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VISIT TO ST. TEILO'S CHURCH at THE NATIONAL HISTORY MUSEUM

by Bishop Daniel Joseph Mullins

On August 13, I joined the Sisters of Holy Cross Abbey, and Fr. John their chaplain, for Holy Mass. It was a special occasion. The Mass was being celebrated in St. Teilo's Church at the National History Museum at St. Fagans near Cardiff.

The National History Museum is part of the National Museum of Wales. It was formerly known as the Welsh Folk Museum, and that remains its official title in Welsh. Opened in 1948, a central part of its remit has been 'the rescuing, recording, removing and re-erecting' of significant buildings, no matter how humble, that form a part of the surviving experience of the Welsh people.

St. Teilo's Catholic Church was originally built on the marshy land near the crossing of the river Llwchwr. The oldest parts of the building probably date back to the early thirteenth century or a little earlier. It was extended in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. After the Reformation, it served as the Anglican parish church for the area. During the Industrial Revolution, the town of Pontarddulais developed and a new parish church, also dedicated to St. Teilo, was provided. The old church continued in occasional use, mainly for funerals, until 1972. The abandoned building quickly deteriorated and enterprising locals used the slates for their own purposes. In 1982, the Church in Wales offered the building for re-erection at St. Fagans.

Dedication to St. Teilo was common across South Wales. He was a contemporary of St. David and a coworker in the monastic re-evangelisation of this area of Roman Britain. We still celebrate his feast on the ninth of February.



Sisters of the Whitland Community, with Bishop Daniel, Fr John and friends of the community

In the removal to St. Fagans, it was decided that St. Teilo's should be re-erected as it would have been on the eve of the Reformation. The late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was a period of restoration and the redecoration of churches throughout Wales. Some time after the Reformation, probably in the 1560's, the rood screen was removed and the wall-paintings plastered over. It was the discovery of some of these under the crumbling masonry that inspired the decision to decorate the restored church as it

would have been in the 1520's. Painstakingly and after much detailed research, the surviving materials were re-used. A hand-carved rood screen showing the twelve apostles and containing twenty-five scenes from the Vita of Teilo has been erected. Statues of Our Lady and St. Teilo were carved and the crucifix flanked by Our Lady and St. John were prepared and installed in the traditional manner. Wall paintings of the Passion cycle and of the popular saints have been placed on the walls using methods and materials of the early fifteenth century. The craftsmanship, scholarship and the exacting attention to period authenticity is quite remarkable. The Catholic community in Wales and far beyond is indebted to the Directors, scholars and skilled craftsmen of the National History Museum.

It was very appropriate that the Cistercian community of Holy Cross Abbey should have been among the first to celebrate Mass in the restored Church. The Sisters sang the Latin Ordinary of the Mass and concluded the celebration with the singing of the Salve Regina. St. Teilo's Church was on the pilgrim route to St. David's. Pilgrims would have called and prayed there and would have continued their journey westward with a visit to the monks at Whitland Abbey.

+ Daniel Mullins

Note: This article by Bishop Daniel Mullins (Bishop Emeritus of Menevia), was written for 'Jottings' (a Cistercian Newsletter for the region and edited by Sr. Peter at Whitland) and is reproduced with permission. Fr John is the chaplain at Whitland Abbey and is the retired abbot of Mount St Bernard Cistercian Monastery in Leicestershire -Ed.

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