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The following article was written by Fr Brian Spillane CM for the September 2002 issue of 'Oceania Vincentian' . ('Oceania Vincentian' is a Publication in the Australian Province of the Vincentians):

THE INTERIOR RENOVATION OF ST VINCENT'S CHURCH, ASHFIELD

Brian Spillane CM

This article for *Oceania Vincentian* has been written to outline the process of renovation of St Vincent's Church Ashfield, in the Archdiocese of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. The church was built by the Vincentians in 1894. The nature of the interior renovations, while not structural in any way, is quite radical in terms of interior design to which people have become accustomed. The renovations to this historical and heritage building are completely in harmony with the directives for church liturgy.

The interior renovations of St Vincent's Church, Ashfield have changed it from being a nineteenth century church to a warm, inviting contemporary centre of worship. This shows what can be done to make old churches new and give their congregations a better appreciation of the fullness of the new order's liturgical rites.

In the Beginning.....

The foundation stone of St Vincent's Ashfield was blessed by Cardinal Moran, Archbishop of Sydney, on 7th October 1894. The centenary of the church was celebrated in 1994 when a whole year of events marked a 100 years of Vincentian service in the parish and the Centenary of the church's Foundation.

The church was built to resemble the church of St John Lateran in Rome. The exterior walls were of brick with cement rendering. The slate roof was supported by an 'A Frame' style hardwood timber structure. It had a timber narthex through which entry was gained under the choir loft into the main body of the church. The pulpit and altar were raised well above floor level and a row of very high backed pews made entry from the front difficult and unattractive. The interior walls provided space for seven 19th-20th century paintings on canvass which depict the Agony in the Garden, the Transfiguration, the Raising to Life of the Son of the Widow of Naim, the Victory of Michael the Archangel, the Assumption of Mary, the Empty Tomb and the entry into heaven of St Vincent. Together with the statues of Mary, the Sacred Heart, St Vincent, St Joseph, St Anthony and the Pietà, these paintings beautify the interior of the church and were a traditional part of the church at the time.

Over the years St Vincent's Church was regularly maintained to preserve the structure close to its original condition. The church was regularly painted inside and out, new carpets were laid, damage and breakages replaced and lighting and sound systems upgraded.

After a century of life, signs of aging were evident. The four walls were beginning to move. The slats and copper attachments of the slate roof needed repair and the leaking roof caused damage to interior painting and floor coverings.

The New Order

With the publication of the Vatican II Document on the Sacred Liturgy, two attempts, in the 1970's and 1980's, were made to bring the liturgical space into harmony with the General Principles of the *New Order*. Neither attempt fully embraced all the principles of liturgical change that were envisioned by the Council. It was never going to be easy to renovate a century-old heritage building, designed for the celebration of the Tridentine Rites, to suit the celebration of the rites of the *New Order*.

A More Comprehensive Project

In 1996 and 1997 decisions were made to paint the interior of the church and change the lighting in the church. By 1998, the painting of the interior of the church was still delayed because the leaking roof was not yet repaired as its high cost was difficult to fund. However, it was clear that the lighting needed to be in place before the painting could go ahead.

In 1998, the newly appointed parish team, assembled a group of parishioners known as a parish pastoral development team (PPDT). This group began to address important pastoral matters including the issues surrounding the church building.

Finally the project began with the rectification of the structural damage to the roof trussing, the installation of a new colour-bond metal roof (for which permission of the Ashfield Heritage Council was sought and obtained) and the installation of the new lighting.

The lighting system adopted, a first for this type of church, operated on the principle of reflected light coming off the white ceiling. The previous 1500 watts of visible fluorescent tubes, attached to the interior pillars, were replaced by 6000 watts of 'state of the art' fluorescent lighting concealed behind timber pelmets. The lighting project, completed by mid 1999, was very effective and pleasing.

