shape that originally lit the sanctuary from above. It is free standing and supports the tabernacle but does not liturgically fit with Hawes’ design.

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While the 1970s octagonal nave supports the liturgical changes from the renewals of the Second Vatican Council, such renovations do not blend with the original building.

Hawes’ major work in Geraldton was the design and construction of St Francis Xavier Cathedral. It was begun in 1916 with the cornerstone laid by Bishop Kelly and completed under the leadership of Bishop O’Collins in 1938.9 Again, the term ‘monumental’ is appropriate. The sanctuary is very large surmounted by a well lit dome with a lantern on the top. The surprise is always the painted striping. Hawes’ was echoing the colouring of cathedrals in Europe that he loved like Sienna where black and white marble is used to great effect in stripes in the interior and exterior. Duccio used such coloured stripes in his painting of the child Jesus in the temple talking to the elders.10

For Geraldton however, there were no funds to support that kind of construction so he painted stripes of orange, white and grey.

10 Duccio di Buoninsegna, “The Boy Jesus Among the Doctors” is in the predella of the Maestà in the Sienna Cathedral Museum. Image supplied by Wikipedia.
The liturgical space works well with the altar placed in the well lit space under the octagonal dome to adapt to the renewals of the Second Vatican Council. Ample side aisles allow for the comfortable movement of the assembly. The altar would have met Hawes’ approval as he felt that “the dignified rhythmic movements of the sacred ministers, & the graceful vestments are lost sight of” if the altar is of solid construction.\(^{11}\) His own church at the Bight on Cat Island in the Bahamas already had the altar positioned so that he could face the people while saying Mass prior to Vatican II.

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Perth was originally built in 1865 and with the growing community was not longer adequate so Archbishop Clune asked Hawes to design an enlargement and later to design a completely new cathedral.\(^{12}\) In the Priest’s House at Mullewa (adjacent to the church) there is a framed version of what Hawes envisioned for Perth. Hawes spent considerable time and effort on various designs for the Cathedral but the final extensions were given over to others as the taste of the predominantly Irish priests was the Gothic style and Hawes thought this to be an unsuitable style for the Western Australian climate.\(^{13}\)

Modified extensions to the Cathedral in Perth went ahead but by the end of the 20\(^{th}\) Century it was obvious that serious repair and renovation was necessary. These renovations were large scale to implement the need for renewal of the liturgical space and the blessing took place on


the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 2009. While there are some minor drawbacks with large pillars obscuring sight lines in various places and difficulties with a sound system that needs to accommodate the large number of hard surfaces that reflect sound, the renewed space is very beautiful and as Hawes’ would say, has ‘liturgical fitness’.14

Hawes’ consciousness of space, proportion, the assembly, liturgical needs and the human scale of the community show a unique vision and talent that the people of Geraldton, Western Australia proudly protect. The continued care and support of these treasures however, require considerable resources and it is hoped that these liturgical and architectural gems will continue to attract the means to do so. Australia has a unique heritage through the work of Mons John Cyril Hawes.