

RELIGION

Crystal Cathedral, the original evangelical megachurch, has a conversion to Catholicism

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On Wednesday, the former Crystal Cathedral, a Southern California landmark that has long stood at the intersection of kitsch and postmodernism just three miles from Disneyland, was officially rededicated by the most unlikely of saviors: the Catholic Church.

When the soaring Philip Johnson-designed megachurch opened in 1980, the Crystal Cathedral was, strictly speaking, neither crystal (the structure is composed of more than 10,000 rectangular panels of glass) nor a cathedral (it housed a televangelist, not a Catholic bishop).

That televangelist — late pastor Robert Schuller — once called the compound a “22-acre shopping center for God.”

Though born on an Iowa farm, Schuller was a California clergyman through and through, with an early understanding of the importance of television and off-street parishioner parking for the purposes of ecclesiastical growth.

Dispatched west to the burgeoning suburbs of Orange County with orders to build a new congregation from scratch in 1955, Schuller met his parishioners where they were — in their parked Chevys, Fords and Pontiacs. He preached from atop the tar papered roof of the snack bar at a rented drive-in movie theater. The fledgling church advertised with the slogan “Come as you are, pray in the family car.”



In June 1957, the Rev. Robert Schuller held his Garden Grove Community Church service at the Orange Drive-In. The church had no permanent building and rented the drive-in each Sunday. (Los Angeles Times)

Orange County still had orange groves in 1955, but the suburbs of postwar Southern California were fruitful and multiplied. And Schuller's success exploded with them.

Television was a natural fit for a pastor fluent in spectacle and the mythology of self, and in 1970, Schuller took his sermons wide with his "Hour of Power" show. By the 1980s, it was the most-watched weekly religious program in living rooms across America.

Forget fire and brimstone, this was a gospel of optimism — or "possibility thinking" — that could later be repackaged into bestselling books. At the peak of his reach, Schuller would preach weekly to as many as 20 million viewers in nearly 180 countries.

Schuller was undoubtedly a visionary and an empire builder, but his ascent was also perfectly timed to coincide with larger societal shifts for Californians in the latter half of the 20th century.

He began his car culture-centric drive-in sermons in the fledgling Southern California suburbs during the same year Disneyland opened its doors and Ray Kroc launched his first McDonald's restaurant. The Crystal Cathedral building was completed in 1980, the year Rick Warren started Saddleback Church in southern Orange County. There are now more megachurches in California than in any other state, with the majority of those congregations lodged in the suburbs between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Schuller retired in 2006, and his ministry, like many things near and far from God, ended in all of the usual ways. There was the overly aggressive expansion, the aging congregation, a botched line of succession and all of the money owed to creditors. Crystal Cathedral Ministries filed for bankruptcy in 2010. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange bought the property, which also includes structures designed by Richard Neutra and Richard Meier, two years later.

Schuller died in 2015 at age 88. But his grand creation, now renamed Christ Cathedral, seems to still have an uncanny ability to reflect the changing tides of Southern California. After a two-year, \$72.3-million renovation, the cathedral was officially dedicated as the new seat of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange at a ceremony attended by thousands Wednesday. The interior looks quite different from the backdrop Americans once saw on their television screens. But Orange County itself looks radically different from the image of affluent homogeneity that long dominated public consciousness.

The county has been majority minority for more than a decade, with large immigrant populations from heavily Catholic countries. That same demographic shift has helped fuel the growth of the diocese, which broke off from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 1976. The Diocese of Orange is now home to 1.3 million Catholics, making it the 10th largest in the country.

Starting this weekend, the Christ Cathedral Parish will celebrate Mass in four languages every Sunday: English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Mandarin.

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