

CHURCH OF ST MARY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, ASCOT VALE



St Mary of the Immaculate Conception Church, built under Fr Henry Bakker (Parish Priest 1919-50), had its foundation stone laid by Archbishop Daniel Mannix on 1 July 1934, and was officially opened by Archbishop Mannix on 15 May 1938. It replaced an earlier church on the same site.

St Mary's is constructed in the neo-Romanesque architectural style – a revival of the Romanesque style common in Europe between the years 900 and 1200.

SANCTUARY – The sanctuary, at the front of the church, is a church's most sacred general area, containing the altar and the tabernacle. Here at St Mary's it begins with the first marble step. In past times the Communion rails marked the boundary of the sanctuary; in St Mary's part of the old marble Communion rails are preserved, between the main body of the church and the areas on either side in front of the altars of the Sacred Heart and of Our Lady.

ALTAR – The altar is the centre of the celebration of the Mass. In the course of the Mass, it is the most sacred location in the church, where the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered to God and the real Eucharistic presence of Christ comes to be. An *altar* means, in general, any *place where sacrifice is offered*, and the central meaning of the Mass is that it is the making-present of Christ's One Perfect Sacrifice – the willing sacrifice of himself, offered to God the Father on the 'Altar' of the Cross to make up for the sins of the human race. The Sacrifice of the Mass is, in truth, this One Sacrifice of the Cross, sacramentally perpetuated until Christ returns in glory; St Mary's, like many churches, has a large crucifix behind the altar to call this to mind. (As well as *altar* primarily meaning the *place of sacrifice*, *priest* means above all *one who offers sacrifice*. All this is why Protestant communities, who do not believe in the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, have 'tables' not 'altars', and 'ministers' not 'priests'.)

HIGH ALTAR – In principle there is one main altar in a church, a symbol of the One Cross and One Sacrifice of Christ. St Mary's, like a number of older churches, retains its high altar from the days when Mass was typically celebrated with priest and people facing the same direction (liturgical 'east' – *ad orientem*). Since the 1960s the priest more commonly faces the people, so new altars were built to accommodate this. St Mary's has a grand baldacchino (canopy) over the high altar, modelled after the baldacchino in St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, and possibly unique in Australia in its size and scope.

TABERNACLE – At the centre of St Mary's High Altar is the tabernacle. Outside the celebration of the Mass, the tabernacle is the most sacred location in a church. It is the receptacle where any of the Eucharist which is left over after Mass is reserved. Christ is therefore sacramentally present in the tabernacle under the species of bread. This is why, when we enter or leave the church, or when we cross over its central axis, it is customary to turn towards the tabernacle and genuflect on the right knee, adoring Christ, the God-man, who is present there. It is a wonderful practice to spend time in the church outside of Mass, praying to Our Lord really present in the tabernacle.

SANCTUARY LAMP – The red lamp (a candle behind red glass) that burns nearby the tabernacle is a sign to people that the Eucharist is in fact present in the tabernacle at that time. This will almost always be the case, but one time when the tabernacle is empty, and the sanctuary lamp removed, is from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening, through Good Friday, until the end of the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday.

AMBO / LECTERN – The lectern from which the inspired Word of God is proclaimed during Mass is more properly known as the ambo. More desirably it is reserved for the proclamation of the Word and associated actions such as the Homily and the Prayers of the Faithful. (The simpler lectern on the other side of the church is just for the priest's convenience, and is not essential liturgically.) Although the supreme presence of Christ to his People, the Church, is under the Eucharistic species of bread and wine, he is also present in many other ways, such as when the scriptural Word is proclaimed in Church. The Mass has two principal linked parts, the Liturgy of the Word, leading into the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Christ's people are served from the 'two tables' of the Word and the Eucharist.

PRESIDENTIAL CHAIR – The priest leading the Mass is said to 'preside'. Because he sacramentally represents Christ the High Priest and is thus also a special 'presence' of Christ during Mass, the presider's chair is not just a convenience but is symbolic of this special role.

BAPTISMAL FONT – The baptismal font is where baptisms are celebrated. In past times, the font was located in our baptistry near the front doors of the church. In the Catholic Church for many centuries, baptism has normally been simply by the pouring of water over the head, but the ancient practice of baptism by full immersion is also completely approved, and indeed has greater symbolic value. A few Catholic churches have revived this practice, and have pools for full immersion.

