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Christ Cathedral acquires its first Holy Relic — the bone of a Vietnamese saint

Still under renovation, the church also just received its 14,000-pound altar



Bishop Kevin Vann gently re-wraps the Holy Relic given to the Diocese of Orange by Cardinal Nguyen Van Nhon of Hanoi during a gathering at Christ Cathedral in Garden Grove on Wednesday, December 5, 2018. The relic is part of the remains of

St. Andrew Dung-Lac, a 19th Century Vietnamese Catholic priest killed for his beliefs and will be buried under the altar of Christ Cathedral. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **SUSAN CHRISTIAN GOULDING** | sgoulding@scng.com | Orange County Register

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Catholicism is steeped in ritual and spirituality. And Christ Cathedral, as it continues its transition into a center of worship for Orange County's 1.3 million Catholics, offers a step-by-step lesson in those age-old traditions.

Case in point: Last week, the new seat of the Orange County Diocese received the first of several Holy Relics that will be interred at the base of its altar.

For Catholics, Holy Relics are the remains of religious figures canonized as saints. Bones, blood and clothing are counted among the sacred remnants.

In a casual gathering around a conference table last week, Bishop Kevin Vann opened the box containing the Holy Relic to reveal a bone from the hand of Andrew Dung-Lac – a Vietnamese priest beheaded in 1839 for his faith. It was the first time either he or the relic's courier, UC Irvine chaplain John Francis Vu, would lay eyes on the treasure.

Marveling at its size, Vann noted that the bone is exceptionally large for a relic. A limited resource, bone fragments donated to churches tend to be tiny, he said.

"This is such a generous gift," Vann said. "It represents the strong bond between the Catholics in Vietnam and Orange County."

Almost 200,000 Vietnamese people live in Orange County – the largest population outside of Vietnam.

As his last official act before retiring in November, Cardinal Nguyen Van Nhon bequeathed the relic to Vu in Hanoi – the sister diocese of Orange County's. Vu chuckled about the rather unsettling experience of flying back home with a human bone in his carry-on bag.

"I was nervous going through airport security," he said. "Would they think I'm a criminal?" Playfully crossing himself for effect, Vu recalled praying, "St. Andrew, you gotta help me."

A second relic, this one from South Korea, will be delivered early next week. Christ Cathedral also will acquire relics from Father Junípero Serra and three North American saints. Officials are in negotiations to secure a relic of a Mexican saint, as well.

"The relics are a reflection of Orange County's multicultural population," Vann said.

They will be interred in ornate containers called reliquaries. The bronze boxes, embellished with semiprecious stones, will be on display at the altar.

Crafted in Italy from Turkish marble, the 14,000-pound altar arrived by ship a week before the first relic came by plane. The \$900,000 altar was donated by the priests of the Diocese of Orange.

"It's one thing to see the altar as an artist's rendering, and quite another to see the final product," said Christ Cathedral spokesman Hank Evers. "It takes your breath away."

Built four decades ago as the Crystal Cathedral, the glass landmark on Chapman Avenue has been undergoing its transformation into Christ Cathedral. The entire \$72.3 million remodel is scheduled for completion in time for the cathedral's dedication on July 17, 2019.

The Diocese purchased the famous Garden Grove building and its 34-acre campus for \$57.5 million in 2012, two years after the Rev. Robert H. Schuller's Crystal Cathedral Ministries filed for bankruptcy.

[Converting a Protestant church to a Roman Catholic cathedral](#) involves adding such elements as a "Bishop's Door." Two 20-foot-tall bronze doors will replace the Crystal Cathedral's glass doors.

Catholic cathedrals also feature baldachins, centerpieces designed to draw attention to the altar. At Christ Cathedral, a metallic baldachin will hover 30 feet above the altar.

Another common sight is a large cross called a Crux Gemmata. Made of steel, Christ Cathedral's crucifix weighs 1,000 pounds.

One of the most welcome changes to the oft sweltering Crystal Cathedral will be air conditioning. Christ Cathedral even boasts [meticulously positioned shades on its 12,000 window panes.](#)

Ironically, cooling systems hold no tradition at all.

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Susan Christian Goulding

After majoring in journalism at the University of Texas, Susan Christian Goulding got her start as a copy editor and reporter at the (late, great) Los Angeles Herald Examiner. She then worked at the (late, great) Santa Monica Outlook and the Daily Breeze as a features editor, writer and columnist. She moved to the Orange County bureau of the Los Angeles Times as a features and business writer. After that five-year stint, she worked as a correspondent for People magazine and a regular freelancer for Readers Digest while raising her two kids, Erin and Matt. During this time, she also wrote a weekly column for the Daily Breeze. Next, she gave up all possibility of free time and earned a teaching credential and masters at UCI. She taught English for four often rewarding and always challenging years in Compton, then at LMU and El Camino College. Missing journalism, Goulding circled back to her original career last year, joining the Orange County Register as a reporter. She also enjoys her return to column writing for the newspaper's OC Home magazine.

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