

Cryptic visions

Mary Russell
descended into the
icon chapel below
Glenstal Abbey

THE small, underground Russo-Byzantine chapel at Glenstal Abbey in Co Limerick glows darkly like a slow-burning fuse. It's a disturbing place to be in. Dark walls close in on you. A circle of stars, set in the dome of the ante-chamber, gleams, pale and weak, as if the energy is draining from it — as if, at any moment, its light will be extinguished.

In the main chamber, set into the domed ceiling, disembodied images of childhood nightmares — a claw, a malevolent eye, a twisted beak — seep into glass stained purple and blood-red. In every direction metal bars block the way, and you look back over your shoulder to check that the tall white gates behind you are still open. That your escape route back up into the bright light of the sun is still there.

Reassured — if reassurance was what you needed — you can then give your attention to the icons for it is from these that the mysterious gleam and throb of life has been coming.

A few years ago, the Glenstal monks engaged the services of architect Jeremy Williams and stained-glass artist James Scanlon who, drew up a plan to build a chapel for the icons which had been presented to the abbey by the Grattan Esmonde family in the 1940s.

In 1987, at the Orthodox Easter, to the sound of Slavonic chant sung by the monks, the completed chapel was dedicated and brought into use.

It is not the individual icons so much as their visual presentation that creates such an impact. Intent on maintaining their

spirituality as well as their eastern origins, the artist James Scanlon set out to recreate the shadowy atmosphere of a chapel lit by candles. Although there is not a candle in sight, the icons glow and are thrown into shadow by electric lights which give the effect of candlelight.

But despite the glow of old gold and dull silver, the feeling of unease persists. And this too is intentional for the whole chapel is a reminder of hell. Not some nebulous, distant place where bad angels go but the personal hell into which everyone, at some point in their lives, descends. To create this impression, the design team worked on the theme of imprisonment and torture — states which are mental as well as physical. The unfinished walls are broken up by green-blue metal structures that look like prison bars. The floor is bare concrete in which, here and there, slivers of metal gleam. They are the discarded tools of the Crucifixion torture — nails, spikes, whips. In the main chamber, there are four stained-glass discs of brilliant colour in which swirl a mad, demonic range of flame-reds, peacock blues, sea-greens — the

colours of a distracted mind. And, underfoot, the domed ceiling is reflected in the globe of the world, marked out in coloured concrete, because for many, hell is here on earth.

