



**St Brigid's Church Red Hill**  
*(Reprinted by kind permission of Dr Robert Riddel)*

**UPON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH  
100 YEARS CELEBRATIONS OF THE LAYING OF THE  
FOUNDATION STONE ST BRIGID'S, RED HILL**

*7th August 2012*

*Brother Tim Scott cfc*

On May 5th 1912 Archbishop James Duhig laid the foundation stone of St Brigid's Church, Red Hill—a church that has literally stood out in the city of Brisbane obviously because of its position, its size and its architecture.

But I would contend that it has also stood out because of another message that it has delivered for one hundred years.

Certainly the title I gave this talk “Upon this rock I will build my church” is very relevant for St Brigid's. It most definitely does stand upon rock and the church was built. In defining the word ‘my’ I would gather most would see it as Christ talking when he says, ‘I will build my church’ and so it is ‘Christ's’ church. However some may have experienced a parish where ‘my’ was presumed to be the parish priest particularly in the eyes of the parish priest! Though I think, as we look into the history of St Brigid's, there would be no doubt that it has indeed been Christ's church and his message was spread to so many over these one hundred years.

Bishop James Quinn bought the land which was originally called “Bishop's Hill” and Joseph Canali designed and built the first church in 1881 which was blessed and opened on the 30th December 1882. Father John Hegarty was put in charge of the parish in 1891 (at that stage there were no parish priests appointed).

A school was opened in 1897, by the Sisters of Mercy, with 400 pupils so obviously there were many Catholic families for whom the sacraments needed to be provided. In Father Tom Boland's book on Archbishop Duhig he refers to the situation of the Catholic church in the mid 1880s. Boland writes:

The Irish were congregated most thickly in the inner suburbs on the north side of the river. The most popular churches were St Stephen's Cathedral, St Patrick's, Fortitude Valley and St Brigid's, Red Hill.

One of the early Catholic families at Red Hill in 1881 was the McAuliffe family whose descendants are still in the parish today.

It was Father Francis McCarthy, chosen as the first parish priest in 1908, who then began the work to build the present St Brigid's with great energy and faith in his parishioners and his God. In the Parish minute-book of 1909, the first entry states:

Minutes of the meeting by the Rev. J. F. McCarthy (Parish Priest) and held in St Brigid's [sic] old church Red Hill, on Sunday afternoon 7th November 1909 at 4.30 pm for the purpose of taking into consideration the raising of funds for the purpose of building a new church in the District.

There it began. Yes literally solid foundations but it was true faith that built St Brigid's. Collecting began almost immediately with the 1909 statement of the new church building fund amounting to 271 pounds. Part of this was done by collectors working in pairs like Maloney & Guilfoyle, Conroy & Scanlan, Rush & Oldham, Quinn & Nolan—to name a few. Other means of collecting were by entertainment organized by the Ladies' Social Committee with river trips, picture shows and social gatherings. It is interesting to note that even the children collected and their money went to the building of the side altars.

Robert (Robin) Smith Dods (1868-1920) of Hall & Dods was chosen by Father McCarthy to be the architect for the new church. In the parish building committee's meeting on the 4th August 1912, Father McCarthy mentioned that he had interviewed Hall and Dods and gave them an idea of the style of building he required. They in turn produced a plan by mid-September. On the 2nd December 1912 Father McCarthy wrote to Dodds:

His Grace Archbishop Duhig has instructed me to proceed with the church according to the pencil sketch plans submitted by you to him. Herewith, accordingly, I instruct you to prepare the above mentioned plans and call tenders as soon as possible. You will please include in the tender the taking down of the stone building and the erecting of a playshed on a site to be determined, the material of same to be drawn as far as possible from the said old building. Furthermore, the stone-work in the aforesaid old building is to be utilized as far as possible in the new church building.

Father McCarthy was very careful not to waste money or materials. He wrote to Hall & Dods on the 20th April 1913 authorising them to call for tenders saying:

Herewith I authorize you to call tenders for the new church on Red Hill, according to the plans and specifications submitted by you and approved by His Grace Archbishop Duhig. I sincerely hope the tenders will be within our means.

