

## A History of St Michael's Church 1822-1964

### Part 1

#### St. Michael's Church of 1822

The present St. Michael's stands on the site of a church of the same name which served Blackrock from 1822 to 1962. This earlier St. Michael's was by no means the first church in the locality to bear this titular. The late Canon T. J. Walsh noted that reference to a St. Michael's church in the peninsula can be found in a Papal document as far back as 1199. The location of the church mentioned at that time was likely to have been close to what is now Ballintemple Cemetery. Lauded as a church of size and stature the St. Michael's of 1822 was the reference point for faith life in Blackrock for nearly a century and a half.

The task of building the church fell to Dean Collins, Parish Priest of St. Finbarr's Parish which then included Blackrock. Modern methods of fundraising would have availed little in those days and church building was only possible with large individual donations. Three Protestant residents of Blackrock contributed handsomely to the fund and were invited by the Bishop to lay the foundation stone on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1819. They were William Crawford, William Beamish and Charles Barrington, all well known names in their own right. Three years later the church was completed and solemnly dedicated by Bishop John Murphy. Subsequently a large bequest from the Will of Mr. Thomas Rochfort was used to furnish the interior.

Initially priests travelled out from the St. Finbarr's (South Chapel) to say Mass. In 1832 the first resident priest arrived in Blackrock; Father William Scannell. In 1848 Blackrock became a separate parish and Father Alexander O'Mahony was appointed as its first parish priest. He would be succeeded by just eleven parish priests over the entire lifetime of the church. Two of these had appointments lasting over twenty years; Father James O'Sullivan (1849-1871) and Canon William Murphy (1933-1955).

The architect of the church was Michael Augustine O'Riordan, a native of Doneraile. An architect of the neo classical style, he already had several churches to his credit before being engaged for Blackrock. Some "trademark" features common to his churches were the placing of large holy water fonts facing outwards on the front façade and having twin doors at either side of the Altar leading to the sacristy area. These were features both of St. Michael's and also of the nearby Chapel of the Annunciation at the Ursuline Convent which he also designed. In 1826, Michael O'Riordan became a Presentation Brother and would subsequently continue to work in church design while making a major contribution to his Orders teaching Ministry.

The church had both ground floor and gallery congregational space and a very beautiful sanctuary. Over the high altar was an arch supported by classical columns and beneath it a tympanum carrying an emblem of the Holy Spirit. A large statue of St. Michael the Archangel surmounted the main entrance of the church while above this was an attractive rose window, the sole illumination in the front façade. Higher still was a plaque whose inscription was identical to that found over the doorway of the present church albeit without the date: *SIT NOMEN DOMINI BENEDICTUM* (Blessed be the name of the Lord).

The picture that has come down to us of life at St. Michael's is one of a vibrant community where all age groups and backgrounds merged together in the context of prayer and sacramental practice. In common with many other parishes the regular Parish Mission was a highly participative event, taking place over at least a two week period. Each year Pastor and people would go forth in procession to the Pier Head for the blessing of the nets to seek God's protection on the fishermen and fishing fleet which were central to livelihood for generations in Blackrock. In the late 1950's and early 1960's Cork saw an unprecedented level of church building with the provision of churches for the new developing suburbs. Little did Blackrock parishioners think that an accident of fire would deprive them of their church and add their own parish also to the building programme.



## Part 2

### The Fire at St. Michael's

Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> January 1962 began like any other day at St. Michael's Church in Blackrock. Morning Mass was celebrated at 8.00 a.m. and the congregation dispersed to the duties of the day. At 9.15 a boy on his way to the adjacent school called in to pray. Smoke was rising rapidly from behind the Altar. The boy ran to notify his teacher Mr. Brendan Creamer who was arriving for school. The alarm was raised and emergency services summoned. The fire was spreading quickly, taking a firm hold of the church whose extensive timberwork offered little resistance to the flames. Arriving promptly the firemen drew water from the hydrants but supplemented the supply with water from the river, running a hose down Church Avenue to the Marina. Schoolchildren and locals gathered at safe distances to watch, aghast at the scene that was unfolding. Canon Ahern, Parish Priest of Blackrock arrived to survey the sad scene, joining the swelling crowd in the church grounds. Satisfied that nobody was left in the building the firemen concentrated all their efforts on the blaze and for a crucial hour and a half pitched all their might against the inferno. A group of helpers assembled and brought many important items from the sacristy including all of the parish records. Local man Denis Carey, a gas engineer, managed to reach the gas taps to turn off the supply in order to prevent an explosion.

