Heritage Week 2006 – Monday, January 23rd
Monday of the Third Week of Ordinary Time

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My Father was chemist at Hanford Atomic Works, as I grew up in nearby Richland, WA. All of the plutonium for making the nuclear weapons of the Cold War was produced in that facility. As a boy of 12, I remember helping my mother clean out some boxes in the attic in preparation for a move. I opened a dusty old box at the far end of the attic and found a certificate of appreciation to my Father for his work on the Manhattan project, dated in 1945, a year after my birth. I asked my mother about it, and was told firmly “Put that back and don’t ever bring that up in this house.”

I never spoke with him directly about it during his life, but it was clear that he carried a great burden of guilt, both about the effect of the bombs in Japan, and later in his life, for the results of his work at Hanford. He was not a religious man, but had a deep sense of integrity and moral responsibility. And he was deeply torn by the difficult morals of the questions of Who Lives, Who Dies, and especially, Who Decides – questions writ large in the lives of the scientists who worked on the projects in which he was involved.

The idea that science and religion can be divorced from each other – dis-integrated – is a problem that has haunted us throughout history. Most scientists are really people of deep faith: Einstein, Fermi, Oppenheimer, to name a few involved directly with the Bomb. The more one studies the beauty and intricacy of Creation, the more one becomes convinced of the loving hand behind that creation.

Both St Francis de Sales and Fr. Brisson were deeply and personally influenced by societies in which the effort to dissociate science and faith had been taken to extremes. The sectarian fervor which characterized Geneva and many of the Protestant enclaves of the Europe of St. Francis’ time made it risky to think or speak independently on any topic – whether science or religion – and forced him to shepherd Geneva from afar. Fr. Brisson suffered the loss of his home as he lived through the anti-clerical prejudice of a France convinced that only Science had answers for human problems.

We, too, live in a world which on the one hand tells us that only Science can be depended upon to discover truth. That the super-natural world is un-repeatable, un-measurable, and thus un-real. And others in our world tell us that the world of the scientist is wrong when placed against the literal Word of God as they read it. That what our experimental and investigative approach tells us is true cannot be true
because it directly contradicts what their faith tells them. The current “Intelligent Design” controversy is just as phony and irrelevant today as the effort to wipe out religious thought and practice was during the Enlightenment. And just as risky.

We live also in a world which readily throws away that which it finds outdated, useless, or inconvenient. Sadly, wrongly, as a society we all-too-easily extend this thinking to God’s people, our brothers and sisters. In particular, today, we mourn the continuing loss of innocent lives as our brothers and sisters yet to be born who are seen by many as inconvenient, unwanted, an interference in our plans rather than as a gift from God. A very real and devastating result of dis-integrating our faith from our lives.

The history of David as Israel’s king in many ways shows us the risk of this kind of dis-integration of our faith and life. He is certainly remembered as one of the great leaders of his time. And his gift of the many psalms attributed to him are an indication of his love of our God. But in his desire to possess Bathsheba, he engineered the death of a good friend and great general. And in his love of power, he lost the love, and then the life of his son Absolom. Despite this, God remains faithful to David. David comes to understand the ways in which he has let his dis-integrated faith lead him to do really horrible things. And God forgives.

We celebrate this week, the heritage of our Patron and Founders – the many gifts with which they have enriched us. Among these is the gift of an integrated understanding of our faith – one which does not allow us to artificially compartmentalize the pieces of our lives. Francis de Sales was an avid reader of the sciences. With the benefit of 400-plus years of natural history we have learned since his time, we certainly read his analogies to nature and see much that is no longer accurate. The stories of the bees and clams that brought knowing grins to us during our novitiate were and remain nevertheless a clear intent to bring the scientific knowledge of the day to a practical understanding and real practice of faith.

We celebrate in a particular way this evening, the relationship between St. Francis de Sales and the Barnabite teacher of physics, John Anthony Baranzano. It is in this relationship that we find the best of the relationship between science and faith. A search for truth in world, enlightened by the truth of the Loving God and the Saving Christ without whom this world would have no meaning, have no existence.

We remember too, the tilted world in which our founder Fr. Brisson ministered. It was a world which saw value only in the provable, measurable, profitable. And it was a world which devalued the sacredness of each person born of God’s loving hand. It is no wonder that St. Francis de Sales would remind us that we are each made in God’s image – and made, therefore in the image of one another. It is no wonder why Fr. Brisson would remind his confreres to always keep in mind the sacredness of our students – and to pray for them constantly.
But it is this same Fr. Brisson who was so clearly absorbed by the technology of the day. To visit his rooms near Troyes, and to see the clock he built and the other ways he tinkered with what today would be computers and ethernet cards, is to understand the ways in which he brought together his faith and his interest in the science and technology of his day at the service of the young men and women whom he and his new community served.

The history of the Catholic scientist and the Catholic University is rich with men and women who have integrated their faith and their science into a powerful and productive resource for human life and faith. From Gregor Mendel, the Augustinian monk who looked beyond the simple “blending” theory of inheritance to the beginnings of an understanding of genes and their actions, to the priests J B McElwane, the founder of modern seismology and Georges LeMaitre, who first proposed the Big Bang theory of cosmology, Catholic scientists have played a central role in the formulation of human knowledge consistent with the tenets of our faith. Indeed in the view of some authors, including Thomas E. Woods, Jr’s “How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization” this contribution has been essential to the progress of our world as we know it now.

But citing the “Big Names” is certainly not to ignore the day-to-day contributions of the many teachers, students, physicians, priests, moms, dads, – all of us, who live our lives comfortably integrating our Catholic faith with the events of our daily lives. And find no contradiction between the world and its beauty as we find it unfolding before us, and the love with which our God continues to bless us and our world as we learn more about it each day.

The Baranzano forum discussion this evening will center on the question of who makes the difficult call when decisions regarding health care – especially when life-and-death issues are involved. We are blessed with many physicians and others in the health care professions here in the Lehigh Valley who live out their faith as they practice their call to care for others. Many of these have spoken to us and will speak to us tonight at these forums. What comes through clearly is that they are women and men of great faith and great knowledge. And for them, there is no contradiction between how they know their God and how they know their profession. The decisions which need to be made are often extremely difficult as anyone who has served as a hospital chaplain including our own Fr. Becker understand all too well.

But what they – and we – understand is that we cannot ever dis-integrate our faith from our knowledge, our religion from our science. They are both equally great gifts from a loving God. And they are both given to us to be placed at the service of God’s kingdom – and at the service and care for one another – as we are each sacred gifts from God.
And we understand, too, what David came to understand in the difficulties and triumphs of his Kingship – that however difficult the decisions, however limited the choices seem, when we remain faithful to the gifts of a loving God, God remains faithful to us.

D.S.B.