

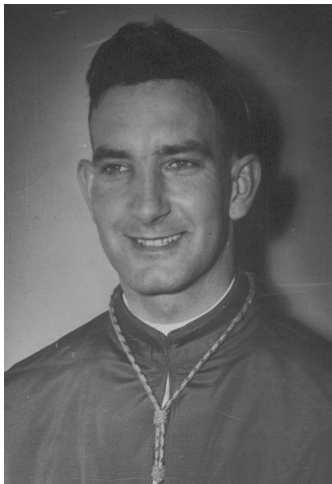
TOM BASS SCULPTURES IN SAINT AUGUSTINE'S YASS

There are four sculptures by Tom Bass in this wonderful church. They are the great crucifix on the front of the building, the Reredos crucifix on the wall behind the altar, the statue of St Paul near the baptistery, and the low relief of St Augustine outside near the front side entrance. I will endeavour to give some background to these sculptures.

Tom Bass wrote the following in 1956 explaining his works.

Although it is all so recent, as I look at it now, the whole wonderful experience we did for the Church of St Augustine at Yass has an air of legend and fable about it unlike anything I have ever known before. It all began in a quite unexceptional way; my wife and I happened to be in the office of the architect Mr J.C.Fowell one day discussing some other work when he produced the drawings for the new church at Yass and gave us the broad outlines of the painting and sculpture proposed for it. A crucifix on the front of the church, a figure of St Paul, and a chapel with some form of mural decoration possibly dedicated to married saints.

These things were discussed in a general way mainly with the kinds of materials which could be used. Finally it was suggested that since the client, a young Roman Catholic bishop, was deeply interested in the works to be done, that we should meet as soon as possible. And so it was arranged for me to accompany Mr John Fowell on his next visit to Yass.



We arrived at the bishop's house on a clear frosty winter's night and the tall dynamic youthful bishop was waiting to meet us. We went straight to his study, a wonderful room teeming with books and papers vibrant with the activity of a powerful mind and unique personality.

There were no preliminaries, none were needed; although our origins, our educations and our lives could not have been more completely different. He a Roman bishop, I a protestant layman. He trained as a priest schooled in Rome, a Doctor of Divinity – I a married man with four children, almost self-educated – a product of the depression years – come from a life that had been chaotic and insecure.

In spite of all these differences, I wonder now, was it because of them our two minds met and sparks were struck. With John Fowell we talked far into the night, mostly about the great crucifix for the front of the church and the figure of St Paul. This was a War Memorial church and the crucifix was to be an emblem of suffering, an emblem for modern man in the hydrogen bomb era, frightened and bewildered at the results of his clever godlessness. I could feel instantly with him that all this could be expressed by that

strange apparently paradoxical moment in the passion when Christ cries out- “My God, my God! Why hast thou forsaken me?”

Paul, at my suggestion, was to be a sailmaker full of mystical power. At breakfast with his priests the next morning and again at lunch, our talk continued and widened out into the most stimulating discussions of the philosophy, purpose and meaning of art. This man was a Lord of his church and he was truly lordly in his manner, full of grace and charm, dignified and powerful. The time spent briefly sharing the life of his household with John Fowell was, as I think of it now, like a moment out of time when we were excused for a little while from our harsh, rational, prosaic world; and now I like to hope that it may mean more than a momentary reversion to a more wonderful period of art, that it could be the beginning of a renaissance of religious art in this new country.

I came back home and then began for my wife and myself a period of intensive reading and research. For Lenore into the lives of the saints who made up her saints panel which under the bishop’s direction gradually formed as a group of saints round the central figure of Christ, each an emblem of a particular state of life. I delved into the life and letters of St Paul thinking between times of the crucified Christ which was to be an emblem of modern man in this present crisis, and gradually the figure began to form in my mind like a great cry of anguish.

Slowly the sketch models and cartoons of these things began to develop and then a day came when the bishop & Mr Fowell, snr, came to see our work. Lenore had a small sensitive colour sketch of her saints panel which, although it developed, did not fundamentally change right through to the finished work. I had a very complete model for the great crucifix which was never really developed as a sketch, about which he made a brilliant suggestion for the form of the loin cloth. This was a wonderful day for us. We had a holy man in our house and a fine religious architect and a deep affection between us all.

