

BYBLOS

A Traditional Christian Book Club that Welcomes Seekers, Inquirers and just Plain Curious Folks

“Ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading.” – Rainer Maria Rilke*

The Mission of BYBLOS:

We are traditional Christians who engage in conversations about Truth, Meaning, Purpose and Life, focusing on a specific book that participants have read before the once a month meeting. Together we cultivate wisdom, virtue and charitable acceptance of others with whom we may not completely agree.

Our disclaimer:

We are not a seminar on Orthodox Christianity, though the values and beliefs of some or even many members may convey this impression. Rather, we are a gathering opportunity for intellectual and spiritual growth, benefiting from the experience of others and the exploration of new and diverse literary landscapes.

Our Name:

BYBLOS is an ancient Phoenician city in present day Lebanon. It was known for its import of papyrus (the paper of its day) from Egypt. The English word "Bible", was ultimately derived from the Greek word *bíblōs* (βίβλος) for “book”.

Our Fellowship:

It is not necessary to be a Christian to attend our meetings. All are welcomed. We do request, however, that each participant complete a short 10-question survey and read through this 6-page document so that we can offer the best reading and discussion environment possible.

Our Format:

The format for our meetings is based on the findings of two surveys of book clubs by BookBrowse, parsing over 100,000 responses from 5,500 book club readers. BookBrowse.com is a website that recommends books and provides extensive resources to book clubs since 1998. From the valuable information that was gleaned

from the surveys we have sought to incorporate “best practices of book clubs” for BYBLOS.

We gather on the third Tuesday of each month from 7:00 PM – 9:00 PM at Nativity of Christ Greek Orthodox Church, located at 1110 Highland Drive, Novato, CA 94949. Approximately five weeks before the meeting, BYBLOS participants receive an email with the title of the book to be read and discussed, along with suggestions where to acquire the book. Ideally, the email also includes (or may follow at a later date) guided questions designed to spark conversation about the book at the upcoming meeting. We gather at 7:00 PM for 30 minutes of socializing. At 7:30 PM the meeting is convened and begins with a short opening prayer. The first 5 minutes are given to any housekeeping items. The second 5 minutes are given to a brief summary about the author and the history of the book. Open conversation begins at approximately 7:40 PM. We end the meeting at 9:00 PM with a short closing prayer.

We read a variety of books, from novels with Christian themes or ethical dilemmas, to biographies, history, spirituality, biblical exegesis, sacramental life, etc.

The Facilitator:

Anthony Scott, the facilitator of BYBLOS, can be reached via email at orthodoxconsultant@gmail.com. In the interest of full disclosure, Anthony served as an Orthodox priest for 38 years. He is now retired and a member of Nativity of Christ Greek Orthodox Church. He believes that the Holy Spirit is everywhere present filling all things and can be found in many shocking and surprising places in the world. “The wind blows where it wills, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

Key Findings of the Two Book Club Surveys from Bookbrowse

There is a widely held perception that book clubs are primarily social groups who use books as a pretext to get together for gossip and a glass of wine. Our research indicates that this stereotype is far from the reality. While there are some groups that are book clubs in name only, 84% of private book clubs and 90% of public groups spend at least 40 minutes of each meeting discussing the book, and most have a facilitator to keep the conversation on track. Generally, the longer a book club spends discussing the book, the happier the members are. In groups who discuss for 20 minutes or less, 55% of respondents express themselves “very happy.” This rises steadily all the way up to 81% who are “very happy” in groups that discuss for 75 minutes or more.

That's not to say that socializing is not important; 71% of those in private book clubs and 43% of those in public groups feel that a social element is very important. But it is generally secondary to the book discussion because, as many of those who value both discussion and friendship observe, it is through the open debate and sharing of perspectives that friendship grows.

Another common misperception is that book clubs mainly consist of women reading "women's" or literary fiction. While 88% of private book clubs are all women, many would be happy to have men in their group, and 48% of public book clubs have male participants. As for what they read, while 70% of book clubs do read fiction most of the time, the qualities that book clubs look for in their books result in most groups reading across a wide range of books straddling multiple genres, including nonfiction; and the longer a group is together, the broader their reading tends to be.

This report shows that most book club members share a common interest in focused, stimulating and respectful discussion, with 98% saying that respect for each other's opinions is very important. But that does not mean that they play safe with their book selections to avoid differences of opinion. 71% of respondents say that it is very important that their group's choices challenge them as a reader; and, when asked what they personally look for in a book club book, 55% say they are drawn to books that are "a bit controversial."

Of course, disagreements happen and, if they are not resolved, book clubs can disband, or people leave.

