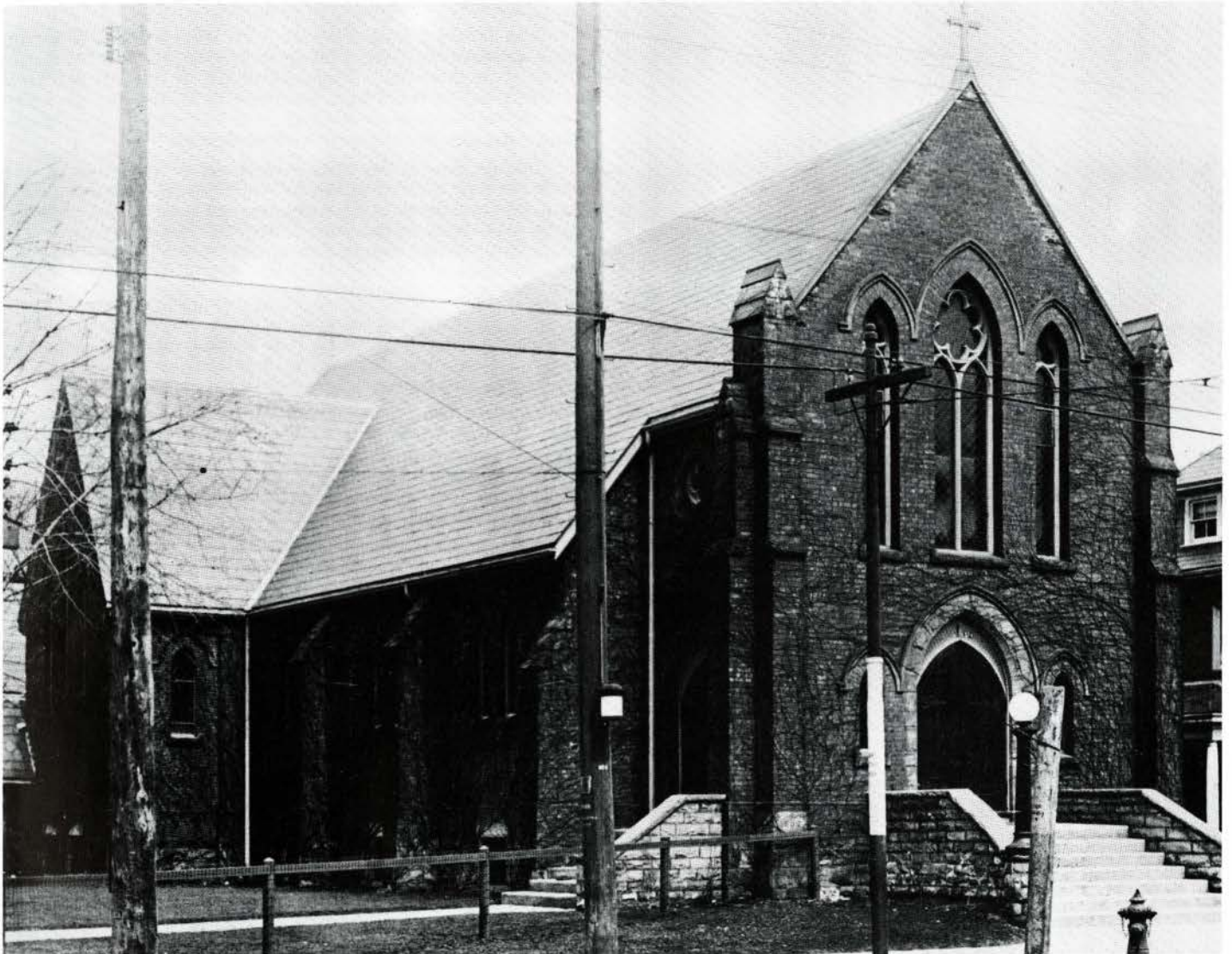


## THE PROCEEDINGS PART II



Author

Figure 2. A. W. Holmes. Holy Family Church, Parkdale, Toronto, 1902. General view as in 1914. Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto.

### **A Thoroughly Traditional Architect: A. W. Holmes and the Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto, 1890 - 1940**

*by Christopher A. Thomas*





Figure 1. Post & Holmes. St. Patrick's Church, Wildfield, Ontario (Gore of Toronto Township), 1894



Figure 3. Joseph Connolly. St. Cornelius Church, Caledon (Silver Creek), Ontario, 1885-86. Interior, looking west.



Figure 4. A. W. Holmes. St. Helen's Church, Brockton, Toronto, 1907-10. General view of church and rectory as in 1914.