*(I noted when Father McCarthy signed the letter he referred to himself as 'priest-in-charge'.)*

Dods was acknowledged as one of Australia's leading architects of the early 20th century. I would like to quote from a paper given by Richard Sundt from the University of Oregon who wrote about the architecture of St Brigid's:

When completed in 1914, St Brigid's succeeded, by virtue of its geographic position and architectural boldness, in making the Catholic Church visible in Brisbane at a time when Catholics were a minority still struggling for acceptance. Rivaling its importance as a symbol of Catholic expansion and Irish solidarity is St Brigid's architectural significance...Dod's reputation as a pioneer of Australian modernism lies not only in his willingness to discard his predecessors' obsession with historic styles, but also and more significantly, in his insistence that buildings should be designed in response to local needs and regional climatic conditions. Because in many respects St Brigid's meets these criteria so well, architectural historians are unanimous in regarding the Red Hill church as Dod's best ecclesiastical structure and possibly his finest work.

The design was based on St. Cecile's Cathedral, Albi in France which was begun in 1282 and completed in 1390. St Brigid's didn't take a hundred years to build! It combined elements of both the Romanesque and Gothic traditions. Thomas Keenan was the building contractor. The original plan included a tower above the chancel but this was not built. The architects wrote to Father McCarthy at the end of October 1913 to say that the quote received to erect the tower was 2349 pounds sixteen shillings and five pence—very precise! They considered this greatly in excess of the valuation of the work proposed and the tower was never built. It would have been built above the sanctuary area of the church. However L. J. Harvey's life-sized statue of St Brigid high up on the outside front wall holds a model of the completed church with a tower. There is a copy of the statue inside the church on the left.

I quote from Richard Sundt again when he writes:

While clearly influenced by the past—whether recent, distant or both—Robin Dods succeeded in creating a bold, and for its time, a truly modern piece of architecture on Brisbane's Red Hill. Without compromising either structural or aesthetic integrity, his design took into account in admirable fashion three important considerations: the parish's limited

financial resources, the desire of local Catholics for a worthy symbol of their faith, and last but not least, the physical comfort of the worshipping community. That this latter concern should figure so prominently in his plans is only natural from an architect best remembered today for his pioneering efforts in developing an architecture suitable to Brisbane's and Queensland's subtropical climate.

Neville Lund, when writing of Dods said:

There are few places in and around Brisbane suburbs, from which St Brigid's cannot be seen. The church rises majestically from the living rock of the hill; its soaring verticality is emphasized by its position and site. All elevations are well handled, and although the character of Albi has been captured, there has been no blatant plagiarism. The scale of St Brigid's is excellent; and on this point he could so easily have fallen into error. Dods created his own church in his own style.

As Nancy Underhill wrote in *Art and Australia* in 1978,

It is dramatic, stark and demarks the space around it. Much of this is due to Dods' sensitive use of brick, which was chosen partly for reasons of economy.

Charles Oldham from Red Hill Arcade – *The Best House of Furniture* provided the quote for the pews and kneelers. Each seat to measure seventeen feet overall! So when you sit in your pew at St Brigid's, please realize that it cost five pounds nineteen shillings—delivered!

At the laying of the foundation stone in 1912 James Duhig made the comment, 'It is the pence of the poor rather than the pounds of the rich that will build St Brigid's'. Certainly this was to be the case as many rallied to help collect the necessary money, obviously stirred by the faith and enthusiasm of Father McCarthy. It is interesting that on April 29, only the week before, Father McCarthy himself performed the ceremony of the laying of the foundation stone at St Joseph's Church, Corinda assisted by their Parish Priest, Father Stapleton.

In an article on St Brigid's written at this time, the unknown writer was describing the dimensions and style. Externally they were given as 75 feet broad, 164 feet long and nearly 100 feet high, while internally the single nave was 44 feet wide and 114 feet long with a height of 60 feet to the ridge of the roof. The writer goes on to say:

Climatic requirements have not been sacrificed to archeological fancies. On each side of the nave are wide double doors opening on to narrow balconies, so that in the heat of summer the abundant circulation of fresh air in the capacious interior will secure the physical comfort of the worshippers.

