

FIRE UP PARISHIONERS' FAITH WITH THE SEARCH

“There’s nowhere else they can go to talk about faith without being ridiculed or judged—whether it’s by their families or on the job.”

Fr. Jeff Gubbiotti

Pastor, Holy Rosary and Church of the Assumption, Ansonia, CT

“Where’s a place where we can invite them to come back?”

That question ran through Fr. Jeff Gubbiotti’s head as he thought about his parishioners at his two parishes of Holy Rosary and Church of the Assumption in Ansonia, Connecticut. Among the two parishes’ 2,000 families were many grandparents whose children and grandchildren were not practicing the faith.

A campfire sprang into the pastor’s mind as a place of comfort and conversation. And that thought led to the image of tongues of fire, hearkening to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

From there, the idea evolved quickly into a plan. Events would take place at alternating sites, every two to three weeks, in the evening, around a fire pit. There would be separate men’s and women’s nights so that parents would not have to find a babysitter. Men were invited to come to “Holy Smoke! Saints and Cigars Around the Fire Pit.” Women could attend the Catholic Women’s Night Around the Fire Pit, advertised as “Rosary and Rosé.”

In addition to holding the promise of a faith-filled, yet fun and relaxing evening for parishioners, Fr. Jeff knew that for those away from the Church, an invitation to a campfire held more appeal than an invitation to



“When a few guys missed a few weeks, catching up is as simple as logging onto FORMED.”



Fr. Jeff Gubbiotti

a meeting. Young people, in particular, would be more likely to come sit around the fire than sign up to sit around a table in the parish hall.

The event kicked off in 2018. Fr. Jeff led off each evening with an opening prayer and the story of a favorite saint from the calendar. The women prayed the Rosary, while the men listened to a talk from Bishop Robert Barron.

Three years later, with the blessing of a FORMED subscription, Fr. Jeff decided to offer *THE SEARCH* to the men of the parish.

Gathered around the fire pit, the men would watch an episode of *THE SEARCH*. Fr. Jeff came prepared with discussion starters to spark informal conversation.

“The conversation ranged all over the place from there,” he said.

The formal part of each evening was set for an hour but often went far past that. Some nights, at eleven o’clock, Fr. Jeff would tell the men, “I’ve got to go to bed. Put out the fire when you leave.”

Fr. Jeff cited two reasons for the men’s willingness to talk.

A couple of the men told their pastor that “there’s nowhere else they can go to talk about faith without being ridiculed or judged—whether it’s by their families or on the job,” Fr. Jeff said.

The ambiance around the fire was the second factor.

“Men sitting around a table tends to be awkward,” Fr. Jeff said. “Around a fire pit is a whole different thing. Lulls in the conversation are okay. You just stand up and stir the fire a bit. Instead of feeling like a meeting, it feels like an encounter.”

Fr. Jeff praised *THE SEARCH* for its production values, editing, and music. More importantly, he said, *THE SEARCH* uses an evidence-based approach for the existence of God and effectively disputes the idea that science and religion are incompatible.

“The directness of the questions at the end of each episode leaves you with something to think about,” he said.

Some of the men in the group have told their pastor that they want to share *THE SEARCH* with people in their families.

“That’s evangelization,” Fr. Jeff said. “When we have that personal relationship with God, we want to share it with joy and witness.”



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