Author W. Holmes was born an Anglican in London, England, in 1863 and received his first architectural training in the office of G. E. Street, one of Britain's pre-eminent High Victorian Gothic architects. From his contact with Street, which must have been brief since Street died in 1881 (when Holmes was only eighteen) Holmes may have derived his life-long sense of mission as a church architect and his consistent devotion to the revived Gothic.

After coming to Canada in about 1886, Holmes worked as a draftsman for Joseph Connolly, architect for five busy years, when Bishop Cleary of Kingston was making constant use of Connolly and when St. Mary's and St. Paul's were being built in Toronto. His years with Connolly set the tone for the rest of Holmes' career, and probably it was in this period that he became Roman Catholic.

Through most of the 1890s Holmes worked in partnership with Albert Asa Post, a former student of Henry Langley. Post and Holmes specialized in the sort of High Victorian ecclesiastical and collegiate design that they inherited from Street, Connolly and Langley. The simple parish church, designed about 1894, for the village of Wildfield in the Toronto Gore, is typical of their work (Fig. 1).

After 1900, Holmes worked on his own from an office in Toronto, without a partner and with few draftsmen, until he retired in about 1940. To the end of his days the High Victorian style and programme were his staple fare, though—as we shall see—he would branch out into other building types and styles when called upon.

Between 1890 and World War I, Ontario changed radically: its cities and large towns grew rapidly, as industry and European immigration tempered the basically rural, Anglo-Saxon character of the Province. Between 1880 and 1910, for instance, the Roman Catholic population of Toronto tripled, many of the new arrivals being of Italian, Polish or other East European origin.

Yet, it is remarkable that the style as well as the scale of Connolly's smaller churches continued to be repeated by Holmes. Holy Family, Parkdale, of 1902, is an English parish church translated to a middle-class street-car suburb of Toronto (Fig. 2). Here, the basic parish-church formula established by Ecclesiologists in the 1840s, of a distinct nave and chancel with short, mainly symbolic transepts, is augmented by a chapel like a second transept set at right angles to the sanctuary. The local pink brick, the detail that is chiefly Early English (with a few elegant French notes), and the leafy street-corner site in a quiet suburb are still very much of the 19th century.

Inside, the sanctuary has been most brutally renovated, but, happily, Holmes' open timber ceiling and choir gallery have been spared. They look exactly like those of Connolly's small church-interiors of the 1870s and 1880s, such as St. Cornelius at Caledon, of 1885 (Fig. 3).

But Toronto in 1900 required, more than anything else, large parish churches, like Connolly's St. Mary's and St. Paul's, for its crowded working-class districts. After 1900, Holmes, more than any other architect, felt the challenge of building churches, like Connolly's, that would be inexpensive yet impressive in their context.

St. Helen's, Brockton, designed about 1907, exemplifies the type. It is like the typical large parish church, Catholic and Anglican, built in the industrial cities of England and Ireland in the High Victorian age, being a long basilican hall with a simple, undivided roof-line. To this plain body are attached liturgical and symbolic appendages—sacristies behind the apse, transepts that serve as entries rather than seating areas, and a tower at one side of the main front with a bold broached spire (added in 1924) that is a neighbourhood landmark. The parish priests lived in the handsome rectory next door, which was built along with the new church (Fig. 4). Such houses, which also served as parish office and residence, very often formed part of the building programme and signified both the distinctive identity and the service of the clergy. The main front of the church articulated with High French Gothic detail—a triple entry-motif surmounted by a 'gallery of kings' and a rose-window, beneath a single large, embracing arch. At heart, it is not much different from Connolly's St. Mary's on Bathurst Street several miles away, (Fig. 5), except that St. Helen's is of red, rather than yellow, brick; its tower is to one side, rather than in the centre of the west front; and the front is handled in a slightly different, rather more modern way.



The interior of St. Helen's is gaudy with decorative systems of a devotional nature and does not attract the contemporary eye much, except as an historic document (Fig 6); this is one of few full-blown late Victorian interiors in Toronto Catholic churches that have not been affected, often for the worse, by the liturgical changes of Vatican II.

The church exudes, however, a perceptible air of exhaustion, noticeable, for example, in the heavy and rather clumsy carving of the foliate nave capitals, and in the somewhat ponderous handling of the exterior. St. Helen's is not so self-confident as Connolly's St. Mary's. On the contrary, one senses a certain lack of conviction, a feeling that the natural lifespan of Victorian Gothic had come to its end, and that a new approach to design . . . or, at any rate, to style . . . was called for.

