

THE CATHOLIC HERALD

PLANS UNVEILED FOR STATUE OF VIRGIN ON LAND WHERE SHRINES WERE BURNED

By Simon Caldwell, Catholic Herald, 9th May 2008

Plans have been unveiled for a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary to stand in London in reparation for the destruction of the medieval Catholic shrines during the Reformation.

The work will be called "Mary Most Holy" and will stand on land alongside the River Thames at Chelsea's Embankment Gardens that was once owned by St Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor who was beheaded in 1535.

It has been commissioned by the Art and Reconciliation Trust, a charity set up to promote awareness of the negative affects iconoclasm can have on culture. It will cost in the region of £1.25 million.

The sculptor is Paul Day, whose previous work includes a 2002 memorial of the Battle of Britain on the bank of the Thames in central London; the Meeting Place at St Pancras station, London, and a memorial to the Queen Mother outside Buckingham Palace in the Mall.

The proposed work, a bronze triptych on a granite plinth, will feature a statue of a "beautiful" Virgin Mary holding up the Child Jesus against the backdrop of ruins.

One of two side panels will show iconoclasts beheading the statues of saints - one cradling the head of the Virgin Mary - while the other panel depicts reformers mocking a crucifix.

Unveiling a model for the sculpture at the Charterhouse in London last week, Mr Day said that its purpose would be "to recall events in Chelsea's local history that were of national importance and whose effects can still be powerfully felt in present day Britain".

"The destruction of England's medieval shrines and devotional images, conducted by Thomas Cromwell, was part of Henry VIII's programme for reform," he said. "In the summer of 1538 Cromwell was ensconced at Chelsea Manor to conduct his affairs because of an outbreak of the plague in central London.

"From there, he ordered the most important Marian shrines in England be brought to Chelsea so that he could witness their destruction. The dissolution of the monasteries and destruction of popular pilgrimage sites heralded an end to the traditional expression of Christianity as passed down through the Middle Ages in England and Wales.

"It is therefore hoped that this sculpture may be sited on or near to the location where the foremost Marian shrines were burnt."

Mr Day said he also wanted his sculpture to express the "supremely negative impact" of iconoclasm beyond the confines of English history.

"Even today, notably in Iraq, Afghanistan and Tibet, images and sacred places are defiled and destroyed, not in a programme of reform, but to intimidate and break the spirit of communities for political dominance," he said.

"Iconoclasm seeks to destroy the objects that define a community by beliefs," he added. "History shows that it can, under certain circumstances, be followed by a desire to efface that very community from existence altogether, leading to genocide."

Mr Day said that the sculpture would create a place for faith communities to reflect on reconciliation by confronting the truths of the past.

A total of 84 shrines were destroyed in England and Wales during the 16th century and hundreds of statues of the Virgin Mary were burned.

Among them was Our Lady of Walsingham, one of the most important medieval pilgrimage destinations along with Rome, Jerusalem and Compostella, Spain. Also burned were the statues of Our Lady of Grace, Ipswich, and the Black Madonna of Willesden, London.

Frances Scarr, chairman of the trust, said the idea for a statue came after a pilgrimage by a group of Catholics and Anglicans to the sites of the shrines destroyed during the Reformation.

Mrs Scarr said that erecting the sculpture would be an act of reparation for the destruction of the ancient shrines and might, she added, help to reconcile people of different faiths. "I hope that when we come before this monument we will ask for God's forgiveness and through the intercession of Mary Most Holy we will pray that she will help us put behind our turbulent past and lead us forward in unity, peace and reconciliation," she said.

The trust is hoping to unveil the memorial on October 13 2009, the Feast of St Edward the Confessor, the patron of England.