In *The Age* newspaper on Saturday 7th February, 1914 Father McCarthy put in an appeal to the Catholics of the Archdiocese for donations as the church neared completion. I quote part of his request:

I am giving an opportunity to the Catholic people to make a present to Almighty God of the actual material of our new Church on Red Hill ...for the modest sum of a half-sovereign each. Now who could refuse this great gift?...I think that very special blessings would attach to all of us if by one effort we should place in the hands of the Archbishop the material of this beautiful church to be blessed and dedicated to God's service. God would surely favour each and everyone who would come forward with such intention, for this church will remain a conspicuous consecrated pile when every living being today has passed into eternity. Moreover, with a little care and attention every twenty years or so it will remain for many generations to come. Such a gift to the honour and glory of our God must surely be to the eternal welfare of the donors.

Certainly Father Brannelly is continuing the maintenance today with a large program of work on the outside of the church to be done over the next few years. Father McCarthy went on to say that ten shillings would place one hundred bricks in the church and he wrote,

To do so at this special time is to come forward with ready aid to build up a suitable abode for Him with Whom we hope to live forever.



I noted with interest that in the first list of donors published was the presbytery housekeeper and a donor from far away Mount Morgan! This fundraising continued and the many various activities organized had raised over 10,000 pounds by 1915. This included over 4000 pounds just in the 1914-1915 year. I gather this was the time before bingo became popular! Maybe the Art Union in 1914 added considerably to the fundraising. The first prize was a motor car valued at 350 pounds along with eleven other prizes including a sewing machine and a gent's gold watch (no comment on who was to get what!) However you will be pleased to note Father McCarthy was a wise man because there was also a lady's gold watch among the prizes as well. There were also prizes of furniture, an original oil of the Last Supper, a violin and glassware. There was an extraordinary variety of prizes to be won. This was drawn on the 3rd November 1914 and the tickets were one shilling each.

In *The Age* edition of June 13th, 1914 it said under the heading, 'Brisbane's Most Conspicuous Sacred Edifice':

Away on the crown of Red Hill there has been reared with unerring skill the superstructure of what will be one of the most conspicuous landmarks in the city of Brisbane—The Rev. Father J. F. McCarthy's new church of St Brigid. It amply fulfills the sage and observant remarks of the French author-lecturer, Paul Blouet, who opined that if a church was noted to be on a commanding edifice it was almost certainly to be a Catholic Church. St Brigid's when completed, will be actually higher than the spire of St Paul's Presbyterian Church in Leichardt Street, and that building stands out against the skyline when viewed by travellers approaching the capital by river.

The magnificent pipe organ was built by B. B. Whitehouse & Co. When this was built in 1913, the company was in the Broadwood Rooms at 185 George Street but in 1921 they moved to Musgrave Road opposite the church. This was very handy for any future work that may have needed to be done. Father McCarthy put in writing the



order for the organ on the 3rd November, 1913. Whitehouse Brothers were very happy with the position of the organ and also recommended that Trackson Brothers supply the electric blower which would cost forty pounds. The casework for the organ was designed by Dods. Whitehouse & Co. used the latest systems in the structure of the organ. To quote from their correspondence:

The key and pedal action, draw stop action, couplers, and all accessories will be worked by the latest improved system of tubular pneumatics. The crescendo and diminuendo balance pedal is quite a new invention and it will be the first introduced into this State.

It is still regarded as one of the firm's most notable instruments of the period. The pipework came from A. Palmer & Son of London and the console fittings from Thomas Harrison of London. Substantial refurbishment of the organ was undertaken in 1994 and 1995 and a complete restoration was carried out in 2001.

The new St Brigid's was dedicated and opened on the 9th August, 1914. This year also marked the sixty years anniversary of Archbishop Dunne's ordination. It was attended by Archbishop Mannix of Melbourne on his first official visit to Brisbane. He had arrived in Australia on the RMS *Orana* on the 18th March 1913 and then on to Melbourne from the west by train. So he had been in Australia only a year. The dedication was presided over by Archbishop Duhig. Many considered the building of St Brigid's as the coming of age of Catholicism in Brisbane and with Duhig's reputation as James the builder, St Brigid's was an auspicious beginning. As an aside—for those who may have seen the souvenir booklet brought out for the laying of the foundation stone of the Holy Name Cathedral opposite All Hallows in 1928—among the photos of our beautiful churches is one of St Brigid's.

