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Center tries to lure lapsed Catholics back into fold

Dan Goldberg The Star-Ledger | Mar. 10, 2011

(Photos courtesy of the St. Paul Inside the Walls Web site.)

MADISON, N.J. -- A small bucket filled with bottles of cold beer sat on the floor, down the hall from the chapel, as about a dozen young adults lounged around on comfortable couches.

They weren?t there to pray or preach -- just to enjoy one another?s company at St. Paul Inside the Walls: the Catholic Center for Evangelization at a former high school.

Fr. Geno Sylva doesn?t know if his guests will return to the Madison campus for a more religious experience.

But he has faith.

As the center?s director, it?s Sylva?s job to find new ways to accomplish an old mission?attracting back some of the one in 10 Americans who are former Catholics, many of whom are disillusioned or disassociated with their religion.

Stemming the exodus, Sylva believes, will require reaching out in ways that might seem unorthodox.

And so St. Paul Inside the Walls has implemented programs to attract a broad constituency. The name refers to Sylva?s aim to bring people inside the walls of the church.

?What we?re doing is offering outreach to those who practice the Catholic faith, to those who have left the Catholic faith and to those of no faith tradition at all,? Sylva said. ?What we?ve done is we?ve spent a lot of time studying society and culture so we could invite people to come to know God in ways that would resonate with them.?

For young adults, that might be pub night, which takes place every Tuesday.

Sudan Martin, a 30-year-old graphic designer from Brooklyn, works on St. Paul?s website but Catholicism wasn?t a big part of his youth. He recently attended his first St. Paul event.

?This is a completely different experience for me,? Martin said. ?I?ll definitely be coming back.?

That?s what Sylva wants to hear.

He compared St. Paul Inside the Walls with a halfway house, but instead of reintroducing people to a community, Sylva is reintroducing them to Catholicism, and instead of finding people a job, he shepherds them to a parish.

The setting is inviting. St. Paul Inside the Walls recently completed a multimillion-dollar renovation, and its 40-acre campus boasts stunning sculptures and peaceful prayer gardens.

Paterson Bishop Arthur Serratelli said bringing people in?creating disciples?is a central tenet of the faith, but changing times have spurred the new approaches.

?The mission is the same as given to the apostles, but the way that we live out the mission changes to meet the needs of our day,? Serratelli said.

There are similar efforts far beyond New Jersey -- Boston Cardinal Sean O?Malley launched a ?Catholics Come Home? initiative for Lent, and parishes in the Archdiocese of Washington will be open every Wednesday to hear confessions as part of the Advent-and-Lent ?The Light is On For You? campaign.

Church experts are putting a special emphasis on young Catholics?in some cases trying to keep them in the church before they decide to leave. Two-thirds of Catholic ?millenials??those born after 1980?leave the church before they turn 23.

?The make-or-break period is adolescence,? said Fr. Dave Farnum, the director of vocations for the Paulist order, at a recent discussion in Grand Rapids, Mich.

According to a 2009 report from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, two in three ex-Catholics say they left because they stopped believing in the church?s teachings; 58 percent disagree with its position on abortion and homosexuality; and 48 percent left because they do not support the church?s ban on contraception.

?It?s hard to say why they leave because it depends on where they?re headed,? said Farnum.

St. Paul hosts a Catholic Q&A on Tuesday nights where about two dozen adults can pepper a priest with religious questions. Upstairs, musicians can work on their Christian/alternative pop-rock music, which they play at local bars or concerts as a way to bring people closer to the faith.

?Music is very universal but it is also very personal,? said one musician, Derek Gazal. ?In that way, it is a lot like God.?

Elsewhere in the building, women meet in a group called Rachel?s Vineyard to discuss their feelings about the abortions they have had?all part of the tapestry that Sylva and Serratelli attempt to weave in hopes of bringing people back who feel abandoned or uninspired.

?I had this idea long before I became a bishop to reach out to people whose professional lives have gone beyond what their religious training taught them, and to let them see how much the church can offer them,? Serratelli said. ?St. Paul Inside the Walls begins a great adventure ... to move beyond what parishes can do.?

[Dan Goldberg writes for *The Star-Ledger* in Newark, N.J. Paul R. Kopenkoskey of *The Grand Rapids Press* contributed to this story.]

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