PASCHAL CANDLE / EASTER CANDLE – At the start of the Easter Vigil each year, a new Easter Candle is blessed and lit from a blessed fire outside the church. The Candle symbolises the Risen Christ, our Light. During the seven weeks of the Easter Season it is prominently placed in the Sanctuary and lit during Masses. After this it is moved to near the font, and still lit at baptisms and funerals.

SACRED HEART ALTAR – The image of Jesus showing his heart, crowned with thorns and aflame with love, is known as the 'Sacred Heart'. It especially symbolises the personal love of Jesus for each one of us, shown above all by his suffering and dying for us. Devotion to the Sacred Heart especially grew from the 1600s, with the appearances of Jesus to the French nun, St Margaret Mary (1647-90), encouraging this devotion.

ALTAR OF REPOSE – In St Mary's, we use the Sacred Heart Altar also as the 'Altar of Repose'. At the end of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening, the Eucharist is taken in procession from the Main Altar to the Altar of Repose, so that Communion can be given to the people at the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday afternoon (when no Mass is celebrated). Until the end of the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, the principal tabernacle of the church is left empty and open, evoking the Lord's Passion and Death. A holy custom is to pray in silence at the Altar of Repose after Mass on Holy Thursday evening, 'keeping watch' with the Lord in his Agony and Passion.

VOTIVE CANDLES – Like many churches, St Mary's has the possibility of lighting 'votive candles', in our case at the Sacred Heart Altar and at Our Lady's Altar. These candles burn in honour of Jesus and Mary, and symbolise our prayers being offered to God. People might light a candle for a particular prayer intention, and suitably spend some time in actual prayer, to accompany at least for a time the physical burning of the candle.

STATIONS OF THE CROSS – A customary devotion in the Catholic Church for many centuries, the Stations of the Cross recall fourteen events from the Passion and Death of Christ (taken from Scripture or from pious traditions). Individuals or groups move from one ‘Station’ to the next, reflecting on the particular episode depicted in each. Like many churches, in St Mary’s Church we especially practise this devotion on the Fridays of Lent and on Good Friday.

SIDE ALTARS: EAST SIDE – Some churches, especially older churches, have side altars in addition to the main altar, often in honour of various saints. At churches where many priests resided, priests would be able to say individual Masses at these side altars. Today the general practice is instead for priests to *concelebrate* the same Mass, if they wish to say Mass in the same church at the same time as another priest.

St Therese of Lisieux (of the Child Jesus) (The Little Flower) (1873-97) – St Therese was a French Carmelite nun. She became much known and loved through the spiritual autobiography that her superiors commanded her to write, published as ‘The Story of a Soul’. This teaches the ‘Little Way’ – doing the little things of everyday life with great love. She had hoped to be sent to the foreign missions, but instead came to realise her calling was to be ‘love at the heart of the Church’. Yet she has been named Patroness of the Missions, because evangelisation (spreading the Good News of Christ) depends above all on the spiritual power of prayer and love. She is depicted with roses, because she said that ‘When I die, I will send down a shower of roses from the heavens. I will spend my heaven doing good on earth’. Inscribed on the base of the altar is an image of the roses falling from heaven to earth. Above the statue of St Therese is the ‘Virgin of the Smile’, an image of Mary in Therese’s family home that she had the impression of having smiled at her. In 1997 St Therese became the third woman to be named ‘Doctor of the Church’.

St Anthony of Padua (1195-1231) – St Anthony of Padua, originally from Lisbon, Portugal, and eventually associated especially with Padua, Italy, was a great preacher and miracle-worker in the first days of the Franciscan Order (founded by St Francis of Assisi (1181/82-1226)). Catholics often ask St Anthony’s prayers to help them find lost items. He is depicted holding the child Jesus, reflecting a story that Christ appeared to him in this form. He, also, is a Doctor of the Church. A lily represents purity.

St John Vianney (1786-1859) – Also known as the Curé of Ars, St John Vianney is patron saint of parish priests. He was parish priest (curé) at Ars in France. Despite struggles during his priestly training and early ministry, his holiness, preaching and confessional ministry ended up attracting pilgrims from all across France. He would spend most of the day hearing confessions (indicated by his violet stole in the statue).

BAPTISTRY – This is where our baptismal font was originally located. It has been customary to have a separate baptistry, but like many churches, St Mary’s has moved its font to the front of the church to enable greater congregational participation.

CONFESSIONAL / RECONCILIATION ROOM – Although it is permissible to have the Sacrament of Reconciliation elsewhere, this Sacrament normally takes place in the confessional. Penitents have the option to kneel behind a curtain, or to sit facing the priest. The red light signifies that the priest is present in the confessional.

