

# The Crystal Cathedral was a monument to televangelism. It's about to become a Catholic church.

---

By Mary Louise Schumacher

July 17

What happens when an icon of feel-good theology and California kitsch gets born again as a Catholic church?

For years, Christians, Southern Californians and design devotees alike have anticipated the resurrection of the Crystal Cathedral, the Orange County church designed by modernist architect Philip Johnson. It was the home of televangelist Robert Schuller and his “Hour of Power” TV program, watched in its heyday by tens of millions, in 156 countries.

Touted as the largest glass building in the world when it opened in 1980, the megachurch was purchased by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange in 2012, thanks to a messy bankruptcy. The diocese renamed it Christ Cathedral and, in fact, acquired the whole architecturally significant campus, including buildings by Richard Neutra and Richard Meier.

It's not every day that the Roman Catholic Church occupies a New Age monument, and the unorthodox pairing provokes certain questions. Could the glitzy building, countercultural in its way, be a fitting home for a faith rooted in tradition? Is Schuller's house of “Possibility Thinking” an apt home for the Sorrowful Mysteries? (The former is the name the late televangelist gave for his affirming

worldview, and the latter is a group of Catholic meditations on suffering.)

“It does feel like a weird marriage,” says Alexandra Lange, an architecture critic for Curbed.

There’s something “New Age-y” and “kitschy and cheery” about the cathedral that seems at odds with the “formality and sternness” associated with many Catholic buildings, says Dallas Morning News architecture critic Mark Lamster, who wrote a biography of Johnson.

“The idea was this open, bright, optimistic message that corresponded to the sunny values of California Americanism,” Lamster says of Johnson’s building. “The building very much meets that philosophy.”

It’s noteworthy that this takeover is happening in the West, an increasingly important center of influence for a Catholic Church that is transforming. Many of Southern California’s Catholic parishes are growing and multicultural, a contrast to the aging, white community that Schuller’s church represented. The diocese of Orange is itself home to 1.3 million Catholics.

Cost savings may have been a motivating factor for the purchase. As cathedrals go, the diocese picked it up for a song, just \$57.5 million. Some see the deal as an act of architectural preservation, if not devotion.

“We’re giving it a life as a worship space and also trying to continue some of the traditions that were here, like the great music that used to be on this campus,” said David Ball, Christ Cathedral’s organist

and assistant director of music.

“It feels very California” to recycle a used cathedral and make something new out of it, says Heather Adams, a freelance religion writer in Los Angeles, who covered the renovation for Religion News Service. The Catholic Church doesn’t generally buy hand-me-down churches, she said in an interview.

The late Schuller called his dream church “a shopping center for God.” He preached a message of plugging into Jesus — guilt free — and attracted a huge flock of believers. Some came in their cars, pulled up outside drive-in theater-style. It was a spread in Vogue that drew Schuller to Johnson, according to Lamster’s biography.

Now, after years of anticipation and \$77 million in renovations, the Catholics will get to test drive Schuller’s telegenic cathedral. The faithful have been invited to celebrate a [Solemn Mass of Dedication](#) at the Garden Grove church on Wednesday at 10:30 a.m. Pacific time. The inaugural Mass will be live-streamed via the diocese’s site. Later on Wednesday, the cathedral will be open to the public, from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. After that, Masses will be celebrated regularly on Saturdays and Sundays, and the church is expected to be open for public daily tours beginning in February 2020, the diocese says.

The soaring, sunshine-drenched spaces that many Americans will remember from their TV screens will look quite different. While the diocese has reconditioned the mirror-like exterior of Johnson’s structure, it has made plenty of changes inside.

“For people who saw it before, you’re going to notice some major things,” says Adams.

One of the most significant is the architectural equivalent of a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses, an elaborate, \$6 million sunshade.

Thousands of quatrefoils, or triangular, sail-like window shades, will reduce glare and heat and improve the acoustics.

“It lets the sunlight in in really beautiful ways and sort of filters the sun as the day goes on,” says Ball of the effect of the quatrefoils.

“And at night it does sparkle. . . . It’s like a box of lights.” Ball gets the cathedral to himself sometimes, including at night, to rehearse.

He calls the retrofitted interior “serene” and believes the attention-getting architecture may inspire the congregation to connect with its contemporary side. Wednesday’s dedication program, for instance, will showcase contemporary music, commissioned for the occasion and the space, though inspired by ancient music, he adds.

Other changes to the church were needed to accommodate the Mass itself. A marble altar — the site where Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is made present, according to Catholic teaching — was given a place of prominence, for instance. Bishop Kevin W. Vann went to Italy to pick out the white and blue-gray Carrara marble for the altar and baptismal font, according to the diocese.

A crucifix typical of Medieval art, weighing 1,000 pounds, has been installed high above the altar, according to the diocese. It was made of blackened steel in Nebraska.

When plans for the interior were first unveiled, Christopher Hawthorne, former architecture critic for the Los Angeles Times, wondered if the Catholics could embrace the kind of “trippy futurism” that Johnson and Schuller espoused. The plans, which he experienced via a virtual reality headset, appeared “heavy, earthbound and handsome to a fault,” he wrote then.

“It is a design more suggestive of the offices of a high-end law firm than the kinds of early experiments in postmodernism — including the AT&T tower on Madison Avenue in Manhattan, with its pediment famously copied from a Chippendale chest of drawers — that Johnson was beginning to pursue when he met Schuller,” wrote Hawthorne, who is now the chief design officer for the City of Los Angeles.

Lange visited the cathedral when it was still under construction and has not been inside the new spaces yet. From a distance, the changes appear to be sensitive and elegant, she says. However, “on a purely aesthetic level, I think it’s better as a piece of architecture the less figurative objects that are there, because then you see [the building] as a kind of wild, giant, minimalist, mirrored object.”

While Schuller was masterful at playing to a global TV audience, including the curious and unchurched, the diocese is still figuring out how to evangelize in the Internet age. It has been sharing peeks of the church on social media, including a photograph of clergy striding in their robes in front of the gleaming buildings. Ball suggests keeping an eye on Facebook Live to see more events at the cathedral, which is still very much a broadcast studio, he says.

A historic photo of Schuller shaking hands with Pope John Paul II

was posted to Instagram by the diocese, too, pointing to an interesting bit of history: Schuller asked the pope to bless the architectural renderings before the first dedication, a generation ago.

An Instagram feed was launched recently for the cathedral itself. Its number of posts and followers remain modest. One post about preparations for Wednesday's dedication features a shot of a bright orange bucket that reads, simply, "Let's Do This."

*Mary Louise Schumacher is an independent journalist based in Milwaukee. She was the longtime art and architecture critic for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel until February.*

The Washington Post

**Others cover stories. We uncover them.**

**Limited time offer:** Get unlimited digital access for less than \$1/week.

Try 1 month for \$1

Send me this offer

Already a subscriber? **Sign in**