the wisdom of St. Francis de Sales applied to contemporary issues

by

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ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) was well known in his day for the insightful counsel he offered in response to questions asked of him about the myriad issues of daily life.

His ecclesiastical title as a “Doctor of the Church” – one of only 33 so designated in the history of Roman Catholicism – means that his voluminous writings provide wisdom along the way to salvation. His recognition as a “master of sacred eloquence” renders testimony to the prowess of his preaching. And the characterization of his style as “inspired common sense” (a phrase coined by Elisabeth Stopp) reflects not only the welcome which his words received but also the approach by which he provided spiritual direction to all those who sought his insight.

Bringing that wisdom, that eloquence, and that common sense to bear on social matters in the twenty-first century is the purpose of this electronic dialogue. We remain convinced that the legacy of our patron saint has something to offer to our world, and that the teachings of Salesian spirituality can still give guidance to anyone seeking to lead a good life.

Our plan is to post an item three items each month in response to a current topic of interest and with reference to the teachings of St. Francis de Sales. Our hope is that this new means of communication will engender a continuing dialogue on subjects of social concern and personal value. So we encourage you to respond to his/our thoughts with your own comments on this blog.

And we begin on this date (January 10), which is the feast day of ST. LEONIE AVIAT (1844-1914), the founder of the Oblate Sisters of St. Francis de Sales, as a tribute to the inspiration with which the Salesian spirit guided her holy life and which still resonates in the lives of those who hear it, speak it, and live it today.

“Simple words are always the best”

With my new Christmas toy, I recently read a Kindle edition of The Kennedy Detail, an in-depth account of the Secret Service’s work, written by one the agents (Gerald Blaine) on the basis of the shared experience of the entire team of agents. While the book focuses on that fateful November day when J.F.K. was assassinated, it adds numerous stories about the challenges of protecting the president and his immediate family from all sorts of harms.

When I recounted some of the book’s tales to a friend, she raised the inevitable question about Marilyn Monroe. The Kennedy Detail debunks any alleged affair rather succinctly by noting that agents-in-the-know recall only two times that she was in proximity to the president, both of which were in the company of several other persons. Hearing this, my friend balked. She dismissed the agent’s recollection as yet another piece of the conspiratorial cover-up that supports the Camelot image of the Kennedy White House.

While conspiracy theories and salacious stories may pique popular interest and generate book sales, they do nothing to advance our knowledge because they have little regard for truth. And that disregard runs the risk of hindering interpersonal trust and eroding public confidence.

The antidote is the virtue of simplicity, a “little virtue” near and dear to St. Francis de Sales. Applied to social communications, simple words are always the best ... and not just because they have fewer syllables and so are
easier to comprehend. Rather, simplicity in speech refers to a virtuous intent that should be foundational to all communications, namely, to be honest.

As the saint counsels readers of his *Introduction to the Devout Life*: “Let your words be kindly, frank, sincere, straightforward, simple, and true; avoid all artifice, duplicity and pretence, remembering that, although it is not always well to publish abroad everything that may be true, yet it is never allowable to oppose the truth” (III:30).

To speak the truth, in Salesian terms, is to speak frankly (and always charitably). It avoids double-talk, negates the need to “read between the lines,” and abhors guile and deception. It values saying what you mean and meaning what you say.

Human interactions of any kind – husband/wife, teacher/student, supervisor/subordinate – are challenging enough. Without the ability to trust that what is said between people is honest and true, however difficult it may sometimes be to say or to hear, our personal growth is thwarted and our social cohesion impeded. Whether in politics or business or just in the ordinary affairs of everyday life, frankly speaking remains the best way to communicate.

**January 20, 2011**

“Learning requires listening”

Folks involved in the world of higher education recently received a sobering indictment about what they do (faculty/administrators) and what they pay for (parents/students). Two sociologists, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, published the findings of their research in an arresting new book entitled *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*.

The book’s description puts the authors’ findings in stark terms: “According to their analysis of more than 2,300 undergraduate students at 24 institutions, 45 percent of these students demonstrate no significant improvement in a range of skills – including critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing – during their first two years of college.”

