

Cathedral of Christ the Light officially dedicated as area Catholics' home

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OAKLAND — It may have been on a concrete urban plaza beneath a baking sun and towering office buildings, but for thousands of East Bay Catholics, this was truly holy ground.

In one of the rarest and most solemn liturgical celebrations of the Catholic faith, the new Cathedral of Christ the Light was officially dedicated Thursday afternoon. The occasion was marked with special rites reserved only for such sacred occasions. Visiting bishops and cardinals from across the country and the globe, including Cardinal William Levada from Rome, were welcomed by priests, nuns and parishioners from all 84 parishes in Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

After a slow procession up the walkway from Harrison Street to the main cathedral entry, flanked by Knights of Columbus members in cloaks and feathered hats, Oakland Bishop Allen Vigneron — for whom the cathedral becomes a residence and the seat of his influence — stood on a podium next to Bishop John Cummins, bishop emeritus for Oakland.

According to tradition, Vigneron "accepted" the cathedral along the shore of Lake Merritt from architect Craig Hartman of the San Francisco design firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and was presented with a symbolic master key to the building.

Accompanied by a drum roll, the bishop struck the massive 12-foot-tall entry doors three times with his golden staff. "Let the doors of this new cathedral be opened for the people of God to enter," he declared.

With that, applause rose up, the doors were opened and the faithful passed through for the first time, dipping their fingers in the baptismal water and crossing themselves, their eyes quickly lifting to the lofty 110-foot-high ceiling of glass and light.

For parishioners, this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience — one they hope will serve to unite Catholics of the East Bay, heal wounds of the past and bless the community at-large.

"We had to be here for the history of this event," said Linda Medel, a member of St. Anne's Parish in Union City. "They don't build cathedrals every day, and definitely not in our own backyard. So this is very exciting. We now have a place to unify all the communities of the East Bay."

The \$190-million cathedral, which includes a mausoleum under the sanctuary, diocesan offices, a conference center, a health clinic, a residence for the bishop, a bookstore, café

and parking structure, replaces St. Francis de Sales cathedral, which was fatally damaged in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

And while some are not entirely pleased with the ultra-modern design of the new building with its exterior glass windows, concrete floors and massive image of Christ formed by thousands of perforations in aluminum panels, most say the cathedral is more about symbol than structure anyway.

"I raise my eyebrows (at the building)," said Eleanor Bollinger of St. Felicitas Parish in San Leandro. "I'm used to the cathedrals of Europe, and I prefer them. This is a unique style."

"Some who are traditionalists have not quite embraced it," said Annette Jenkins of St. Augustine Parish in Oakland. "But I really feel it's going to bring the many different ethnic groups in our church community together. Everybody can come here and cheer God's words and feel comfortable, warm and welcome.

"And it's a healing thing for some of the problems in the church in the past," she said. "We cry out, we need help, and we find it right here by this beautiful lake."

Indeed, most feel the cathedral, the mother church within the Diocese of Oakland, will provide a sense of place and common ground for the increasingly diverse groups in the church community. The diocese holds Masses in 17 languages.

"I am so happy, I'm about to faint," said Patience Anyanwu, matron of the Nigerian Igbo Catholic Community based at All Saints Catholic Church in Hayward. She and her husband, Ambrose, were selected to greet the bishop as he entered the cathedral doors. "We have such a broad community. Mexican, Chinese, Indian, Filipino," she said. "We all can come here from our parishes and have our place together."

The Mass of Dedication was a three-hour ceremony, beginning with the sprinkling of holy water on the walls, the altar and the parishioners. The angelic voices of the choir filled the sanctuary. The cathedral holds about 1,350 people; chairs and a video screen were set up on the plaza for about 1,000 more.

Thursday's event was a private celebration for parishioners, but a civic and interfaith prayer service will be at 10 a.m. today for the general public. The first official Mass will be at 10 a.m. Sunday and will also be open to the public. The cathedral is at 2121 Harrison St., at Grand Avenue, in Oakland.