

## Developments in style; the Liverpool churches of F X Velarde

Francis Xavier Velarde (1897-1960) the Liverpool architect known primarily for Catholic churches and schools in the North West of England, has until recently remained obscure outside the rarefied circles of ecclesiastical architecture. The past decade, however, has seen an increasing interest in his work and the churches in particular. After half a century of being considered old fashioned, too personal, and of only local interest, they are subject to reappraisal as an important example of an alternative approach to Modernist Architecture. A route that might have been taken but for the upheaval of the Second World War. That Velarde's work is highly idiosyncratic and sits outside the mainstream of post-war Modern architecture is true, his buildings are in words of his tutor and mentor, Sir Charles Reilly,

*"...pieces of individual excellence rather than examples of a new school of thought, and I cannot honestly think of them inspiring imitations (using the word in its best sense) to successful emulation."*<sup>1</sup>

It is with the benefit of hindsight too simple to dismiss his work as having no lasting relevance, it is rather a part of a less prominent tendency, one interested in evolution rather than revolution. As Velarde explained on one of the few occasions when he committed his thoughts to writing, the architect should himself be an artist, for whom,

*"tradition is the lifeblood of art....it is his function to combine tradition and creativeness, which are not opposed but, rightly understood, are complementary and even integral to each other".*<sup>2</sup>

This focus on continuity has its origins in his education at Liverpool School of Architecture under Sir Charles Reilly and on subsequent travels, with him, through France and Germany to view the work of architects such as Dominikus Bohm and Rudolf Schwarz. An important figure in Velarde's early career, Reilly was in many ways a surrogate father, his own having died when he was six. Reilly had a reputation for promoting his former pupils and occasionally taking a hand himself, as when he acted as a consultant on the Peter Jones store in Sloane Square by William Crabtree. Briefly at the forefront of European church design in the 1930's Velarde continued with themes and motifs picked up at this time for the rest of his career expanding and developing these influences into his own personal style. This development in Velarde's work can be tracked clearly through the design of his churches from his seminal pre-war masterpiece of St Monica's, Bootle, 1933-36, described by the architectural historian, Nikolaus Pevsner as, *"an epoch-making church for England"*,<sup>3</sup> to his post-war mature style highpoint, English Martyr's, Wallasey 1950-53.

This article explores the architectural developments and continuities in Velarde's Merseyside churches for the RC dioceses' of Liverpool and Shrewsbury (which encompasses the Wirral).

**Fig 1**

### **St Matthew's Clubmoor 1927-30**

Velarde graduated from Liverpool University in 1924, a promising student winning the John Rankin and White Star prizes in his final year and being nominated for a Rome Scholarship. Upon completing the course he had a choice between working in Liverpool or in Reilly's words *"You be a dog and go to America."*<sup>4</sup> Taking the hint he accepted the offer of junior, salaried partnership in the practice of Weightman & Bullen. An established Liverpool firm with strong connections to the Roman Catholic church, most of their projects consisted of churches and schools. Velarde's first project, the design of a cross for the crypt of the Catholic pro-cathedral, St Nicholas, Copperas Hill, was produced with the sculptor Herbert Tyson-Smith (1883-1972). This collaborative partnership between Architect and Sculptor lasted for the rest of Velarde's career with Tyson-Smith eventually responsible for the design of his gravestone. The short-lived practice of Weightman, Bullen and Velarde was not an entirely happy one with Velarde complaining that he

had to “do all the design work and got paid very little for the trouble.”<sup>5</sup> The commission for the large RC church of St Matthew, Clubmoor 1927-30, to serve the expanding new suburbs along Queen’s Drive became Velarde’s first major project, one he took with him to when he left to start his own practice in 1930. The parish, established in 1922 had a prominent site on the corner of Queen’s Drive and Townsend Avenue for its new church, the Catholic counterpoint to the nearby St Christopher’s Anglican church designed by Velarde’s friend Bernard Miller. The intention was that the churches on prominent sites would provide some relief and sense of location to the low-density suburban sprawl of the new housing estates. Velarde did not disappoint the very high campanile of St Matthew’s functions effectively as a local landmark. Designed, in what was at the time, a conventional, for Catholic churches, Byzantine style the new brick building cost approximately £15,000. The majority of the funds came from an unusual source, the Honan bequest. Matthew Honan had been a successful Liverpool architect before the First World War being responsible for churches such as; St Joseph’s, Chorley (1909-10), St Benedict’s, Warrington (1911-14) and St Phillip Neri, Liverpool (designed 1912 and completed in amended form 1920). Killed at Beaumont Hamel on the Somme in November 1916, he left £12,000 towards a new church on the condition that it was designed in the Byzantine manner.<sup>6</sup> Velarde obliged.