In light of continually soaring tuition costs, these results call into question whether a college education is really worth the price. In another new book called *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids, and What We Can Do About It*, Andrew Hacker (also a sociologist) says “no” – especially since much of the increased cost is going into the “amenities arms race” to pay for things that spruce up the campus environment and student life but have little to do with learning.

It’s true!

It need not, indeed cannot, be said of all university students, but the state of affairs which these sociologists describe generally does paint an accurate picture, evidenced by the student who, on the first day of class, used his limited vocabulary to inquire: “are we going to just do business” (i.e., get a syllabus, find out what the assignments are, etc.) “or are we going to do learning stuff, too?”

And that’s one major cause of the limited learning that takes place in college today – the consumer mentality with which students arrive on campus. They come here not to learn, but to “get” something: credits, a degree, and maybe, someday, a good job. Higher education has become a product, not a process; a tool, not a skill. Like
so many other things, a higher education is seen as merely utilitarian. Its purpose is not to improve one’s lot as a person – to make oneself more “free,” as the term “liberal” arts was intended – but to be the necessary ticket in today’s world for any number of careers and professions.

But it’s not all the students’ fault. They may arrive with this cultural malaise, but once on campus they find that “customer service” is an institutional rallying cry. Student “satisfaction” is becoming paramount, whether or not what satisfies entails actual learning. Faculty who place stringent academic demands upon students risk driving the customers away; it’s easier simply not to require too much. After all, anywhere else that people buy something, it’s not a hard or difficult process (if you can afford to pay the price).

But this is nothing new. The student-faculty, cultural-institutional struggle has long been part of the educational milieu. While financial matters may now heighten the intensity of the conflict, the real problem that limits learning resides in the inability to listen that plagues a younger generation beset by the information age’s cacophony of pixels and megabytes.

More than four hundred years ago,Francis de Sales commented on the power of listening. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, where he offers counsels against “evil friendships” (in part III, chapter 21), the saint writes this: “How are you to meet the swarm of foolish attachments, trifling, and undesirable inclinations which beset you? ... [O]ne thing I know, that our heart breathes through the ear, and that while it exhales its own thoughts through the mouth, it inhales those of others by the ear. Let us then carefully guard our ears against evil words which would speedily infect the heart.”

Flipping this odd image (“our heart breathes through the ear”) to its positive side, we might say that learning requires listening, and that real listening occurs only when the words penetrate to the heart, when what we hear goes deeper down into our being, there to the vital place within us where we come to appreciate things and care about people.

If words, spoken or read, are brushed aside in the interest of just getting something, learning is and will be limited. Only when the heart listens, along with the head, will students learn to be and become who they are.

January 30, 2011

“The only weapon that will work”

The scenes from Egypt are chilling: thousands of protestors marching precariously across a bridge, facing military forces all too ready to exercise their might; tear gas forcing the marchers to retreat but not convincing them to disperse.

Citizens of Egypt seek a greater voice for democracy in their land. Neighboring nations worry about the potential for similar uprisings. And the world waits to see whether the powder keg of popular revolt will be ignited by a government’s violence against its own people.

Some are calling this another “Facebook revolution.” Whether or not the swell of the crowds is attributable to new forms of online communication, the fact remains that the human desire for participatory government is a deep-seated, even inspirational, corollary of that freedom we cherish as an inalienable right. And with that
freedom comes a heavy responsibility, not only for the individual persons who exercise it, but for those social entities who should protect and promote it, as well as for all of us who embrace freedom as a human good.

The responsibility so dramatically highlighted in this conflict, and similar ones elsewhere, entails giving due attention and respect to the truth of the human persons about whom the battle is being waged. Without consideration of the value of human life, for and upon which the democratic ideal of freedom is premised, no good can come of the struggle. As George Weigel once wisely wrote, “Freedom untethered from truth leads to chaos; chaos leads to anarchy; and since human beings cannot tolerate anarchy, tyranny as the answer to the human imperative of order is just around the corner. The false humanism of the freedom of indifference leads first to freedom’s decay, and then to freedom’s demise.”

