
'Dead Theologians' brings life to parish youth group



Teens at St. Philomena Parish in Des Moines listen as youth minister Doug Gonzales, at left, discusses St. Michael the Archangel during a recent meeting of the Dead Theologians Society. The meetings are conducted by candlelight to promote an atmosphere conducive to prayer. This photo was enhanced with a flash attachment.

By Terry McGuire

DES MOINES—The teens have dubbed their gathering spot the “Upper Room” because that’s where they meet every Sunday following the 5:30 p.m. Mass – upstairs in the parish office building behind St. Philomena Church.

Their evening begins downstairs with a light meal deliberately absent of soda pop and other sugary substances. Afterwards, the recorded music of Gregorian chant beckons them upstairs to evening prayer.

The mostly bare, blue-carpeted room is dotted with clusters of glass-shrouded candles. Their flickering flames will provide the only source of light for the approximately hour-long meeting. Icons adorn the walls to remind them of the saints. Icons of the saints they’ve already studied occupy a special place on one wall.

Some of the teens are wearing the black hooded sweatshirts with the emblazoned monstrance logo that identifies them as members.

“Does everybody have your bibles and catechisms?,” youth minister Doug Gonzales asks the 16 young

people seated on the floor this night.

The weekly meeting of the Dead Theologians Society (DTS) is under way.

The name draws from the popular 1989 movie starring Robin Williams, "Dead Poets Society." But instead of an unconventional prep school teacher seeking to inspire his students with poetry, the DTS seeks to inspire and educate high school age students and young adults about their faith by focusing on the lives of the saints.

The effort was started in 1997 in a Catholic parish in Newark, Ohio by the pastor and two staff members. For intrigue, they held the meetings not in a fluorescent-bathed classroom but in a room of the church basement featuring a catacomb-like setting of candlelight, incense and Gregorian chant.

Today, the DTS has a national office in Black Earth, Wis. and approximately 140 chapters around the country, said Eddie Cotter, Jr., a founder and national director. The St. Philomena chapter, launched about two months ago, is the first in the Northwest, he said.

Prayers for the souls in purgatory are a regular part of the meeting, as is the closing recitation of a mystery of the rosary. But "the main element is studying the life of the saint and how does that life relate to us," Gonzales said. "It's not just a story about an old, dead guy."

To date, they've studied Padre Pio, Bernadette of Lourdes, Maximilian Kolbe, St. Basil, St. Leo and St. Michael, among other saints. And though lesson plans are available from the national office, Gonzales does his own planning, determining what aspect of Catholic theology he'd like the teens to study that week, and then finding a saint whose life reflects that.

"When we wanted to study the doctrines of the Eucharist, that's when we talked about Padre Pio," Gonzales said. "When we wanted to talk about the role of Mary in the Catholic Church, we talked about St. Maximilian Kolbe."

The chapter is named in honor of St. Michael the Archangel. "We wanted a saint that had a little bit of attitude to kind of help us rise up and be strong," Gonzales said. Gonzales, a onetime Protestant minister who converted to Catholicism, joined the St. Philomena staff last August as pastoral assistant for faith formation and senior high ministry. The parish had gone several years without a youth minister.

Gonzales had known about the DTS through segments he'd seen on Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Network.

"So when I hired here, and when we made a decision to start a youth group, we listened to what everybody wanted... what model we wanted here...and the DTS was a good match."

He brought the idea for a DTS aimed at high school age teens to St. Philomena's pastor, Father Bryan Hersey, who liked the concept.

"I thought this is a good idea to get the kids to know that not only are these saints out there -- the saints actually have something to say," Father Hersey said.

Gonzales speaks to the teens with a passion for his topic while keeping the sessions relevant and sprinkled with humor. But it's far from an hour-long lecture. The teens make observations and ask questions. They're also assigned specific readings from Scripture to share with the others as the meeting proceeds.

"I never really liked youth groups," said Brian Livingston, a junior at Seattle's O'Dea High School. "I always thought they were kind of weird and dumb and not really for me." But he figured he'd give the Dead Theologians a try after his mother told him about the "really cool" new youth minister the parish had hired.

“I’ve really liked getting involved in my faith,” Livingston said. “It’s like the first time I’ve been able to ask questions and understand what’s going on.”

Marlys Hunt, a freshman at Seattle’s Holy Names Academy, longed for a parish youth group when she was a student at St. Philomena School. Now that she’s part of one, she said the weekly sessions have deepened her knowledge about her Catholic faith and church teachings. For instance, she has learned about Mary, and why “we believe she should be venerated” while the Protestants don’t.

Hunt also enjoys the catacomb-like setting. “It really sets the mood,” she said. Not all of the chapters meet in out-of-the-way locations, or gather by candlelight, said national director Cotter. Lighting that is conducive to prayer is what is sought.

Our policies say “that the format is to be emphasized more than the meeting space,” he said.

Chapters pay a start-up fee of \$500 to the nonprofit organization and then an annual fee of \$250 to “support the apostolate and its growth,” Cotter said. He said 15 new chapters have come aboard since an eight-month freeze on new chapters was lifted about a month ago.

Cotter believes the society’s popularity derives in part from the pope’s call for the new evangelization. The DTS also provides a “format that’s very palatable to young people,” Cotter said. “And at the same time we’re teaching real solid, interesting stuff.

“They get inspired by the lives of the saints,” he said. “They know that they’re real people” with flaws and challenges and not simply statues or faces on a holy card.

“The saints are actually doing a lot of the catechizing for us,” he said. “We’re just a delivery system for what’s there.”

Thomas Aquinas, John Vianney and Catherine of Sienna are among the most popular saints, Cotter said. Some of the others have seasonal popularity: St. Nicholas during Advent; St. Patrick during March.

The apostolate’s signature black hoods, subterranean meeting spaces and mysterious name join to grab the attention of youths when a chapter first arrives in a parish, Cotter noted. Such trappings, however, can also raise suspicions about a new “secret society” slipping into the parish if people aren’t properly informed.

To avoid such misconceptions at St. Philomena’s, Father Hersey makes the presentation of the sweatshirts and accompanying chaplets and scapulars to new members during the weekend Mass – in front of the community. The chapter also recently hosted an open house to answer any lingering questions about the DTS.

“Sometimes people (mistakenly) thought we had some type of hoods over our heads with long-flowing capes or gowns or something, but that’s not it at all,” Cotter said. “It’s just a hooded sweatshirt. And every kid and most adults have a hooded sweatshirt with (the name of) their sports team and school on it.”

On the society’s stationery and Web site, “we’re quick to reference the passage in Romans, 6:11, where St. Paul said ‘to be dead to sin but alive in Christ,’” Cotter said. The organizations motto is “Dead to the World Alive in Christ.”

Several youth ministers contacted by *The Catholic Northwest Progress* said they hadn’t heard about the DTS or they felt the society was too conservative for their parish.

But Gonzales and the teens said efforts such as the Dead Theologians Society are needed, particularly because Catholics in general – not just the young people – lack a basic knowledge of their faith, especially when compared with other denominations.

They know Christ is truly present, but they can’t tell you why,” Gonzales said, “so that’s what we’re trying to correct here at St. Philomena.”

James Ferguson, a senior at Thomas Jefferson High School, feels Catholics have a duty to go out and learn their faith. “Because if you’re confronted by somebody of a different religion, you can actually tell them what your faith is, what you think, and even put up a decent argument against their’s, instead of saying, ‘I don’t know.’”

<http://www.seattlearch.org/FormationAndEducation/Progress/122004/Dead+Theologians++++++12-02-04.htm>