Extreme Makeover: Parish chapel edition

Parish in search of home finds sanctuary in truck driving school, and using furnishings and statues from other churches transforms it into worship space

WOODINVILLE
BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

In November of 2004, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta Parish celebrated its inaugural Mass in a large barn. From there, the parish moved to a Lutheran church building, and then to a junior high school cafeteria. So the parishioners didn’t bat an eye when they learned that their new chapel, as of this past December, would be located in the same building as a school for truck drivers.

When Father Frank Schuster was appointed pastor last June, he inherited a parish in the midst of a difficult transition. The parish’s founding pastor, Father Scott Connolly, had just been reassigned to the Church of the Assumption in Bellingham, and its Spanish-language ministry had been taken over by St. Brendan Parish in Bothell.

“It was clear to me that many parishioners were understandably grieving the loss of their former pastor,” said Father Schuster. “The loss of the Hispanic community at Brendan was also hard for many in the community.”

On top of these challenges, Father Schuster soon received notice from the parochial administrator, who oversaw much of the renovation, that his parish would face. The space — “a shabby-looking warehouse with torn-up carpets and walls that were pretty flimsy,” according to Father Schuster — required a half-million-dollar renovation effort, which had to be carried out between Oct. 1st and the archbishop’s Dec. 16th deadline for the project.

A remarkable transformation

It would not be easy, but the parish was committed to seeing its vision for the new chapel realized. “We only had a few months, and anybody who knows anything about construction knows that that’s a very hard timeline to meet for any project,” said Father Schuster, “but we were able to achieve it with everyone working together.”

The renovation was “a collaborative effort from the very beginning between our finance council, pastoral council and building committee,” said Shauna Smith, Blessed Teresa’s pastoral assistant for administration, who oversaw much of the project.

Once basic structural issues were addressed, the chapel was outfitted with items new and old. “We have everything that you would expect in a chapel,” said Smith. “We had an altar and an ambo custom-made for the space. We secured statues from a consignment shop back east, so the statues get a new life here in our chapel. We have pews from St. Bernadette’s in Seattle, so the pews have history here in the archdiocese. Our stations of the cross came from the [1992] fire at [St. James] Cathedral. I think the beauty of this chapel is that it represents the history of the archdiocese. It’s really beautiful that we’ve been able to breathe new life into some artifacts and statues from churches that have closed down.”

Father Schuster can hardly believe the rapid change in the space. “It truly is beautiful — the transformation from what it was before to what is there now is remarkable,” he said.

A place of comfort

On Gaudete Sunday, Dec. 16th, Archbishop Alex J. Brunett installed Father Frank Schuster as pastor of Blessed Teresa in ceremonies held in the chapel on Dec. 16.

Parishioners at Woodinville’s Blessed Teresa of Calcutta Parish, who celebrated their inaugural Mass in a barn, have recently transformed a building in a driving-school complex into a welcoming worship space. Archbishop Alex J. Brunett installed Father Frank Schuster as pastor of Blessed Teresa in ceremonies held in the chapel on Dec. 16.

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