Smoke billowed forth from the stricken building. Shattered glass was strewn everywhere and slates lay along the paths around the church. The rose window at the front façade completely blew out affording a grim view of the interior. Inside the devastation was even greater. The huge classical columns of the sanctuary had fallen leaving only their bases standing. The arch over the altar and the other beautiful furnishings lay in pieces. An important consideration for the priests was how to bring the Blessed Sacrament to a place of safety. Father James Cummins, C.C. and Father Michael O'Brien, Convent Chaplain, wearing firemen's helmets and accompanied by Fire Officer William Crowley made their way to the Altar at the height of the blaze. For a final and fitting time, the Blessed Sacrament was removed from the tabernacle of St. Michael's, just minutes before the roof caved in. Nearly half a century later the bravery of these men and their reverence for the Blessed Sacrament is a powerful lesson for our times.

Emergency crews stayed at the scene for as long as was necessary and the building was sealed. The firemen managed to prevent the fire from spreading to the boy's school, nowadays the parish hall. With a cloud of smoke filling the air over Blackrock, the church fire was the overriding news of the locality. To this day people who witnessed the event will speak about it with feeling as the author has found. More than one person has recounted the sight of the flames and smoke from inside the church rising behind the St. Michael's Statue, which did not fall despite the desolation all about. The church bell also survived and later became a gift to the new Ursuline Convent in Georgia, U.S.A.

Immediately after the fire the same Ursuline Order placed their Convent Chapel at Blackrock at the disposal of the Parish for all church services. Much smaller than St. Michael's it was in many respects remarkably similar having been designed by the same architect. For two and a half years it would serve as parish church *pro tem* while the clearing of the site and the mammoth task of building a new church was taking place. Perhaps only when the new St. Michael's emerged in 1964 could a sense of closure be brought to the event. Reviewing all that had been done by way of effort and generosity Bishop Lucey

could then say: "Thus, out of the catastrophe of January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1962, have God and His people made good to come."..

### Part 3

#### Church for a New Era

Within weeks of the fire which destroyed St. Michael's on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1962 important decisions as to its replacement had been taken. Although the external walls had remained largely intact the possibility of rebuilding the original structure had been discounted from the point of cost and practicality. It was decided to build a new church on the same site but on a significantly larger scale. A committee was formed comprising the priests of the parish and two dozen parishioners to undertake the work of fundraising. In the words of "The Fold" magazine: *"the names of the appeal committee are sufficient guarantee that there will be no lack of effort or generosity in providing the necessary funds, though the call comes at a difficult time."*

The Cork Churches Appeal, which financed the Rosary Churches of Bishop Lucey, had met with huge public support and seen participation from far outside the parishes concerned. It was hoped that the same momentum could be achieved to pay promptly for the new church of St. Michael's. As it transpired the building fund garnered over £80,000 by the time the new church was opened in 1964. An additional £40,000 approximately was received from insurance on the earlier church and the combined figure was not far off the total cost of the building programme. Posterity had to bear but little of the church debt.

James Rupert Boyd Barrett had designed all but one of the Rosary Churches and was also chosen for the new St. Michael's. A versatile architect, he had a flair for suiting his churches to their physical surroundings and landscape. The contractors selected were John Sisk and Son Ltd, a company with a national reputation but very popular in Cork. Mr. Joseph Murphy led the team as foreman and was complimented for his work by Bishop Lucey at the opening of the church. The site having been cleared, work formally began on the new church in July 1962 and most appropriately the foundation stone was laid on the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel, September 29<sup>th</sup> of the same year.

The capacity of the old church was given at 700, while the replacement aimed to accommodate 1,100 worshippers. The old church, although dignified in external appearance, did not have a spire. A defining feature of the new St. Michael's would be a slender spire rising to 150 feet, and making the church visible from far and wide. By the summer of 1963 the building was showing good progress and construction activity at the sight was intense. The long line of magnificent Spanish ochre tiles along the high vaulted roof cut a pleasing spectacle on the skyline while the finish of dressed stone on the front walls glistened in the first fine weather of 1964. Pentecost Sunday, 7<sup>th</sup> June in that year was approaching and a parish was en fete to celebrate the beginnings of their new church.

The Dedication Ceremonies commenced with the solemn blessing of the interior, followed by the blessing of the external walls. Only at that stage were the public admitted to fill for the first time the pews and aisles of their new place of worship. The chief celebrant at the Mass of Dedication was Father D.J. O'Donovan, P.P., while the entire Liturgy was presided over by Bishop Lucey in the presence of many of the most senior clergy of the Diocese. The homily was given by a native of the parish, Rt. Rev. Mgr. Barrett, Vicar General based in Clonakilty. Aptly he described a special aspect of the day's events when he said: "We are witnesses today of the re-birth of a parish".

From the vantage point of over forty years since its opening we are grateful to the generations that have passed down to us this place of worship and trust that its mission in our midst will be cherished *AD MULTOS ANNOS.*

**M.O'B**