

# theuniverse

## OUR LADY STATUE PLAN FOR THAMES

The Universe, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008

THE Art and Reconciliation Trust has launched a £1,250,000 appeal for a national memorial in Chelsea to the Medieval shrines destroyed during the English Reformation.

ART is an ecumenical movement which has the backing of Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, who has pledged "my support and above all my prayers" for the success of the project.

The ambitious scheme was the inspiration of ART's Catholic chairman Mrs Frances Scarr.

"For many years, groups of Christians have been offering prayers and sacrifices in reparation for their own sins and those of their country," Frances explained.

And it was in this spirit that many of them undertook a pilgrimage of reconciliation to 84 Mediaeval shrines dedicated in honour of Our Lady.

Where possible a Mass was said at each of the shrines which were destroyed at the Reformation, but otherwise the pilgrims said the Rosary, and the Divine Mercy Chaplet which calls on God 50 times to have mercy "on sinners and on the whole world".

In the course of their travels across the whole of the UK it became increasingly apparent how much of England's historic religious heritage had disappeared during the Reformation.

"Beautiful Gothic buildings had been torn down, murals whitewashed over and ancient fittings stripped from churches, with the result that hundreds of years of our Christian heritage have been lost forever," said Frances.

In 2003, the pilgrims achieved their goal of visiting all 84 shrines, and at their final Mass together Peter Hutley - whose twice-yearly plays about the life of Christ have made his Wintershall estate an English Oberammergau - asked if the group thought they had made enough reparation or was there more they should do.

Without a moment's hesitation, Frances said: "Why don't we erect a beautiful statue to Our Lady in Chelsea for what happened there in 1538, when many hundreds of statues of Her were destroyed on a huge bonfire?"

The rest of the group agreed this was a good idea, and although Frances was initially rather nervous about "what to do or where to go," she worried unnecessarily.

“By Divine intervention Paul Day the sculptor was recommended to me by a friend and then Paul introduced me to Tony Dyson who obtained the necessary planning permission,” she said.

From the first, ART’s idea was for an ecumenical national shrine which as many people as possible could identify with, and for some months Frances wrestled to find it a title which would not alienate anyone, before she came up with *Mary Most Holy*.

“It is a title all Christians can relate to: Moslems too refer to Our Lady as *Miriam Most Holy* - it doesn’t exclude anyone.

“It is also important that the shrine will be outside, not in a church or in a mosque, so anyone of any faith can stand in front of it.”

In 2003 the Art and Reconciliation Trust was formed to promote tolerance and reconciliation in countries where religious persecution has led to the destruction of churches and shrines, and to promote awareness of the negative effect that such iconoclasm can have on a culture.

The Chelsea memorial will be in the form of a bronze sculpture with its title carved in several languages into a granite base, and it will include historical information about the Reformation, and 12 scenes from the life of Our Lady in low relief.

The centre of the shrine, which will be 14 feet wide and ten feet high, will be a statue of Our Lady with the Christ Child in her arms.

The proposed site for the memorial is reclaimed land along the Chelsea embankment, the nearest site ART could get to the former Chelsea Manor.

The Manor, once the home of St Thomas More, was confiscated by Henry VIII when his former Chancellor refused to acknowledge him as head of the Church in England.

In 1538 Henry offered the use of it to his Lord Privy Seal Sir Thomas Cromwell during an outbreak of plague in central London.

Following Henry’s break with Rome, it was Cromwell who masterminded the dissolution of the monasteries and the destruction of shrines, and who ordered the contents of the despoiled monasteries to be brought to his Chelsea home so that he could personally oversee their destruction.

And it was there that many statues of Our Lady were burnt.

Perhaps the most famous was that of Our Lady of Walsingham, which at the time was the fourth most famous place of pilgrimage in Christendom, behind Rome, Jerusalem and Compostella.

Other famous statues which met the same sad fate were the Black Madonna of Willesden, which had

been venerated since at least the tenth century, and Our Lady of Grace of Ipswich, whose shrine had been chosen for the marriage of Princess Elizabeth, the daughter of Edward 1, to the Count of Holland in 1297.

The internationally renowned sculptor commissioned to design and make the Memorial is Paul Day whose recent work includes the Battle of Britain Memorial close by the Houses of Parliament, The Meeting Place at the newly restored St Pancras International Station, and a memorial to the Queen Mother which will be unveiled by the Queen later this year. Paul, a committed Christian and a “lovely, humble man” has put his heart and soul into the work, said Frances.

Speaking at the campaign launch, Paul said: “The destruction of images and sacred places is a perennial story. Fresh acts of iconoclasm surface regularly around the world. 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. In the last century, when violence of all kinds reached new and terrifying heights with scientific and mechanized precision, symbols of all kinds, secular and religious, were naturally targeted to undermine peoples’ sense of identity.

“I am horrified by the wanton destruction of great works of art and architecture irretrievably lost.”

If all goes well, ART would like to see the memorial replicated in other trouble spots around the world.

“We hope that the London shrine will be the first of 12. There are many countries which have seen their churches destroyed, in Eastern Europe, in Rwanda, in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War.”

Raising them - even in replica - will cost several hundred thousand pounds apiece, given the costs of making and transporting the huge sculptures and the costs of maintaining them in perpetuity. But the names of all donors and benefactors will be enclosed in a time capsule and buried beneath the statues.

So how will Frances feel when she finally sees the first shrine at its planned unveiling in Chelsea on 13 October 2009?

“Very moved,” she said, “and maybe rather tearful.”

## **APPEAL DETAILS**

[www.artandreconciliation.org](http://www.artandreconciliation.org)

PO BOX 63701 London SW3 4UH

info@artandreconciliation.org