

St Vibiana

Written by [Balustrade and Bitters](#)

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St. Vibiana - "The Patron St. of Nobodies"

When we picture the savior of a Catholic church, the image that comes to mind probably isn't a series of restraining orders followed by a couple of nasty court battles, but that is exactly what it took to save the Cathedral of St. Vibiana, one of Los Angeles' last remaining nineteenth century landmarks, from being torn down by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 1995. The Archdiocese insisted that the 1994 Northridge earthquake had damaged the cathedral beyond repair, and despite efforts by the Los Angeles Conservancy to prevent demolition, the Church steamed ahead with its plan to tear it down and build a new, modern cathedral complex, without a permit and without the required environmental review. In fact, they got as far as positioning the wrecking ball and actually removing the lantern from the bell tower, when, in literally the final hour, the Conservancy obtained a court order to stop the demolition. The City eventually gave the Archdiocese a larger plot of land to build their new cathedral in exchange for St. Vibiana's. The Conservancy began searching for a buyer, and in 1999, real estate developer Tom Gilmore bought the property and soon began the resurrection and reinvention of an irreplaceable historical landmark.



Although I had heard of the Cathedral of St. Vibiana, it wasn't until I met recently with Anika Warden, events coordinator for what is now Vibiana Place (the eight million dollar end result of the rocky transformation of the aging and damaged cathedral into a stunningly lovely event venue), that I understood just how extraordinary this majestic structure is. You get an overwhelming sense of hushed awe as you walk through the arched front doorways and become enveloped in **Vibiana's drama, history and grandeur**: the elegant and subtly detailed color effects of golds and maroons; the columns; the solid marble, ornately domed altar; the moody juxtaposition of shadow and light, vastness and void; all the grand opulence that defines the Baroque.

Upon researching **Vibiana's history**, I found the story of her **namesake particularly fascinating**. Known in the Roman Catholic Church as the **"Patron Saint of Nobodies,"** Vibiana's remains, believed to date back to the third century, were **discovered in early 1851 when Pope Pius IX began excavation of a vineyard he had purchased** near the Appian Way outside of Rome, located over an intricate network of catacombs that had lain undisturbed for nearly a thousand years. Her tomb was discovered within, with the inscription **"to the soul of the innocent and pure Vibiana"**, along with a crystal vase believed to contain her dried blood. The tomb was crushed in the removal process, and inside were discovered the bones of a young woman, seemingly put to a violent death. Following the inscription on the tomb was a wreath of laurel, an emblem used by early Christians to symbolize martyrdom. Although there is no recorded history of Vibiana, and no one knows what act or acts of martyrdom earned her the emblem inscribed on her tomb, after a brief investigation, Pope Pius IX declared Vibiana an official "virgin and martyr." The Catholic Church now believes her to represent those throughout history who perform saintly deeds never to be acknowledged-the "nobodies" who go unrecognized into obscurity.

The Pope turned the martyr's remains over to Bishop of Monterey Thaddeus Amat, who sailed with them to Santa Barbara, where they were laid in the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows. In 1856 a special feast was held, and Vibiana was named the principal patroness of the southland's ecclesiastical jurisdiction, the only jurisdiction in which she is celebrated to this day. The Cathedral of St. Vibiana, named for the saint by Pope Pius IX and designed by two of Los Angeles' first practicing architects, Ezra F. Kysor and

W.J. Matthews, was built in 1876, and Vibiana's tomb was moved once more, to remain enshrined above the church's altar for almost 120 years, an unlikely and serendipitous odyssey for an unknown young woman of the third century.

Anika graciously gave us a tour of the immaculate facility, which, thanks to the vision of Tom Gilmore and partner Richard Weintraub, now hosts everything from weddings, fashion shows and Grammy parties, to events like a Snoop Dogg concert in 2006. The enormity of the space intensified our sense of awe, particularly as it was completely devoid of any of the elaborate accoutrements that make each event unique. We were there in mid-morning, when only natural light pours into the space through the windows that no longer hold stained glass, and although a tasteful amount of the intricate painted detailing is left on portions of the ceiling and walls, and above the columns, much of it, such as the copper dome over the altar, has been painted white, giving the space a purity that leaves you feeling enveloped in the divine. Anika later sent me photos of weddings and events held at Vibiana, and the transformations are unbelievable. The space can be lit with any color combination you could wish for your event, from subtle and elegant to spectacular, and the attention to detail to fit each event's theme is unsurpassed. The lovely, intimate gardens are also available to host receptions, dinners and cocktail parties.

Although a lot has changed since the renovations, much of the history has been preserved. The original confessionals, for example, remain untouched after renovation. I couldn't help but wonder just how many sins must have been confessed over the span of 120 years in those small, dark cubicles, how many Our Fathers and Hail Marys murmured as penance to purify how many repentant souls, in a church that could once seat up to 1200 people at one time, which, astonishingly, was about one tenth the population of Los Angeles when the cathedral was built in 1876!

The former rectory, built in 1933, which sits adjacent to Vibiana at the far end of the gardens, is slated to be converted into a restaurant downstairs, and a bridal lounge upstairs, in what were formerly the church bishop's bed chambers. Gilmore and Weintraub also have plans underway for a mixed-use high-rise condo tower on a lot next to the former cathedral, which will offer up to 3000 sq. ft. of lush condo housing for city dwellers, all in synch with the rebirth of a vibrant downtown LA.

Vibiana's remains now rest in the crypt of the church's new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, a few blocks from Vibiana Place, but thanks to the heroic efforts of the Los Angeles Conservancy and Tom Gilmore, the man with the vision, her name will live on for quite some time to come as Vibiana Place promises to remain an event space of unparalleled beauty on the downtown LA scene.

Vibianala.com

210 S. Main St.

Los Angeles, CA

90012

213.622.4949

info@vibianala.com