



The New Cathedral of Oakland, California How Does It Pray?

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Abstract

After an earthquake destroyed the Cathedral of Oakland, California (pop. 450,000) in 1989, it was decided to erect a new one on a different site. After much planning a new, quite striking building was constructed, but one that was to be the centre of a complex of building hosting other church ministries. The building and plan has been much admired by architects, liturgists and theologians. This short article explores how well this building complex will help parishioners to pray and serve needs of the local church.

Keywords

Church architecture, Cathedrals, Architecture and prayer, Prayer, Oakland, California

What is the place of a new cathedral in a modern city? The question takes us to the city of Oakland in California that lies across the Bay from San Francisco. Oakland lost its cathedral as the result of a major earthquake in 1989 when it had to be closed and eventually demolished with its site put to other uses. This is not about a question, therefore, of remodelling or refurbishing an existing church, but about a new building built from scratch and on an entirely new site. What place could such a new cathedral have in a modern city? It could not make the impact medieval cathedrals once did as the tallest, largest and richest buildings in town. Nowadays a church will be overshadowed in size by larger and taller city office buildings. Nonetheless, a cathedral will have to be a large and expensive structure to make its statement felt. After the earthquake in 1989 some local parish churches substituted in place of a cathedral, but in 2005 it was decided to build a new one, which was completed and dedicated in September, 2008. It is large building and was very expensive, often expense was what preoccupied comment rather than how it would be as a place to pray.



Oakland, California is a city of about 450,000 people on the west shore of San Francisco Bay, directly across from more fashionable San Francisco. Oakland has had a long history as being a second city, over-shadowed by its cross-Bay neighbor. It is a working class place dotted with many pockets of poverty and wealth. It has had its share of poets and authors whose writings usually slant toward the Left. Labor relations, industrial action are a part of a long history. Oakland is as multicultural a town as any in America where everyone belongs to a minority. People generally get along remarkably well, but don't forget its violent side. *Hell's Angels* and the *Black Panther Party* came from here.

The cathedral comfortably holds about 1,350. It is oval in shape, not cross shaped as is traditional with northern European cathedrals. It has a very high vault –12 stories high. Running the length of the nave on each side and into the apse are walls, about 12 feet high, that lean slightly outward to be met by a stepped series of horizontal louver beams parallel to the walls and to the ground that lean inward. There are perhaps 35 of these red oak louvers funnelling upward to a flat oval ceiling which is shaped as the outline of a fish, the ancient Christian symbol. The lower walls are grey cement (they may be covered with marble some day), but are quite plain now except for eye level stations of the Cross attached to them and the traditional 12 candle fixtures that represent the 12 apostles. The lower walls

are penetrated by a series of openings leading to substantial alcoves that can serve as chapels of the saints or for other devotions. Viewed from the nave they do not attract much notice, but inside they have place for statues, mosaics or paintings illustrating the subject of that particular alcove. They are large enough to accommodate private Mass, but I do not think that use is being contemplated now.

Outside the main entrance doors there is a large open meeting area, but only a somewhat skimpy narthex inside. Two very high latticed screens that can be drawn to close off the nave from main entrance and this forms the narthex area although the screens seem to be kept open most of the time. Just inside the narthex are two Reconciliation rooms (Confessionals), open and airy, not yet quite as soundproof as they might be. In the nave itself, as we have noted, the hardwood Red Oak louvers run the whole length of the space, each louver about a foot above the other forming a latticed wall admitting a filtered light. Beyond that wall is the outer wall of the cathedral which is made up of panels of translucent glass that allows light to filter into the nave through the many lattices –hence the church is well named as the *Cathedral of Christ the Light* for it is natural light and not artificial light that sets its daily mood. Daylight flowing into the Cathedral from outside darkens the nave during rainy winter days and makes it light and airy on Oakland's sunny days during spring and summer. Weather itself is designed to help set the mood for prayer. The view for passers-by on the street outside is less pleasing, however. The ring of slanting panes of glass are opaque causing some critics to say it resembles an inverted pail.