It was time to repair the roof and begin the interior painting. The Boffa-Robertson Group, architects for the project, developed the colour schemes and presented them to the parishioners for their feedback. One colour scheme had pastel tones while the other provided richer earthy tones. The warm, earthy tones of ochre and red-brown, fawn and brown-pink, were chosen. Four quotes were sought for the enormous job. They ranged from \$35,000 to \$250,000! The one chosen was \$93,000. The painting of the church took twelve weeks and was ready for Christmas 1999. While the project was under way, the church hall was used for weekend masses and weekday masses were celebrated in the parish centre.

To prepare for the interior painting, the tall columns of the church were stripped of the previous light fittings, the fans, and the sound speakers, while the ill-fitting stations of the cross were also removed so that the original plaster design work on the walls could be restored. A set of new Italian crafted stations was to be placed on the walls of the glass vestibule where they would be easily accessible to the parishioners.

The parish was very enthusiastic about the lighting and painting renovations. The PPDT and the Finance Committee, decided to propose further renovations in keeping with the liturgical principles of Vatican II. It was recognised that these further proposals would touch on very sensitive issues for the parishioners. Hence the need to keep them informed of proposals while listening to their concerns. Members of the PPDT were very effective as sounding boards for the parishioners and for allaying their concerns.

At the outset, the PPDT invited professional liturgists to give advice on appropriate changes to the

liturgical space. The church itself became the venue for several monthly meetings of the PPDT. The team enjoyed the expertise of Fr Paul Crowley, Fr Gerard Moore sm and Sr Carmel Pilcher rsj - all from the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commission. The team also visited various Catholic churches recommended as models of how liturgical renovations might be done or not done. They also consulted the liturgical design consultants, Sr Jill O'Brien sgs and Randall Lindstrom AIA, from Prism Studio in Melbourne, as part of the initial investigations.

The PPDT, with Liturgical experts, engaged the professional skills of architects, engineers and draftsmen from the Boffa-Robertson Group. The experience and advice of the directors of this firm have been most valuable for renovating the parish church, the local parish school and the parish offices. The Boffa-Robertson Group is now the parish architect.

Consultants Involved

On 18th November 2000, the PPDT called a Parish Assembly with Noelene Veness, as the Consultant Facilitator. Fr Gerard Moore sm, Co-ordinator of Liturgy at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, addressed the liturgical principles that needed to be the foundation of any renovation. Architect Jock Robertson, with the assistance of Mark Boffa, gave the assembly a Power Point presentation which offered pictures of the various earlier renovations of the church since its beginning, and outlined all the proposed changes.

The issue of communication with the parishioners has been central to the process of renovation. Every proposal from the PPDT was written up and published in the parish bulletin. These letters of communication can be read on the parish website under the address: www.vinash.org.au/renovations.html. They offer an outline of the process and development of the renovations as they progressed. At another address on the website, www.vinash.org.au/parishioners.html you can read some of the parishioners' letters written in response to the church renovations. These letters make interesting reading.

Proposed Plans

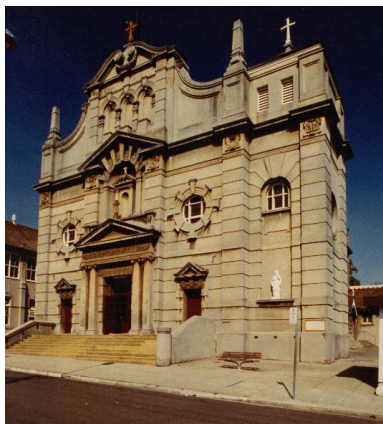
The general outline of the plans proposed at the Parish Assembly was as follows:

A new glass entrance vestibule to offer a sheltered space for people to gather both before and after Celebrations. The shape of the glass wall to be in harmony with the gently curved wall behind the main altar. The Stations of the Cross to be on this glass wall.

