

THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL: light, shadow and colour, a glimpse of Heaven part III. by Bernard Lauwyck



When Fr. Sean Doggett, based in Grenada, visited our Roseau Cathedral for the first time, he burst out “*This cathedral is so white*”. And indeed white is the dominant colour inside our Cathedral, from the white marbled tiles to the white ceilings. These white painted walls somehow take away from the brilliance of the stained glass windows. Darker colours on the walls would bring out the radiance of the colourful play of light in a much superior way.



As the seating area or nave is extra bright, there is an area in the cathedral which is underlit and in the shadows. This area is the Sanctuary, the most important space in the whole Cathedral : it contains the Altar, the Ambo or the place to proclaim the Word of God, the Bishop’s Cathedra who is the presider during the liturgies.

This sanctuary is enclosed on three sides with walls punctured only with 4 windows. These 4 windows in stained glass were constructed with deep dark colours in the flamboyant style. Not much natural light penetrates into the

interior. Frequent complaints are that the Bishop's face can not be seen when he sits on the Cathedra. Also that the large crucifix behind him is barely visible. This is unacceptable and needs to be improved during the renovation works.

However I want to point out that this was not always so and a photograph I received of the Cathedral before Vatican II Council (1962-1965) clearly shows a much brighter sanctuary during daytime. I want to devote a whole article on the pre-Vatican II sanctuary of the Cathedral.

Research on the choice and use of colours in buildings in the past centuries is also very interesting. When we scraped the white painted timber louvers of the Bishop's House in 1994, we discovered underneath white coats, colours such as dark green, vivid red and deep blue. This provides us with an indication how the Bishop's House used to be polychrome and how multiple colours were combined in the 19th and early 20th century.

We wonder if the interior of our Roseau Cathedral also used to have a wonderful display of light, patterns, designs and fascinating colours.

