

Crystal Cathedral enters a new era as it transforms into Christ Cathedral



Architect Scott Johnson of Johnson Fain discusses the renovation of the former Crystal Cathedral to press and invited guests. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)



By **Anh Do**

SEPTEMBER 17, 2016, 7:55 AM

The Crystal Cathedral was for decades a powerful symbol of a certain kind of church.

The landmark church was built by the Rev. Robert H. Schuller, the famed pastor who brought the drive-in church to Orange County during the beginning of the postwar suburban boom and preached an upbeat, modern vision of Christianity.

The **Philip Johnson**-designed structure made of steel and more than 12,000 panes of glass became world famous and was a forerunner to other so-called mega churches.

But more than a year after Schuller's death, the Crystal Cathedral is undergoing a major transformation in both design and ownership.

The makeover will transform the building into Christ Cathedral as the Catholic Church takes it over.

Officials from the Diocese of Orange, the nation's 12th largest, gathered earlier this week to preview the changes, which they plan to unveil for the public at Sunday's celebration of the diocese's 40th anniversary, an event expected to draw nearly 10,000 of the Catholic faithful. The diocese bought the famed building in 2011.

During the preview, people can take a virtual tour and see a sanctuary splashed in white, highlighting an altar, the bishop's chair and baptismal font. With nearly 3,000 seats, the new space will allow for more people, with pews arranged in a radial pattern and featuring a circular shaped Blessed Sacrament Chapel, bearing a portrait of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

"The great cathedrals of Europe took generations to complete," said Bishop Kevin Vann, who promised the creation of "a beautiful and functional Catholic interior design."

"We do not have the time luxury of former cathedral builders. Our goal is to dedicate Christ Cathedral by 2019," added Vann, who started his job after the purchase of the church and its 34-acre campus. A driving force behind the design, he has sought ideas from priests, lay people and experts.

Estimated costs for the cathedral are about \$72 million, according to the Rev. Christopher Smith, rector and episcopal vicar of Christ Cathedral who is leading the design project.

Four years ago, officials launched the For Christ Forever campaign to help raise funds for refurbishing. They collected about \$39 million with an additional \$21 million expected to come in during the next two to five years, according to Cindy Bobruk, who heads the Orange Catholic Foundation.

She counts 24,000 families among contributors who gave \$25 to \$20 million, with the latter amount coming from an anonymous, non-Catholic donor. Priests from the diocese with 57 parishes and more than 1.3 million registered Catholics donated an average of \$8,000 each, Bobruk said.

"You begin with your dreams," said Smith. "Our goal was to fashion a cathedral that is beautiful, maintains the architectural integrity of the original Philip Johnson building and can serve the community's needs."

Scott Johnson of Johnson/Fain Associates, principal architect, has crafted an interior layout intended to merge liturgical requirements with "transcendent beauty." Virtual reality tours will be available to the public at this weekend's celebration. The iconic building, lauded for its exterior shell, will stay, officials said, but it is experiencing major repair and reconditioning. They hope the space will inspire contemplative and solemn prayer.

"This is the commission of a lifetime. This is a cathedral for the new millennium," Johnson added. "We're talking about a building that could last forever."

Many fans of Schuller's vision, and followers of great religious architecture, will be following the transformation.

“The Crystal Cathedral is not an attempt to be an architectural ego statement,” Schuller said in a 1997 interview with the American Academy of Achievement. “It’s probably the ultimate spiritual and psychological statement that could be made in architectural terms.”

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UPDATES:

7:55 a.m.: Updated with additional details and background information.

This article was originally published at 5 a.m.

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