

# *New Vision*

## *The Fr. Bob Camuso Years*

**F**ather Bob Camuso likes to say that he's still in advertising, only now he has just one client. Before becoming pastor of St. Anne Parish in 1996, Father Bob spent the first 20 years of his career creating million-dollar-advertising campaigns for legendary Ogilvy & Mather in New York City and later for his own advertising agency in Seattle. During this time, he had many clients, including Fortune 500 companies like Lever Brothers and General Foods.

All this changed in 1992. That's when Father Bob was ordained to the priesthood and put his considerable advertising skills to work for one client: The Almighty.

When he arrived at St. Anne in 1996, he immediately brought common sense, business savvy and taste for the aesthetic to a parish that sorely needed stability and leadership. He quickly went to work on the most ambitious building program in decades: renovating the school and the church. Some in the parish believed it couldn't be done, but Father Bob had a vision, a gift for persuasion, and an appealingly dry sense of humor.

"In Father Bob's first sermon he told the story of flying cross country, wearing his Roman collar," said parishioner Paul Martin. "The plane hit a storm and was experiencing extreme turbulence. His seatmate turned to him and said, 'Father, can't you do something?' 'Sorry, ma'am,' said Father Bob. 'I'm in sales, not management.'"

### **Microsoft Millionaires**

In the mid-1990s, a new gold rush was transforming Seattle. With the dot.com boom exploding, Microsoft minted scads of new millionaires. Tech companies like Amazon.com issued stock options, creating wealth on a scale unprecedented in Seattle. Suddenly, the city became a



*Fr. Bob Camuso, pastor of St. Anne Parish, 1996—2005.*

magnet for new college graduates and others looking to cash in. The national media fell in love with the Emerald City, with the 1993 movie "Sleepless in Seattle", the television series "Frasier" and albums from Pearl Jam and Nirvana topping the charts.

Queen Anne Hill's proximity to downtown made it a major draw for renters and buyers. The Queen Anne neighborhood became a magnet for the new families flooding into the city.

Father Bob recognized that these families could rejuvenate the parish, injecting energy and enthusiasm into the community and helping fund the renovation of the school and church. He put his considerable advertising skills to work to make this happen.

"His vision and organizational skills were excellent," said Mary Jo Martin. "We had gone to sporadic meetings over the years, but he made it happen. The school remodel speaks for itself."

He was an ideal man for the job. Whereas many priests entered seminaries in their teens and knew little about the business world, Father Bob's years in advertising helped him communi-

cate his vision to the parish. He understood people's doubts and struggles, in part because he'd gone through them himself.

As a youngster, he'd grown up in the Catholic tradition. But at 16, he stopped going to church. For more than 20 years, he turned his back on God to pursue his own life—graduating from high school, joining the Navy, going to art school and finally working as an art director in New York and Seattle. In 1977, things began to change.

"I realized I was on a spiritual search," he said. "I was searching for God but I didn't know it at the time. I decided to get off the fence when I came to Seattle. I finally met someone who invited me to church. When I left Mass to go home, I knew I had to go back."

"Bob was no goody two-shoes," said Larry Asher, Father Bob's former partner in the ad firm Asher and Camuso Advertising in Seattle, and now president of Worker Bees in Seattle. "Advertising is this kind of glamorous field, life in the fast lane, hard-drinking, hard-living. I think some people couldn't put it together, but if you knew Bob, it totally made sense."

### **A Vibrant Community**

After his ordination, he served as parochial vicar at Holy Family Parish in Kirkland for three years before moving to St. Andrew Parish in Sumner for a year. He became pastor of St. Anne in 1996. He loved the parish's location at the top of Queen Anne, with its array of shops, pedestrian friendly streets and strong sense of neighborhood.

"I liked the provincial quality of the hill," he said. "There's a sense of community that includes not just the Catholics, but the entire neighborhood. The geography of Queen Anne hill has a lot to do with it. The people protect and look out for the children. The merchants have a sense that these are our people. It's not anonymous. It's a kind of village."

Despite the parish's ideal location, it had a reputation among priests as being problematic. The

revolving door of recent pastors had left many parishioners critical of the archdiocese. In addition, the church and school buildings both needed a great deal of attention. Father Bob felt he was up to the challenges.

### **Renovating the School**

When Father Bob started his term as pastor, St. Anne School already had a long and reputable history, with an enrollment of over 200 students. But the 70 year old building was in dire need of upgrading and expansion.

"Father Bob was always a supporter of the school," Pat Durand said.

"He strongly encouraged us to work toward

compensating our teachers at 100 percent of the Washington State Scale. My most vivid memory of him was in 2001. We were at a parish staff meeting when an earthquake hit. He jumped up and ran across the street to make sure the children were safe."

Principal Pat Durand and Father Bob worked together to develop a plan for the school's future. This included an ambitious plan to upgrade the and expand the school building.

When people saw Father Bob and Pat Durand's enthusiasm for the project, many people stepped forward to contribute money and solicit donations. The effort gathered steam. Father Bob was not shy about taking a lead role in the fundraising efforts.

"Some priests have a problem asking for money," he said. "But I feel like I'm doing them a favor by asking them to donate to something that will be there long after they've gone. You don't get many opportunities to contribute to something that will be there doing its work day



*Pat Durand, principal of St. Anne Parish School, 1993 - present.*

after day. I think everyone who gave to the school had to be pleased. Their gift is still there working for them.”

