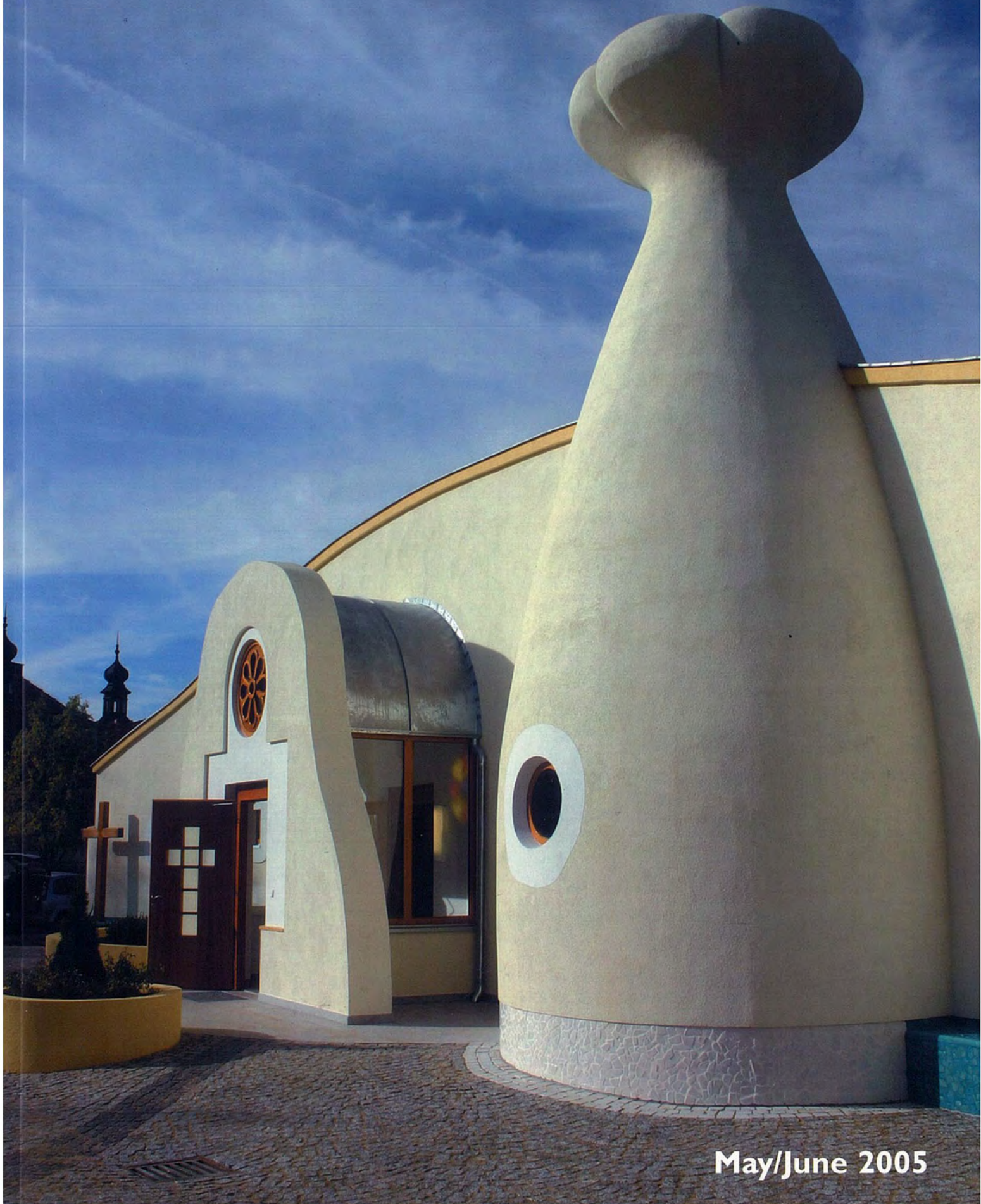


CHURCH BUILDING

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ST JOSEPH'S CHAPEL, LONDON ORATORY

unashamedly baroque, brompton upholds finest architectural and liturgical traditions



An array of statues add to the beauty and sumptuousness of the decor at London Oratory

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AT THE Mass for the blessing of the new St Joseph's Chapel at the London Oratory, the homily focused on Mary, sister of Martha, who poured expensive ointment over Christ's feet to the disapproval of Judas Iscariot. His complaint was that the cost of the ointment could have helped feed the poor, writes *MOYRA DOORLY*.

The act of adorning churches as an expression of human love for God has fallen out of favour recently, the homily pointed out. Today's emphasis is all on emptiness and the absence of imagery and decoration. Some claim that the new minimalism allows for a purer and simpler approach to worship and that the ornamentation of altars and church buildings is superfluous and unnecessary. Others, how-

ever, bemoan the barrenness of today's churches and claim that love for God should be demonstrated in as many ways as possible.

The beauty and sumptuous decoration of the London Oratory, like Mary's outpouring of love at the feet of Christ, is testament to an age-old impulse in Christianity which is still alive and well despite the iconoclasm of the current age. The design for St Joseph's Chapel, which had never been fully completed, gives expression to this impulse in a way that is consistent with the architectural and liturgical traditions the Fathers of the Oratory are committed to preserving.

Like the Oratory itself which was begun in 1880 to a design by Herbert Gribble and has

a simple cruciform interior with a dome over the crossing, St Joseph's Chapel – one of nine side chapels – is unashamedly and extravagantly baroque, the style of the Counter Reformation. The array of statues brought from Rome makes the Oratory an important if little appreciated London museum of Italian sculpture according to Simon Jenkins in *England's Thousand Best Churches*.

Funded by an anonymous benefactor, the new work consists of a screen of six Sienna marble Doric columns, each 5.7metres (19ft) tall, which curve around and behind the altar. The columns support a carved stone entablature on which stand two 17th century Italian Baroque angels which have been reposi-

tioned from elsewhere in the Oratory. The Doric order was chosen because of its supposed origins in wooden construction, making it particularly appropriate for a chapel dedicated to St Joseph, a carpenter. This choice was also made in order to comply with the architectural logic of the building as a whole, the Doric order of the altar screen being subordinate to the Ionic order of the rest of the chapel, which in turn is subordinate to the Corinthian order of the Oratory.

The colours of the columns and panels were chosen to complement existing marbles in the chapel and the apse is lined with curved panels which look just like red and black marble but which are, in fact, Scagliola, a man-made material used to simulate marble since the late 16th century. Scagliola can be found in many European churches of the Baroque period and is made from selenite, a variety of gypsum which is cooked, ground to a fine powder and then mixed with pigments of coloured earth and with animal glues to form a thick paste. The coloured paste is then applied to the design and after hardening is flattened with water and pumice stone before being polished, waxed and lacquered.

A notable feature of this project was everything was done in just nine months – from Listed Building application to completion on site!

This 21st century baroque chapel was blessed on March 19, 2005, the Feast of St Joseph.



A screen of six Sienna marble Doric columns curve around and behind the altar

PROJECT TEAM

Architect: Carden & Godfrey (Project architect
– Russell Taylor)

Client: The Provost and Community of the

London Oratory, Brompton Road, London

Main contractor: Cathedral Works
Organisation (Chichester) Ltd

Scagliola: Hayles & Howe Ltd