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Take a virtual reality tour of Christ Cathedral's new sanctuary

By **DEEPA BHARATH** | dbharath@scng.com | Orange County Register
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GARDEN GROVE – Orange County's iconic glass cathedral is all set for its transformation into a flagship structure for the Roman Catholic Church, while retaining its architectural majesty, which continues to draw tourists to what used to be the Rev. Robert H. Schuller's Crystal Cathedral megachurch campus.

On Wednesday afternoon, officials with the Diocese of Orange gathered inside the sanctuary of Christ Cathedral, now barely a glass shell, to unveil the design of the new cathedral and set a timeline for the construction project – days before the diocese's 40th anniversary celebration.

The project will break ground in April and will likely be completed in October 2018, said Mark Dubeau, the diocese's chief financial officer. He said it could take several additional months to install the Hazel Wright organ, which was refurbished in Italy, shipped back to Orange County and now rests in an Irvine storage facility. That means the cathedral may not be ready until 2019.

“This is a mostly funded plan,” Dubeau said, referring to the \$60 million raised by the Orange Catholic Foundation through an unprecedented fundraising campaign over the past four years.

The cathedral is expected to cost about \$72 million – down from an estimated \$108 million – when completed. That is a feat accomplished through significant scaling down, said the Rev. Christopher Smith, rector and episcopal vicar of Christ Cathedral, who is overseeing the project.

“You begin with your dreams,” he said. “But now we have a project that is financially sound. 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.”

During the unveiling event, attendees got to experience what the renovated cathedral might look like by wearing virtual reality goggles for [a three-dimensional video](#).

The video took viewers through sweeping views of the cathedral’s sanctuary bathed in white, the predominant color – from the lighted altar in the center of the church and the bishop’s chair to the baptismal font and the Blessed Sacrament Chapel bearing the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which will be wrapped in glass and stainless steel.

Those who attend the 40th anniversary celebration Sunday at the Christ Cathedral campus will be able to get this glimpse of the new cathedral design, diocesan officials said.

The seats in the new sanctuary will “radiate like the spokes of a wheel,” ensuring that all in the sanctuary get a clear view of the altar, said lead architect Scott Johnson. Interestingly, Johnson, 35 years ago, was a young apprentice in the New York City office of Philip Johnson, the architect who designed the original Crystal Cathedral.

“I was there listening to him go over the speech he would give at the inauguration of Dr. Schuller’s cathedral,” Scott Johnson said. “And here I am today.”

The floors and walls will be made with limestone with walnut panels, and the gold-leaf altar will be adorned with travertine and Italian marble, he said.

Santa Ana resident Matt Shannon said he was impressed with what he saw of the design through his virtual reality goggles.

“This is one of Orange County’s most architecturally significant buildings,” he said. “It’s great that the diocese is doing a respectful redesign by maintaining the integrity of what was the Crystal Cathedral.”

The building is appealing because it places more emphasis on people, said Sister Kit Gray, who oversees community building efforts at the Christ Cathedral campus.

“To me, it seems like a design that puts people first,” she said. “It draws us around the altar, which represents Christ and the faith. That’s what the church is about – building community.”

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Deepa Bharath covers religion for The Orange County Register and the Southern California Newspaper Group. Her work is focused on how religion, race and ethnicity shape our understanding of what it is to be American and how religion in particular helps influence public policies, laws and a region's culture. Deepa also writes about race, cultures and social justice issues. She has covered a number of other beats ranging from city government to breaking news for the Register since May 2006. She has received fellowships from the International Women's Media Foundation and the International Center for Journalists to report stories about reconciliation, counter-extremism and peace-building efforts around the world. When she is not working, she loves listening to Indian classical music and traveling with her husband and son.



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