### Fig 2

Externally the low mass of the rectangular brick nave is punctuated by pairs of small rounded headed windows, (a common Byzantine motif) flanked by single storey side aisles. The sanctuary has a semi-circular apse to the same height with the campanile articulating the junction between the two. If the exterior was conventional then the interior was anything but. The large volume of the nave is open to the sanctuary with only a small level change, an altar rail (now removed) and a proscenium style arch separating them. The low side aisles have a series of broad semi-circular arches running down the length with a large one opening into the adjacent Lady Chapel. The whole is in exposed brick with a shallow barrel vaulted ceiling. The simple nave serves to focus attention on the ornate altar, carved by Tyson-Smith, under a gold painted ciborium on four spiral columns. The decorative richness of the altar and the use of gold and angels would come to one of the characteristic elements of a Velarde church. Generally well received by critics despite Pevsner’s comment that,

*“the top stage with its stubby Romanesque angle columns and its copper cupola is decidedly embarrassing, and the body of the church with small round windows is without distinction.”<sup>7</sup>*

For a first completed commission this church shows considerable confidence, even with the above reservations about the campanile. Allowing for the limitations imposed by the bequest it displays some of the flashes of what would become a distinctive Velarde style; the copper topped campanile, the gold detailing, the Tyson-Smith bas-relief carving, the bold brickwork.

### Fig 3

#### **St Monica’s, Bootle 1933-36**

The next Catholic church completed by Velarde in Liverpool was what is generally regarded as his finest pre-war work, St Monica’s, Bootle 1933-36, although this was not his next project. The next project was his only offering for the Anglican faith, St Gabriel’s, Blackburn 1932-33. In this instance, notionally working with Bernard Miller after a recommendation from Reilly, Velarde produced a powerful composition in brick freed from stipulations about style and inspired by his travels down the Rhine. At St Gabriel’s the campanile is abandoned in favour of a squat tower attached to a westwerk, that is a tall mass of flat masonry at the liturgical west end, clearly influenced by Dominikus Bohm’s St Kamillus, Monchengladbach 1929-31. Velarde continued to alternate between the use of semi-detached campaniles and westwerks, for the rest of his career. Another distinctive Velarde detail on both these churches was the use of parapet gutters, these served to hide the rainwater goods and increase the effect of an abstract mass of brick volumes. According to his son Giles Velarde, FXV hated downpipes and would go to extreme lengths to avoid them on the principle facades of his churches.<sup>8</sup> Sadly the resultant parapet gutters often

failed leading to visually intrusive retrofit gutters and downpipes, a detail Velarde would have hated.

#### Fig 4 & Fig 5

At St Monica's the westwerk would reappear, this time without the attached tower, along with a number of important design developments which become typical in his work. Another new parish established in 1922, a site for the church was purchased from the Earl of Derby's estate on the north-east corner of Derby Park. After some debate about the size of the congregation to be accommodated a figure of 500 souls was decided with a substantial budget of £18,000. The external form is simple and all in two inch Hadley bricks from Shropshire with a half-inch lime mortar joint coloured with red Parbold sand. The effect of this combination of brick and coloured mortar was to emphasize the monolithic qualities of the composition. The importance of the subtle combinations of brick and mortar were later reiterated by Velarde,

*"Correctly handled even the simplest materials can give a dignified result...As brick is commonly used, it is important not only to choose a good brick but to use also suitably coloured mortar. Recall that mortar constitutes about thirty percent of the surface of brick building, so that a mistake here is fatal."*<sup>9</sup>

Sadly subsequent repointing has been undertaken in a light mortar and the monolithic quality compromised.