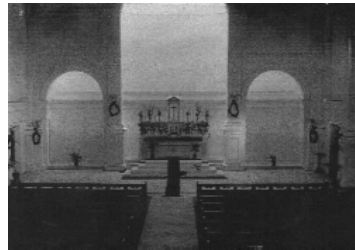
1. The removal of the altar rails.
2. The re-location of the place of reservation into a prayer chapel (the old sacristy).
3. The re-shaping of the former sanctuary, including the removal of the pulpit, the tabernacle and all the straight lines, while incorporating two gently curved steps; once again in harmony with the front glass wall.
4. The re-location of the Baptismal Font to the centre of the church.
5. The opening up of three confessionals so as to provide alcoves for Mary, the Sacred Heart and the Pietà, while retaining one confessional to be renovated as a reconciliation room.
6. The installation of a large transparent acrylic cross to be hung above the altar in front of the painting of the Risen Lord.
7. The provision of wheelchair access to the church and to the sanctuary.
8. The covering of all cold, grey marble and the introduction of jarrah timber elements on the centre and side aisles, the sanctuary steps, the alcoves and the liturgical furniture (altar, ambo, and chair).

9. The removal of the Stations of the Cross and the re-location of a set of new Italian crafted stations in the vestibule entrance.
10. The removal of the statues from the sanctuary altars into their own special alcoves.
11. The relocation of the vestry, the sacristy, the workroom and the general storage space.
12. The creation of a contemplation garden between the church and the presbytery.

The renovation proposals were presented to Ashfield Municipal Council, to the Archdiocesan Liturgy Commission and to the Senate of Priests. All the renovations complied with the principles of heritage renovation and conservation. All approvals were granted, including the extensive financial outlay. A generous bequest of a parishioner also enabled the parish to proceed with the plans.



St Vincent's Church, Ashfield



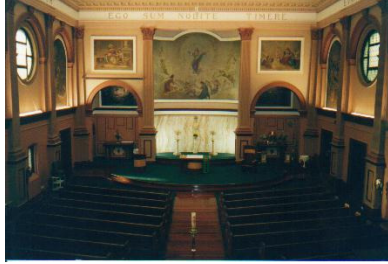
Sanctuary, 1895



Wedding, 1950s

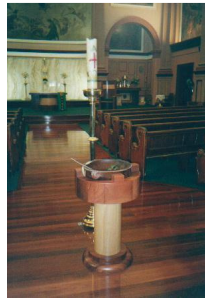


Exposition, 1950s



Renovated Interior 2002

(See also Front and Rear Covers)



Baptismal Font



Baptism during Eucharist



Blessed Sacrament Chapel



Sunday Eucharist

Liturgical Principles Involved

The liturgical principles governing the changes were as follows:

1. **That the interior of a Catholic Church is a living dynamic space** which is subject to growth and change as the Liturgy demands.
2. **That the Liturgy demands the full, active and conscious participation of the people.** Any structure that undermines this principle is an obstacle to worship. The altar

rails and the hard straight lines throughout the church were seen to be such an obstacle. These set out lines of demarcation between Presider and congregation and prevented a sense of inclusion and welcome to those present.

3. **That there is only one Liturgical Space** which envelops the whole of the interior of the church building. This principle underpinned the use of the two elements that designated and unified the liturgical space: the jarrah timber and the Tuscan green carpet. The timber was placed down the centre aisle and around the perimeter of the walls. The carpet was placed under the pews, from the glass vestibule wall right through to the sanctuary.
4. **That Baptism is the Sacrament of entry into the church** and must, therefore, hold a central place in the Liturgical space. To this end the Baptismal Font was placed in the centre of the Liturgical space for use at Baptisms, the blessing of coffins at the beginning of funeral rites and for making the Sign of the Cross by parishioners as they enter the church.
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6. **That the place of reservation ought not to be within the main body of the church,** but in its own special place. Even the latest instructions from Rome suggest that this place ought to be a separate building altogether. To this end the present Sacristy is planned to become the prayer room and place of reservation. The former Baptistry at the front of the church is to be the vestry. This location will provide ready access for the Presider to greet the people before the celebrations begin. The former nun's chapel on the northern side of the church will become the sacristy, the cleaning and workroom and will include a wheelchair unisex toilet facility for easy access to worshippers.
7. **That statues of saints have a special place within the church building but not within the sanctuary.** For this reason the statues of Mary, the Sacred Heart and the Pietà were removed from the former side altars or from the body of the church, and placed in their own special shrines. These shrines had previously been three confessionals. The fourth confessional will be developed as a Reconciliation Room in accordance with the appropriate liturgical principles.
8. **That there ought to be a ready, wheelchair access to the church for people to pray and visit the place of reservation.** This end is met through a contemplation garden which will lead to the prayer room and reservation chapel (the former sacristy). This garden will be full of green plants and flowers and will incorporate some of the marble altar rail and other elements that have been conserved throughout the renovations. The former 'Baptismal Font' becomes a water fountain. The garden provides space for a handicap access ramp for easy entry to the chapel and the church. This prayer room and reservation chapel will double as a room for parents and carers to use with their young children where they can still participate in the liturgical celebration.