The arrangement of pews, also of Red Oak, is conventional with a centre aisle leading down the nave and two smaller side aisles, but the pews themselves are not conventional since they curve to match the oval shape of the building. The clergy, the choir and other religious are separated from the congregation in the pews. About 200 can be seated in the sanctuary on the spare wooden chairs provided, divided into three sections – one for the choir, one for priests and deacons and, of course, a substantial throne made of granite for the bishop. The total feeling of the main space of the cathedral is spare, unemotional and to my mind somewhat Cistercian, but not at all unpleasant.

A celebrated feature of this building, one frequently commented on, is the *omega* window which forms the back wall of the church. The inner wall behind the sanctuary area is dominated from ceiling almost to the lower cement walls by a translucent screen. This screen, 60 feet high, is pierced by many thousands of small pin-points each one transmitting a small point of light so that you can see or *discern* (a word carefully chosen here) the image of Christ that appears on the screen, an image which is permanently imprinted on the screen. The image imprinted is a copy of the famous carving of Christ taken

from the front portal of the great Cathedral at Chartres. This medieval image of Christ in majesty will mediate the pious response of those praying in the nave. Many viewers will recognise the provenance of the image and its historic importance at once, but others will not. The image is designed to be permanent. How successful it will be in promoting prayer only time will tell.

At the opposite end of the church over the entrance is another translucent screen (the *alpha* window) representing an opening flower. This screen allows light to enter the building following the rising and the setting of the sun. Just inside the entrance is a large Baptismal font (c. 8 feet across) which also serves as a “vast holy water font” to bless yourself as you enter the church. The water from this font constantly flows down into the crypt area one story below where it is caught and recycled to continually fill the baptismal pool again. At the dedication a bucket of water from each parish was poured into the font to signify the unity of local churches to the diocese. A large *square* altar block, large enough for many concelebrants to gather on its four sides, is placed in the centre of the sanctuary area. This altar stands on a raised *circular* platform that has room enough to accommodate the concelebrants standing around the altar along with servers, censor bearers and any other persons who need to be there. There are four tall major candle sticks standing on the edge of the platform. The whole rests on four progressively larger rings, each one nesting on the other, so in effect, one must ascend five steps from the level of the nave to the level of the main altar (physically, not always an easy thing to do). The first circular platform, the one on which the square altar rests, is of a translucent material that allows light to filter down from the altar to the crypt below – a crypt that will serve as a mausoleum – the light from above tying the living parishioners with the dead.

Leading from the altar is a causeway going to the back wall of the sanctuary to provide access to the door of the “tabernacle” (perhaps not the best word), but to the place where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. This door is centrally located with the bishop’s throne slightly off to one side. This place of reservation is prominent and immediately visible to everyone as they first enter the Cathedral. The Blessed Sacrament Chapel is located directly behind the high altar and is separated from it by a wall. In this chapel area a devotional quiet is expected and is observed. It has become a place where many people pray.

Next to the altar is a substantial structure with a staircase that leads to the Reading Desk, or the Pulpit, for reading the lessons and proclaiming the Gospel. Seating for the choir is located immediately behind the reading desk in order to facilitate musical response after the lessons and to emphasize the intimate connection of music with the reading of the Word. Behind and to the side of the reading desk is

a large life size, wooden crucifix which may overshadow the readers, but it will remind everyone that it is from the Cross that faith in the Good News arises. A deacon or priest proclaims the Gospel from here and may preach the sermon as well. This need not always be the case, however, since at a weekday celebration a priest can preach while standing in the nave.

Music is, of course, a part of praying but, to be frank, the acoustics in this church “need work” which will no doubt soon be attended to after the organ pipes have been set in place. The organ pipes when they come will rest on large carved wooden beams that stretch out and overlook the action in the sanctuary.

The Provost of the Cathedral keeps reminding everyone that this Cathedral is part of a major complex that houses many other church ministries. This seems a fair reminder since the Cathedral building complex takes up an entire city block. A web-site devoted to *Cathedral of Light, Oakland, California*, presents an articulate and thoughtful set of hopes for these new buildings. The chancery office and bishop’s house are here, there is a large classroom/hall that can hold about 300, with a dining room and kitchen nearby to prepare food, even large dinner parties after a class or conference is completed, there is a Catholic book/gift shop. Finally and not least, there is an ample parking lot conveniently located underneath the buildings. The role of a *Provost* is seen as distinct from the role of the pastor of the cathedral parish. A Provost will be in charge of the Cathedral’s role as the mother-church for the whole diocese, while the Pastor’s role will take in the concerns of the congregation of the local parish. The complex of buildings and spaces clustering around this Cathedral church does make it the logical centre for informing and alerting the clergy and ministerial teams in the liturgy and liturgical style desired by the bishop, as well as educating lay workers and clergy to new theological developments and to the ever changing shape of social justice issues. At present there is, for example, a *pro-bono* legal office attached to aid the poor who may need routine legal help and there is a medical office for them as well.