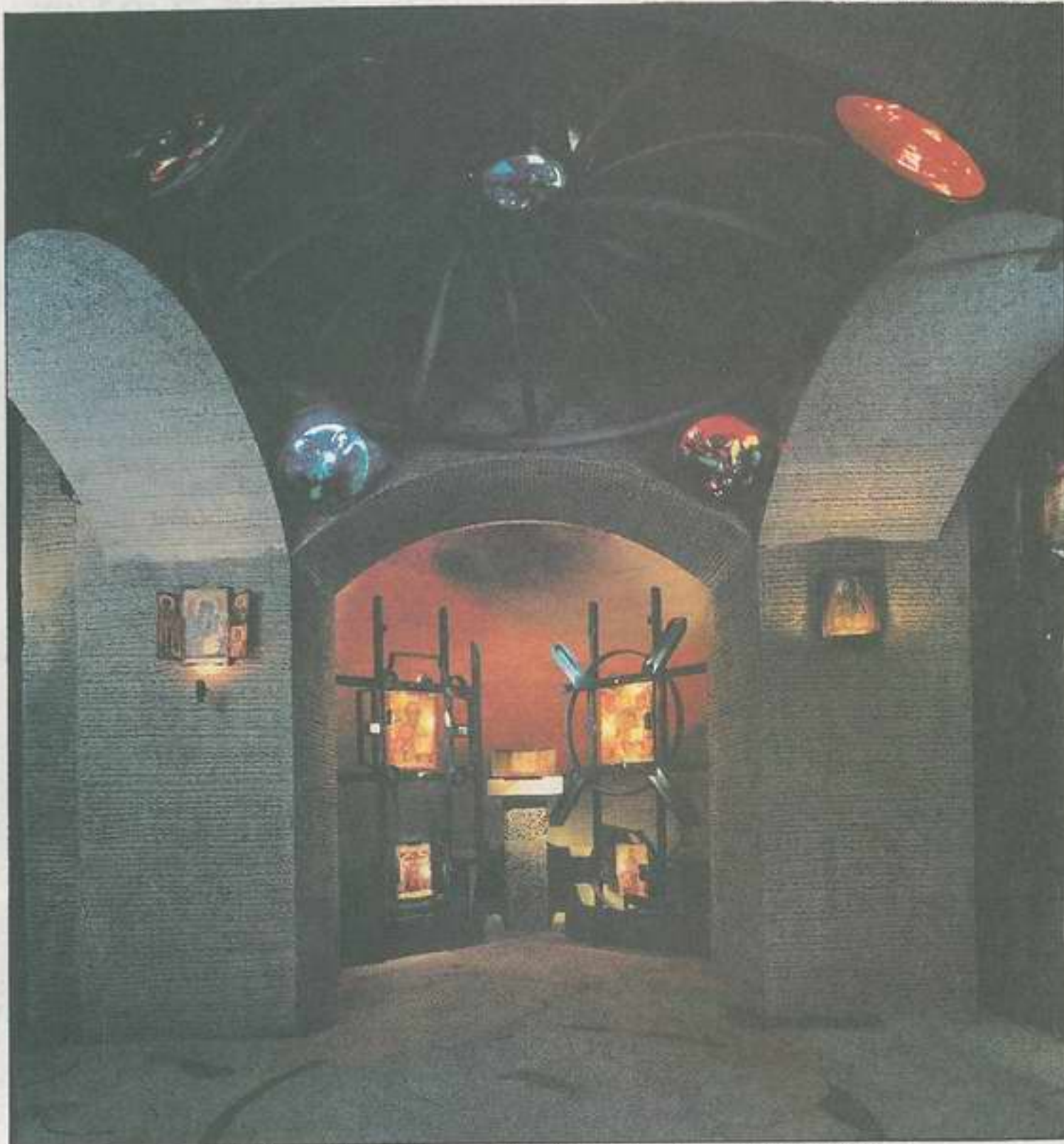
But there is life after hell, as some who have survived incarceration and torture will testify and the lay-out of the icon chapel reflects this as well. According to Russian Orthodox ritual, the sanctuary represents heaven and the nave earth. Here, the sanctuary is set apart from the nave by two heavy blue-grey metal doors on which hang some of the icons. At one point in the liturgy, the doors are opened and heaven is revealed, in all its glory, to those on earth.

The symbolism was not lost on Sheila Cassidy, who herself survived torture and imprisonment in Chile in 1975. In her book: "Good Friday People", just published, she describes how she went to spend a few days at Glenstal Abbey and while there, visited the icon chapel. Her eye was caught by the Resurrection icon known in English as The Harrowing of Hell: "I never really understood Holy Satur-

day," she wrote, "until I saw this icon." It showed Christ descended into hell, but triumphant, his feet trampling the instruments of his torture. To Sheila Cassidy Holy Saturday had always been a non-day, when, liturgically, nothing much happened. From this icon, she learned that it was the day when triumph was in the air, when those suffering in their private hell could begin to get the inkling that soon it would all be over, that soon they too would be the risen people. It is a powerful analogy to draw and she draws it firmly, underlining the reality of suffering, likening hell to the fate of those she knew — nuns mostly — who suffered and died in places like Chile and Nicaragua.

Brother Anthony, who, with Brother Patrick, was largely responsible for setting the icons in their rightful place, emphasises that they are not museum pieces but religious objects and should be perceived spiritually. There is little danger that they will be seen otherwise for the concept of the whole chapel is too powerful for that and it is the icons that transmit the message: After hell, there is light.

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL BLAKE



Light in the darkness: the icon chapel at Glenstal Abbey.