And the fundamental truth to which freedom should be connected, a truth which is now threatened by the potential for violence in a government’s clash with protestors, is simply this: “the only proper and adequate attitude towards the other is that of love” (John Paul II).

But love does not do away with conflict. In fact, it may be the only weapon that effectively solves the conflict. This was the import of FRANCIS DE SALES’ inaugural speech as the newly appointed leader of the cathedral chapter in 1593. At the time, the chapter – a form of local church government – had been exiled from Geneva, where Calvinist beliefs had overtaken the intermingled religion and politics of the region.

He spiked his address with a veritable call to arms: “At last the day has dawned! We must re-conquer Geneva, the ancient seat of our assembly.” Enthused and inflamed by this agenda, his audience could not have seen what was coming next. “It is our fault,” he proclaimed, “if the name of the Lord is blasphemed among the nations.”

After chiding them for their deficiencies as teachers and examples of the faith, he then gave voice to his novel battle cry: “We must bring down the walls of Geneva with charity; we must invade Geneva with charity; we must recover Geneva with charity.” He made clear that he would “not propose to (them) iron or that powder whose odor and stench recall the infernal furnace.” Instead, he exhorted them to “breach the walls of Geneva with our ardent prayers and storm the city with mutual charity.” He concluded by reminding them that “Our front lines must wield the weapons of love” because “to the one who loves, nothing is difficult.”

Today, that kind of weaponry is no less needed in these difficult times. Without recourse to transcendent values, secularist solutions are at risk of collapsing. Without respect for the rule of law that justly maintains social cohesion, the ideal of democracy will falter. Without an attitude of genuine love for fellow citizens, peace cannot prevail ... in Egypt or anywhere else.

February 10, 2011

“The Digital and the Divine”

“There’s an app for that” – even when it comes to God!

Designed by Little iApps, “Confession: A Roman Catholic App” offers technological assistance to folks seeking sacramental reconciliation. It is the first such device to bear formal approval from a bishop.
Not surprisingly, media mockery over the confluence of the digital and the divine spurred erroneous conclusions, such as the jestful comments on the ABC News web site that “you can now wipe your slate clean” through the iPhone. Apparently such hyped speculation was sufficiently widespread to evoke a clarification from the Vatican that the program does not substitute for the sacrament.

But religion’s foray into the evolving world of information technology is no joke. On the contrary, the Church can, indeed must, embrace the new means of social communications not only to remain relevant but to fulfill its mission in the modern world.

New means of communication make it possible to spread the Good News farther and wider and faster. Digital designs enable worldwide access to religious truths. And the global outreach afforded by information technology can facilitate social networks and interpersonal friendships. No wonder that today comes the “Pope2You” on the net!

Actually, the merger of Gospel message and technological innovation predates the twenty-first century, as can be seen in a famous episode from the life of St. Francis de Sales.

In 1594 the governing council in Thonon approved an ordinance prohibiting its citizens from gathering in public to listen to the sermons from the papist preacher. He responded to the town’s leaders with an innovative plan:

“Gentlemen, I have been preaching the word of God for some time now in your city. Your people can hear me only seldomly and then only partially and in secret. For my part, in order not to overlook anything, I have seen to it that some of the more important fundamentals have been written down, fundamentals that I had chosen as the main theme of my sermons and talks in defense of the faith of the Church.”

Taking advantage of the newly-invented printing press, he published some 85 pamphlets which he then posted in public and on doorposts. In these writings he so clearly explained the teachings of the church and the errors of heresy that the townsfolk eventually ignored the law and came to hear him speak.

His success in this endeavor was one of the reasons Francis de Sales was later named patron saint of journalists and writers. That patronage continues to be celebrated today with the annual publication, on the feast day of St. Francis de Sales, of the pope’s message for World Communications Day, the last three of which focus directly on new technologies and the ever-present need for info-ethics in our digital age.

