

All Saints' Theology Café: A Meditation on Being Part of the Body of Christ

For a little over a year, parishioners of All Saints Orthodox Church in Hartford, CT, have been gathering informally to discuss subjects related to theology, the Church, and more generally, the experience of living the Orthodox faith in community and the world. Named the *Theology Café*, this monthly event hosted and facilitated by Fr. John Jillions offers an opportunity to grow relationships with fellow church-goers, welcome newcomers, and share thoughts on and experiences in the life of faith with each other. Originally formed to give place and time to deeper discussions of theology and practice, *Theology Café* began when Amy Hayashida approached the clergy with the idea “to have community outside of Sunday morning and at a place where people could share food and drink. We had heard about ‘Theology on Tap,’ a similar event held by other denominations such as Catholicism, thought it was a bit more formal that we wanted for our series.”

So, on October 3rd, 2023, the first assembly of the group met. Attendees were given some framing around theological discussions and a guiding principle: Participants were free to use whatever was discussed, but not to identify who said what unless they received permission to do so. This principle’s purpose was to help people feel free to speak, ask questions and try out new thoughts, lower their guard, come together, break down barriers, build trust, and generate ideas. They were then asked to write down questions they would like to discuss. Questions submitted included: *“What does it mean that God is Trinity?”* *“How did you come to Christ and the Church, and what was helpful and what was not?”* *“How do we understand or approach forgiving people who have hurt us?”* *“How do we deal with death in the Orthodox Church?”*

Amy remembers, “initially, it was very loose and we would chat generally, but we found it goes better if there is a topic to start with and that has become the routine.” Father John agreed, commenting on the necessity of facilitation to balance more active participants with reserved once, and to encourage well-rounded discussion. “It takes a certain willingness to allow for a little bit of messiness and not being totally in order, allowing for the Spirit to act... to trust the Spirit is there and in the church and it will stay in its ‘orbit’, so to speak.”

Now, a typical first Tuesday of the month at the Jillions’ house begins with parishioners from diverse walks of life meeting over light (usually) snacks and greeting each other with stories of the week or a follow-up on a recent homily or shared book. Then, with their beverage of choice, be it tea or stouter stuff, they settle into the living room and prepare to muse on a topic set forth by Fr. John Jillions. Father John starts with a prayer and a scripture reading or a saint’s life, and then kicks off discussion with a question. Recent conversations have centered on the delegation sent by Metropolitan Tikhon to Pope Francis’ funeral, a talk by Father Constantine on the priesthood and

laity, and relating to others, of any faith, as an Orthodox Christian. Other topics have ranged from the life of Saint Maria of Paris to thoughts on prayer and living out faith in the context of politics from Bishop Benedict when he was in attendance.

“I always look forward to hearing what other people are thinking about and connecting with each other before and afterwards,” says Amy. Fr. John reflects, “it hasn’t changed much. It’s always been relaxed, about ten people, different people each time, but often the same core. A certain influx of newcomers keeps it fresh. And that it continues and doesn’t feel stale is good evidence it serves a function while other more traditional gatherings of the parish continue such as the weekly bible study after vespers and a catechumen’s group.”

Foremost among the strengths found in this series has been that, by bringing individual perspectives together to gain and grow from each other’s experiences, these conversations have grown a greater spirit of community and appreciation for the variety and vitality of Orthodox, and spiritual life. Several in the group have made comments similar to Fr. John’s conclusion here: “Honestly, I’m amazed. We’re coming up to Pentecost. Jesus talks about the ever-flowing fountain that’s within; I’ve found that it doesn’t dry up. Even with the same people there, people have experiences, wisdom, people have thoughts that I learn from every single time. And that’s something to keep in mind – everybody in the church has a degree of inspiration and insight and others learn from that. Without exception, there’s something I take away... it is the simple fact that God works in people’s lives and we get to see that.”