Shortly afterwards the bishop wrote and made a suggestion about St Paul, to have, as he put it, “the thread of St Paul’s needle loosely falling into the Greek for ‘In Christ’”. He said, “I have a very special and deep theological reason for this suggestion.” I went almost straight ahead with the great crucifix and shortly afterwards the bishop was appointed Coadjutor Archbishop of Hobart.



He paid us one last visit with Mr Fowell before he left and we offered him our wistful congratulations. He had come to see the crucifix and it was for me a most moving thing to share with this man a unique combination of artist and priest in the creative processes of the work. As an artist myself I could understand his yearning that day when he said

how much he would love to be there the day the crucifix was to be put into its place on the church. Soon afterwards he wrote to me, “ To have been deprived of sharing with you and Mrs Bass the vital and unique experience of bringing some of its (the church’s) beauty into being is one of the heaviest little chips of God’s great cross that has ever cut into my heart.”



Then I began work on the figure of St Paul and when I was finished I showed it in our annual Sculptors’ Exhibition and while it was still there I wrote to the Archbishop to tell him about it. I am sure he will permit this extract from the letter:

“Now that it is over and all the excitement of bringing him into existence is gone I feel like a husk. When I went back to the barn (my studio) to clean up after it was gone I found myself having great bouts of nostalgia to get him back and be working on him again as I had done night and day for weeks. I have never worked so intensely and because I know you would want to know I will tell you that I feel it is the best thing that I have done.

“There came a point when I realized that almost every feature of him was a symbol and must be made to express some aspects of his life, work and spirit.

“The shining wrinkled brow must express his divine anxiety. What he called his anxious care.

“The eyes must be the deep mystic soul of the man and I wanted to mouth to be one that could say,

“Though I speak with the tongues of man and of angels and have not love I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal’.

“I will always remember the night you said that for me in Yass.

“The nose must express his great powerful leadership.

“The hands must be hands that worked but sensitive, sacramental.

“And the feet of a missionary who had tramped up and down the known world.

“I think I told you before that, to me, the needle is the symbol of Paul himself, sharp, penetrating and creative. And as I worked I realized that the sail he is stitching is Christianity. I was making a slight variation to the sail to get a place to

put your Greek inscription, and when I stepped back I found that the folds of the sail, as they break over his arm, make the architectural form of a church.

“You were right about the Greek inscription. It did look too clever in the thread. It made him look as though he had just performed a conjuring trick. I got over it by incising the letters into the sail and encircling them with thread. I feel sure you will agree with it that way.

”That is how it is with Paul. He seems to manage things himself. Only requiring my cooperation. I used to get a message from him every morning before I left the house at a quarter past seven. Believe it or not, the Reverend Father Kevin Halpin was reading from his epistles on the radio just at that time. Naturally the whole family thinks and talks about St Paul. One day Lenore was getting Tim ready for Sunday school and wanted him to wear socks with his sandals. Tim objected; Lenore insisted that it was wrong not to wear socks. Said Tim: ‘Well it was good enough for St Paul, wasn’t it?’

Then, at the end of June in the same year, 1955, just nine months after it was begun, I completed the modeling of the crucifix, and once again I wrote to tell Dr Young about it and sent photographs of the clay model. In it I said, ‘How to tell you about the crucifix I don’t know, only this. One day as I was working and feeling in myself the sense of desolation and anguish I was trying to express I remembered feeling the same way at another time. Suddenly I realized that it was while I was doing the Unknown Political Prisoner.’

In 1952 an international sculpture competition was held on the theme ‘The Unknown Political Prisoner’ in which I was one chosen to represent Australia and for which I did a strangely abstracted and emasculated figure whose chest was a barrel cell and out of the kneeling suppliant figure grew muscles and tendons and sinews to form a prison made of itself, to express my conception of the theme that man is imprisoned in his own sin and political intolerance. This theme is a tragic aspect of the crisis of our time and is undoubtedly a parallel to the theme of our crucifix.