The creation of telephone apps and the bombardment of digital messages may, indeed, represent a “second flood” in this information age (Roy Ascott). But, as the French journalist Jean-Claude Guillebaud reminds us, like the Noah of old, there is a way to navigate the new terrain ... by taking advantage of the opportunity technology offers to bring a higher perspective to our world.
February 20, 2011

“The pursuit of perfection begins with knowing yourself”

In the movie Unknown, currently in theatres, Liam Neeson stars as a man who wakes up after a car accident in Berlin only to find that his identity has been hijacked by an assassin. Enlisting the aid of an illegal cab driver and a former East German security official, he seeks to find himself, only to discover that ... no, I won’t ruin the ending for those who have not yet seen it!

But during his sojourn to self-discovery, the main character utters a curiously simple idea: mental illness, he opines, is the conflict that exists between who we are and who we think we are. One might rightly infer that mental health is the absence of such conflict.

But who do we think we are? And how do we know?

The question of personal and social identity occupies our entire life. Discovering our “self” is a task of youth. Cultivating that sense of self, and improving it along the way, takes up the majority of our days. And relishing in it or relaxing with it is what we hope for in retirement.

These days, however, the path to self-enlightenment all too often seeks to avoid conflict. We hear of the need to raise our self-esteem, thereby learning to love ourselves for who we already are. Popular psychology gives us the tools—in workbooks and ten-day exercises—to enhance our sense of self so as to be liked and appreciated by others. With this socially sanctioned knowledge, we will then be in a position to perform better, live healthier, and find success. The problem, though, is that such an approach seems designed, as my scholarly confere notes, “to make one feel better and better about less and less.”

Educators at all levels continue to be faced with this growing movement to improve self-esteem. Gone are the days when a student might receive a “failing” grade in a course and have to repeat a program of study for his/her own good; the worst rating on Pennsylvania’s System of Student Assessment in elementary and secondary schools is designated now as “below basic.” And with the current spate of inflated grades in post-secondary education, many, if not most, students (and some parents, too) consider receipt of a “C” to be a personal affront that targets them for future failure in their desired profession, rather than an accurate acknowledgment of “average” work. The conflict, it seems now, is between who we are and who we want to be or think we can be or should be.

But resolving that conflict—and bridging the mental health gap between who we are and who we think we are—is not a matter of discovering the unknown, nor is it a result of enhanced self-esteem. Rather, it comes from first acknowledging the truth about ourselves, from accepting what is known, if we but have the courage to admit it.

More than four hundred years ago, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) gave a new twist to the ancient philosophical dictum, “know thyself.” In one of his Letters of Spiritual Direction (p. 98), he admits that
“We can’t go anywhere without having our feet on the ground, yet we don’t just lie there, sprawled [in the dust].” And in his classic Introduction to the Devout Life (I:5), he elaborates on this realistic image of human life: “We must not be disturbed at our imperfections,” he writes, “since for us perfection consists in fighting against them. (But) how can we fight against them unless we see them, or overcome them unless we face them?” The twist comes in his steadfast conviction that, although the struggle to find and improve our self may sometimes be difficult, “we are never vanquished unless we lose our life or our courage.” And, he concludes, “Fortunately for us, we are always victorious provided that we are willing to fight.”

In other words, the real pursuit of perfection begins (and continues) with the willingness to make an honest and forthright appraisal of who we are, shortcomings and all. Taking this necessary first step sets us on the path toward becoming who we can be. It also enables us to see others for who they are and to treat them kindly along the way ... as fellow sojourners on a road still less traveled, yet the one alone on which we fill find our true identity and our eventual happiness.

March 10, 2011

“Journeying through Lent”

Yesterday, Christians the world over celebrated Ash Wednesday. Blackened crosses imposed on foreheads signaled the beginning of the annual season of Lent and its six-week journey toward Easter.

This year, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of Fr. SANDY POCETTO, there’s a new roadmap for that journey. In his newly published book – A Lenten Journey with Jesus Christ and Saint Francis de Sales – our senior scholar offers Salesian quotes and meditations corresponding to the biblical readings for each day of Lent.

The selections in this very readable volume give a clear indication of the inspired common sense of our patron. Take, for instance, what the saint says about fasting, one the three spiritual exercises typical of Lenten observance: “It is not enough to fast exteriorly if we do not also fast interiorly and if we do not accompany the fast of the body with that of the spirit.”

