News



Michael Sacco, executive director of the Center for Student Formation and First Year Experience at Boston College, speaks to students at an Agape Latte event. (Elizabeth Campbell)



by Jesse Remedios

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March 21, 2019
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Hillside Cafe is one of the most popular dining facilities on the Boston College campus. Busy students shuffle in and out to grab coffee and sandwiches on their way to class, the gym, the library.

On the first Tuesday of each month, students who wander into the cafe around 8:30 p.m. often hang around a little longer than usual when they notice some of their friends, and a few hundred other classmates, seated around a light brown backdrop in the center of the room. Once there, they enjoy a program of trivia, live music and, the main event, a 30-minute story about faith.

Some in the Boston College community credit these stories, part of the school's popular Agape Latte program, for keeping students connected to their faith in an era when many young people are leaving the church.

"So many students say that talking about God to peers is 'awkward,' " said Karen Kiefer, director of Agape Latte and Boston College's Church in the 21st Century Center. "Sharing an Agape Latte story frees them from that awkwardness, and they can have a conversation that they are interested in having in a very approachable way."



Coffee cup with an Agape Latte sleeve pictured in Gargan Hall, Bapst Library at Boston College (Megan Hopkins)

Getting students to discuss and reflect on their faith is the whole point of Agape Latte, which launched at Boston College in 2006 through a partnership with the Church in the 21st Century Center and Campus Ministry. Agape Latte aims to provide students with an engaging program that allows students, no matter how religious, to talk about their faith in a warm and approachable atmosphere.

"Agape is such a low-risk, easy, welcoming environment that if you're exploring, or if you just want to hear an awesome talk that resonates with college students, it brings you in," said Pat Mulach, senior at Boston College and co-chair of the Agape

Latte student board.

"Bringing storytellers, lattes, desserts and God together in a casual coffee bar setting seemed like a strong programming brew," said Kiefer.

While the laid-back atmosphere may be what initially attracts students, the stories told at Agape Latte are the true centerpiece of the program. "The distinctive form of an Agape Latte presentation is storytelling rather than a lecture," said Keifer.

Each month, Agape Latte's student board invites one speaker to deliver their story. The group is encouraged to think about individuals on campus whom students know, respect, relate to or talk about, or who are individuals who have an important story that might resonate with students. Some prominent alumni have even returned to campus with their own stories, including actor Chris O'Donnell and former NFL quarterback Matt Hasselbeck.

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Speakers are prompted to share a story about a time in their life when they faced a struggle or decision and how their faith either changed or helped them. Before the big event at Hillside Cafe each month, students meet with presenters for a coaching session to help them share their story in a more powerful way.

"The best speakers share authentic stories — snapshots from their faith and life journeys — to pass on transformative lessons to students," said Kiefer. "Even though a story is about them or someone they know, the story is for the students — hoping that the story, and the lesson it shares, can help the students as they journey."

The Agape Latte experience extends beyond just the 30-minute story in Hillside Cafe.

"Different speakers will connect with different people in various ways," said Kathleen Mikkelsen, senior at Boston College and the other co-chair of the Agape Latte student board.

Mikkelsen remembers having a powerful conversation this fall following a talk by professor Brian Robinette. Robinette began his Agape Latte story by ringing a small bell and encouraging students to engage with silence. Mikkelsen didn't connect with Robinette's message initially, but she was surprised to see her friend — who had a

rough summer — was moved to tears while reflecting on the story later that night. "That's exactly what I needed to hear," Mikkelsen's friend told her.



Peter Trainor and Elizabeth Stief, Boston College, both 2015 graduates of Boston, speak to students at an Agape Latte event. (Elizabeth Campbell)

Similarly, after hearing a story on the theme of "waiting," Mulach recalled a late-night talk with his roommate about searching for God amid the anxiety of job interviews and graduating from college. "That conversation doesn't naturally happen," said Mulach. "Having a platform like this to spark that conversation really goes a long way."

Kiefer firmly believes that if an Agape Latte story helps one student on their faith journey, then the program was successful. The numbers reflect that Agape Latte is having a much greater impact, though.

In the early years of Agape Latte, only about 25 to 50 students attended events. Currently, thanks to creative marketing around campus and on social media, 400 to 500 students typically attend the six main Agape Latte events per academic year. Five years ago, the student board expanded Agape Latte and launched "Espresso Your Faith Week," with a week's worth of additional creative events to help students

see God working in their lives.

According to Kiefer, more than 60,000 students have attended Agape Latte events in person, and an additional 150,000 people have viewed events online through the Church in the 21st Century's YouTube channel.

Four years ago, the Church in the 21st Century Center began working with colleges across the country to bring Agape Latte to their campuses. There are currently 44 colleges and 13 high schools that host Agape Latte events each year.

When asked what she hopes students take away from Agape Latte, Kiefer said, "We hope that they realize our faith stories matter. They remind us who we are, where have been and help us see all that is possible through God's amazing grace.

"These stories get them thinking, get them talking and these conversations can change perspectives and change lives."

[Jesse Remedios is an NCR Bertelsen intern.]

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 22-March 7, 2019** print issue under the headline: Sharing faith stories over casual coffee.