The Beaux-Arts classicism that had by this time become virtually the universal language of public architecture throughout North America, seems to have offered Holmes a more satisfactory avenue, both formally and iconographically. This style is exemplified in St. Ann's, Gerrard Street East, of 1912-14 (Fig. 7). The underlying form of the church is what it had always been in Connolly's or McCarthy's hands—a vast, simple masonry hall, inflecting to the street in a decorative facade that is a kind of false front. In this case Holmes based his facade on those of the churches built in Rome during the 16th century Counter-Reformation, such as della Porta's design for the facade of S. Atanasio dei Greci, 1580. Originally Holmes' facade was to have carried a pair of belfries on its heavy end-sections, which would have both improved the effect and made explicit its derivation from earlier Roman models.

Needless to say, a most Catholic milieu, Holmes married the prevailing Beaux-Arts classical fashion to historic associations appropriate for the reactionary rule of Pope Pius X. Pius, who ruled from 1903 to 1914, was, though a most saintly man, implaceably hostile to modernizing, liberalizing trends in the Church. In fact, he condemned as heresy a congeries of such attitudes, which he lumped together as 'Modernism'. It is hard to imagine a more suitable architectural allusion for his reign than those churches built in Rome after the Council of Trent.

Exactly the same associations are called up by Holmes' facade for Holy Name, on Danforth Avenue in East Toronto, designed in or about 1914 (Fig. 8). Here the allusion, obviously, is to the facade of the Jesuit mothers-church in Rome, Il Gesù, a prototypical work of the Counter-Reformation.

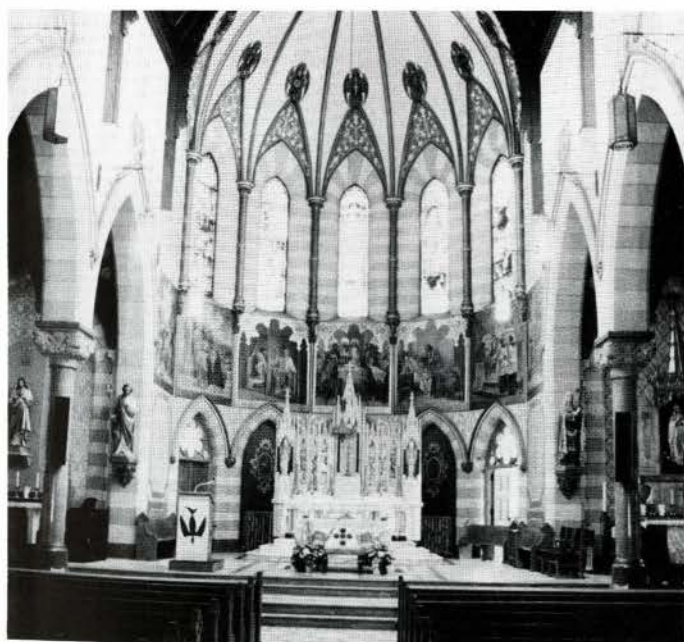
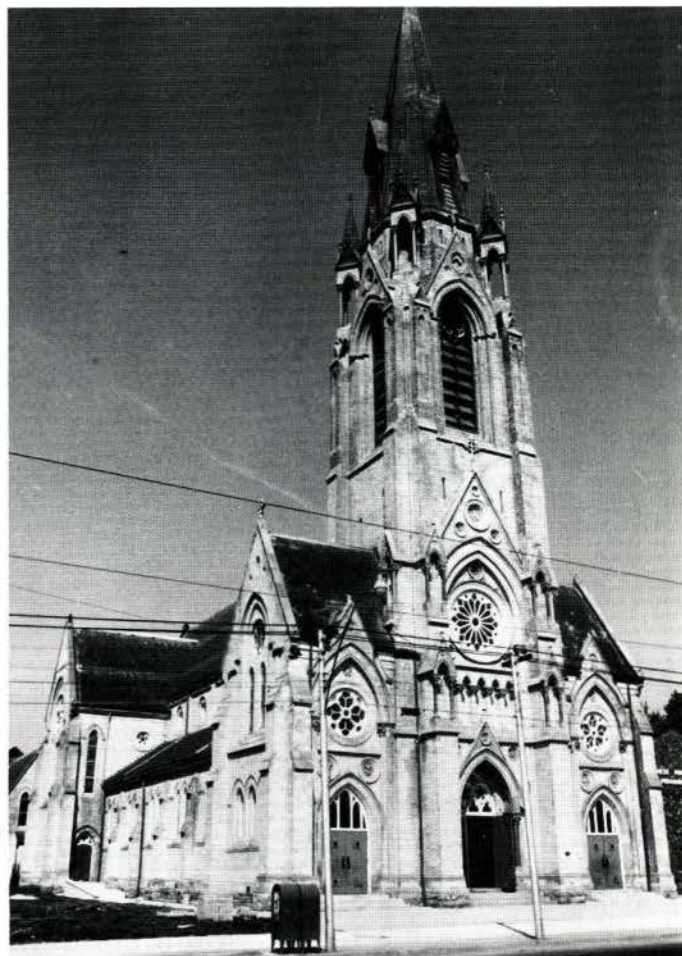
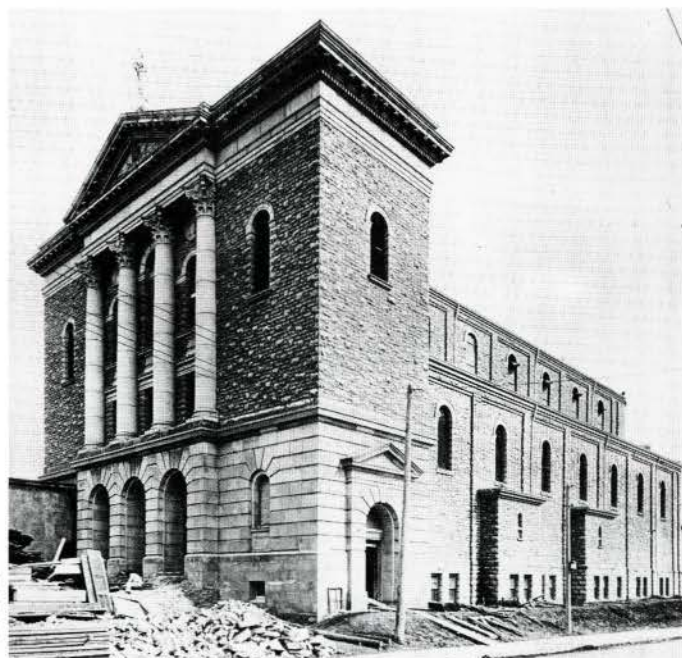


