

Theology on Tap

By Sarah Greenberg

Review correspondent

The young adult years can often be a time of transition and uncertainty. Twenty- and 30-somethings find themselves in a state of flux, as they negotiate the daunting responsibilities placed upon them: navigating the workplace, finding significant companionship and planning for their future.

The Catholic community provides its young parishioners with an antidote to their malaise, complete with cold, frothy beverages.

Theology on Tap, a program that offers faith-related conversations in area restaurants and bars, engages young adults in their 20s and 30s – though all ages are welcome – in the richness of the Catholic faith. The program consists of regularly scheduled discussions, in which a notable speaker presents on a certain topic before opening the conversation to listeners. Theology on Tap serves as a way for young people to connect with one another and ground themselves in Catholicism.

Local Theology on Tap groups meet in Baltimore, Ellicott City, Frederick and Annapolis, gathering in accessible areas and venues such as the Greene Turtle in Fells Point and Patrick's Irish Pub in Baltimore. With topics ranging from war theory and Islam v. Christianity, to stem cell research and same-sex marriage, the events draw crowds of 30 to 40 people, mostly in their early 20s to early 30s.

"We first and foremost present these topics with charity," said Rodnie Matute, 34, of St. Michael's at Aberdeen Proving Ground and a leader of Theology on Tap in Fells Point for six years. "We pride ourselves on having a friendly environment."

Some of the featured speakers at the Fells Point Theology on Tap group have included Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, Bishop Denis J.

Madden, Father Leo Patalinghug of Grace Before Meals and Mary Ellen Russell of the Maryland Catholic Conference.

Meeting in pubs and restaurants helps open eyes to what's going on in the church in a "real-world setting," Matute said, "which allows people to see the broader sense of our faith."

The discussions demonstrate to today's young adults, regardless of the level of their commitment to a religious practice, that they can incorporate their faith into everyday life.

"Young adults tend to compartmentalize their lives, but you can bring your faith and social life together, said George Brunner, 23, of St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown and a Theology on Tap group leader. "I want to break that barrier."

Expanding young adults' sense of Catholicism "converts hearts," according to AnnaMarie Link, 28, of St. Mary in Annapolis and a leader of a Theology on Tap group.

"We educate and promote discussion about what the Catholic Church believes and why the Church is strong," she said. "Young adults get a solid teaching from someone educated on the topics."

Such open discussion reifies abstract concepts of faith that elude or intimidate young adults "looking for something more because they feel that nothing is offered for them," Brunner said.

Theology on Tap is a national movement that began in Chicago. Feelings of insecurity plagued college student Tim Learning in 1981 when he sought solace from Father Jack Wall of St. James Parish in Arlington Heights, Ill. Father Wall and youth minister Tom James responded by designing a six-week program of open discussions they dubbed "Theology on Tap."

The program's success prompted the Archdiocese of Chicago to establish an Office of Young Adult Ministry, headed by Father John Cusick and lay minister Katie Devries. In 2003, Father Cusick and Devries joined forces with RENEW International, an organization lauded for its success in creating parish-based

programs. Since partnering, RENEW Theology on Tap has exploded throughout the country.

Theology on Tap invites young adults seeking meaning and guidance during this confusing time in their lives to pull up a chair, grab a drink and chat. At the close of his Theology on Tap discussions, Matute often hears from his attendees: “I really needed that.”

Visit BaltimoreCatholic.com for links to local Theology on Tap resources.