Certainly the Irish contribution for St Brigid's was evident if one goes by the names. The Stations of the Cross, each donated by a family, e.g. Sweeny, Brennan, Cronin, Kelly. The Main Altar was donated by the Donovan family in 1914. Even to recent times with the new marble altar that faces the people being donated in memory of the O'Dowd family. They are definitely all typical Irish names.

In the biography of Archbishop Dunne, mention is made that he refused to open churches unless they were almost free from debt. This continued for thirty years. I quote from the book;

This was finally lost by Dunne in 1912 after the arrival of his coadjutor, Archbishop James Duhig ... One of the first acts of the young Duhig was to lay the foundation stone of St Brigid's, Red Hill. This monumental and aggressively Catholic structure heralded a new building era ...

Certainly the dedication and official opening of St Brigid's was a magnificent occasion and well covered in *The Age* newspaper—five pages. I am not sure who the author of the article was, however I found the opening paragraph very powerful Allow me to quote part of it:

The long sustained energy displayed by the parishioners of Red Hill had worked them up to such a pitch of enthusiasm that their eagerness to see their new church opened was displayed in a most remarkable manner. As the church reared itself above ground their solicitude and interest increased, and when they saw it almost completed their wishes, if possible, would have annihilated the time which separated them from the moment when the episcopal blessing would be imparted to the building amidst great éclat, and when the Sacred Host would take its place on the High Altar and when God would enter the beautiful Tabernacle—always to remain there. They awaited impatiently the lighting of that sanctuary lamp which for generations to come will send forth soft rays of calm and peace to those stricken souls who, weary and heavy laden, seek consolation in the hallowed building and there silently commune with the Eternal Father.

The building of St Brigid's was referred to as "a Titanic task"—the sinking of that ship only two years before, still fresh in the minds of many, I should imagine. The faith of the people would ensure that this edifice would not sink but would continue to carry many to God—and it has for a century. So at a time when the bills had to be paid other pressures were there. The Archdiocese for instance was asking that money be donated to open a new Christian Brothers' school at South Brisbane on the site of St Kilian's (now known as St Laurence's). Of course many young men answered the call to fight in World War One; leaving so much for the womenfolk left behind to have to do. But raise the money they did.

As the Hibernians in full regalia assisted in keeping the huge crowd in position, Archbishop Duhig—assisted by Father McCarthy and James Byrne, then administrator of the cathedral (and later to be the first Bishop of Toowoomba)—led the episcopal procession along with the many clergy for the dedication ceremony. In the procession were Dr. Mannix, coadjutor Archbishop of Melbourne, Bishop Sheil of Rockhampton (whose mention in Duhig's welcome caused some laughter and applause as it was stated that Shiel's diocese was ten times the size of Ireland!) Bishop O'Connor of Armidale. Many priests—including Fathers Potter of Warwick, Walsh of Gatton, Lee of Rosalie and Toowong, Lane of Ipswich, O'Reilly of Bathurst, Hennessy of Young, Gallagher of Goulburn—were there to rejoice in the new edifice. There were over twenty priests present.

The Mayor, Ald. Jenkinson, Members of Parliament, well known names like T. C. Beirne, Frank McDonnell, T. J. Ryan, H. D Macrossan, Christian Brothers from Terrace and Nudgee College and the Sisters of Mercy (who were given the front rows of the choir gallery), were among the many in attendance. As the Pontifical High Mass began, a new experience for many churchgoers occurred. Again I refer to the account of the ceremony.

When the celebrant entered the sanctuary the pillars of electric lights which are installed in the angles behind the buttresses were turned on and shed an effulgent light over the altar without being visible to the congregation. This admirable feature is unique to Queenslanders.