Figure 6. A. W. Holmes. St. Helen's, Brockton Sanctuary.



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Figure 5. J. Connolly. St. Mary's Church, Toronto, 1885-89.



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Figure 7. A. W. Holmes. St. Ann's Church, Toronto, 1912-14. General view as in 1914. Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto.



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Figure 9. A. W. Holmes. St. Ann's Toronto. Interior, looking east. After Construction, VIII (December 1915), 497.

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Figure 8. A. W. Holmes. Holy Name Church, Toronto, 1914-26.

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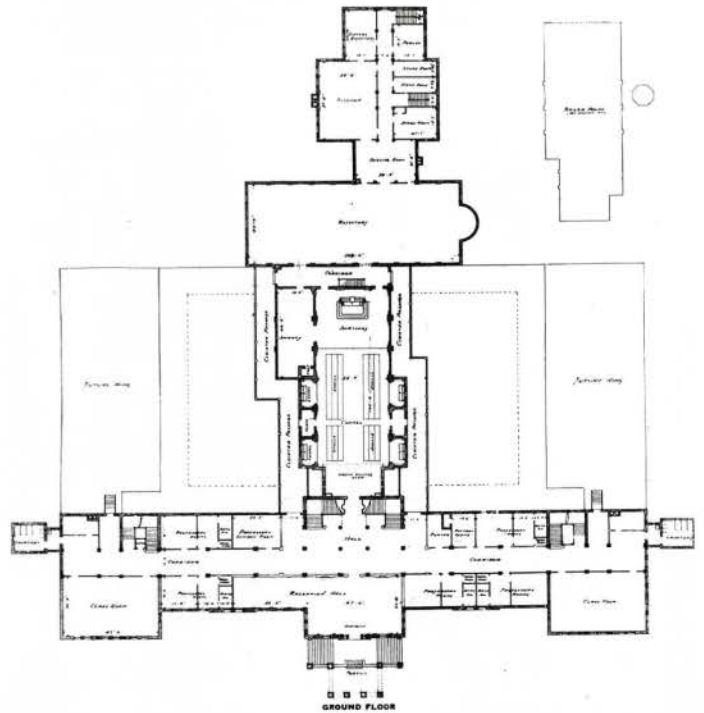
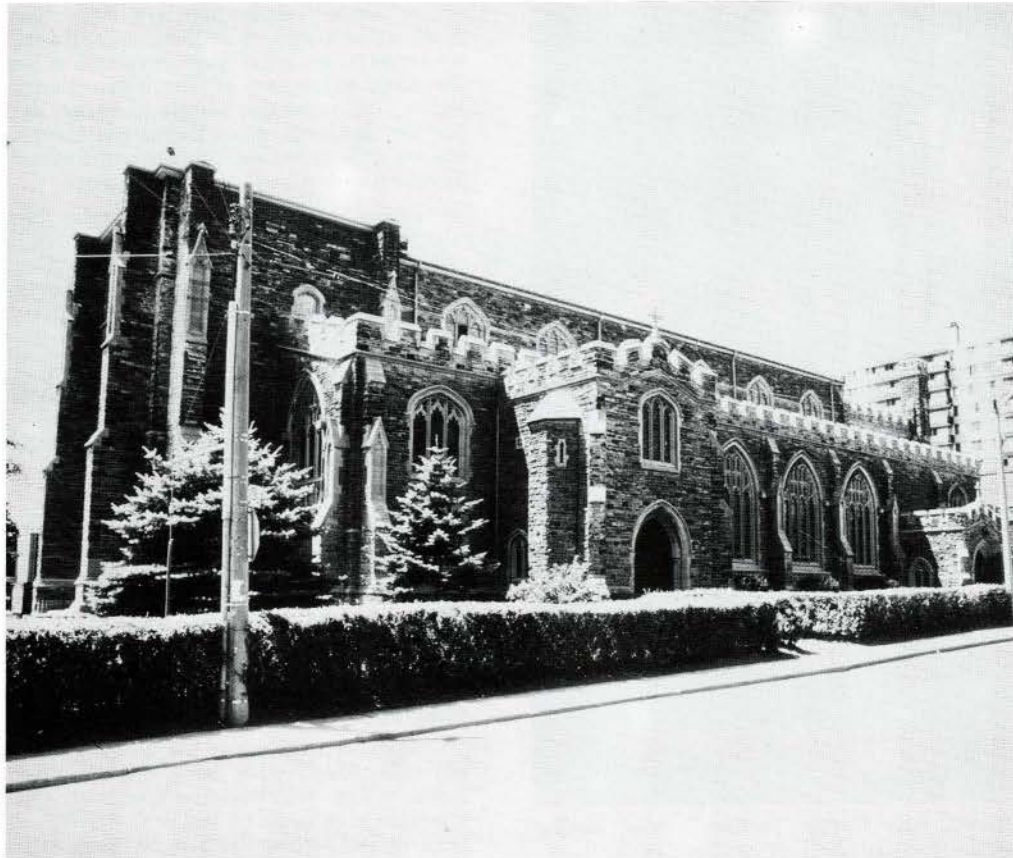


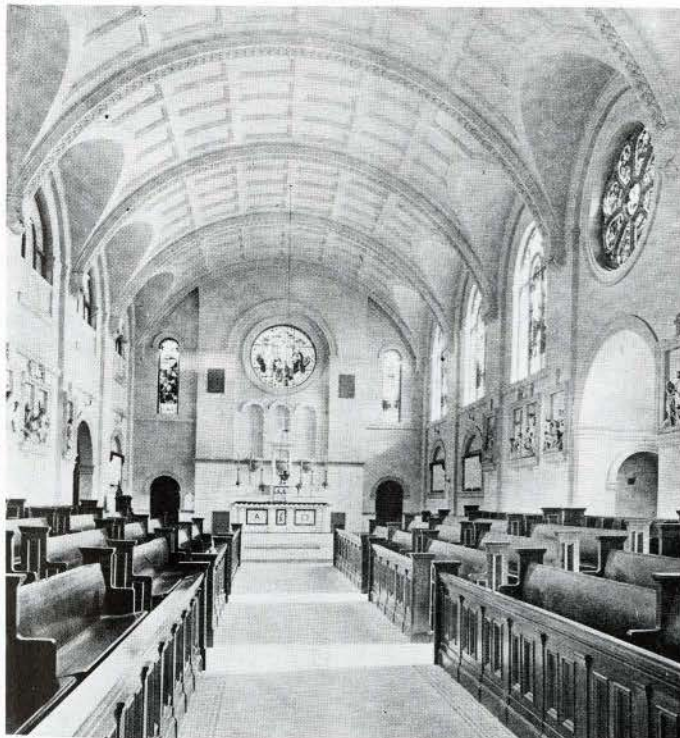
Figure 10. A. W. Holmes. St. Augustine's Seminary, Scarborough, Ontario, 1910-13. Main-floor plan. After Construction, VIII (December 1915), p. 486.





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Figure 13. A. W. Holmes. Holy Rosary Church, Toronto, 1925-27. View from the south.