My letter continued, “Without question, Christ is the Unknown Political Prisoner.” Didn’t he say, as I imperfectly remember it, “Forasmuch as ye do it unto the least of my brethren ye do it unto me. I did try as far as my capacity would allow to make a symbol of this utmost spiritual anguish but I could go no further than that. One may understand that such a terrible agony of the spirit was not merely the outcome of the event: countless people died, unjustly and in pain. To me what is different in this death is that he suffered in the same degree as his capacity for infinite love. I could not be satisfied with my attempt to realize the awfulness of this.”

In answering this letter, Dr Young said, “The master of this man over his own life is strikingly achieved. Did you realize that? Despite his torture and physical helplessness, he is still freely redeeming man.”

And I replied, "Yes, I did understand that this sacrifice was a voluntary thing and it is that very idea of Christ laying down his life that causes me to disagree with so many representations of the crucifixion.



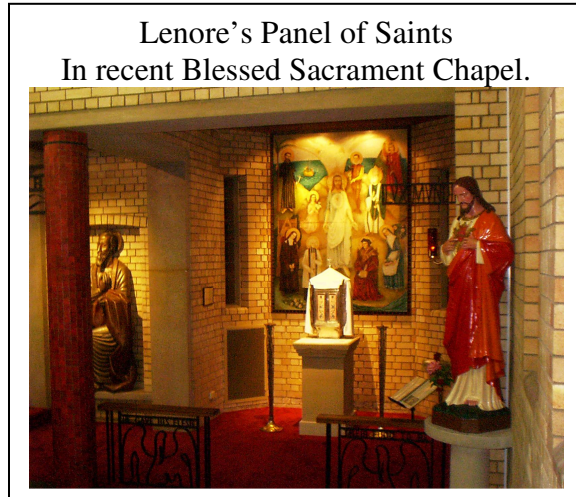
Something savage and terrible was being done to him, but it was transcended by his utter submission to it. You know of course that I am quite ignorant of formal theology but to me one of the most profound meanings of the crucifixion is that while the Jews and Romans were the executors, basically it was between Christ and God his Father and his triumph was the perfection of his submission to that will."

In one of my letters to the Archbishop I said: "Now I have a message to you from Lenore. She says more and more as she works on the panel she thinks your conception of it was inspired. The saints are such a diverse assortment of people that they seem to have achieved unity in variety; they have become a divine community surrounding their radiant Master."

And he answered, "And so Lenore continues to penetrate the beauties of Paradise and grows in the understanding of the harmony of opposites produced in souls so different as a Therese and a Thomas More. I should love to be following her week by week. I follow her in prayer. Tell her to draw the next line of Xavier as a prayer for me."

And later again I wrote to him: "Lenore has been working at the saints panel for many months now. For some weeks the children were away being cared for by relatives but we missed one another unbearably and so decided to do the impossible, that is to finish the panel with the children at home. She does all the housework at night, washing, ironing, cooking the next day's meals, fixing school clothes, and the thousand and one domestic tasks. In the mornings we start very early so that we can begin work as soon as possible after the children leave for school. Even so there are endless distractions during the day. Our three year old is at home and gets into all the little difficulties from which only a mother can rescue her.

Nevertheless, she is making steady progress and I feel doing a beautiful work. The saints are emerging more every day as distinct and unique persons. St Francis Xavier, so full of missionary fervour, St Aloysius, the handsome princely Florentine youth, with chaste and downcast eyes; St Louis, the gentle would-be king; St Maria Goretti, kneeling in childish adoration of the Christ; St Therese, so vivid a person that she seems to come off the



painting towards you; and the Cure d'Ars – do you remember how they said of him that he was near to death for so long that the people began to believe he would never die? He looks like that; St Thomas More looks the fine, sturdy, scholarly spiritual man that he was; Elizabeth of Hungary is full of grace, with her apron frilled with roses; and St Patrick in his green mantle holding the shamrock, symbol of the Trinity, glowing with mystical fire. The figure of Christ is a vision. I won't try to describe him, except to say that I feel he must have looked like this."