Archbishop Mannix gave the sermon with an emphasis on ecumenism. Beginning with a quote from the Gospel of St John Ch. 17: 20-21 — ‘And not for them only do I pray but for them also who through their words shall believe in me. That they all may be one...’ He mentioned the appeal to both Catholics and non-Catholics to a world conference to discuss the union of Christian churches. Mannix said:

Our hearts go out in sympathy to those who, wearied and tortured by religious unrest, and doubt and strife, grasp at any hope of giving health and healing to the rent and mangled fragments of what ought to be the one living mystical Body of Christ.

I have to admit that Archbishop Mannix did emphasize the important and prominent position of the Catholic Church in the history of Christianity.

He finished the sermon in praise of the many in the parish and others who worked so hard for St Brigid’s:

...so noble a monument of your faith and generosity and love. This church so imposing in its massive grandeur, so harmonious in its treatment, so striking in its architecture, is not to be the offering of some wealthy citizen who has been blessed by God with the good things of this world and who desires to make some return from out his abundance to the God who has given it all. Even so it would have been a noble gift, but in the sight of God your church is something richer, nobler, more precious. It is the offering of many faithful loving hearts; those whom were moderately wealthy give from their sufficiency, the poor given even from their slender store, and all give generously and lovingly from out the living faith that is deep rooted in their souls.

I was amazed to find that the usual Apostolic Blessing for such an occasion sent by the Pope, then Pope Pius X, was hand written by the famous Cardinal Merry del Val from the Vatican on June 19th, 1914. In part he wrote:

The Holy Father desires me to express to you His appreciation of the spirit of generosity shown by the population of St Brigid's Parish, and by many other benefactors in connection with the building of the new Parish church. His Holiness moreover most cordially bestows the Apostolic Benediction on all those who, in a spirit of devotion, will be present at the dedication ceremony as well as on all who have contributed or in future will contribute to the fund for the building and completion of the new Temple of God—worthy testimony to the faith and piety of Catholic Australasia.

St Brigid's was dedicated on the 9th August 1914 and Pope Pius X died shortly after.

The cost of the building was 15,000 pounds, furnishings cost 2,500 pounds. Of this 17,500 pounds, 11,358 pounds had been collected with another 2,000 pounds collected on the day of the dedication. So it is amazing to think that just a little over 4,000 pounds of the original amount had to be raised to pay off the church. After many speeches by several people at the banquet that followed, Mannix finished by saying that though Father McCarthy had not the misfortune to be a bishop himself, he realized that a great deal of the work attributed to bishops and other dignitaries of colour was really due to the hard work and labour of the clergy. He was glad to see the great work that Father McCarthy had accomplished. He was proud of it because Father McCarthy, like himself, was a Corkman. He reminded the people that there was a saying in Ireland 'never trust a Corkman' but those who had trusted Father McCarthy had made no mistake.

James Duhig felt deeply for the spiritual needs of his flock and often praised them for their efforts. From a sermon given in April 1934 and printed in *The Work and Progress of the Catholic Church in Australia* he had this to say:

Today not only are the spiritual needs of nearly a million and a half people faithfully supplied but the young are educated, the sick are nursed, the orphan is fed, the aged are cared for...The faith of the people is expressed not only in the daily practice of their religion, in prayer and sacrament and Holy Mass but in those thousands of material edifices built to the glory of God, from the weatherboard church of the inlands to the magnificent cathedrals of our capital cities; from the tiny outback schools, where devoted little communities of nuns keep a constant vigil over the Catholic children of lonely settlements, to the great colleges and convents that crown the hills.

Maybe he was thinking of men like Father McCarthy when he referred to the early pioneers of the church as '*Erant gigantes in diebus illis*'—'They were giants in those days'. He emphasized again the faith of the people, not the structures, when he continued, 'No matter how vast and grand the superstructures may rise in the future, the part played by those who laid its foundation can never be obscured'.

As mentioned earlier the church is not just a building but a living congregation. For example the St Vincent de Paul Society began in the parish on the 18th February 1894—nearly 120 years of work for others by people of the parish—certainly the parish practising what is preached. They distributed over a hundred hampers of food to families last Christmas. As their Rule says:

At their outset they felt the need to 'bear witness' to their Christian faith by actions rather than words. They regarded the unfortunate as their brothers, whoever they were and whatever the nature of their sufferings. In them they saw the suffering Christ.

