

San Francisco Chronicle Features Lane Center

"A priest walks into a bar -- and serves up some theology" by Marianne Costantinou, San Francisco Chronicle - Thursday, October 20, 2005

It certainly looks like your ordinary Irish pub: shamrock decorations dangling from the ceiling, Guinness beer advertising plaques on the wood-paneled walls, shepherd's pie on the menu. The stools along the bar are abuzz with the after-work, preparty crowd. The big-screen TV is playing baseball, and upstairs, some blokes are shooting pool.

But not all is typical on this Tuesday night at Ireland's 32, one of the city's most popular bars, on Geary Boulevard in the Richmond District. On one side of the bar, about two dozen folks are gathered round, and while most are nursing beers, they're wearing name tags and speaking softly when they're speaking at all. But mostly they're just listening to two speakers. The crowd is made up of young people in their 20s and 30s. The speakers are old enough to be their mothers -- if they didn't happen to be nuns.

This is "Theology on Tap," a national series of seminars run in bars and restaurants by the Catholic Church. The program began 25 years ago in the Archdiocese of Chicago as a way to reach out to young people who either didn't attend church regularly or had questions that they didn't feel comfortable discussing on church grounds. Today, parishes in at least 30 cities host the seminars. In San Francisco, they're run by the archdiocese's Office of Young Adult Ministry and the University of San Francisco's Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought.

By hosting the seminars in a relaxed social setting with people their own age, the hope is to encourage open discussion, said two recent lecturers, Mary Brian Kelber and Mary Criscione, who belong to the order of the Sisters of Mercy. Their topic: "Feminism in Today's Church."

"It's not being preached to on Sunday," said Kelber, a professor of nursing at the University of San Francisco.

And there's nothing untoward about talking about the religion in a bar, the lecturers said.

"This is where Jesus would be, with the people," said Criscione, a lecturer at St. Patrick's Seminary and at Santa Clara University.

Most of the talk at their meeting was not so much of faith but of church policy. Interestingly, though the topic was feminism, 11 of the 24 attendees were men. And although they wore street clothes, it was still surprising to hear the nuns be so, well, irreverent.

Both criticized the limited role of women in the church, especially in decisionmaking. Why shouldn't women help select the pope? Why are only celibate males dictating sexual ethics and practices, like birth control? Why are women relegated to just the behind-the-scenes, thankless grunt-work?

As the lecturers threw out these questions, people raised their hands or beer glasses to answer. At times, folks agreed. At others, they didn't. It never got heated, but the two-hour meeting was always compelling.

During intermission and afterward, several newcomers spoke enthusiastically about the session. They felt that its setting was especially conducive to the frank discussion.

"In church, you'd feel more inhibited," said Amy Crigger, 28, of Richmond, a practicing Catholic but irregular churchgoer. "Because you're thinking outside the ideas of the church, it's more natural to talk outside the church."

"If this were a traditional church setting, like the church basement or a retreat, I'd be saying 'Hail Mary' and holding my tongue," said Eileen Salinas, 33, who drove down from Martinez with two friends, and was one of the more vocal participants. "I'm very active in my parish, but usually I'm the only one there without silver hair. It's nice to be talking about these things with people your own age. ...

"You always get in debates in a pub. Heck, this pub would traditionally have political discussions," she added, pointing to the bar's ceiling, covered with protest signs championing the Irish Republican Army. "Why not have a theological discussion?"

Only one more session is scheduled for this year. The Rev. Stephen Privett, president of USF, will open the floor to a discussion of: "Immigration: Moral Convictions and Social Policies."

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