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Figure 11. A. W. Holmes. St. Augustine's Seminary, Scarborough. Chapel interior, looking east. After Construction, VIII (December 1915), p. 484.

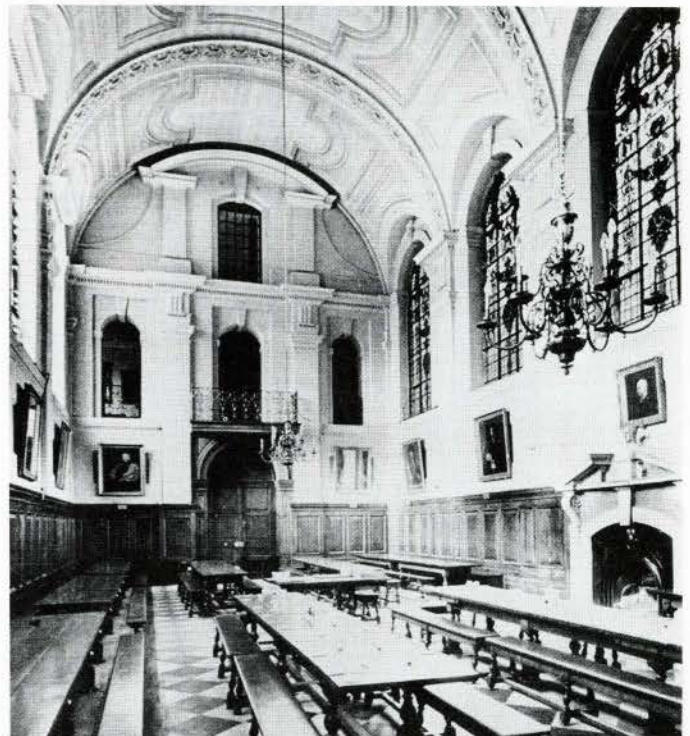


Figure 12. William Townesend. Hall of Queen's College, Oxford, begun 1714. After Kerry Downes, English Baroque Architecture, London, 1966, plate 535.





Author

Figure 14. A. W. Holmes. Holy Rosary, Toronto. Interior, looking east.



Author

Figure 15. Church of St. Mary, St. Neot's. Interior, looking east. After post-card view in possession of Holy Rosary parish, Toronto.

St. Ann's, however, merits a closer examination. The interior, as we would expect, is an aisled basilican hall and, like the facade, is inspired by the grand, stern classicism of Rome after Michelangelo, with some suggestions of Wren's Baroque London churches as well (Fig. 9). The high-rising altarpiece, treated as a ceremonial gateway over the tabernacle, with a cupola and trumpeting angels, carries further the style of the church facade and so participates in the overall decorative system, as do a pair of side-altars.

Holmes chose a related classicizing style for his largest commission for the Archdiocese, St. Augustine's Seminary, Scarborough, of 1910-13. The building is simple, forceful and austere: sitting on a knoll above the Scarborough Bluffs overlooking Lake Ontario, it is as splendidly isolated as the candidates for Roman Catholic priesthood, who would be trained there, were expected to be.

The functions to be accommodated by the Seminary were complex, since the programme was part ecclesiastical, part collegiate and part monastic. Probably only the classic formality and rational organization of space encouraged by Beaux-Arts design principles would have allowed these functions to be lucidly organized in an envelope of appropriately monumental

The Seminary plan is a simple 'T', the cross-bar along the front consisting of wings of offices and student rooms, punctuated with class-room pavilions, and the Seminary Chapel, set at right angles to the long front and forming the upright of the 'T' (Fig. 10). The Chapel, symbolic of the *raison d'être* of the institution, is, appropriately, the climax of the processional axis that leads the visitor or arriving student from the main entry. Beyond the Chapel, and neatly interlocked with it, is a further wing of dining, recreational and service areas, together with a small convent.

Again, Holmes based the design on Baroque sources, though this time chiefly in his native England. While the tall lantern-dome evokes Roman (and therefore specifically Catholic) models, the parti appears to be based on that of an English country-house: the centre-block of the Seminary is a highly simplified adaptation of the one by Vanbrugh for Castle Howard. Similarly, the Chapel is based on halls or chapels of Oxford colleges designed in the Baroque area, like the hall of Queen's College by Townesend (Fig. 11 and 12).

After World War I, however, Holmes' designs returned, for the most part, to the Gothic; not the time around to the free Victorian Gothic, but to the refined, decorative new-Gothic pioneered after 1900 by academic architects like Cram and Goodhue.