#### Fig 6

The westwerk is dominated by three large Portland Stone angels carved by Herbert Tyson-Smith above round-headed windows set in blocks of two by four. English perpendicular crossed with the European Expressionism of Bohm. The body of the church has six bays, with similar arrays of windows set into the high side aisles, as at St Gabriel's, above which square flying buttresses connect to the only slightly higher nave, where very small, unadorned pairs of windows form a clerestory. The mass of the nave continues eastwards to form the sanctuary, which is without an apse. A single large window on the south side, set above a side chapel, illuminates the sanctuary; that on the north side is concealed behind a choir gallery. Velarde explained that,

*"it is attractive to have south and south-west sunlight streaming into the sanctuary on the gospel side. This means that the morning Mass congregation will suffer no inconvenience, while during the rest of the day the building will be suffused with warm sunlight."* He advised against a window at the back of the sanctuary, *"because at its best the brightness of the light distracts attention from the altar, and at the worst it almost blinds those kneeling in the front and centre of the church."*<sup>10</sup>

Charles Reilly described the interior as displaying a *"quality of the imagination ... which few recent churches anywhere can equal"*.<sup>11</sup>

The nave and sanctuary are set under an almost continuous pitched roof in green-grey pantiles. The creation of the nave and sanctuary as an almost single space is an interesting development and is still more striking internally where it reflects the spirit of the Liturgical Movement. The walls and arcades are finished in exposed brick, and contrast with a highly decorated reredos and canopy in the sanctuary. Elevating the choir into a gallery on the north side of the sanctuary over the sacristy reduced the physical separation between the priest and congregation. Velarde's rationale was that the choir was there *"to lead the congregation and encourage it, but not to do its work"*.<sup>12</sup> He had first proposed placing the choir in a west-end gallery, and the suggestion to place it to the side of the sanctuary came from the parish priest, Dr Foley. Velarde commented that *"This in many ways is a good position for a choir, but I should point out that it will rob the sanctuary of side light and the sacristies of top light."*<sup>13</sup> The Builder was most impressed, commenting that the innovation *"has released the church from a very ugly feature which usually cramps the west end and blocks the main window with its organ and equipment"*.<sup>14</sup> It is framed

internally with a screen of unglazed 'windows' matching those on the south elevation. The abstraction of this screen, uncompromised by window frames, achieves an Italian rationalist feel, akin to the paintings by Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978).

There are only five steps up to the altar and a very light communion rail to set the priest apart from his congregation, while the flat ceiling is almost uninterrupted. Velarde's long time assistant and de-facto office manager, Janet Gnosspelius reported that Velarde was worried that churches were bad for speech, so was careful about his ceiling shapes and came to avoid barrel vaults, preferring stilted roof trusses with soft celotex ceiling board as a sound absorbent.<sup>15</sup> The light metalwork of his altar rail designs, in brass or chromed steel, formed from flat bar, have an almost art deco feel. These were typical of all Velarde churches, although sadly re-ordering during the 1960's has removed most. A detail echoed in the ambo's and choir screens, resulting in a consistency of design through all the metalwork elements.

The fittings at St Monica's are very fine and apart from some re-ordering by Richard O'Mahony in 1986, are original. Every detail was considered, designed and drawn by Velarde, including the water stoops in the shape of Ionic capitals, the bentwood sanctuary chairs with their scrolled arms, the glass and chrome light fittings (now lost), the Deco lectern, and the mosaic floors of the baptistery and English Martyrs' chapel. The most prominent internal features are the richly decorated altar (by Tyson Smith), the canopy and the reredos, the latter disliked by Pevsner, who noted that "*it is a great pity that the altar wall is so prettified*".<sup>16</sup> The reredos, occupying the entire (liturgical) east wall, has a chequerboard pattern of slightly raised rectangles flanked towards the edges with slender stylised Ionic pilasters, and is decorated with six ascending angels. These figures, carved by W. L. Stevenson, are to designs by Velarde. Floating above the altar is a rectangular canopy slightly arched in the middle, again with a geometric pattern but this time of brightly coloured squares, held at the four corners by stars and scrolls. The pale colour palette of the sanctuary, flooded with light from the south window, contrasts dramatically with the otherwise dark brick interior, instantly establishing this as the focal point of the church.

