

## The Geography of Grace: My New Life Started Across the Street from the Altar

Some places are more than buildings.  
They become characters in the story of your life.

For me, that place is Christ Cathedral.

Long before it was a Catholic cathedral, it was the Crystal Cathedral—one of the most famous churches in America, built by televangelist Robert H. Schuller. Like many people in Southern California, I grew up aware of it. But I never imagined how often my life would intersect with that shimmering glass sanctuary.



As a teenager, I played handbells in my Catholic parish choir. Every once in a while, we were invited to play weddings at the Crystal Cathedral. I remember walking into that immense glass space with bells in hand, sunlight pouring through thousands of panes of glass. At the time, it simply felt impressive. I didn't realize I was stepping into a place that would quietly follow me through decades of life.

Years later, when my own family was growing, I bought fifteen or twenty tickets as a Christmas gift so we could all attend the famous Christmas Pageant together. If you ever saw it, you know what it was like.

It was spectacular.

Live animals. Massive choirs. Dramatic lighting. And at one point, angels—actual humans suspended high above the sanctuary—flying through the air while singing. It felt like something between a Broadway show and a worship service.

For a long time, the cathedral seemed larger than life.

Then came the difficult years.

Like many large ministries, the church faced struggles—financial pressures, leadership changes, and family challenges that unfolded very publicly. None of that erases the good the ministry did for many people, but it was a painful chapter. Eventually, the campus went through bankruptcy, and for a time the future of the great glass cathedral was uncertain.

For several years it sat mostly quiet.

Then something remarkable happened.

The campus was purchased by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange and began a long transformation into Christ Cathedral. The building that had once symbolized American televangelism would become the center of Catholic worship in Orange County.

But the most remarkable part of the story was unfolding just across the street.

Directly across from the cathedral campus sits a Kaiser Addiction Medicine Clinic. That is where I eventually found myself sitting in a recovery group led by a therapist who specializes in cirrhosis and alcohol recovery.

In that building—literally across the street from the cathedral altar—my life was saved.

At the time, I wasn't thinking about symbolism or geography. I was just trying to survive alcoholism and learn how to live again.

Only later did it strike me.

The place where my recovery began was less than a football field away from the altar where I now attend Mass.

As a teenager, I rang bells inside that sanctuary.

As an adult, I brought my family there for Christmas celebrations.

And years later, after returning to the Catholic Church, I attended my first Christmas Mass back there.

It wasn't technically midnight Mass.

It was the 3:00 PM family Mass.

But to me, it might as well have been midnight.

Recently, a Christian friend from A.A. asked if I would take him to see the cathedral. He knew I went to mass there weekly, and he had heard how beautiful the building was and wanted to visit, though he made it clear he didn't want to attend a Catholic Mass. I was happy to show off the grand place. I welcomed the chance to share the space with him. I've reached a place in my life where I see the beauty in every path to the light - it's a gift available to anyone who seeks it, regardless of where or how they pray. To me, the walls of the cathedral aren't there to keep people out, but to hold a space where anyone—Catholic or not—can feel a little closer to their faith.

As we walked through the campus, the roar of Chapman Avenue traffic seemed to dissolve. The air felt different there—stilled by the sound of the fountains and the wide, open plazas. We stepped inside, and for a moment, we both just stood there. The light poured through the thousands of glass "petals" on the walls, creating a shimmering, underwater glow that felt both immense and intimate.

The space was alive with quiet movement. We watched people scattered throughout the pews; some were deep in silent meditation, while others stood before the statues of the saints, their lips moving in whispered petitions. My friend watched them with a quiet curiosity. He didn't quite understand our Catholic tradition of



honoring the saints or "talking" to the statues, but he didn't need to. He recognized the universal language of devotion. He saw that they weren't praying to stone, but reaching out to something far greater, using the art around them as a bridge.

Right then, the air began to vibrate. Someone was at the great Hazel Wright Organ, practicing for a service. A single voice began to sing, the notes climbing up into the glass rafters and hanging there like incense. It wasn't a performance; it was just a moment of pure, unforced beauty.

My friend stood there, taking it all in for a long moment. Finally, he leaned over and said softly, "I can feel something in this place." The experience hadn't just impressed him; it had moved him.

In that moment, I realized the cathedral had quietly become a character in my life's story.

It was there when I was young.

It was there when my family gathered in joy.

It was there through years of uncertainty and change.

And it was standing just across the street when I found the help that saved my life.

Sometimes we imagine grace arriving in dramatic ways.

But in my case, the distance between where my recovery began and where I now pray is only a few hundred feet.

Sometimes grace doesn't travel very far.

Sometimes it's waiting right across the street.