Holmes' largest church of the 1920s, Holy Rosary, Toronto, of 1925 - 27, was modelled faithfully—in fact, almost line-for-line—on a 15th century English parish church, St. Mary the Virgin at St. Neot's, Huntingdonshire (Fig. 13, 14 and 15). For Holy Rosary, Holmes lengthened the nave of his prototype slightly and reduced its liturgical limbs—a choir was hardly needed in a parish church in Toronto—but otherwise Holy Rosary is an accurate copy. Only the tower of St. Neot's church was not reproduced, for want of funds.

The interior of Holy Rosary is extremely handsome and likewise derivative, though the rood-beam, an unusual feature in a Canadian Catholic church, is not found in St. Neot's.

The self-conscious, dignified Englishness of Holy Rosary is known to have delighted Holmes, the former London Anglican. Certainly, too, it lent prestige to a parish, on the edge of exclusive Forest Hill Village, where Catholics, if anywhere in Toronto, had socially 'arrived'.

In the 1930s Holmes finished his career, as he had begun, with medievalizing collegiate design: for St. Michael's, the Catholic college associated with the University of Toronto (Fig. 16 and 17). Now, however, his Gothic was lean and roofed masses of medium height with pavilions and dormers, picturesquely arranged in court-yard groupings, were a return to the collegiate Gothic programme in which Holmes had been trained.

Thus, Holmes' career shows remarkable continuity: he was, indeed, a most traditional architect. Like many others of his generation—most in North America—he rejected out of hand the deliverate, anonymous 'International Modernism' being developed in



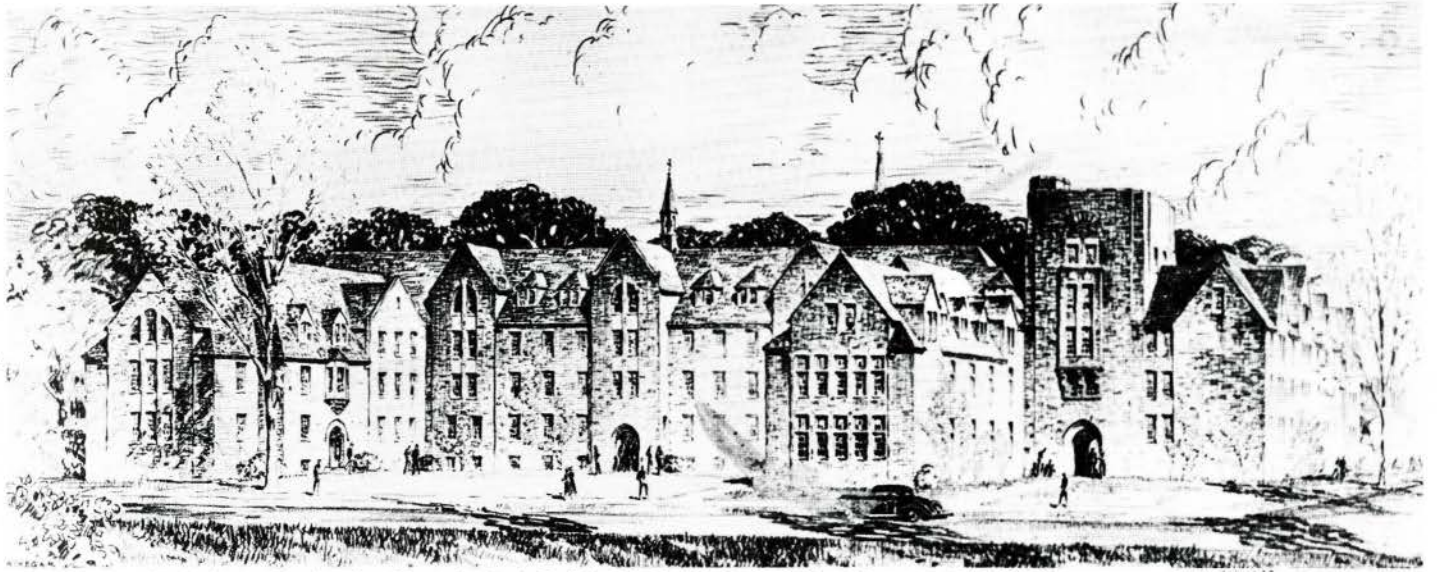


Figure 16. A. W. Holmes. Design for 'Queen's Park Buildings', St. Michael's College, Toronto, 1935-36.

Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, and sought, instead, to address modern needs in traditional styles—or in styles that alluded to the traditions. Work like his is, therefore, of particular interest to us now, as we re-examine the idea of the modern.