STATUES IN THE FOYER – The statues in the foyer of St Mary's Church are of St Vincent de Paul (*east*) and St Philip Neri (*west*).

St Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) was a French priest, outstanding for helping the poor. Blessed Frédéric Ozanam (1813-53) named after him the 'Society of St Vincent de Paul' (1833) that now helps the poor in countless parishes worldwide.

St Philip Neri (1515-95) was an Italian priest, called the 'saint of joy' for his radiant happiness and humour, and 'second Apostle of Rome', for helping re-convert the heart of the Church after the corruptions of the Renaissance. At Pentecost 1544, he had a vision of the Holy Spirit entering his heart as a flame of love, which from this time he could feel burning within him.

HOLY WATER FONTS – At all doors of the church are holy water fonts. Holy water is one of the *sacramentals*, having been blessed by the priest, who in the name of the Church prays for God's blessing upon all those who will use the water. It is customary to make the Sign of the Cross using the holy water upon entering and leaving the church. Holy water especially reminds us of the spiritual cleansing of baptism. Using holy water as we enter the church *building* is an image of how, by the water of baptism, we entered the Church, *People of God and Mystical Body of Christ*.

MEMORIAL CHAPEL – An unusual feature of St Mary's is the mortuary chapel or memorial chapel, to the memory of the dead, with its prominent crucifix. Fr Henry Bakker (d. 1950), who built our present St Mary's Church and is buried in the courtyard, would conduct funerals here.

SIDE ALTARS: WEST SIDE

St Mary of the Cross (MacKillop) (1842-1909) – St Mary MacKillop, Patroness of Australia, is Australia's first saint, being born in Melbourne, dying in Sydney, and canonised as a saint in 2010. She founded the Sisters of St Joseph to educate children, especially poor children of the Australian countryside. This wooden altar where her picture rests was for a time the main altar of St Mary's Church, when Mass facing the people had become the norm but the present marble main altar had not been built.

St Peter & St Paul, Apostles – The two great Apostles are depicted either side of Christ's Cross. St Peter holds the keys, in reference to having been given the 'keys of the kingdom of heaven' by Jesus (*Mt 16:19*). The statue of St Paul may have once held a sword, in token of his martyrdom by beheading.

St Joseph, foster-father of Jesus – The great saint is shown holding the child Jesus. St Joseph's flowering staff references a legend that this miraculous flowering was how he was picked out among Mary's suitors as God's chosen one. An image of the 'Pietà' ('pity'), Mary holding the crucified body of Jesus, is below the altar.

INFANT JESUS OF PRAGUE – This is a famous and beloved image of Jesus as a little child, wearing elaborate robes. He holds an orb, symbolising his kingship over the world, with his other hand raised in blessing. The original statue came to Bohemia in 1556, and from the 1600s has been in a Carmelite convent in Prague, Czech Republic. Devotion to Our Lord using this image has been associated with many heavenly favours.

IMAGE OF OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL SUCCOUR (or *Perpetual Help*) – The original of this beloved icon of the Madonna and Child, in the Byzantine style and probably of Cretan origin, has been in Rome since 1499. Mary comforts the baby Jesus when he is frightened (and almost drops his sandal) at the vision of the instruments of his Passion, held by the Archangels St Michael and St Gabriel. The Redemptorist Order of priests especially promotes this devotion, often with novenas (prayer for nine consecutive days or, in this case, weeks) perpetually repeated. The Greek writing indicates ‘The Mother of God’; ‘The Archangel Michael’; ‘The Archangel Gabriel’; ‘Jesus Christ’.

OUR LADY’S ALTAR – Catholics honour Mary, the Mother of God, with very special devotion, and particularly in this church of St Mary’s named in her honour. This statue of Our Lady was solemnly crowned by then-Auxiliary Bishop George Pell in honour of her queenship on 16 July, Feast of Our Lady of Mt Carmel, in the ‘Marian Year’ 1987-88. Below the altar is an image of St Dominic (1170-1221) and St Catherine of Siena (1347-80) venerating the Madonna and Child, with St Dominic receiving the Rosary from Our Lady, as tradition holds.

LEGION OF MARY COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUE – The Legion of Mary, an international Catholic organisation whose members, basing themselves on devotion to Mary, carry out works of spiritual service in parishes and elsewhere, was established by Frank Duff in Dublin, Ireland in 1921. It was brought to Australia by Fr Henry Bakker, parish priest of Ascot Vale, and the first meeting of the Legion in Australia was held here at St Mary’s in 1932, as commemorated by this plaque. The Legion is now in numerous parishes around the country.

