

PATRICK H. DALY

## HOLY ALLIANCE

A new crucifix recently unveiled at one of England's oldest Catholic churches is a perfect synthesis of classical and modern, says the parish priest involved in commissioning it

**W**hen Pope Benedict XVI meets some 500 artists from around the world in the Sistine Chapel on 21 November, he aims to establish, in the words of Antonio Paolucci, director of the Vatican Museums, a "new and fertile alliance between faith and art". It is precisely this idea which inspires one of the most talented and exciting artists working in England today, Rory Young, and there can be no work of his in which that alliance is more clearly demonstrated than the new crucifix in the historic Catholic parish church of St Peter and St Paul, Wolverhampton, reputed to be the oldest place of public Catholic worship in post-Reformation England and whose extensive reordering was finished on 29 June this year. The reordering has been given the President's Award for 2009 by the Ecclesiastical Architects' and Surveyors' Association and National Churches' Trust.

Rory Young (b. 1955), a graduate in fine art and self-trained in masonry and carving who works at his studio in Cirencester, designs and carves statuary memorials and architectural works of art in stone. Over the years he has had several commissions from Anglican parish churches in Gloucestershire and beyond, and in recent years more ambitious church commissions – such as the 16 panels of the Genesis cycle on the Great West Door of York Minster of 1996 and the life-size *Millennium Pilgrim*, carved in blue-hearted Ancaster limestone, for Southwell Minster of 2001 – have won Rory Young wide acclaim. The St Peter and St Paul commission was Young's first from a Catholic church and, for a variety of reasons, the artist states that the crucifix project, central to the parish's plans for the church's ambitious reordering, was his most exciting and daunting so far. This was not least because he was working in a new material – aluminium.

When a new project is mooted, Young states that from the outset his main objective "is to honour a building by enhancing its existing qualities". Already pleased that he should be invited to produce work for a Catholic church, and such an historically significant one at that, Young states that

"my excitement grew when I walked into an unexpectedly magnificent classical interior".

In his statement to the Art Workers' Guild, of which he is a member, Young says: "Being part of a long tradition does not preclude the opportunity for artistic expression. My priority is for new work to fit quietly into its location. If it also conveys a spiritual message or stirs the emotions, that is a bonus." The fact that three elderly parishioners burst into tears of joy at the moment the Rory Young crucifix was unveiled at the Mass of Re-dedication on 29 June, would suggest that the artist's goal has been achieved.

Rory Young's first visit to Wolverhampton was in August 2006. Together with myself, the architect Stephen Oliver and the finance committee chairman, Betty Green, the original plan that the crucifix should be affixed to the back wall of the church's eastern recess was rejected in favour of a suspended Christ on a Cross like a rood. The obvious materials of marble, wood, plaster or bronze were dismissed in favour of aluminium. Across Young's mind flashed the silver-gilt reliquaries from the Byzantium and the Rococo, not least the colossal Baroque silver altar that houses the body of St John Nepomuk, which he had recently seen in Prague Cathedral.

But what of this "alliance between art and faith", the leitmotif of the Sistine Chapel's artistic convention? With the Greek Revival style of the church very much in mind, Young recalled from the "Seeing Salvation" exhibition at the National Gallery in 2000 a carved relief on an ivory casket of about AD 410, showing a crucified *Christus Triumphans*: "full frontal, head up, eyes open, feet uncrossed, arms and hands horizontal and outstretched, with the robust body that would have been familiar from the pantheons of Greek and Roman deities". Daring, perhaps, and disturbing for a congregation used to Gothic images or the sentimental, Italianate mission crosses imported in such large quantities to the British Isles in the nineteenth century; but (*pace* those parishioners who expressed disappointment that their new crucifix was not "traditional") a presentation of the crucified Christ that goes back to



**Rory Young's crucifix in place in the Church of St Peter and St Paul, Wolverhampton.**  
Photo: David Cave

the earliest representations of "the wondrous Cross". Antonio Zappulla, a former student of Wolverhampton University, observed: "Christ is not in pain. It brings hope to those who suffer." And this was precisely the reaction Rory Young aimed at: "I wanted a Christ that has transcended all the pain and torture of the Crucifixion reality to be an icon of hope and redemption."

Young adds: "The *corpus* [the body of the crucified Christ] is not in the Western medieval tradition of the suffering, tortured Christ who inspires empathy. We are moving away from the medieval idea of our bodies as diseased and emaciated." This link that Young sought between Christ who had overcome death and was floating on the Cross was further highlighted by the artist's adoption of a suggestion made by Archbishop Vincent Nichols – still at Birmingham as the Sts Peter and Paul project unfolded and immensely excited by it – that the five wounds should be gilded.

Two months since their new crucifix was unveiled, the parishioners of St Peter and St Paul have developed a deep relationship with it – as so many have said, "such a young, fresh looking Jesus". And the fact that the crucifix has been claimed by the parish community underlines for Rory Young that link between art and faith. Young hopes that, in reinterpreting the beginnings of Christianity, one might be carrying it forward to a new generation.

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