



## The Holy Spirits

Happy hour goes righteous as New Jersey's religious institutions hit the taverns to attract young believers.

By Sharon Waters

It's Sunday night at Just Jake's bar and restaurant in Montclair. The room is filled with 40 young adults drinking beer and munching appetizers. Amid the conversation and clinking of glasses, two priests begin speaking.

Cheers erupt occasionally from the adjacent bar area, where the Giants are on the big-screen TV. But in this back room, the crowd is silent and respectful. This is what they came for: to hear a talk titled "Forget Mars and Venus—We're From Earth," about relationships human and divine.

At La Pastaria in Summit, managers, teachers, and carpenters listen as a priest peppers his discussion of Jesus and spirituality with references from *The Producers* to Palm Pilots, Monica Lewinsky to Mel Gibson. At Sportz Bar and Grille in Fairfield, the discussion on Monday nights in the fall isn't about who's playing the Jets, but what it means to be Jewish.



Rabbi Jason A. Miller (far right) keeps 'em laughing during a Torah on Tap theology session at Sportz Bar & Grille in Fairfield. Photograph: Steve Hockstein

All across the state, bars and restaurants are proving to be popular if unlikely sites for religious rap sessions. The drink and conversation flow freely as priests, pastors, rabbis, and ministers search for creative ways to reintroduce men and women in their twenties and thirties to their spiritual roots. The Roman Catholic Church, which pioneered this outreach program, gave it a name: Theology on Tap.

Begun in 1981 by the Archdiocese of Chicago, Theology on Tap has become popular in New Jersey. Within the past two years, Catholic parishes in Summit, Somerset, Upper Saddle River, Montclair, West Orange, Ocean Township, Westfield, and Pennington started participating in the program. The two-hour meetings, which are run independently by each parish, typically draw 40 to 100 people; they usually open with a formal presentation followed by a question-and-answer or discussion period.

"There are so few opportunities to socialize in an informal setting with regard to your faith, and this is a great opportunity," says Steve Wolcott, a 39-year-old portfolio manager from Springfield, at a June session in Summit. "It's casual, plus we're all here for a purpose: to connect with our faith."

For many young adults, college is the last place they participate in group discussions or any formal learning about theology. But for some, the terrorist attacks of 2001 have fueled a strong desire to connect to faith and put life events into a spiritual context. "September 11 changed everything," says Father Joseph Reilly, rector of the College Seminary at Seton Hall University. "That rocked people's world like it never had been before. That was a metaphor for people realizing that maybe values in their lives or their connection to God was something to rely on, because it was the only thing that made sense." Theology on Tap provides a forum for young adults who are unsure of how to return to a house of worship they may not have visited for years, says Reilly, who also assists parishes in Bayonne and Roseland.

"I always got the feeling that they thought they were hypocrites if they just walked in the door" of a church, says Father Jim Chern of Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church in West Orange. "So I said, *Maybe this would give them a little bit of an opening.* We're meeting them on their ground, meeting them in their territory."

If any priest can make a 20-something comfortable enough to return to church, it's 30-year-old Chern. His office

- ARCHIVES
- CONTACT US
- CUSTOMER SERVICE
- HOME
- NJ HOME & GARDEN
- NJM ONLINE STORE
- OUT AND ABOUT
- SOCIAL DATEBOOK
- STATEWIDE DINING
- SUBSCRIBE
- TABLE HOPPING WITH ROSIE

features relics of devotion to his two masters: God and the New York Yankees. A crucifix lies next to a Yankees hat on the coffee table, a Bible near a copy of *Time* with a cover story about the team's 1998 World Series victory.

Chern uncorked Montclair's Theology on Tap in January 2002 with Father Bill Sheridan of Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church. The monthly sessions alternate between Just Jake's and McGurk's Tavern in West Orange.

Sheridan, 41, and Chern spend roughly 10 hours outlining, writing, and revising their 30-minute talks. After their presentation, attendees discuss the topic among themselves, and then the priests field their questions for about an hour. Each session offers time for mingling before and after.

Chern and Sheridan wear clerical collars and their presentations can sound like homilies, but before the night ends, they take a laid-back approach so newcomers won't be scared off. "I'm not going to start sending you church envelopes, and it's not an automatic thing where now you're sucked in," Chern says. "I'd rather have it be, you come and feel comfortable to talk and have made some connections with people. Hopefully from that you'll make the decision that you want to join this parish." At his next Theology on Tap session, nearly three-quarters of the last class return for a refill.

David O'Brien, 36, director of parish ministry for St. Teresa of Avila in Summit, started his Theology on Tap program in January 2003 as an outreach to recent college graduates who are turned off by the formality of the traditional hometown services they've returned to.

Providence Wissel fits O'Brien's target group. The single Summit resident, who was raised a Catholic, says that at 35 she finds herself Christian, not Catholic. She rarely attends Mass because she works on Sundays, in retail sales—an effective excuse, she admits. "It seemed like the ideal setting outside of church to meet people of a similar faith," Wissel says of Theology on Tap. "To me, this is better than sitting in a pew. This is discussion. This is more being part of a community. It's more comfortable, and I think it's more useful."