As Fr. Pocetto explains, fasting is not, of itself, a virtuous act; it becomes virtuous only if/when we undertake it with the motivation of pleasing God. In other words, the traditional Lenten observances are not intended for physical or psychological well-being, nor are they practiced to draw attention to oneself. Rather, they are spiritual exercises, intended to open and strengthen one’s heart in relation to the “God (who) is God of the human heart” (as Francis writes in the Treatise on the Love of God, I:15).

Moreover, fasting in the Salesian sense is not primarily about denying or limiting our intake of food. On the contrary, one can practice fasting of the spirit while eating plenty! Try eating whatever is set before you, even if you don’t like it (as long as it doesn’t make you ill). Try being agreeable to others at
the table, even if they are not particularly congenial to your own spirit. In these ways, the focus of the fast will be your own choice and preference ... and that’s actually something more difficult to give up!

In these examples, as well as others throughout the book, readers will encounter the practical genius of Francis de Sales ... and very practicable ways to progress along the six-week journey of Lent.

About this legacy, POPE BENEDICT XVI commented just last week that “The figure of this Saint radiates an impression of rare fullness, demonstrated in the serenity of his intellectual research, but also in the riches of his affection and the ‘sweetness’ of his teachings, which had an important influence on the Christian conscience.”

Now, thanks to Fr. Pocetto’s good work, that influence can continue in our own time.

March 20, 2011

“Out of the mouths of babes ...”

I’m still struck by what I overheard leaving church this morning. At the entrance was a volunteer with a big can accepting donations to aid the victims of the recent disasters in Japan. As one young family was heading to the parking lot, the little girl turned to her father and asked if they could go back and put more in the can. The father replied that they had already donated. The little lady retorted: “But they need it more than we do.”

The images from the massive earthquake and tsunami, as well as news about potential nuclear fallout, are seared into the world’s collective mind. The number of victims is enormous. A disaster of this magnitude is almost too hard for the mind to grasp.

Commentators of all stripes have offered a multiplicity of views. Some are raising concerns about architectural standards; others are sounding the alarm about nuclear power. Many are apprehensive; many more are sympathetic.

The enormity of the pain and suffering will lead, no doubt, to questions about the beneficence or providence of the divine: how can God let something like this happen to so many innocent people? It’s an age-old question. It has no answer, at least none that is acceptable, here below. Some things just don’t make sense, at least not the way that we try to make sense of things.

The words that do resonate, or should, are those of the little girl: “they need it more than we do.” The people of Japan need help. At this point in time, they are not Japanese or Asian. They are not capitalists or communists. They are not enemies from ages past. They are people, fellow human beings whose situation is so overwhelming that they cannot manage to extricate themselves, by themselves, from the mind-boggling dilemmas they now face. Their needs are basic – food, water,
shelter, and all those fundamental human necessities that we take for granted until something tragic like this occurs.

And the world is responding. Nations and organizations, and groups and individuals, stand ready and willing to help. It reminds us all that, when life comes down to it, we share a common humanity.

Long before this series of events, in his Introduction to the Devout Life, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) suggested a simple means of reflection that remains pertinent in this regard: “Examine your heart often to see if it is such toward your neighbor as you would like his to be toward you were you in his place. This is the touchstone of true reason.”

I doubt that young girl ever heard of Francis de Sales, but she did give voice to his suggestion. With just a bit of true reason — his or hers — we can all respond to the call for help.

March 30, 2011

“When the mind gets stuck on knowledge”

In the preface to his new book — God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World, and Why Their Differences Matter — Stephen Prothero makes this experiential observation:

One reason we are willing to follow our fantasies down the rabbit hole of religious unity is that we have become uncomfortable with argument. Especially when it comes to religion, we desperately want everyone to get along. In my Boston University course, I work hard to foster respectful arguments. My students are good with “respectful,” but they are allergic to “argument.” They see arguing as ill-mannered, and even among friends they avoid it at almost any cost.

So true in Center Valley, too! But it’s not due to the subject matter. It’s not religion (or politics) that calls forth the students’ restraint. There’s something more insidious at work.

