

# Catholic Crystal Cathedral: Great deal or odd choice?

by [David Gibson](#) in the [January 25, 2012](#) issue

Even by the depressed metrics of Southern California's real estate market, the Catholic Diocese of Orange negotiated a sweet deal when it purchased the iconic Crystal Cathedral, the longtime pulpit of Robert H. Schuller and the backdrop to his popular *Hour of Power* television broadcasts.

Not only did Catholics get a national landmark designed by renowned architect Philip Johnson, but Bishop Tod D. Brown wasn't even the highest bidder: Schuller and the board of the "possibility thinking" megachurch opted to take Brown's \$57.5 million offer over a \$59 million pitch from Chapman University because the bishop promised to keep the campus as a place of worship.

"A true miracle!" exulted the diocese's top lawyer, Tim Busch, when the unexpected deal was announced. But divine intervention—or at least "an exceptionally gifted architect," as one anxious churchman put it—will now be needed to transform the television-friendly showcase into a Catholic sanctuary.

That won't be an easy task, given the disparity between traditional Catholic worship requirements and modern Protestant sensibilities. The challenge of redesigning the Crystal Cathedral's interior was central to the cost-benefit analysis that was driving the Orange Diocese's calculations throughout the process, according to church officials familiar with the deal.

Bishop Brown was initially cool to the idea of buying the Crystal Cathedral, which was \$50 million in debt when it filed for bankruptcy months ago. Brown, who wanted to leave a new cathedral as part of his legacy, was only gradually won over by aides and business advisers.

Some of the bishop's hesitation stemmed from the fact that while the 2,800-seat Crystal Cathedral was a relative bargain, the diocese does not have much cash on hand. The diocese will need to launch a major fund-raising effort that could total

\$100 million. The effort would entail the sale of other property in order to cover the \$57.5 million price tag, as well as several million more that will be needed for renovations and hefty maintenance costs.

But the opportunity was too good to ignore. For one thing, the Crystal Cathedral's price tag was a lot less than the cost of building a new cathedral from the ground up.

The Diocese of Orange—now the tenth largest in the nation, with 1.2 million Catholic souls—was facing construction costs approaching \$200 million on a lot half the size of the Crystal Cathedral's 31-acre campus.

Though some may wince at the assertive modernism of the Crystal Cathedral's glass design, the reality is that any new cathedral would likely have followed a similar style—as is the case with Oakland's glass-and-steel Cathedral of Christ the Light, which was dedicated in 2008.

Lingering concerns over the cost and size of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles—nicknamed the "Taj Mahony" after retired Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony—also played into the decision to make the Crystal Cathedral deal work.

"This was a no-brainer from a business perspective," said a churchman familiar with the purchase, who declined to be named as negotiations continued. Rome, which is attempting to discourage new cathedrals that lack the traditional look of cathedrals, gave its approval two weeks after Bishop Brown had won the bidding war.

Now comes the task of transforming the Crystal Cathedral from a theaterlike atrium complete with Sony Jumbotron screens into a Catholic cathedral where priests will celebrate mass with incense and reverence.

Brown said he has "no intention to change the exterior" of the famous building, but he also conceded that "critical design upgrades" were required inside to make it "suitable for a Catholic place of worship."

One local priest who supports the purchase of the Crystal Cathedral said he is hoping for the best but preparing for the worst: "This could be a liturgical home run," he said, "or a complete disaster." —RNS