That the church belongs to the people and that they are the ones who ought have a say with regard to how the church is renovated. Throughout the entire process that began in 1998, the progressive steps suggested by the PPDT were publicised in the parish bulletin before they were actually taken. The problem with such a means of communication is that not all people read the bulletin. Those who did not read the bulletin and did not keep abreast of the changes did experience some angst and discontent.

On several occasions when people read about proposed changes they offered their objections with comments such as 'the colours are too dark' or 'I can't live without the altar rails' or 'I can't live without the pulpit' or again 'where are the kneelers?'

And yet, these same humble and gentle people, would come along a week or two later and admit, 'aren't the new colours so warm and welcoming?' or 'I can live without the altar rails!' or 'You know, since you removed the altar rails, I feel, after more than 70 years, that I have finally arrived at the celebration of Eucharist'.

The reactions that people have shared, since the renovations began, are testimony to the truth that the official liturgical principles are indeed sound; that the Liturgy is the first theology; and that some people can only change through osmosis and lived experience.

The majority of parishioners have been so affirming of all the changes that have taken place. Positive affirmation and constructive comments have also been received from the Vincentian priests, brothers, seminarians, as well as the Daughters of Charity who have come to visit the church during the five years of renovation. The opportunity to journey with the renovations has been undertaken by so many Confreres and Daughters from the Sydney Houses, as well as by visitors from other parts of the province. Such affirmation and encouragement have had a very positive influence on the Parish Team and the PPDT. For the PPDT members, this wonderfully positive reaction of the Vincentians and Daughters was very much a reversal of the biblical saying: 'Prophets are not welcome in their own country!' These renovating prophets were made very welcome!

Ashfield has been under the pastoral care of the Congregation of the Mission since 1894. St Vincent's, Ashfield and the Vincentians are synonymous with each other. That the founding community should be part of such a radical change to the peoples' church is an expression of the pastoral care shown by the Vincentians over 108 years and the unmatched loyalty and trust of the parishioners of St Vincent's, Ashfield to whom the church belongs!

Learning from the Project

What have we learnt from the process of renovation during the past 5 years?

When the new team arrived at Ashfield in 1998, there was never any sense that the process of church renovation would be its main concern for the ensuing 5 years. The team arrived with the new lighting and the interior painting as projects that were already in motion.

It is a rather interesting question as to whether these projects would have been better completed before or after the major renovations of the interior liturgical space of the church. The new lighting and interior painting won the approval of the people very quickly. Because these two projects had been completed so well, there was a sense that the overall renovations were in good hands. This attitude of the people was a source of encouragement during the unfolding of the total renovation of the church.

It has been clear from our experience that having qualified theologians and creative architects on the job is absolutely essential if the project is to succeed. An enthusiastic leadership team and an approving people are sure to bring such a project to a successful conclusion.

The parish plans to celebrate the definitive renovations of the church in response to the Second Vatican Council with a special 108th Birthday party on October 13th 2002. Everyone, associated with St Vincent's Parish Ashfield, is invited.