Despite occasional issues, it is important to note that most book club members describe their group as a vital and fun aspect of their life. Book clubbers enjoy a sense of community and, often, personal friendships within their group; but, above all else, they value intellectual challenge and growth.

More Information from the Surveys on Book Clubs

74% are private (members are personally invited to join, or they are voted in)

26% are open

85% of book clubs meet monthly

Size of Book Clubs:

- 65% of private book clubs have between 8-15 members
- 57% of public book clubs have between 8-15 members
- 18% of public book clubs have 16-20 members

- 9% of public book clubs have 21-30 members
- 4% of public book clubs have 31+ members

81% of public book clubs enjoy 75%+ attendance rate

Book club participation increases with age

88% of private book clubs are women only

1% of private book clubs are men only

What participants look for in the book that is selected for reading and discussion:

- 97% - Will provoke good conversation
- 96% - Think my book club will enjoy it
- 95% - The book is well written
- 73% - Think my club will be challenged by it
- 60% - It's inspiring
- 57% - The genre is different from what we've recently read
- 53% - It's a bit controversial

91% of public book clubs meet between 1-2 hours

The longer that book club members spend discussing a book, the generally happier they are in public book club meetings

63% have the same facilitator; 30% rotate facilitators

Typical Tasks of a facilitator:

- Leads the discussion, helping the group to stay on topic and assists in encouraging all members to share
- Prepares or provides questions to discuss
- Presents background information on the author and the book
- Sends out meeting reminder(s)
- Chooses the book or presents options for the group to choose the next book

Some groups identify certain topics as off-limits such as sex or politics

81% of public groups do not serve alcohol

95% of members of public groups are either "very happy" or "happy" with their club

92% of public groups say their book club is "important" or "very important" to them

The main reasons people leave book clubs:

- People not reading the book before attending the meeting
- Members who rarely speak
- Book selection
- Not staying on topic
- Integrating new members
- Overly dominant participants (ODPs)
- Poor attendance
- Did not like how the discussions were conducted
- Felt the group in general did not share my values

Suggestions on how to be a positive presence in meetings:

1. Read the book; note passages that are meaningful to you and share these at the meeting
2. If provided, reflect upon the guided discussion questions, making a note or two on how you respond to the questions or a specific question
3. Listen attentively when others share
4. Resist engaging in sidebar conversations
5. Try to be regular in attendance
6. Be welcoming and feel welcomed
7. Self-monitor the length of time you speak
8. Accept others and love them as God loves them, though you may disagree with their perspective or opinion
9. Share your thoughts and feelings; your vocal contribution is important
10. Be sensitive to others present who may be uncomfortable with “purple language” (swearing, cussing, etc.)

BYBLOS CONVERSATION COVENANT

1. We are open, courteous, curious and accountable to one another.
2. We don't attack, criticize or accuse.
3. We don't engage in sidebar conversations, which can distract those nearby when someone else is publicly speaking.
4. We are fully present, extending welcome, and presuming we are welcomed.
5. We acknowledge one another as equals and treat each other with respect allowing time for all to speak.

6. We stay curious about each other. Curiosity helps create good conversation and enables us to share our deep longings and real fears when we feel others are genuinely interested in us.
7. We recognize that we need each other's help to become better listeners. We will listen intently to what is shared and the feelings beneath the words. We will all take responsibility to ensure that no one person dominates the conversation.
8. We are not reluctant to disagree. Risking an expression of disagreement can be a sign of respect for the other and an acknowledgement that together we are on a quest for understanding. We will listen with charity, as Saint Benedict encouraged, "with the ear of our heart".
9. We slow down so we have time to think and reflect. Conversation creates the conditions for us to rediscover the joy of thinking together. We will take time to enjoy each other's company and remember to pause between our thoughts to give each other time to reflect on what has been shared and to hear each other.
10. We expect our conversations to be messy at times. Life doesn't move in straight lines and neither does a good conversation.
11. We know that it is possible for us to emerge from our time together enlightened, inspired, surprised and less burdened than when we came. We affirm that this time can provide renewal, refreshment and new possibilities; that seeds planted here will keep growing and flourishing in the days ahead in service to God's Church and to the poor, the needy and the suffering.
12. We honor deep confidentiality when necessary.

Adapted from "Touchstones" in The Center for Courage and Renewal's Circle of Trust Retreats, "Conversation Covenants" of the Fund for Theological Exploration, and The Catholic Common Ground Initiative.

If you remain interested in BYBLOS, having just finished reading the Introduction, please complete the ten question survey which can be accessed at the same place you found this document on the parish website - Ministries/ BYBLOS Book Club/ Survey. After you complete the Survey, you will receive confirmation of your participation in BYBLOS.