Fig 7, Fig 8,

Within the plan form asymmetrical side aisles, one always wider than the other, became another Velarde motif, perhaps borrowed from Bohm's Christ the King, Leverkusen 1928. Where size would not permit side aisles one was omitted to maintain the asymmetry. When asked why he incorporated irregular or asymmetrical elements into the composition of his churches, he replied that "*he thought it would make God laugh*".<sup>17</sup>

The aisle on the north side (liturgical south) is just wide enough to incorporate a Lady Chapel, while the narrower one opposite terminates in a long, thin chapel dedicated to the English Martyrs where a triptych depicting St Thomas More, St John Fisher and colleagues is signed 'G. W.' and dated 1938. The chrome finish, first employed by Velarde in the entrance lobby at St Gabriel's, is also used for the gates to the English Martyrs' chapel and even on the mantels over the radiators. The drawings in silver on the otherwise plain glass of the sanctuary windows were by Marjorie Brooks (Mrs W. G. Holford), a Rome scholar in decorative painting and another close family friend. Here she drew figures of saints directly on to the surface of the glass, sealed by a secondary layer of glass internally for protection. In these details we can see the idea of a building as a total work of art, perhaps most fully realised in St Monica's but always an ambition of Velarde's where budgets would allow.

Fig 9

Another small but distinctive Velarde pre-war detail, in this case from one of the rather workmanlike schools, appears at this time. Our Lady of Lourdes Primary school 1930, the commission with which Velarde had set up his office, was extended to include a new secondary school on the same site. The secondary school designed in 1937 but not completed until 1942 due to the outbreak of World War II, included between its classroom windows mullions in the form of carved angels. This detail, mullions as angels, would become a standard motif on his schools

and churches post-war, only deviating when secular considerations resulted in the substitution of angels with fluted pilasters, such as Scalby Senior School, Scarborough 1939-42.

### **Our Lady of Pity, Greasby 1950-53**

Apart from completion of the occasional school, the war years were, for Velarde as with most architects, a lean time. In Velarde's case this was compounded by extreme ill health, leaving only his part time teaching income from Liverpool University. By 1945 new enquiries were beginning to come in, with post-war reconstruction, primarily of schools, but also small churches to serve new housing estates. The later were predominately converted military hangers and prefab buildings with little architectural presence. Most of these 'mission hut' churches have been demolished. An exception was the completion of the much larger St Aloysius, Roby 1939-52, designs for which were completed before the war but with construction delayed until the necessary permits could be obtained in an environment of post-war rationing of materials. An untypical Velarde design with a west tower rather than campanile or westwerk, pointed concrete arches to the nave and a very 'prettified' altar and canopy in some ways redolent of St Monica's.

The war had an important architectural impact in other ways, Velarde now found himself part of the 'previous' generation, one for whom evolution was the predominant ethos, the new wave of graduates coming out of architecture schools were however after revolution. International Modernism was, slowly at first, to become the order of the day. In Liverpool this transition had its own flavour as a result of the exiled Polish School of Architecture being billeted at Abercromby Square during the war. Graduates from this period recalled how they had to *"run to keep up with the Polish students."*<sup>18</sup> Never one to worry about being at the cutting edge of a 'movement' Velarde returned to what he knew, brick rectangular churches with fine fittings. Subtle shifts were forced upon him, the handmade two-inch bricks of St Monica's were now much too expensive, as were the carved stone angels which were replaced with concrete versions except for the occasional well-funded project.

His first substantial post war church design was Our Lady of Pity, Greasby 1950-53, for the Diocese of Shrewsbury. This was a new client for Velarde and probably came about as the parish priest, Father John Murphy was an old school friend. Murphy was appointed to the parish in 1944, returning as Bishop of Shrewsbury for the laying of the foundation stone in 1951 and the opening in 1952.<sup>19</sup> Although not a large church, the composition attempts a show of grandeur towards the street. The gable of the narthex at the liturgical west end is linked to a campanile by a single-storey arcade that serves pragmatically to restrict access to the presbytery courtyard and visually to unify the composition. The nave and sanctuary occupy a rectangular box below a shallow pitched roof. The external buttresses along the nave were a late addition, prompted by fears that the thrust of the internal arches might push out the side walls. The round-headed windows, originally with blue-green tinted glass but now clear (in UPVC frames), are curiously arranged, with one upper window set over a lower pair linked by fluted cast mullions.

#### **Fig 10 & Fig 11**

Internally, the church is impressive, a single space comprising a five-bay nave and single-bay sanctuary defined by six powerful semi-circular brick arches. The ceiling of flat plaster panels is currently painted white but was originally a Velardian blue. The sanctuary is only three steps above the nave, adding to the simple connection between the congregation and celebrant. The communion rails have been removed, but the altar, tabernacle and a fine polyptych of the Crucifixion with Our Lady and St John flanked by angels all display Velarde's distinctive style.

