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# St Francis Xavier's, Pahran

## Melbourne's first Vatican II church

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PICTURES • Fiona Basile\*

The liturgical principles of the Second Vatican Council found their first architectural expression in Melbourne at St Francis Xavier's, Pahran.

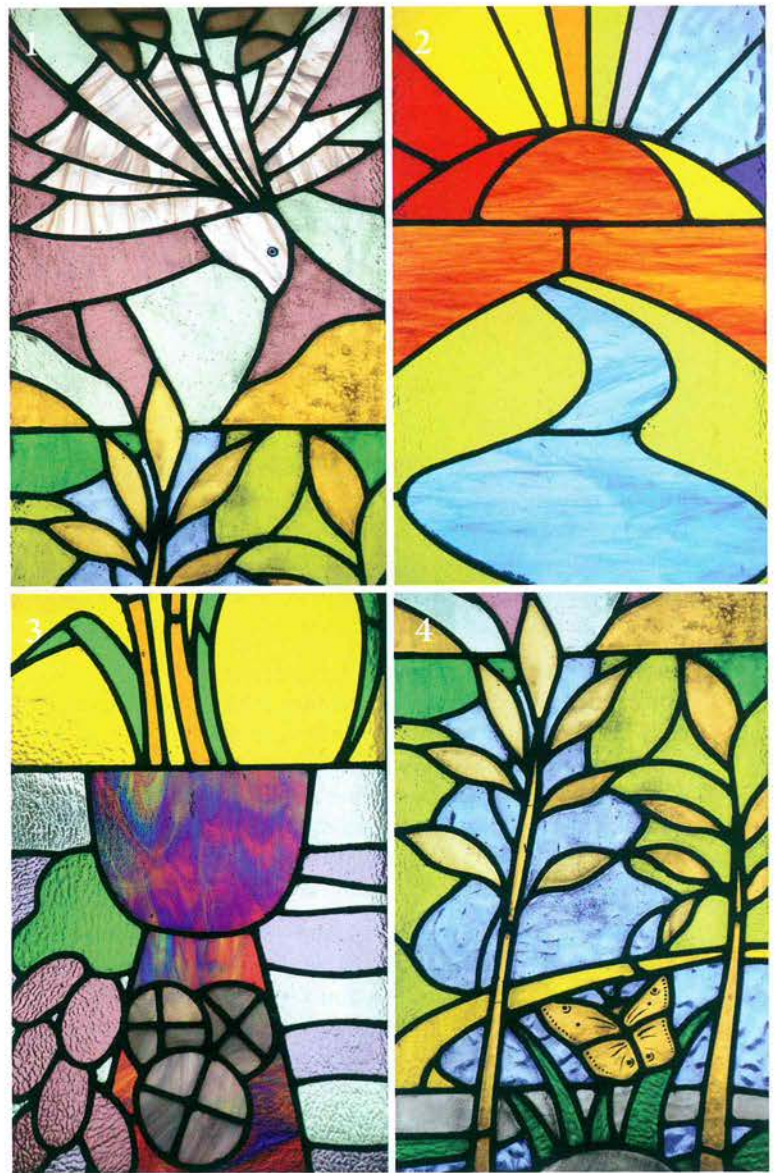
St Francis Xavier's, Pahran, is a church that deserved a future to match its architectural quality. It is one of the most original and aesthetically satisfying postwar churches in the Archdiocese.

When it was opened in 1964 its design won widespread admiration both from architects and the public. But St Francis Xavier's was built for a parish which, even in the churchgoing climate of 50 years ago, is said to have had one of the smallest congregations in Melbourne. As time went on the parish ceased to be viable and was amalgamated with its neighbours. In 2007 St Francis Xavier's, no longer needed as a parish church, was transferred to the John Pierce Centre for the Deaf, whose headquarters it remains and which proudly maintains it.