The Hibernian Society whose motto is “Faith, Hope, Charity”, were always there for those in need by diffusing its benefits to help the distressed and the needy. On their regalia apart from the Irish symbols was the Australian coat-of-arms which symbolized, in the words of their longest serving member:

...the love for sunny Australia, the land of our Society’s origin, and devotion to her high national ideals and aspirations, and our determination to ever assist in moulding her destiny to help in maintaining her freedom and integrity.

The Sacred Heart Sodality, still gathering at St Brigid’s, strongly promoted the Christian life of its members. The outreach to those families in need is still so central to the parish—all of these groups sent or are sending a message that the gospel preached inside those magnificent walls spread beyond them. I have the privilege of serving the Mass there each week on Monday and Thursday mornings and I am always edified by the cross-section of cultures present at the Masses as well, of course, as the regulars sharing their faith and kindness.

Father McCarthy continued as parish priest until 1926, and his place was taken by Father Frank Masterson until 1964—nearly forty years. Following Father Masterson’s death, Father John Clarke was appointed and he continued as Parish Priest from October 1964 until 1997. He was to make several changes to the church building following the Second Vatican Council. This was followed by a time of pastoral review in 1997 and during that time Fathers Stephen Hinkler, Vince Hobbs and Anthony Mellor served as administrators. In 1997 St Brigid’s welcomed in residence, Bishop John Gerry, who was to share his extraordinary spirituality with the people for several years. The Jubilee Parish was created in 2006 and Father Peter Brannelly was appointed the foundation parish priest.

Our new Archbishop, Mark Coleridge, celebrated a special Mass at St Brigid’s to mark the centenary of the laying of the foundation stone. It happened to be Trinity Sunday.



I would like to conclude this account of the building of St Brigid's with part of his homily at the Mass as it summarises, I believe, what St Brigid's is all about.

*The Trinity gathers up all things into a symphony of perfect love—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but the whole of creation as well...This church is symphonic in other ways too—it was inspired by a French design (Cathedral of Albi), designed by an architect who was Kiwi-born of Scottish parents and spent much of his life working in the UK, built by an Irish PP and his largely Irish Catholic community, and built here on Australian soil—again the symphony of sounds... It was built by a community that was largely marginalized, but which sought acceptance and true insertion in society—as the foundation stone shows (It mentions not only Archbishop Duhig, Pope Pius X and Father McCarthy, but also King George V and Sir William McGregor, Governor of Queensland). It was built as a statement of their own dignity and of the grandeur of their Catholic faith—at a time when both were often denied. But built finally as a hymn in bricks and mortar, in stone, glass and metal—a hymn to the perfect love of the Trinity that we celebrate today—the love that touches the earth uniquely in the Eucharist, the prime purpose for which this church was built and the great mystery which this building seeks to show forth...Much has changed in the last 100 years, but St Brigid's stands firm on its hill as a witness to what does not change—the perfect love from which all things came and to which all things will return—the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...*

May the next hundred years continue to bear the fruits of the Gospel message sown over the last one hundred years. In the words of the present Parish Priest, Father Peter Brannelly:

*It is very important that we remember and celebrate the vision, real sacrifices and faith of those who have gone before us and who have provided us today with such a solid foundation on which to live out our Catholic faith.*

*Brother Tim Scott is a Christian Brother and was born and bred in Spring Hill—so St Brigid's has been very much part of his life. His grandparents and their families arrived from Ireland and settled in Red Hill in 1881 and thus have had a continued lineage connected with the Parish to the present day.*

*Tim has taught in various schools around Brisbane and Queensland and used to make sure the students had special history and art appreciation lessons included in the curriculum. At present he organises and teaches English classes to refugees and migrants at Rosalie in one of the former classrooms at what was Sacred Heart School, formerly administered by the Sisters of Mercy.*

*He has a particular interest in things historical and has helped in the archival work for the Christian Brothers over the years.*

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