Here we have the classic Velarde pre-war compositional elements; the mass brickwork, the campanile (which he would use for all the larger churches for Shrewsbury), the lightweight-chromed metalwork, the small rounded-headed windows. To these he added a new feature, the painted ceiling. This device would become one of the most distinctive aspects of a post-war Velarde church as we shall see.

## English Martyrs, Wallasey 1951-53

The grandest of all Velarde's post-war churches and the epitome of his mature style, English Martyrs ranks with St Monica's as Velarde's most important work. The size of the church permitted a number of ideas trailed at St Monica's, such as the choir gallery, asymmetric aisles and multiple windows. As at St Monica's there is a completeness to the composition, with the fittings and art works created under his supervision and most of them surviving.

The parish dates from 1901, with a temporary church erected in 1907. The local firm of Edmund Kirby & Sons were commissioned to design a new building in 1937, but the war brought this project to a halt. Post-war a fresh scheme was sought, this time from Velarde with the completed church opened on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1953 at a cost of £50,000. It features the expanses of fine brickwork typical of Velarde's work, with bold, simple masses expressing each element of the building and rising to a semi-detached campanile.

The church is faced in grey-brown brick, set in Velarde's favourite English garden wall bond for the nave, low aisles and campanile, and stretcher bond for the projecting baptistery and porch. The pitched roofs of the nave and sanctuary are continuous, without even the small step seen at St Monica's. There are no parapets to the main body, and the absence of rainwater goods helps to reinforce the abstraction of the plain brick façades. As at St Gabriel's, he went to considerable lengths of detailed design here to avoid their presence on principal elevations.<sup>20</sup> The most distinctive element is the campanile, which changes at high level from a square plan in brick to an octagonal open belfry in stone, topped by a copper cupola. The archetypal Velarde signifier. The nave fenestration is curious, round-headed windows are punched into the brickwork in two banks of four windows, forming a cruciform pattern, separated by two single windows. The single-storey aisle has a blind arcade with cast statues of the English Martyrs set centrally in each bay, but no windows. These and a larger pietà on the south face of the campanile are all by Philip Lindsey Clark.<sup>21</sup> Cast and carved sculptures are particularly prominent on the exterior here, and feature as mullions in the window arrays to the sanctuary and paired windows to the baptistery and its link corridor.

### Fig 12 & Fig 13

As in most Velarde churches the interior is also faced in exposed brickwork. The upper walls of the nave are supported on seven-bay arcades, their round-arch openings continuing the modern Romanesque theme of the fenestration, which is repeated in the great double arches to the sanctuary and high altar. The arcades are supported on round concrete columns incised with silver-painted spirals under vestigial cushion capitals marked by crosses; never again would Velarde adopt the internal buttress cut by passage aisles found in his pre-war churches. The arcade and column configuration has a very similar feel to the slightly later St Teresa, Upholland 1952-57 for the Diocese of Liverpool, except that being slightly smaller that church has only one side aisle and the colour scheme is blue and gold. The columns supporting the nave walls in that instance are clad in gold mosaic rather than grey render and silver trim. A feature repeated from St Monica's is the choir gallery set to the side of the sanctuary, here with a single round-arched opening inset with a bronze balustrade still broadly Deco in spirit. The faceted painted ceiling first trialled at Our Lady of Pity, reoccurs, this time in red with chevrons of silver and orange. Velarde was very particular about the selection of colour for his churches, often waiting until the construction work was almost complete before confirming after viewing samples on site.<sup>22</sup>

He writes with his brother, Raphael Velarde, the parish priest at Bromborough, in an article for *Clergy Review* on *'Modern Church Architecture and Some of its Problems'* about the use of colour,

*"In a church of modern design it will be wise to avoid elaborate colour schemes; three colours will usually prove sufficient, and the scheme will find its natural climax in the decoration of the sanctuary. Generally speaking, quiet colouring of the walls will offer a splendid foil to a more elaborate pattern in the treatment of the roof or ceiling; and the sanctuary floor offers an obvious opportunity for a design in harmony with the altar."*<sup>23</sup>

The sanctuary is raised up six steps, originally behind a low communion rail (now gone), with the altar up a further three steps and backed by a triangular stone reredos carved with reliefs of the twelve disciples looking up to Christ at the apex. The reredos is slightly forward of the east wall, where there hangs a large metal crucifixion. The altar itself has been moved further forward and reduced in length, but it retains Velarde's tapered base decorated with a silver angel proffering a chalice. Here the integration of nave and sanctuary in plan creates visual continuity yet in section the height difference reinforces the separation. A more extreme example of the raised altar platform than his pre-war churches it is perhaps in response to the need for the congregation to see the altar from the far end of a long nave.

