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Churches and chapels-of-ease built in the first part of the 20th century for the growing Catholic population had to be relatively cheap, with maximum capacity for minimum outlay. A simplified Romanesque style was considered suitable as it required little in the way of applied ornament. This principle was applied to St Thomas's, which, though you would hardly know it now, was a compact and plain brick hall of six bays with round-headed side windows and timber roof, seating a congregation of 200. The site had cost £1300 and the building £2000, of which £1276 had been paid by the time of the opening, leaving a debt of about £2000, which seems to have been paid off fairly quickly. The architects were Kempson and Conolly, who carried out a lot of Catholic work of the era.

The chapel might have been plain in design but it was enriched inside by what the report in *The Advocate* of the opening day described as 'a neat sanctuary and a devotional altar in white and gold'. There was 'a rich carpet' in the sanctuary. Various other ornaments and 'aids to piety' had been promised 'by benefactors'.

The dedication to St Thomas Aquinas is unusual in the Archdiocese of Melbourne. In the course of his address, Archbishop Carr said that if time permitted he 'would like to speak at some length in regard to St Thomas, who was little known except among professional students of philosophy and theology.' The Archbishop continued:

The place that St Thomas held in the domain of philosophy and theology was analogous to that held by Shakespeare in English literature. Of him it could be truly said that there was no subject connected with theology or philosophy which he did not touch, and there was no subject which he touched that he did not adorn.

None of those present on that day in 1915 would recognise the chapel—or church as it is now usually called—of St Thomas Aquinas as it is now. In 1954 the building was imaginatively altered and restored, and given a Spanish Baroque façade of—one has to say it—voluptuous beauty. The façade and the restoration were the work of one of Australia's finest church architects of the last hundred years, Thomas Payne. His often highly elaborate designs (examples include Newman College Chapel and the great tower of St Dominic's, East Camberwell) use the architectural language of the style he was working in but translated into a personal idiom.

At St Thomas Aquinas's the Baroque façade is more South American Spanish than European Spanish. It is criss-crossed in grooved diaper patterns set into the stucco wall with enamelled tiles where the grooves cross. Below a curved Baroque parapet a stylised diamond-form window is enriched with sinuous curves and moulding. The elegant main doorway, which unusually

for a Melbourne church opens directly onto the street, is surmounted by a broken pediment—that is, a pediment with two separate curved halves. Inside, the stone laid by Archbishop Carr is set into what is now an inner narthex wall, suggesting that Payne built his façade forward of the original façade, like a curtain, with the original wall remaining as a much altered interior wall. The unusual arrangement of double steps in the narthex leading to lateral doorways into the nave would seem to confirm this.

It's worth noting that the Spanish theme had nothing to do with the fashion for Spanish Mission design of twenty years earlier (see St Roch's, Glen Iris, *Melbourne Catholic*, February 2019). It was a product of Thomas Payne's originality.

In his restoration Payne concentrated externally on the façade. The side walls were rendered but the windows were retained in their original form along with the open timber roof. He added sacristies and a sanctuary in the form of a square apse with chamfered corners. Inside, apart from repainting, there was little to alter. A life-size crucifix had been installed over the altar in the 1930s, the work of sculptor Walter Langcake. The fine timber reredos, panelled and with rich carved representations of the Eucharist, saints and other motifs, dates from about the same time and is possibly also by Langcake, as might be the timber altar, now moved forward from the reredos, with its inset carved panel of the Last Supper.

The contemporary Melbourne sculptor Leopoldine Mimovich carved the Stations of the Cross and the statues of Our Lady and the Sacred Heart on either side of the sanctuary arch. The statue of St Thomas Aquinas in the entrance to the nave is thought to be 18th-century Spanish, the gift of a parishioner. The appearance of the interior, now after two years' restoration, has none of the strong Spanish influence of the façade (except for the decorative light fittings) and yet accords with it with its own highs and lows of plain wall surfaces contrasting with richly carved statuary and reredos.

From that plain chapel-of-ease of 1915 has come a church unique in Melbourne. It is an elegant contribution to the streetscape and a foil to the collegiate Gothic of the school opposite. More importantly, it is a well-used and cared-for church, administered since the 1970s by the Augustinians (St Thomas was a Dominican). It is in demand for baptisms and weddings and is still, to paraphrase the words of Archbishop Carr at the opening 104 years ago, raising the minds of its worshippers heavenwards.

St Thomas Aquinas's is at 43 Bromby Street, South Yarra. Website: www.parishofsouthyarra.org.au.

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