DIVINE MERCY IMAGE – The image of Jesus next to the organ is known as the ‘Divine Mercy’ image. The Divine Mercy devotion invites us to trust in God’s mercy, especially expressed by the words at the foot of the picture, ‘Jesus, I trust in you’. In the 1930s Jesus appeared to the Polish nun, St Faustina Kowalska (1905-38), and asked for this devotion to be promoted, and for this image with these words to be painted and venerated. The red and white rays represent the blood and water that flowed from Christ’s side on the Cross, when the soldier pierced his side with the lance (*Jn* 19:34). Other aspects of the devotion are the Divine Mercy Chaplet, prayed on rosary beads; and the Feast of Divine Mercy on the Sunday after Easter.

STAINED GLASS WINDOWS – The upper stained glass windows depict: (*east side*) – the Nativity; the Annunciation; the Revelation of the Sacred Heart; Jesus with the sisters Mary and Martha; (*west side*) – The Presentation; the Ascension; Mary, Queen conceived without original sin; Our Lady of Perpetual Succour being venerated by St Gerard Majella (1726-55). The windows behind St Therese’s altar reflect her role as Patroness of the Missions. In the Baptistry are images of the Baptism of Jesus by St John the Baptist; and Jesus teaching Nicodemus about baptism. The two confessionals have images of the Crucifixion; and of St Joseph.

SACRISTY – This is the room where the priest vests for Mass, and where the items required for Mass are kept. Some of the important items here are the priest’s vestments (amice, alb, cincture, stole and chasuble); unleavened bread; wine; chalice (vessel for the wine); ciborium (vessel for the bread); paten (plate for the bread); cruets (glass vessels for wine and water); altar linens (altar cloth, corporal, purificator, pall); liturgical books (lectionary for readings, missal for prayers); candles; thurible and incense; holy oils (olive oils blessed by the bishop).

LOURDES GROTTO – Near the Presbytery (priest’s house), the rock grotto in the courtyard with the two statues represents Our Lady appearing to St Bernadette Soubirous (1844-79) in the grotto at Lourdes, France, in 1858. Nearby is a small shrine with a statue of the suffering Christ.

OUR LADY OF FATIMA STATUE – Also in the courtyard is a statue of Mary appearing to the shepherd children Lúcia dos Santos (1907-2005), St Francisco Marto (1908-19) and St Jacinta Marto (1910-20), at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917.

LATIN WRITING IN ST MARY'S CHURCH

Latin was the language of the Roman Empire, which in the time of Jesus ruled all around the Mediterranean Sea; Greek was prominent in the eastern half of the Empire. So as the Faith spread through the Empire, the main languages of the Catholic Church were Greek in the east and Latin in the west (though the Faith also existed outside the Empire, expressed in other languages and cultures). With the division of the Orthodox Church from the Catholic Church (from 1054 in particular), Greek lost prominence in the Catholic Church, as most Catholics were in the western Latin-speaking part of the Church. In our own times, in which no one speaks Latin as their mother tongue anymore, the continued official use of Latin (rather than some one national language like English or Italian) still reminds us that the Church is not 'owned' by one particular country or people, but is equally for everyone.

UNDER THE OPUS SECTILE IMAGES ON THE SANCTUARY

Resurrexit sicut dixit – **He has risen as he said.** (Matthew 28:6)

This is under the picture of Jesus risen from the dead. These are the words spoken by the angel to the women who came to Jesus' tomb on Easter Sunday morning.

Fiat voluntas tua – **Your will be done.** (Luke 22:42)

This is under the picture of the 'Agony in the Garden' – Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he died, asking God the Father, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this chalice [of suffering] from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done'.

ON THE SIDE WALLS OF THE SANCTUARY

Zelus domus tuae comedit me – **Zeal for your house has consumed me.** (Psalm 69:9)

After Jesus drives the money-changers out of the Temple, the disciples, seeing how Jesus burns with enthusiasm for the holiness of God's house, remember these words from the Psalm. (John 2:17)

Domine, dilexi decorem domus tuae – **Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house.** (Psalm 26:8)

ON THE HIGH ALTAR

Introibo ad altare Dei – **I will go to the altar of God.** (Psalm 43:4)

In the Mass prior to the reforms of Vatican II, Psalm 43, with 43:4 as Antiphon, was part of the priest's prayers at the foot of the altar at the beginning of Mass, before he went up to the high altar.

