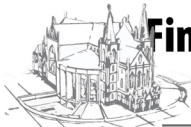


Opinion



Finding peace with Gibney

Fr Robert Cross, also an archaeologist, has been excavating the site of St Mary's Cathedral as large parts of it are dismantled in preparation for its completion. This is part six in his series of his findings.

Having successfully excavated the coffins of Bishops Martin Griver and Matthew Gibney from under the floorboards of St Mary's Cathedral, the next problem was how to remove the coffins from the graves.

From all appearances, the older coffin of Bishop Griver seemed to be structurally sound, both in terms of the outer wooden coffin and the inner zinc coffin. However, the younger coffin of Bishop Gibney was in a perilous state and required substantial support to lift it intact.

Two mechanical lifting devices with slings were used to lift the coffins. But before the slings could be placed under the coffin, lengths of timber had to be inserted between the coffin bases and the soil on which the coffins rested. This was not an easy task given the very confined space in which to work.

The night before the coffins were lifted from their graves, I became very familiar with Bishop Gibney.

For, alone at night in a darkened Cathedral, I found myself suspended on a plank only centimetres above the skull of Bishop Gibney. With arms reaching around both sides of Bishop Gibney's coffin, I excavated beneath the coffin to

insert timbers to support the base of the coffin which had been eaten through by white ants.

Confident that Bishop Gibney's soul was resting in eternal peace, I felt some sense of peace in dealing with his mortal remains!

The next day, the coffins were successfully removed and placed on the Cathedral floor before a crucifix and candles for further archaeological investigation.

The coffin of Bishop Griver was in a good condition.

Unlike Bishop Gibney's coffin, it was little affected by white ant activity, probably because of some protection afforded by the woolen material which covered the coffin.

Apparently, white ants are deterred by the protein found in wool.

It was decided that the coffin of Bishop Griver would be left intact for the time being and investigated at a later date.

On the other hand, white ant activity had seriously compromised the integrity of both the outer wooden and inner zinc coffins of Bishop Gibney. Because there was a fear that the coffin could disintegrate when moved, the coffin was completely opened to investigate the remains of Bishop Gibney.

Unfortunately, the white ants

had also affected the internal fittings and contents of the coffin as well as the normal body decaying processes. However, there was still much that could be discerned.

Contrary to liturgical protocol, Bishop Gibney was vested in green Mass vestments. He should have been vested in purple. Obviously the Bishop's Irish heritage took precedence!

The Bishop was also wearing a red zucchetto (skull cap), a roman collar, and ornate green Mass vestments, including a maniple. A green mitre with glass "stones" was resting over his stomach.

As the white ant material was removed, a metal cylinder became visible along the side of the bishop near his right leg. Initially it was thought to be a crozier, but further cleaning revealed that it did not extend beyond the upper leg. There was much excitement as it became evident that it was a document cylinder.

The cylinder had been severely corroded and there was doubt about whether the contents of the cylinder could be salvaged. The cylinder was carefully removed and a document conservator was contacted to see if the contents could be salvaged. To our surprise, the cylinder was found to contain



Anticipation: The intact coffin of Bishop Griver is carefully lifted. PHOTO BY ROBERT CROSS

five separate documents.

Some were official Roman documents relating to his Titular Sees, the others being typed pages giving historical details about the Titular Sees. There were also a couple of Italian stamped envelopes in which the original Roman documents were sent. These documents have been conserved and are currently awaiting further investigation and translation.

When the archaeological team

had completed archaeological recording the coffins, a ceremony was conducted by Mgr Thomas McDonald to accompany the translation of the coffins from the Cathedral to temporary storage by Bowra and O'Dea Funeral Directors.

Eventually the remains of the two Bishops will be returned to a new crypt being constructed beneath the new High Altar of the Cathedral.