

Sod turned for rebuilding of historic Sacred Heart Church in Guyana

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Bishop Francis Alleyne turns the sod

A turning-of-sod ceremony on Friday Feb 18 marked the beginning of a massive reconstruction of the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church to the tune of \$85M (US\$420,000). Parishioners, well-wishers and religious leaders of the Catholic Church in Guyana gathered at the site where the former 143-year-old church once stood.

The Church of the Sacred Heart, popularly once referred to as the 'Gem of Main Street', had its origins in 1861 when a chapel designed by Fr Schembri was opened on Christmas Day on the Main Street site.

The church originally catered to the Portuguese and Masses were all said in that language.

At the ceremony, Sr. Mary Noel Menezes, one of Guyana's celebrated historians gave a brief summary of the history of Sacred Heart Church.

The design and plans for reconstruction of the church have been agreed by the Sacred Heart Rebuilding Committee, headed by Ramsey Ali and Roman Catholic Bishop of Georgetown, Francis Alleyne, OSB. The committee has already raised G\$24M and is optimistic that the project will continue to be funded once it is seen that work has started.

Ali told the gathering that three buildings would be constructed at the site and that the pace of the works would be dependent on how quickly the rest of the money would be raised. There will be the main church building and there will be a facility for priests and a parish hall.

Those behind the project have pointed out that at present they do not have all of the money needed to complete the structure. However, they said that a number of potential donors have told them that once plans are finalized and the reconstruction begins, they will be ready to consider financial and other assistance to the project.

"The same day we announced in church that we are going to rebuild this church, a parishioner touched me on my shoulder and said, 'I am going to make a contribution', and it was a very sizable contribution", he said.

The wooden Sacred Heart Church was destroyed in a matter of minutes on December 25, 2004, mere hours after church-goers left the midnight Mass for Christmas Eve. Eyewitness accounts stated that the fire originated in the St Joseph Chapel located on the north side of the church when an electric bulb burst and its glowing filament fell on the combustible material in the nativity crib (made of branches and

dry leaves). That happened just after 9am when those assembled were singing the final hymn for Christmas morning Mass. The building was not insured at the time.

The church was a heritage site at the time of its destruction.

Bishop Alleyne, prior to turning the sod on Friday, stated that apart from the rebuilding of the church, there will be other buildings in the complex, namely library facilities, a place for archives, media and the Catholic newspaper as well as internet would be built on the same grounds.

“It is still at the stage of dream, discussion and sketching. But as this vision takes form, the intention of hope that we can put as much as possible in place to access every means to better know and live our faith”, the church leader said. “Today we turn the sod, so that we can plant the seeds of our visions, of our hopes. That we can allow that breath of God to breathe into all that happens here as it takes shape and become the living presence of God, a presence that may thrive here for all to see and benefit from”, His Lordship stated.

The contractors began work Monday Feb 21. They are Alan Fernandes and Jerry Max Gouveia. First set of works include the laying of a foundation and a steel frame structure.

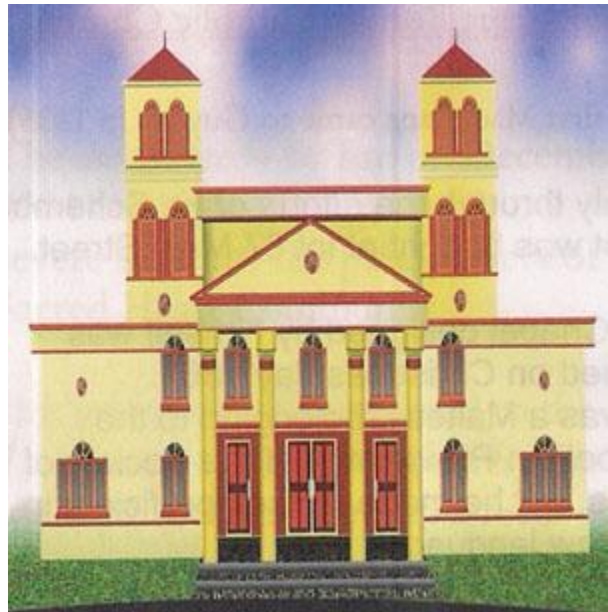
Ali told the gathering that prior to this, \$10M was already spent on clearing the burnt out site, a sum that was raised by Jesuit priest Fr Chira, former Jesuit Superior in the diocese.

In an interview, Ali also said the committee intends to tap in to the Guyanese Catholics in the diaspora and hold fundraising activities such as fairs, concerts and the church’s annual Cross Buns sale, which Ramsey boasted raises over \$1M each year. A website, www.sacredheart.gy, has also been established to inform persons around the world about the project.

The new church will have a similar façade to the old one; would be a bit smaller with one altar as compared to 3 altars that the old one had. The new building will also have a chapel. The new altar will be in the middle of the church, so that the congregation would gather around it. Ali stated that the church will serve as a location also for tourists in central Georgetown to find a Catholic house of worship and said, too, that Bishop Alleyne might be considering moving the midday Mass at the Cathedral to the new Sacred Heart.

On Friday, several persons, including those from the business community were on hand to make on-the-spot cheque donations.

(Leon Suseran, For Catholic Standard newspaper)



An artists impression of what the new \$85M Sacred Heart R.C.Church would look like upon completion