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Seeing Through Crystal Glass Darkly

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Someone once dubbed Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral "a place Jesus would have lived if he could have afforded it."

Schuller's monument to himself was the centerpiece of an evangelistic enterprise that lies in bankruptcy ruins and the glittering tower now belongs to the Catholics of Orange County.

For a long stretch, Schuller had peddled a blend of self-help and "positive" religion from a stage festooned with palm branches, festive bouquets and celebrity side-kicks enlisted to endorse the brand. The cathedral was an extension of the preacher's vanity and hunger for stardom. Its location near Hollywood fit with the culture of fantasy and hollow pretense.

The defeated grand master of this gauzy Christianity used the sale of his alter-ego to play Solomon, choosing the Orange County Diocese over a local university as the new owner because, he explained, the temple shouldn't be allowed to pass over to secular use. That reasoning incorporated the arguable claim that the cathedral's purpose had been primarily sacred.

As I recall, Catholic churches that are closed go through rituals that, in effect, de-sacrilize them. What, then, must be done to certify a former hybrid-Protestant architectural attraction as authentic Catholic real estate? Must it be somehow cleansed before being consecrated?

More unnerving is the question of whether churches honor their service to the humble Prince of Peace by building and owning extravagant houses of worship. The debate has raged for centuries. We rave at the beauty of Medieval cathedrals that were constructed at great human cost and huge diverted resources. It is argued that the expense was for the greater glory of God, but did those soaring masterpieces improve the preaching and practice of the Gospel?

What does that kind of symbol mean these days? Is it a source of uplift and strengthening of spirit that translates broadly into a faithful, courageous witness to the world of painful need around it. Or does it spark fleeting pride and empty bragging rights? It projects riches: for good or ill? A way of the cross or an attachment to corporate status seeking?

The glass church is now the Catholics' problem. It comes with an eerie past.

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