Today’s college students (admittedly, a generalization) seem allergic not only to argument, but to thinking. They presume, with no ill will, that they are in college to “get” knowledge, which requires that someone “give” it to them. Their attitude is that we professors should teach them, as if they have no part to play in the process of learning other than as receptors for the information being distributed to them. They want the answers to the test, but they express little interest in figuring out the rationale for why the answer is what it is. They prefer to be told rather than to explore. They come (or go online) for knowledge, not for education.

Multiple germs contribute to this allergic (or lethargic) reaction, among which is the ever-increasing concern for assessment. Not that assessment is un-important; marking progress is valuable and necessary for both accreditors and investors, and reliable testing can re-assure all alike that universities and their students are on the right path.
But when institutions of higher education place more emphasis on measuring outcomes than on forming characters, it should come as no surprise that students focus on passing an examination rather than on cultivating the intellect. When a core curriculum offers little more than a smorgasbord of courses du jour from which students can choose according to their (not-yet-educated) interests, it’s no wonder that students have a merely superficial acquaintance with some subjects. When faculty teaching is about packaging virtual products rather than drawing out critical thinking, and faculty advising is reduced to signing forms rather than mentoring emerging adults, students may turn out less stressed, but they also come away short-changed.

Commenting on the Newman’s classic *Idea of a University*, Fr. Ian Ker explains why “merely to know is not to be educated.” The former comes with the accumulation of subject matter; the latter happens only by cultivating or enlarging the mind. For Newman, this enlargement

consists, not merely in the passive reception into the mind of a number of ideas hitherto unknown to it, but in the mind’s energetic and simultaneous action upon and towards and among those new ideas, which are rushing in upon it. ... It is not the mere addition to our knowledge that is the illumination; but the locomotion, the movement onwards, of that mental centre, to which both what we know, and what we are learning, the accumulating mass of our acquirements, gravitates.

To get the mind in motion requires energy, on the part of both lecturers and learners. To cultivate the intellect requires interest in, and attention to, doing so. This is the import of Francis de Sales’ exhortation regarding the priority of education. While originally directed at the clergy of his day, the same can be said for anyone engaged in the world of learning:

Those among you who are employed in occupations that impede them from study are like people who wish to eat fancy foods, contrary to the character of their plain stomachs, and because of that they grow faint little by little. I can say to you truthfully that there is no great difference between ignorance and malice, except that ignorance is to be feared even more, especially when you consider that, not only is it offensive in itself, but it also leads to contempt for the ecclesiastical state.

Today, the symptom of that contempt can be seen in what Prothero described as students’ being allergic to argument. Healing that ailment does not occur automatically just by being in class or passing an exam or getting a college degree. Its only cure is the cultivation of the mind, the enlargement of that intellectual muscle that comes from exercising it ... by thinking and questioning and debating. Merely to listen is to mis-understand.
April 12, 2011

“April showers ...”

For a fleeting moment, the sun appeared yesterday! I say “fleeting” because sunshine hasn’t been in the forecast here for what seems like months; cold temperatures and stormy precipitation have been the order of the day, despite the calendar designation that Spring has begun. Although the boys of summer have returned to the diamond, our outdoor sporting schedules have run amok.

When the golden rays appear, so do changes in scenery. T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops become the fashion for the day on campus. Natural light replaces fluorescent bulbs to make reading possible. Dreary outlooks turn into smiles. (And lectures held indoors draw a smaller audience!)

But now it’s raining ... again!

Even without clinical causes, it’s apparent that seasonal swings affect our psyche. The human spirit longs for light. The mind knows what the calendar calls for. The soul searches for a warmer glow. We wish for paradise, with its garden-like association. (And by proverbial standards, the May flowers this year should be gigantic after all the showers we’ve had to endure.)

If it’s any consolation, the truth is that the sun is always shining! No matter how our sensibilities may change along with the climate, the sun never moves! Of course, we know this, though we are not always cognizant of it. Some days it takes a conscious effort to “see” the sun.