The church is still used once a month for Masses but its principal function is as a community centre and offices. This means that its interior has had to be altered to adapt the church for its current use. Many of the fittings that were designed expressly for it, visible in the contemporary photograph of the interior, have been removed. Most went to other churches. The hewn granite *mensa* of the original altar has been re-erected in a memorial garden outside the church. A portable altar-table constructed with timber from the pews is now used for Mass.

The present location of the beautiful *Madonna and Child* (on the right in the black-and-white photograph), the work of Austrian-born Melbourne sculptor Leopoldine Mimovich, is not known, nor is that of the six fine beaten-metal candlesticks (perhaps a *Kairos* reader will be able to throw light on this).

The 1950s and '60s were years of great confidence for the Catholic Church in Melbourne—as an illustration, think only of the vast Corpus Christi College in Glen Waverley,



1,2,3 and 4. The stained glass windows of the prayer room at St Francis Xavier's in Pahran (also the John Pierce Centre for the Deaf), which were designed by one of the deaf community members.

now the Victoria Police Academy—and small in numbers as the then parish of Pahran was, it had the faith in the future to build a new church in place of its 1920s dual-purpose school building.

It also had the imagination to look to the future and not to the past. The new St Francis Xavier's was the first church in Melbourne, perhaps in Australia, to reflect the liturgical recommendations of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, in a sense it anticipated them. The council was still in session when the church opened, and the design reflects the principles of the Liturgical Movement, which had become increasingly influential in the Church since the 1920s and on which the council to some extent drew for its own liturgical insights. The Liturgical Movement was strongest in France and Germany, and this accounts for the architectural style of St Francis Xavier's, which is European Modernist.

The Liturgical Movement favoured a change from the traditional 'linear' church plan with the altar at one end and the congregation in rows of seats receding down a nave to an arrangement in which the priest and altar were in the midst





5. St Francis Xavier's Church and John Pierce Centre for the Deaf, Prahran. 6. The interior of St Francis Xavier's Church/ John Pierce Centre for the Deaf. 7. The hewn granite mensa of the original altar, re-erected in a memorial garden outside the church. 8. The prayer room at St Francis Xavier's. 9. The interior of St Francis Xavier's soon after its opening in 1964. 10. A portable altar-table constructed with timber from the original church pews is used for Mass. 11. A tapestry that hangs on the walls of St Francis Xavier's made by the John Pierce Centre craft group. 12. The colourful stained-glass windows that run around the top perimeter of St Francis Xavier's walls.

of the people. This was often referred to as 'worship in the round'. St Francis Xavier's was designed on an octagonal plan to put this theory of worship into practice.

The pews were in shallow blocks around the altar, with no pew very far back, so that wherever you sat in the church you were close to the liturgical action. This was an architectural expression of a theological principle emphasised by the council, that the people at Mass were not spectators but participants.

From the 1970s on this type of plan would become the norm for new churches in Melbourne, but in 1964 it was still avant-garde. The architects of St Francis Xavier's, Smith & Tracey, a firm still active in ecclesiastical design in the Archdiocese, were blazing a trail. It is to their great credit that they combined an innovative principle in church-building with a design of such quality that it won second place in the Royal Australian Institute of Architects' building of the year awards.

St Francis Xavier's is planned in the form of an octagonal drum surrounded by sacristies, baptistery and other

spaces at ground-floor level. The lower walls are brown brick. Above them rise the upper walls of the church, an ingenious design in which two layers of clerestory windows are set between masonry rendered white. The white gleams in the sunlight.

Above the shallow roof rises a large white cross. The windows are filled with stained glass in abstract format, rich blues and reds, each piece bright as a jewel. Inside, the effect of the tinted light filling the church, even with the upper layer of glass now hidden above a false ceiling, is dramatic and beautiful.

Altered yet structurally intact, St Francis Xavier's is aesthetically and historically an important element in the architectural heritage of Melbourne Catholics. ❏

This is the 14th in a series of articles in *Kairos* on churches in the Archdiocese of Melbourne.