The wider north aisle terminates in a Lady Chapel illuminated by four round-headed windows, with an altar by Herbert Tyson Smith. The baptistery by the entrance is no longer in use but remains complete. There are more Tyson Smith carvings round the square font, set on another tapered base, this time of angels chasing the Devil; the pyramidal cover is carved with fish scales and capped with a gilt cross. Here the ceiling is decorated in orange with silver and blue ribs, while the adjoining lobby has a pattern of blue and white diamonds on an orange background. The range of geometric painted patterns to the ceilings at English Martyrs shows Velarde at his most playful. Indeed the austere brick interiors are enriched by wealth of decorative detail, in ceilings, metalwork and carved angels – Velarde was clearly making the most of the opportunities afforded by such a substantial commission.

**Fig 14 & Fig 15**

Brickwork, semi-detached campanile with copper top, carved angel mullions, multiple round-headed window arrays, Decoesque metalwork screens, coloured ceilings, integration of work with artists and sculptors, absence of downpipes, here we see nearly all the classic Velarde motifs coming together in another example of the total work of art. It is a measure of the success of his composition and importance of this church that it was elevated from grade two to grade two star listing in 2013. The one typical element not yet evident is the use of gold mosaic. This would arrive in the slightly later churches; St Teresia, Upholland 1952-57, The Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, Blackpool 1950-57, St Alexander's, Bootle 1955-57, and St Lukes, Pinner 1957-58, before again morphing into a different format for his final church in the North West, Holy Cross, Bidston 1955-59.

### **Holy Cross, Bidston 1955-59**

Of the later churches mentioned above the greatest loss and indeed the greatest loss in the canon of Velarde's work was the demolition in 1991 of St Alexander's, Bootle 1955-57. Here was a large, mature phase, church complete with all the finest details typical of Velarde. Faced with an impressive westwerk topped by twin towers, the closet remaining parallel being St Luke's Pinner. Designed for 500 people at a cost of £90,000 it featured a baptistery, top-lit under its own sharp-pointed cone, is set on the north side of the long *Westwerk*, (also as at St Luke's), and an interior with bands of fenestration illuminating the spacious interior. Again, round-arched arcades shielded uneven aisles, supported on round, tapered columns finished in gold leaf. The wooden ceilings were also ablaze with gold and bright colours, while the terrazzo floors were inlaid with gold mosaic and coloured emblems. Here, however, there was one novel feature: the placement of the Lady Chapel directly behind the main altar, separated by a light and elegant bronze screen that supported a carved wooden Calvary.

**Fig 16**

This church and the other mature phase examples mentioned above are what we typically think of when discussing Velarde churches, although the last one completed entirely by him before his untimely death in 1960, at the age of 63, Holy Cross, Bidston represents something of a new direction in his work. It was also Velarde's personal favourite.<sup>24</sup> Fundraising by the parish began in 1954, to replace a temporary building that had been serving the growing suburb of North Birkenhead since 1929, on land originally set aside for a public library. Velarde had already

designed the Catholic primary school associated with the church, in 1947, and was the obvious choice of architect. Holy Cross was consecrated on 11 June 1959, having cost £87,000 including fittings.<sup>25</sup> The (liturgical) west end and the top of the campanile are clad in Portland stone, but otherwise this is a brick building with a long nave under a tiled roof, with low side aisles and a projecting Lady Chapel. The land rises slightly, so the east end is sunk into the side of the hill, while the ceremonial entrance is lifted by five steps. It is this west end that differs most from Velarde's earlier churches, consisting of a central stone cube flanked to the left by a secondary, smaller cube containing the day-to-day entrance, and to the right by the tower containing the baptistery within its base. Slender stone pinnacles with finials and crosses top the corners of the central cube, an effect somewhat resembling the Brno Crematorium of 1930 by the Czech architect Ernst Wiesner, a colleague at the university from 1950. This elevation disturbed Pevsner, who described it as an 'overscaled toy fort tower'.<sup>26</sup>

### Fig 17 Fig 18

As is often the case, it is the interior that delights. The first surprise is immediate, with an entrance lobby clad entirely in striking red and black diamond patterns of mosaic. The relative darkness of this space is lifted by a tall, conical skylight. The porch leads into the narthex, also clad entirely in mosaics, this time in a bold black and white chequerboard pattern inlaid with cross motifs in gold. The effect is almost post-modern. To one side, at the base of the tower, is the baptistery in red and white diamond mosaics inlaid with fish and hands in Velarde's favourite gold. Light, abstracted metal screen doors allow the baptistery to be visible from the lobby through the narthex, and this run of fully mosaic-clad spaces provides a highly original and dramatic entrance sequence unlike anything previously seen in his work.