For Francis de Sales, this solar truth was always more than just a cosmic fact. In his estimation, it signifies a spiritual reality – the constant presence of God – that can give consolation to our days. As he points out, the sun, “by a unique and continuous act, offers and communicates its light to the inferior world and is not in any way affected in itself by the alternation of nights and days, even though, from our view, the diversity of nights and days makes us distinguish in it a constant beginning over and over again.”

From our perspective, seasons change, and with it so do our moods. But the gentleman saint reminds us that, like the light constantly emanating from the sun even when we can’t see it, so the beneficent God remains present to us in a perpetual way, even amid the alternating experiences, both good and bad, that characterize our earthly existence.

Perhaps the beauty of this thought can bring a ray of hope to our day ... even when the game is rained out!
April 20, 2011

“The benefit of being disturbed”

Today I went online in search of a video clip for my class. Unbeknownst to me, YouTube is getting a social conscience, as it now tags some clips with this “graphic” warning: “This content may contain material flagged by YouTube’s user community that may be inappropriate for some users.” To access such scenes requires the user to sign in and verify that he/she is of adult age.

While I’m far past the required minimum age, I did not sign in. But I was able to access clips from The Passion of the Christ that served my pedagogical purpose. And, yes, the material there may, indeed, be inappropriate because the images can be quite disturbing.

As they should be.

For Christians around the world, this is the time considered “Holy Week” – a time to recall, intentionally, the graphic realities of the agony, the scourging, the humiliation, and the suffering associated with the crucifixion of “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (as the legal indictment posted on the cross so boldly proclaimed). Without recourse to actual footage of the events, movie-makers are left to their imagination as to how to portray these scenes. Inevitably, such imaginative videography generates impassioned rhetoric when it concerns something at the core of major world religions, as did Mel Gibson’s movie when it first appeared in 2004.

Yet “passion” is the point. It’s not the emotion motivating film critics, nor even the gruesomeness depicted in the movie. It’s a passionate concern for humanity on the part of the God in whom people believe that is the reason for remembering and the cause for celebrating this time of year.

That the elements of the passion disturb us is actually a beneficial thing. The vividness of what happened brings to life the truth it portrays. The shock of the scenes jolts our senses, stirs our affections, humbles our awareness, and moves us (hopefully) beyond the knowledge of the facts to the realization of their meaning – that divine love knows no bounds, not even the bounds of sadistic torture and ignominious execution.

That is why Francis de Sales, in the concluding part of his best-selling Introduction to the Devout Life, urges his readers to “consider the love with which Jesus Christ our Lord has suffered so much in this world, especially in the Garden of Olives and on Mount Calvary.” This reflection is intended not merely as visceral viewing for the mind. Instead, he seeks to plunge us more deeply into the very core of who we are and how we find meaningfulness in a world that all too often does not make sense. “See,” he says, “it is certain that on the tree of the Cross the Heart of Jesus, our beloved, beheld your heart and loved it. By the love he bore it he obtained every good that you shall ever have ....”

One such good that comes from these events is portrayed magnificently by Maia Morgenstern in the role of Mary. The haunting power of her eyes throughout the film often gives insight to the viewer. In a particularly poignant moment, after the cross is raised, she stands up and looks full bore at the battered body of her son hanging in front of her. It is then that she opens her hands and lets fall to the ground the rocks that she had been grasping with all her pent-up emotion. She gets it. She appreciates it. She now knows that she no longer needs to clutch onto strands of human antipathy.
And for that reason – because they visually demonstrate the loving care of God for humanity that transcends our propensity for conflict with one another – the apparently disturbing images of the Passion are rightly called to mind during this Holy Week. “Ah ... how deeply must we imprint this upon our memory,” de Sales reminds us. For then the impression may lead to realization, and the realization to a change of heart, and the change of hearts to a change in how we treat each other in today’s world.

April 30, 2011

“As the World Watches”

The pope and the monarchy once again share the world’s stage. In yet another quirk of timing, the beatification of John Paul II on May 1 takes place just days after the wedding of Prince William, second-in-line to the British throne. You may recall that the pontiff’s funeral in 2005 was celebrated just days before the second marriage of the heir to the throne, Prince Charles.

