

A Walk Through The Cathedral

By Mark Tully



When I was asked to write an article describing a walk around the Cathedral I realized that I had never really explored the church, although I had worshipped there for many years, and still do. So I took this opportunity to explore it in company of the Presbyter-in-Charge the Rev. Dr. Paul Swarup.

As we approached the Cathedral through its large garden in the heart of New Delhi I was reminded of St. Paul's Cathedral at the heart of the city of London. Although in many ways the two buildings are very different both are dominated by their domes, both are neo-classical in style, and they have a similar grandeur. The Cathedral Church of the Redemption stands on a broad base and rises in massive blocks to the tower, topped by a dome. On top of that dome a cupola stands on narrow pillars, carrying a cross soaring high above the body of the church. The buff sandstone walls contrast with the bright red tiles of the sloping roofs.

Looking at the Cathedral from outside the lack of windows adds to its massive appearance. In the early days after the capital of India was moved from Calcutta to Delhi the chaplain of the nascent city envisaged a massive Gothic church on the lines of Westminster Abbey. Sir Edwin Lutyens, the architect of Rashtrapati Bhavan, rejected the concept. He felt that Westminster Abbey, with all its glass windows would only be fit for 'frying bacon' in the heat of the Delhi summer. Henry Medd, who eventually designed the Cathedral, heeded Lutyens warning and that is why the Cathedral does not have many windows. Medd had worked for Lutyens and was assistant to Henry Baker, who designed the two wings of the Secretariat and the Council House, now Parliament.

Opposite the south gate of the Cathedral's garden a short avenue leads to Rashtrapati Bhavan, which was of course the Viceroy's House when the Cathedral was built. This proximity to the Viceroy's House may be the reason why the Cathedral stands where it does. Originally the site of the Cathedral was to be south of Rajpath, in the middle of the large roundabout on Janpath now known as Motilal Nehru Place. One theory has it that, with the rising tempo of the independence movement, it was thought it would be unsafe for the Viceroy to travel that far to attend church each Sunday.

But there is also evidence that the clergy felt the site South of Rajpath would be too far away from most of the congregation who lived to the North of it. The Cathedral's eventual setting, in the surroundings of Baker and Lutyens' magnificent buildings adds to its grandeur.

The Cathedral is built on an axis which runs from East to West with the high altar at the eastern end. So Henry Medd respected the Christian tradition of churches facing the rising sun which symbolizes the risen Jesus. A few steps led us up to the great door set in the West wall. In 1947 the first Bishop of Delhi knocked thrice on that door and asked permission to enter thereby signifying that the Church of the Redemption had become a Cathedral. Until Independence Delhi was part of the Lahore diocese and so there was no bishop in Delhi and therefore no Cathedral. Paul reminded me that still on special days like Christmas, Easter, ordinations of priests, and consecrations of bishops the service starts with a procession through the West door, down the long nave, up to the chancel where the clergy sit.

When we entered the Cathedral from the west end my eyes were drawn to the sparkling white marble high altar. This was the intention of the architect too. The Viceroy Lord Irwin took a particular interest in the construction of the Cathedral, so much so that it was often known as the Viceroy's Church. He has been described as "an Anglo-Catholic of singular and exemplary piety." . He used to attend Holy Communion in the Cathedral on weekdays as well as Sundays. Being an Anglo- Catholic his worship was centred on the sacraments, and in particular on the sacrament of Holy Communion celebrated on the high altar So Medd designed his church to focus attention firmly on that altar. The six tall candles in silver candle-sticks on the altar are symbols of the Anglo-Catholic tradition too.

At the west end there is a gallery for the organist and the choir. On the walls of many churches there are lots of tablets remembering those who have passed away. In Delhi's Cathedral there are three: one commemorating Arthur Mahinder who for more than thirty two years played the organ in that gallery and was master of the choir; the second commemorating Major General George Tabuteau, Director of Medical Services in India; and the third Henry Alexander Nesbitt Medd the Architect of the Church. The stone font where babies and other new members of the Church of North India are baptized is also situated at the west end.