All these exuberant patterns are, however, only a foretaste for the drama of the body of the church. The nave and sanctuary are combined, without a chancel arch, under a panelled blue and gold ceiling, terminating in an apse. The lower half of the space is clad in travertine, the upper parts in fluted plaster – why Velarde abandoned his usual preference for a brick interior is unknown, but he concealed fluorescent tubes behind the cornice of the travertine that would have accentuated the fluting. The aisles are connected by an ambulatory that ran round the apse, all defined by a continuous arcade of semi-circular arches supported on round columns. These columns have no capitals, not even the minimal, stylised versions found at The Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, Blackpool, though they are again clad in mosaic. A continuous band of geometric window arrays, alternating rectangular and round-headed lights filled with Velarde's characteristic tinted glass, illuminates the asymmetrical side aisles. Above the ambulatory at high level five similar window arrays flood the sanctuary platform with light. Two flights of six and three steps lead up to the altar, although the low, light, chrome-plated communion rail was removed in the one act of reordering undertaken here. The semi-circular apse and ambulatory are reminiscent of early Romanesque basilicas and the single volume of the main worship space suggested that – like other architects in the vanguard of the Liturgical Movement – Velarde was returning to the earliest Christian worship for inspiration.

The Lady Chapel is set at right angles to the body of the church. This simple pace, with its own apse, is encrusted with the most spectacular mosaics: every surface is clad in blue tesserae, set in a diamond pattern with gold highlights. The focal point is a representation of Our Lady and the Christ Child, seated and flanked by angels. Designed by Velarde and made by Art Pavements, a subsidiary of Carter's of Poole, they too echoed the early churches of Byzantium and Ravenna.

### Fig 19

This highly idiosyncratic and original church closed in July 2006 and has remained boarded up ever since. That such a fine building should be at risk is a cause of great concern.

## Conclusion

Briefly with his pioneering early works at St Gabriel's and St Monica's, Velarde was at the forefront of contemporary church design in Europe, championed by his friend and mentor Charles Reilly

he was kept in the cross-hairs of architectural debate. Post-war and particularly after Reilly's death in 1949 he steered a more personal and idiosyncratic path. The development of his style continued to evolve but this time out of step with mainstream Modernism, not that this would have bothered him. By early 1960, when though ill, he was pressured into providing an entry for the architectural competition for the new Metropolitan cathedral, the world had however moved on as evidenced by Sir Frederick Gibberd's centrally organised winning entry. After his death his former assistants completed the churches still in progress, all in London, in a Velarde manner. The next new commission, St Michael All Angels, Woodchurch 1960-65 was to be a radical departure. Designed by the recently graduated Richard O'Mahony it tended towards a central organisation and avoided brick altogether in favour of concrete and aluminium. There is perhaps a nod to the former master in the positioning of the Lady Chapel behind the altar as at St Alexander's, but otherwise all is changed.

Fig 20.

Velarde always worked in brick, he did not like concrete, and used it merely as a structural system for schools and the non-typical St Aloysius, Roby, where post-war austerity limited the availability of his preferred material. Brick provided the '*splendid foil*' against which he could elaborate the altar and as his designs developed the colours of the ceilings and gold clad mosaic columns. From the very start he had worked with artists and craftsman, filling his churches with opportunities for them to illustrate their skill. He had adapted ideas discovered on his travels through Germany and added his own motifs such as angel mullions. All of these elements, highlighted in the local examples described, might lead one to think that Velarde was merely working from a pattern book; this would be an error. The skill with which he pulled his palette of ideas together was unique to each church, just when you think you are seeing more of the same a new development or combination appears. The designs are clever, simple, yet complex, they have a typological similarity with other church architects of the period, yet are instantly recognisable as highly personal to him, we are lucky to have so many in the North West.

Most of his surviving churches are now listed, including the grade two starred Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine in Blackpool, which remains the fastest listing undertaken by Heritage England to date.

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