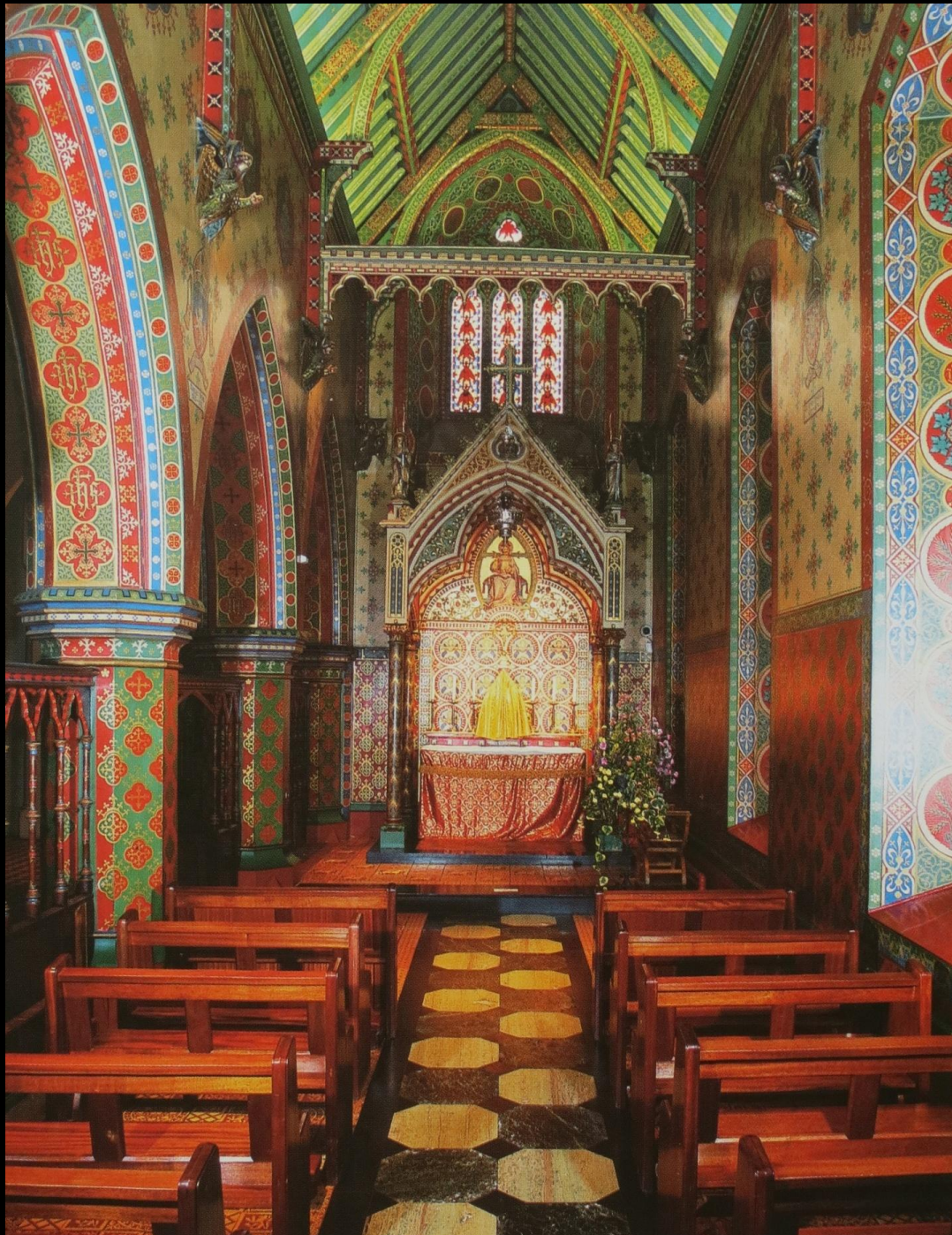
It is quite possible as the Roseau Cathedral interior finishes were done in the period between 1854 and 1910. This period was dominated by an architectural movement called Victorian Gothic Revival or the neo-Gothic Style. In the UK where it started, the style became a reaction to the drabness of industrialisation and the loss of ancient skills and craftsmanship due to machine mass production. The pioneer of this movement was architect and designer Augustus W. Pugin (1812-52). He was a Catholic convert and was deeply inspired by the "spiritual" medieval Gothic churches. The Gothic Revival style spread rapidly into the world. This style brought back the expert joinery work, intricate iron detailing and the colours of the Gothic churches as they were before the "white washing" of churches' interiors when Henry the Eight divorced his Spanish wife Catherine and the English Catholic Church from Rome in one historic move.

Professor Eamon Duffy in his book "The stripping of the altars" describes the vitality and appeal of Catholicism in the lives of the common men and women of Henry's England. It was a religion full of ritual symbolism and visual imagery. Statues were in polychrome; every church wall space had murals depicting scenes from the Bible. Nothing was left empty.

With the power grab of King Henry VIII and the long reign of his daughter Elisabeth I, all these murals and walls were painted over or whitewashed. Sacred objects that had for ages enshrined the devotional life of people and their communities were removed and/or destroyed. Some of these murals are now recovered from under 500 years of white wash, paint and grime.

Architect Augustus Pugin wanted to bring back the vitality, beauty and mystery to worship by architectural means. He looked back at the parish church buildings from the Middle Ages for inspiration and to borrow ideas. His designs were embraced both by High-Anglicans and Catholics alike. His churches are quite dramatic and full of splendour.

To illustrate this, I enclose a photograph of the restored Blessed Sacrament chapel of the St. Barnabas Cathedral in Nottingham, completed in 1844 as the biggest Catholic Church in England. The interior was painted white in 1993. Recently it was restored with some of the riot of colours, mystery and drama which designer A.W. Pugin originally used.



A.W. Pugin originally colour scheme restored in the Catholic Cathedral in Nottingham

It is my firm belief that our Roseau Cathedral was not designed for the present monastic white colour scheme. This Cathedral had a riot of colour and drama common in the late 19th and early 20th Century decoration.

Let us explore this a little more in a next article, by studying old photographs.

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