Karen Moyer, co-chair of the fundraising campaign along her husband Jamie and Murray and Betty Ferguson, agreed Father Bob played a huge part in the success of the project.

“The process was methodical and uplifting,” she said. “It was successful because of a very giving community. We all wanted to leave behind something for many generations to come. His legacy is the success of the campaign and what it brought to the school and parish.”

Father Bob enjoyed meeting with the families, going to the receptions, and asking for contributions. By 2001, enough money had been donated to begin the project. He went shopping for an architect to bring his vision to reality.

He contacted the firm Lease, Crutcher, Lewis, who had renovated St. James Cathedral. “When I was in advertising we often said that there were three things involved in any project—Quality, Price and Speed,” he said. “I’d tell clients, ‘Pick any two. If you want quality *and* speed you pay more.’ I told the architects I would like all three on this project. They just laughed, but they delivered.”

The timeline was tight. The renovation work had to be accomplished during the summer months when the school was out of session.

Over the summer of 2001, the three-story 1922 unreinforced masonry schoolhouse was given a seismic upgrade. The following summer, the entire structure was renovated with new flooring, doors, hardware, ceilings, and finishes.

On the west side, they demolished the existing social hall, first constructed in 1950, and built a new multipurpose Banchemo social hall / gymnasium / stage. Over the new hall they added new Middle School classrooms, and in the main building they created a new kitchen, a school science room, offices, a custodial room, and a teachers' lounge.

Parishioners pitched in to help the crew complete the project. Ken Orth spent hours refitting the classrooms with whiteboards, flags, clocks, and TV wall hangers because there was no money to pay the construction crew to do it.

“I was working in the school and Fr. Bob saw the lights on in the classrooms,” Ken said. “He came stomping up to see who was there (I think he thought the school was being robbed). I had to remind him that he asked me to do the work and it was the only time I had to work on it. He never came to check on me again.”

When classes resumed in the fall of 2002, the remodel was nearly complete. The end product pleased everyone. Indeed, one professional architectural association named it the year's best remodel in the state in its size category.

The school continued to flourish. Enrollment climbed as families sought to enroll their children in the beautiful new facility with its outstanding faculty and excellent curriculum. Soon there were waiting lists in all grades. The annual school auctions raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for additional projects. In 2008, the auction total was \$203,990.

As Father Bob predicted, the renovated school drew many young families into the parish. A parish which had once been graying, now echoed with the sounds of children's laughter. Young parents added their talents and energy to the parish, as their children would add their talents and energy to the parish of the future.



## Renovating the Church

Building on the momentum of the school remodel, Father Bob set his sights on remodeling the church interior. As a centerpiece for the design, Father Bob wanted a stunning piece of art. Michelangelo might not be available to do the commission, but there had to be another artist up to the task.

During the years prior to his ordination to the priesthood, Father Bob served on the Seattle Arts Commission during its period of greatest innovation. He became friends with a wide circle of artists, dealers and collectors in the region.

On a visit to New York, he had lunch with an old friend, Charles Cowles of the Charles Cowles Gallery. Father Bob mentioned that he'd love to have a Manuel Neri sculpture for his church. Neri is one of the world's premier figurative sculptors, his works included in more than 30 American public collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Because Cowles represented Neri, he knew the Northern California artist would be interested. Cowles got priest and artist together and they clicked.

Neri had begun a sculpture in 1973, but did not finish it until 2003. He wanted it to go not to a museum or a private home, but a church. Father Bob persuaded Neri to donate it to St. Anne Parish in 2003.

Neri's statue of Mary gives the mother of God Semitic features with an African cast: high cheekbones and large nose with full, generous mouth. Her rough hands extend in welcome, palms up, and her large feet rest on a white orb meant to suggest the moon, befitting her status as

heaven's queen. Mary reigns over the church's baptistry, in full view of the congregation.

"The Catholic Church has always believed that art helps people to find God," Fr. Bob said. "We express our faith through signs and symbols and believe that the Bible is the inspired, not the literal, word of God. We pray with our whole body, using both the right and left brain, the word from the left and imagery from the right."



*The statue of Mary by renowned artist Manuel Neri.*

The statue was to be the first step in the renovation of the church. But like so many renovation projects in the history of Catholicism, whether Notre Dame or Chartres, it didn't go as planned. In 2005, the Archbishop asked Father

Bob to move to serve as pastor of St. Thomas More Parish in Lynnwood. Though he wanted to finish the remodel at St. Anne, he answered the call. He worked at St. Thomas More for three years. In July 2008, he became pastor of St. Luke Parish in Shoreline.

In addition to his priestly duties, Father Bob began a Catholic radio program in 2004. Conversations with Father Bob" is heard on stations from Seattle to Louisiana and from Texas to Toronto. It's also on the Internet, continuing his work of creating a dialogue between Catholicism and contemporary culture.

Father Bob's departure took many parishioners by surprise. Who would take on the leadership of the parish? Would the new pastoral leader be able to rally the parish behind a renovation of the church? Could the parish keep up the momentum created by the successful school renovation? These would be the challenges facing the next pastoral leader of St. Anne.