ON THE BASE OF THE DOME ABOVE THE HIGH ALTAR

Ecce Agnus Dei – **Behold the Lamb of God.** (John 1:29)

These were the words spoken by St John the Baptist to his disciples when he saw Jesus passing by: 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.' In ancient times, the Jews offered lambs and other animals in sacrifice to God in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is the true Lamb of God who offered his own life in sacrifice to make up for all the sins of the whole world. At every Mass, the priest says the same words of St John the Baptist to the people before Holy Communion as he holds up the Eucharist – Jesus, the Lamb of God, crucified and risen, truly present under the appearances of bread and wine. And having the words written on the dome which is over the high altar and tabernacle reminds us that Jesus, the Lamb of God, is always present in the Mass, and in the tabernacle – in the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Eucharist.

IN THE OLD BAPTISTRY AT THE BACK OF THE CHURCH

Nisi quis renatus fuerit ex aqua et Spiritu Sancto non potest introire in Regnum Dei –

Unless one is born again of water and the Holy Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

These words of Jesus to Nicodemus give his teaching that by God's plan, sacramental Baptism by water is the normal channel by which we first receive the grace of the Holy Spirit which is necessary to enter God's heavenly kingdom.

A Short History of St Mary's Parish

- 1895:** Moonee Ponds Parish was established and a small wooden church in gothic style was erected in St Leonards Rd, Ascot Vale, to relieve the pressure upon the Essendon district.
- 1912:** St Mary's becomes a parish and Fr A. May is appointed as first Parish Priest and takes up residence in the temporary presbytery at 123 St Leonards Rd.
- 1913:** Archbishop Carr opens new school, presbytery and renovated church on 23 February.
- 1916:** Foundation stone of new brick presbytery laid by Archbishop Carr on 16 July.
- 1917:** New hall acquired in St Leonards Rd.
- 1919:** Fr Bakker takes over from Fr May as Parish Priest.
- 1927:** Sisters of Our Lady of Sion arrive to take over St Mary's School from the Sisters of Mercy. Convent opened and blessed by Archbishop Mannix.
- 1932:** The Legion of Mary, brought to Australia by Fr Bakker, holds its first meeting in Australia (and Oceania) at St Mary's.
- 1934:** Foundation stone of new church laid by Archbishop Mannix on 1 July.
- 1938:** Brick Romanesque church completed, and opened by Archbishop Mannix on 15 May.
- 1945:** First Mass offered in Maribyrnong in the Public Hall.
- 1946:** Dedication of St Mary's Church on 24 May, Feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians.
- 1947:** Land for St Margaret's Church purchased.
- 1949:** St Margaret's Church building purchased from Broadmeadows Army Camp and sited on the land.
- 1950:** Fr Bakker dies aged 81, and is buried in a grave in the shadow of the church he built. Fr P. J. O'Doherty becomes Parish Priest.
- 1957:** Junior School opened at St Margaret's.
- 1962:** Temporary church completed at Avondale Heights; Mass is provided by priests of Ascot Vale.
- 1963:** Sacrificial Giving introduced.
- 1966:** Gymnasium opened in guild hall.
- 1968:** Fr J. O'Shea introduced Mass facing the people and the original wooden altar was painted to match the marble high altar and placed on refurbished and carpeted platform.
- 1973:** New convent built on the site of the old Guild Hall; the sisters moved in in 1974. Old convent in Roseberry St demolished.
- 1975:** New altar and lectern purchased by Fr Tom Jones and carpeted platform extended.
- 1976:** Fire destroyed Old Hall.
- 1977:** New Hall built on site of old convent.
- 1982:** Fr Sam Dimattina becomes Parish Priest.
- 1988:** St Margaret's School is renovated and refurbished.
- 1993:** St Mary's School completely renovated, painted and refurbished.
- 1999:** Mgr Aldo Rebeschini becomes Parish Priest.
- 2001:** Fr Jim Clarke becomes Parish Priest.
- 2005:** New main altar for St Mary's installed.
- 2006:** Sound system upgraded and ceiling painted at St Mary's.
- 2008:** New carpet and restoration of kneelers at St Mary's.
- 2010:** Fr Justin Ford becomes Parish Priest.
New hall and classrooms at St Mary's; new Meeting Area and classrooms at St Margaret's.
- 2011:** New extended playground at St Mary's. Reorientation of sanctuary and pews at St Margaret's.
- 2012:** New organ at St Mary's.
- 2014:** Painting, new carpet at St Margaret's. Parish website launched.
- 2015:** Redevelopment of St Mary's School. Opening of MacKillop Building, St Margaret's School.
- 2016:** Promulgation of Preservation Church Account to support St Mary's Church.
- 2019:** Roof restoration of St Mary's Church.