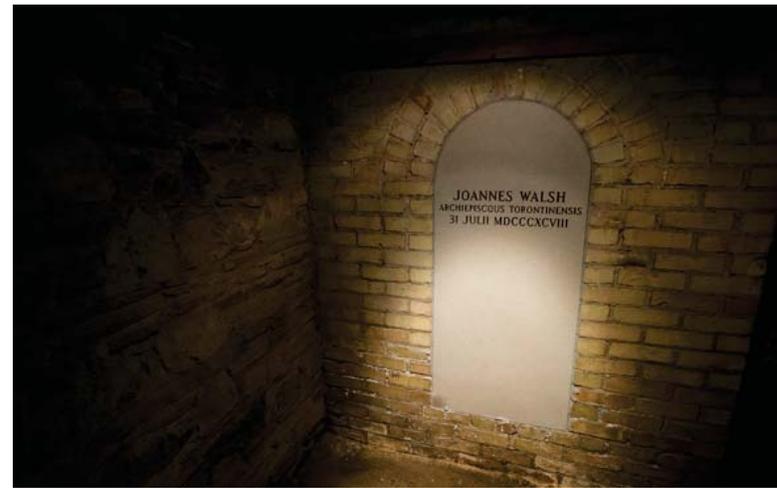


+VG Architects - Restoration of St. Michael's Cathedral: creeks, bones and a missing stone



Fr. Busch, a former fine arts student turned advertising man turned priest, who is now the rector of St. Michael's. "When you put artifacts into a foundation stone, it speaks to what that person intended this place to be. It's important to see what maybe Michael Power might have put in there as a protection or talisman for this building. He may have put in relics and notes." Funds for the original building came in pennies from mainly poor Irish immigrants and gifts of individual bricks from the local brickworks.



A crypt in the cellar of Toronto's St. Michaels Cathedral. The Cathedral is going through an ongoing renovation of phases which is National Post currently seeing the foundation being re-built.

Courtesy of the National Post - Charles Lewis

Hidden in the ground beneath Toronto's St. Michael's Cathedral, among the piles of damp earth, construction material, crypts and coffins, is one thing Father Michael Busch would love to find: the cornerstone. It has no structural significance and if it is never recovered there would be no delay to the massive renovation that is already 10 years old and will likely continue for 10 more.

But Fr. Busch believes the elusive stone may contain more clues to the vision, for the faith and for the building, of Michael Power, appointed first bishop of the diocese in 1842. It was Bishop Power who wanted a neo-Gothic church in the fashion of York Minster but of a more modest size. "It's the foundation stone of the cathedral," explains

Now the diocese is spending many millions of dollars that will rework the interior and exterior, everything from basement up to steeple. The basement alone is a "structural and engineering nightmare," says Fr. Busch, laughing at the sheer scope of the work. Each stained glass window will cost upwards of \$200,000 and will have to be shipped to Germany or Austria for renovation.

All of this to restore the style envisioned by Bishop Power, who presided when the cornerstone was placed during a ceremony on May 8, 1845, near the northeast corner of the church, but would die before it was completed. "It's a style that emphasizes verticality; things soar up," says Fr. Busch. "Arches are pointed, not rounded. It's meant to draw your eyes forward. Same for the tall steeple

that you see from the outside — it, too, stresses the movement upwards." Bishop Power bought the land out of his own pocket for about 350 pounds and construction began in 1845. He was criticized for picking such a remote site, west of the main town centre around what is today Queen and Power.

Townsppeople dug out the foundation by hand, removing 96,000 tons of dirt, in return for a barbecue. Shipwrights made the interior columns out of the endless supply of maples and oaks. The bishop died in 1847 and the church was consecrated in 1848 just after a city father, John Elmsley, a convert to Catholicism from the predominant Anglican faith of the time, guaranteed the debt of £1,800.

Elmsley and his family are among the 68 Catholics buried beneath the church. That number includes Bishop Power, whose vault is directly below the main altar, three other bishops, some families from what was then the city's elite, a few sisters who worked in the first orphanages and a man who fell from the roof during construction. Bishop Lynch chose to be buried in the garden courtyard because he did not want to be in the dark. Burials stopped in the mid 1880s.

The steeple was built in 1867, in time for Confederation celebrations, but it took another 30 years or more before the cathedral began to resemble what it is today. Over the years, though, additions were made that veered from the original design. It became an accretion of styles, most of which would be missed by anyone not trained in art or architecture or not within earshot of Fr. Busch's booming baritone.

The line of the ceiling from the back of the church to front provides one example: The angular ceiling is neo-Gothic. Then suddenly, just before the altar, the ceiling becomes curved in the Romanesque style. In a later phase, those curves will be straightened out.



Father Michael Busch

When Bishop Power died he left no drawings or other plans. The only hints Toronto architect Terrance White found were notes from William Thomas, the original architect.

In the late 1990s, the Archdiocese of Toronto came up with a master renovation plan that covers the interior and exterior and from below ground to the steeple. The idea was to update to current standards of construction, but at the same time to go back to Bishop Power's original vision and create a pure neo-Gothic structure. Because the building is supported on original wood and stone, the foundation became a priority.

The project was so daunting that there was a thought of selling the land and building anew. Fr. Busch, who considers this a dream assignment, combining his love of fine art and faith, says the loss to Toronto would have been tragic. "It's not just a building that will be beautiful to look at. It's a living testament to



A painting of Bishop Michael Power
Thompson/National Post

the faith. It draws people here. They come and get inspired and go out and do work.

This is what Bishop Power envisioned." That, of course, is why he would love to see the cornerstone, to see what other messages Bishop Power passed along. For his part, Mr. White, a partner in +VG Architects in Toronto, believes the cornerstone is probably still there but may be so deeply buried that it may become prohibitively expensive to dig out. And given the other issues that had to be dealt with the damp world below, the cornerstone is more gravy than the main course itself. He titled his firm's work underneath the building as

"creeks and bones" — "creeks" to deal with the ground water that could continue to undermine the structure and "bones" to figure out how to deal with the bodies below. There were 28 identifiable vaults, or crypts, in the basement but no one had any idea if they would account for all 68 bodies that were registered with the diocese. "The Church didn't want the project to start and suddenly have to stop because of the discovery of human remains," Mr. White says. An archeological firm was brought in to try to look for bodies in the foundation, but to no avail. "We got down to one last option — to open up all the crypts," Mr. White says.

Once the crypts were open, all the bodies were accounted for. "There was one crypt that was built by a well-to-do family. When we opened it you could see the benches that held the adult-sized caskets. But there was also the casket of an infant and what was stunning was the remains of a rose on top of the child's coffin were still there. You can imagine it placed there by the child's mother. So what was apparently dead and gone and past came alive again in the memory of the cathedral."

+VG Architects is a full-service architectural firm offering new design, expansions and heritage restorations for cultural, educational, municipal, justice, healthcare, residential and recreational facilities. Our staff of +50 operates in five offices in Ontario, in Brantford, Kitchener, Toronto, London and Belleville.

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