At the same time, Holmes' work expresses the basically conservative character of Toronto Catholics of his period, challenging the dominant Anglo-Scots Protestant culture on its own terms. On the other hand, the dogmatic, triumphal aspect of Roman Catholicism, especially

at the beginning of the century, is expressed in Holmes' allusions to the architecture of the Counter-Reformation. In fact, it is exactly that Roman Catholicism has presented these two faces to the rest of English Canada: on the one hand, an earnest—almost desperate—desire to please and succeed; on the other, a defensive, even arrogant tendency. Thus, Holmes' work, though generally unspectacular, captures the ambivalent essence of what it has meant to be Catholic in Toronto.

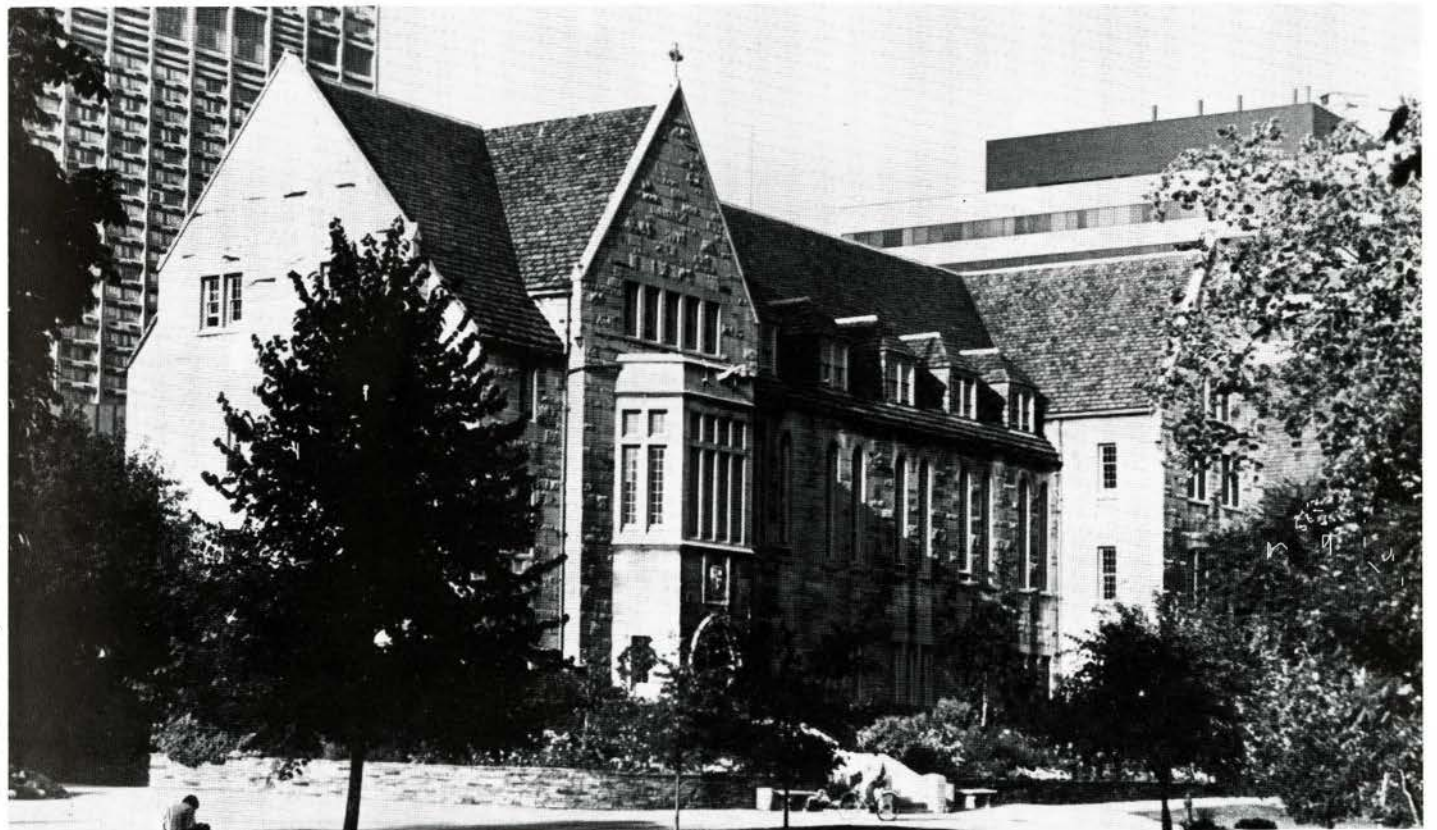


Figure 17. A. W. Holmes. Brennan Hall, St. Michael's College, Toronto, 1938-39. General view today.