Then on a hot day in early Summer I put the great crucifix on to the church. The new priest of the parish could not have been more kind and hospitable, but naturally I wished that Dr Young could have been there, as I knew he longed to be. But I had no doubt that is such a way we are reminded that our works are to an end far beyond our desires.

The last work to be done was the reredos crucifix. My conception of it was quite different from the crucifix outside. I saw it as part of the Mass – a liturgical emblem as formal as the chalice yet containing an emotion. I described my idea of it in a letter to Dr Young like this: "I will strip everything irrelevant out of it. I want to reveal nothing but the beauty and purity of his sacrifice."

And the day came when I loaded the panel, the reredos crucifix and St Paul onto a truck and set out for Yass. It was wonderful – and disturbing – to take our work into the almost completed church – to set them in place at last – to see if they would become part of the total architecture of the church. But the supreme test of their religious and devotional meaning would come when the church had filled the function for which it was created.

That day began for us when, standing in front of the church, we saw Archbishop Young in jeweled mitre and robes of embroidered parchment coloured silk, with silver



crook, walking with the clergy towards his church, a year and a half after he had left it. And as he climbed the path to the church his eyes never left the great copper crucifix crying out to God.

We watched the solemn, beautiful ceremony of blessing the church which began at the main door and continued right around the church with the sprinkling of holy water, returning to the main door. We were deeply touched to see this man bestow the blessing on the church he had created to the glory of his God.

Then the doors were thrown open, the clergy entered two by two, and last of all the shepherd with his silver crook beckoning his flock to follow him in. The ceremony of blessing continued inside the church, the sanctuary and the side aisles, and then we saw him approach first St Paul, then the saints panel, so fervently to bestow the blessing of holy water.

At the end of the speech-making, he told the people of the meaning, significance and purpose of many things in their church> He explained the meaning of the great crucifix and the symbols of the passion surrounding it, and the symbols of the lintel stone, of the fish, which is the ancient symbol of Christ, stabbed with a cross and carrying a basket of bread which is on the altar grille and of the old legends of the pelican stabbing its breast with its bill to feed its young in the sanctuary gates – and much more. He told the people how the symbols can lead us deep into religious mysteries far beyond the power of the word.

Early next morning the first Mass in the new church was said by Archbishop Young, and we saw the reredos crucifix incorporated into that beautiful ritual. Prayers were said for us and all those who had contributed to the building of the church. When Holy Communion was given, the Archbishop spoke to his people from the sanctuary, and afterwards, babies were blessed in the side chapel. Then when the people were gone he knelt down and prayed before Lenore's saints, each in turn, and then to St Paul. And so the fervour of all our work and dreams was fulfilled.

It must be rarely indeed that artists are so honoured, so richly rewarded, and finally left with such a sense of the beauty and holiness of an art directed to the greater glory of God, nourished as it was by a warm heart and a generous spirit.

1954 we celebrated fifty years from the laying of the foundation stone of this wonderful church. Leading up to that celebration the sanctuary was remodeled to fit in more with the various changes to the liturgies. The area where Lenore's panel of saints is was made into a Blessed Sacrament Chapel. There were a number of alterations. These were blessed by Archbishop Carroll and Tom Bass was with us for the occasion.

Later in the year the Darmody family wanted to do something for the church to remember their parents. I suggested we could get Tom Bass to do the low relief he had planned for the 1950s. A maquette of the proposed low relief was in our safe. The Darmody family contacted Tom Bass but the cost was beyond them. Eventually Tom said he would do it

for much less and make his own contribution if it was dedicated to the memory of Mick and Joan Darmody and also their and his great friend, Archbishop Guilford Young. It was arranged and the final sculpture was blessed on the feast of St Augustine, 28th August. 2004. St Augustine had finally arrived in his church.



Tom Bass with Archbishop Carroll
After the blessing of the low-relief
Of Saint Augustine.

Father Laurie Bent, PP