If the sessions were held in a church basement instead of a bar, Wissel says, she probably wouldn't attend. "It has to be enticing. I honestly think that's what God would have had in mind. They sat around at the Last Supper. It's really the same thing," she says. "It's breaking bread. It's putting enjoyment and sharing into a setting with like-minded people who have similar beliefs and share and discuss things from a Christian perspective."

And in a time when semi-anonymous online dating is popular, Theology on Tap provides a low-key, almost old-fashioned way for singles to mingle. Organizers see friendships formed and phone numbers and e-mail addresses exchanged.

Theology on Tap is a template that can be used for any faith, says Judi Black, coordinator of the program in Chicago. "We don't even use the word Catholic," Black says. "It's a program where you provide the speakers to do your theology, whatever that is. You're working within the context of your own religious persuasion, whatever that is."

The gathering of Jewish men at Sportz Bar & Grille in Fairfield is called Torah on Tap. Its mix of beer, kosher pretzels, and rabbinical instruction provides a modern method for teaching Judaism to a new generation, says Rabbi Jason A. Miller, 28, a former rabbinic intern at Congregation Agudath Israel in Caldwell, who started the program in November 2002 to reach young adults and other Jews who may be uncomfortable with the idea of attending a synagogue. "We're trying to make Jewish learning fun," says Miller, who recently was appointed associate director at the University of Michigan's Hillel Foundation, a worldwide Jewish outreach program for college students. "It's something so different from learning in the synagogue environment. Some people have their hang-ups about that. It doesn't have the feel of an institution."

Some members of his Conservative congregation thought it was a prank when Miller hung flyers that showed a yarmulke-wearing man pulling a beer tap. Every few months, about three dozen adults, mostly men, gather in a private room at the sports bar to hear Miller discuss the Torah or a contemporary topic, like Jews in sports.

Last fall the First Presbyterian Church of Rumson began holding an alternative worship service every other Tuesday evening in its fellowship hall. Each presentation has a scriptural theme, and features music, movie clips, skits, maybe even a dance routine, to reinforce the message. With refreshments served, the aim is to create a coffeehouse atmosphere in which young adults feel welcome and participate, says the pastor, the Reverend John Monroe. "You don't have to be in a church mode when you enter," Monroe says. "It's geared for people who don't find traditional church engaging."

Discussions often focus on weighty topics—war, atheism, bioethics, forgiveness, the pursuit of happiness. Nearly every Theology on Tap group in New Jersey has presented or planned a session on sexuality, whether it's the Ocean Township parish's "Is the Church Anti-Sex?" or the West Orange and Montclair priests offering, "Let's Talk About Sex—the Sixth and Ninth Commandments," both presented last fall.

Dan Lancia, a 29-year-old stockbroker from Edison, liked the straightforward style of the June session he attended at Tumulty's Pub in New Brunswick, organized by St. Matthias Roman Catholic Church in Somerset. "Anytime you put

a religious message into real terms like that, I think it really helps,” says Lancia, who also attends conventional church services every week. “Things like this help tie it all together, giving you a practical application of the faith—things you can do in your everyday life.”

Since the Archdiocese of Chicago started Theology on Tap 24 years ago, the program has grown nationally. Now various denominations in 44 states and six countries officially offer the program, says the archdiocese’s Black, each institution having obtained permission to host from the archdiocese, which copyrighted Theology on Tap and sells a how-to manual for \$25. But Black says that she knows of many more organizations presenting similar programs. “There’s a recognition out there that the young-adult community is probably the least served community,” Black says.

Mary Korfmacher, 24, attends Mass every week at Westfield’s Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, sits on its pastoral council, and taught fourth grade at its parochial school. She’s saddened that more of her peers aren’t involved in the church, which is why she wanted to bring Theology on Tap to Westfield. At first her pastoral council questioned who would attend the sessions, noting that few young adults attend Mass. That, Korfmacher says, is the whole point.

“The older generation wants to put blame on us: ‘Why aren’t you coming?’ ” she says. “But I think it’s on both groups, because the young adults feel there’s nothing there for them.” Holy Trinity started Theology on Tap this fall, holding its sessions in a room at the Westwood, a banquet hall in Garwood. Patricia Martin, the church’s coordinator of youth and young adult ministry, organized the series with Korfmacher, offering advice based on sessions she attended in Summit.

One group of older parishioners that seem happy to lend support are the owners of the restaurants and bars where Theology on Tap is held. Philip Angelo, who co-owns La Pastaria, offered his restaurant and free food for St. Teresa’s first two sessions. Even after he began charging \$9 a plate for appetizers and unlimited pasta and pizza, he still forfeited most of his regular restaurant business during the Thursday night sessions. But Angelo says he was happy to help the church he attends in the town where he lives. “St. Teresa does a lot for us,” he says. “They help our business and they help us spiritually. We feel like we’re a blessed place.”

“The general person would think it would be abnormal to sit in a basement of a bar listening to a priest speak about spirituality,” says Katie Riley, 25, of Leonia, while attending one of St. Matthias’s sessions at a pub in New Brunswick. “But it’s like God can go with you anywhere.”

*Sharon Waters is a writer living in Metuchen.*