



## The design of the new church of St. Bernard

With the sad circumstances surrounding the demise of the former St. Bernard's church, this new building is seen rising from the ashes and brings with it an uplifting belief of renewed faith. It is a sign of hope for the community.

It was decided after the fire to seek new ideas for St. Bernard's and a design competition was held. Dempsey Architects won the competition with a concept which met the requirements of liturgy, environment and history. Set into the side of a hill with commanding views over Belfast Lough, the design of the new church was influenced by both nature and chronicle. The church was to be built using natural materials where possible. The use of natural stone in Irish buildings conjures up images of raths and crannogs. This became the starting point from which flowed the embracing wall to protect the main church. Using Donegal stone walls, with their small openings, is appropriate for protection but also incorporates the singularity of placing the Stations of the Cross in stained glass in each aperture. The roof is of natural Spanish slate and, constructed as it may possibly have been in previous times, possesses the features necessary to provide a natural environment for community worship. The large horseshoe clerestory glazing provides most of the natural light flooding down into the main body of the church. The cupola glazing set at an angle in an already offset roof is the fitting crown of light directly over the sanctuary and provides an appropriate focus within the church.

The embracing walls symbolise arms protecting the church. They also welcome the congregation on arrival. Finally, the cross to the rear is designed to rise high into the sky to symbolise and witness to the community the church's presence. At night the cross is flooded with light to act as a beacon and during the day can be viewed from within the church as a reminder of the great sign of the New Covenant. The overall symbolism of St. Bernard's is one of welcoming the worshipping community to pray with the knowledge that they will be safe and protected (in their prayers.)

Inside the church, one is at once struck by the ample volume of space which is enclosed and protected by the natural oak ceiling with its clerestory and cupola glazing, which appears to float giving an uplifting feeling. The sanctuary area is united with the place of assembly in a striking way by the use of stone flooring throughout the building and non differentiation of wall finishes. This has ensured the integration of the sanctuary into the central worship space.

Dempsey Architects worked closely with Father Daniel Whyte, the Parish Priest, in appointing artists from all over Ireland to create a place of worship that utilised only the best ideas from all. The worshipping community gathered around the altar and ambo is central to the celebration of faith expressed in hearing the Word of God and offering the Eucharist. The sanctuary is surrounded by the congregation and has been designed in natural stone and in

natural non-geometrical shapes. The placing of all liturgical furniture has been carefully designed to provide full symbolism using the natural materials throughout, including oak, stone, silver and bronze. The stained glass trio window presiding over the sanctuary recalls the coming of the Holy Spirit of God at Pentecost and his continuing presence in the church.

This epiphany of the new church of St. Bernard's, with the Lord's help will inspire renewed faith and hope among the people of the parish and in the Church of Down & Connor.

Dempsey Architects      October 2003