What is the position of a cathedral nowadays in a mixed racial and ethnic city like Oakland? It is, of course, the home of the local bishop and the focus of the evangelical work of the diocese. It is a place for prayer and worship for the living who are present at its altar, and for the dead who lie in its crypt below and in all the other burial places of the diocese. It needs to house a school and a media centre for updating the religious consciousness of layfolk, of religious and clergy. It needs to be a focus of social outreach and for promoting social justice on the local scene. It needs to be a place where the faithful can feel free to gather in large numbers. Members of other religions and all well motivated people should know about the place and always feel welcome when there. The Oakland Cathedral

complex is well situated in the City to try to carry out all of these things. It is located in the centre of town at a beautiful spot by a large and attractive natural lake, a lake that hosts numerous sea birds and fish, has rowing, sailing and regular jogging tracks. The Cathedral stands by the shore with the lakefront highway passing by the “front door.” Farther back, behind it, is the usual city skyline of large, tall office skyscrapers, yet curiously they do not dominate this smaller building. When lighted internally at night the Cathedral has been described as a jewel in the heart of the city of Oakland, its translucent walls casting a glow over the dark backdrop of tall buildings that seem warmed by the Cathedral’s light. By day the Cathedral is not far from Oakland’s City Hall, its Museum, Convention Centre, the Courthouse, and other civic institutions. It is three blocks from the subway system and was said to be in a part of Oakland that had less violent crime than other parts of the City. It is also not far from districts of poverty and under-privilege - important since Oakland is not a wealthy place. The Cathedral is well placed, therefore, to do what a contemporary cathedral needs to do. Will it accomplish these things? Only time will tell.

When I attended the mid-morning Mass on a major Sunday the Cathedral was about 70% full (there had been an 8:00am Mass previously and at 12:00 there would be another, equally crowded.) At the daily weekday noon Mass one notices the presence of passers-by, of local people, of some workers from the office and civic buildings on a lunch break. Their numbers will vary. On a Sunday celebration the congregation is mixed both ethnically and financially, accurately reflecting the city’s population. The people who came were dressed neatly for Sunday, they came as families and in ones and twos. How well did they pray? How deeply did they pray? Who can tell, for the building is new.

But how well does the Cathedral *pray* as a church building? This was the question I was specifically asked to write about. I have been to this church on many occasions, sometimes when it was quite empty and again at a main Sunday Mass celebrated by the retired, but very beloved local bishop. When the Cathedral is empty, when no service is going on and only a handful of devout are present, it comes across as a place to be meditative, to bring your own religious resources with you – your readings, your Rosary, your personal devotions. One can pray as if alone with God in this large space. The cathedral is indeed very large and can seem cold, although the Blessed Sacrament is prominent - something which facilitates personal prayer. If you find sitting in rows of pews too impersonal for private prayers, you can always leave the nave and go off to one of the side alcoves and find in them the statues, icons and paintings that support particular devotional prayer. When filled on Sunday it is, of course, a different story. At a Sunday Mass when I was present the large

congregation was quiet, they sat back and did not sing very much (but the provisional acoustics may have had something to do with that). As for preaching, it is tempting in such a church to deliver what amounts to an address, which like the reports that keep emerging from committees have only marginal effect, but that temptation can be overcome. The final impression left is that this cathedral is a new and a striking building. It is not shaped like a conventional north-European Catholic church. Many who come are a bit over-awed by it all, some are simply curious out-of-town visitors just looking around, some come wanting to find their new parish home. After all the thought and planning will it serve the needs for prayer? Only after there have been some Ordinations in this church, only after it has witnessed a series of major religious and civic events, triumphs and disasters, only after a lot of Easter celebrations and Baptisms have taken place—when the Cathedral settles down into the community, when its decorations have been changed and rechanged again by passing generations, then, we will find out *how well the cathedral prays*. The building is too young yet to say.

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