It has a carved wooden representation of the Cathedral's dome as its cover. As I walked up the nave past row after row of polished wooden benches, known as pews, I got an impression of the size of the Cathedral. Paul told me that when chairs are also placed in the side aisles that flank the nave the Cathedral can accommodate five hundred and forty worshippers. Some of the congregation at the last Christmas Midnight Mass had to brave the winter cold because there was no room for them inside the church. Most visitors walking round the Cathedral are unlikely to see the black marble foundation stone laid by Lord Irwin on the twenty third of February nineteen twenty seven. It's laid in the floor at the top of the nave, the centre of the church, and is now covered by a red carpet. Nearby the marble stone are the front pews.

The South pew was reserved for the Viceroy and the North pew for the Commander-in-Chief. Those pews have crowns engraved on them.

The long nave is balanced by a long chancel. The clergy taking part in the worship sit on both sides of the chancel below the plain wooden throne of the bishop, which bears the red shield of the Delhi diocese set on a white plaque. The bishop attends services whenever he wants to and particularly on special occasions but Paul told me no one else was allowed to sit on that throne, or in (Greek – *cathedra*), the word from which Cathedral is derived.

Standing before the high altar I saw in the middle of the six candlesticks a silver cross gifted by George V, the only ruling British monarch to visit India before Independence. He it was who announced that Delhi would become the capital of India at the great Durbar of 1911. The altar was decorated with flowers elegantly arranged in silver vases. Above the high altar I saw a copy of one of the Italian Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini's paintings of the Madonna and Child. Behind the high altar there is an elaborately carved wooden screen with a curved panel at the top on which an image of Christ on the cross stands. On one side Mary, the mother of Jesus, looks up at the twisted, half-naked figure of Jesus, nailed to the cross, and on the other stands St. John.

The image of the crucifixion is particular relevant to the Cathedral. Most churches are dedicated to saints but after much discussion it was decided that Delhi's Cathedral should be dedicated to the Redemption. Christianity teaches that it was Jesus on the cross who won redemption from our sins for us.

The figures of Christ on the cross, the blessed Virgin Mary, and St John were carved in Italy and given to the Cathedral by the Dean and Chapter of York Minster. It is the Cathedral of one of England's two Archbishops', the Archbishop of York. The Dean and Chapter of York also gifted a substantial sum for furnishing the Cathedral. The link between Delhi and York was forged by Lord Irwin who as a Yorkshire landowner also became the first Earl of Halifax a city in Yorkshire. He had earlier been MP for Ripon, a Cathedral city in Yorkshire. Paul and I discussed the possibility of reestablishing the link between York Minster and Delhi's Cathedral Church of the Redemption. We moved to the southern side-aisle where the small side chapel of the Ascension is situated. There a lamp burns continuously signifying that bread, which has been consecrated by a priest during the celebration of Holy Communion, is kept there for those who are infirm. Several pictures of scenes from the life of Jesus painted by the artist A.D.Thomas hang in the side aisles. In the Chapel of the Ascension Paul pointed out that the artist had included a portrait of himself clad in a green robe in his painting of Christ commanding his disciples to 'go into all the world and preach the gospel'. The Cathedral's only stained glass window is in the Cathedral – a colourful, nonrepresentational, modern design gifted by Lynn Wilson.

Crossing from the southern to the northern side aisle I came upon the Children's Corner. It includes a magnificent Christmas tapestry which is a copy of the nineteenth century Pre- Raphaelite artist Burne Jones' tapestry in the chapel of Exeter College Oxford.

Finally, I walked back to the centre of the Cathedral and looked up at the tall columns and the high vaulted roof which had created acoustical problems until it was coated with a special plaster. I realised it was the height of the Cathedral's interior and the shadowy light let in by the few windows which created it's mysterious atmosphere, an atmosphere eminently suitable for sacramental worship. It's no wonder therefore that Lord Irwin was delighted with the Cathedral when it was completed. He would be delighted that the same tradition continues today with, so Paul told me, more than five hundred worshippers attending services in English, Tamil, and Hindi every Sunday. Today the Cathedral is part of the Church of North India (CNI), a Church in a Special Relationship with the Anglican Communion and formed in 1970 with the union of six denominations.

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