

Jewel of the Rotunda

By Dr Frances Gardiner

Into his new Lying-in Hospital, Bartholomew Mosse sought to infuse a sacred heart, a chapel, now regarded as the *Jewel of the Rotunda*. Sited centrally on the first floor above the front hall, this oasis of aesthetic peace is located off a corridor bustling with birthing activity. Baroque in design, it contrasts with the Neo-Palladian style of the building, while eighteenth century rococo flourishes soften the austerity of the main edifice.

Architecture

Architecturally, the chapel is striking, a square double-height space, encapsulating highly elaborate plasterwork side by side with equally ornate woodwork. A gallery traverses three sides of the room bordered by an embellished iron palisade, an organ on the north wall faces the altar and stained-glass Venetian window on the south wall. Ten fine mahogany fluted columns with Corinthian capitals support the gallery and mark the entry to side pews. The intricate entablature, frieze, architrave, dentils and cornice surrounding the gallery reflect the artistry of both woodcarving and plasterwork.

Barthelemij Cramillion, a stuccodore from Flanders (or Wallonia), decorated the ceiling and altarpiece, unique in Irish church decoration at the time. In Europe, 17th century Baroque gave way to 18th century Rococo art, *rocaille* meaning stone and *coquille* meaning shell, often regarded as over-elaborate decoration. More popular in France than Britain, it reflects Irish openness to continental influence. Parliamentary support of Irish arts by voting sums of money to the Dublin Society also followed a continental rather than English pattern.

Faith, Hope and Charity

Since time immemorial, great artists sought to move hearts and minds through the use of allegory. By depicting examples of virtue, people could learn to *be good* and to *do good*. Art, as a vehicle for Christian doctrine and focus of Christian worship, illustrated universal truths with the brush, in painted allegory format. Images are more



Faith



Hope



Charity

striking and memorable than words. The principal Christian or theological virtues are Faith, Hope and Charity, outlined in Saint Paul's first apostolic letter to the Christians of Corinth (1 Corinthians 13:13): '*And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity*'.

In the Rotunda Chapel, the allegorical figure of *Charity* is depicted with two angels suspending a garland over her head. With an infant at her breast, she draws two children close and her fine dress overhangs the upper cornice. Just to the left, a banner in red held by angels proclaims '*Thy children have come to the birth. There is not strength to bring them forth*'.

The allegory of *Hope* shows her head uplifted and her hand is resting on an anchor. Following the banner above the lectern, the words read '*Kings shall be thy nursing fathers and their Queens thy nursing mothers*' (Isaiah).

Above the organ, an angel with a trumpet sounds the last day while another points to the *Book of Tablets*. The banner above the font reads '*That our sons shall grow up as the young plants and our daughters may be as the polished corners of the temple*' from the Book of Psalms.

The most striking allegory is *Faith*. Angels place a garland on her head, three cherubs smile on us as Faith is depicted with covered eyes. Having the eyes veiled, blind faith, is a traditional presentation of Faith in Christian iconography. Seated with her feet on a rock, the Rock of Faith, which is held to be her true foundation, her right foot treads on a fox whose muzzle and tail hang over the cornice. The fox is commonly used in Christian iconography to represent the enemy of faith, symbolised by the vine, in religious terms a heretic. The left arm of *Faith* suspends a plummet stone, reminding Christians not to stray, the coiled serpent below ready to strike should spirit weaken. The cross and bible too remind one to keep the faith. Much stucco work portrays foxes as heretics or other emblems of human fraud. It can also imply persecution of faith or even false prophets. The final section of scroll states '*Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise*' (St. Matthew).

The organ and font, still in use today, offer contrasting designs and materials. On the south side stands the Venetian window over the altar. Cramillion depicts revelation images of the Lamb of God seated on The Book of the Seven Seals beneath a *baldacchino* or canopy of heaven delicately held by two cherubs. The chapel was first opened for worship on the 19th September 1762, by the Arch-Deacon of Leighlin, the Venerable Robert King, but alas was never enjoyed by Mosse, whose death occurred in 1759.