DeSales celebrates 400th anniversary of patron saint's most influential work

By FRANK DEVLIN (Special to The Morning Call)

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The upcoming Heritage Week at DeSales University, celebrating the lasting influence of school namesake St. Francis DeSales, is a bit more special than usual.

This year, 2009, marks the 400th anniversary of the one-time Bishop of Geneva's most influential writing, the 1609 tome "Introduction to the Devout Life."

A literary roundtable discussion of the book, a guide to nurturing one's spirituality while navigating the challenges of the physical world, will be held 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at the DeSales Center.

Other Heritage Week events, all of which are free and open to the public, include a Monday forum on bioethics, including Peter Lawler, a member of President Bush's Council on Bioethics, and a media discussion Wednesday with Raymond Arroyo of Eternal World Television Network.

Heritage Week, now in its fourth year, is presented by the Center Valley school's Salesian Center for Faith and Culture. The center was opened in 2000 to highlight the idea that "faith and culture can work together, that they both enrich each other," says the center's director, the Rev. Thomas Dailey. "Religion is not separate from everyday life."
"Introduction to the Devout Life," Dailey says, includes "the principle on which everything the Salesian Center does is based."

The book, one of many writings by DeSales, grew out of letters DeSales wrote to the wife of a relative of his. The relative was an official with the French court, and the woman, Madame de Charmoisy, was seeking guidance on how to remain spiritual despite the distractions of the courtly life.

DeSales (1567-1622) did not advocate turning away from the physical world, says the Rev. Bernard Bangley, who has written modernizations of "Devout Life" and other works by DeSales, and who will be on the panel of the literary roundtable.

Instead, Bangley says, DeSales "would like you to spend more time in prayer and carry that spirituality throughout the day."

Dailey agrees.

"Not only can [spirituality] be lived out in the midst of everyday activities," he says, "for the vast majority of folks, that's where they are supposed to be holy."

Dailey says there is a story about a mother of several children who wrote to DeSales, worrying that she couldn't get to church frequently enough. "He said, 'You should not be going to church all the time. You should be taking care of your kids. It's in being a mother that you should be holy.'"

Bangley says DeSales preached that "spirituality is not exclusively for those living cloistered lives. It's for everyone." In its accessibility, Bangley says, "Devout Life" "stands alone" from other works, including the classic spiritual guidebook "Imitation of Christ."

Bangley, a Presbyterian, says the Catholic saint's prose speaks to him because it focuses more on how anyone can live a holy life, and not so much about doing so the Catholic way. "He doesn't insist that I dance exactly to his tune," he says. The message is "the most important thing is [the state of] your spiritual life."

It turns out that DeSales' book has ecumenical appeal, Bangley says, even though DeSales spent part of his career trying to convert Protestants like Bangley back to the Catholic fold. "Historically we would have been at enmity," he says.

Just as "Devout Life" has transcended denomination, it has transcended borders, languages and time. "There were at least a dozen translations within 20 years," Dailey says, and the book remains popular, and relevant, to this day.

Some passages ring with timeless common sense, Dailey says, like when DeSales "says we worry ourselves silly over things we can't control. The more we learn to accept the things we can't control, the more at peace we're going to be.

"What he writes in the book is focused on how to live a good life -- living a virtuous life, how to be humble.

"That applies to everybody," Dailey says.

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