Not surprisingly, both celebrations this weekend are receiving world-wide attention.

The pageantry on display for a royal wedding evokes the finest traditions of pomp and circumstance: parade precision and fashion elegance join with the pride of the populace to mark an historic occasion and to portend the future of the monarchy. Pundits predicted that one to three billion people would be watching.

Not counting the worldwide television audiences, more than two million pilgrims are expected in Rome to take part in the three ceremonies connected to the beatification: the prayer vigil to be held in the Circus Maximus on Saturday, the Mass of Beatification in St. Peter’s Square on Sunday, and the Mass of Thanksgiving also in St. Peter’s Square on Monday. Marked primarily by spiritual decorum, these events will also manifest the flag-flying, song-singing jubilation that attends such an occasion.

While both ceremonies carry on centuries-old traditions, the events in St. Peter’s Square reflect the totality of a life, not just the splendor of a day. The ritual of beatification acknowledges a legacy of holiness that continues in the present, not just the prospects of a royal future. It is a response not just to the solemn words of new spouses, but to three “voices” within and beyond the whole world.

One such “voice” is that of the people. Six years ago, at John Paul II’s funeral, the cries of the assembled throngs cried out as one “Santo Subito” – meaning, make him a saint right away! Wisely, the celebration of that funeral paused to let the voice be heard. Just as wisely, that voice was appropriately heeded, as it was soon thereafter decided that the process by which the late pope’s cause for canonization (to culminate in sainthood) would not have to wait the requisite five years before it could be initiated. But, first, other voices would have to speak.
And speak they did. The second voice – that of God – would be heard through signs of spiritual favor, graces given that would demonstrate supernatural power at work in the world through the intercession of John Paul II.

One such sign is the holy life attributed to the late pontiff. Through a detailed documentation of his life and work, aided by the sworn testimony of more than 144 witnesses, it became clear that his was a life of heroic virtue. Another sign is the intercessory power attributed to John Paul II, which was demonstrated in the miraculous cure of a French nun who had suffered from Parkinson’s disease (Sr. Marie Simon-Pierre).

In that process, the third voice was speaking, the voice of the Church. Though it unfolded with atypical speed, the process of historical, scientific, and theological examination served to verify what the voice of the people already said. As the prefect of the Vatican office charged with this responsibility noted, “santo subito” had also to be “santo sicuro” (a saint, to be sure).

The beatification – in which John Paul II would henceforth be known as “blessed” – marks the penultimate step on that journey to sainthood. The first such celebration, in which a pope beatified a future saint, took place in 1662, when Pope Alexander VII beatified Francis de Sales (who died in 1622). Now, for the first time in history, a pope will beatify his predecessor, on the same liturgical day (Divine Mercy Sunday) on which the latter died. The voice of the world’s people will once again be raucous in its affirmation ... in the hope that one day soon John Paul the Great will also be known as a saint.

May 10, 2011

“Passing the test takes perspective”

The library is busy. Lounges fill with books and papers. Computer labs are whizzing with word processing and project presentations. Even the chapel has a few extra visitors. It must be time for final exams!

The week brings its own stress, to be sure, especially for Seniors sweating whether or not they will have to cancel previous plans for graduation. But such anxiety, as is almost always the case, is usually self-imposed.

Perhaps it’s the adjective “final” that precedes the “examination.” Students sense the finality of the moment. They think this one test will make all the difference in this course, this one course will make all the difference in their GPA for the semester, their GPA this time round will make all the difference in their pursuit of a degree, and this degree will make all the difference in their desired career, which in turn will make all the difference when it comes to determining the status of their lives.

It’s time for some perspective.
Yes, final examinations are (or should be) important. And they are not (or should not be) measures of effort or achievement but of performance, which is what future employees and citizens will be called upon to do with their education. So, demonstrating proficiency is necessary; “really trying hard” does not suffice.

Nevertheless, as Prof. Gilbert Meilaender rightly points out in a First Things essay called “Playing the Long Season,” passing the true test of education does not come down to that “one shining moment” of a final exam, but to the “long season of life, which confronts us not so much with prompts as with recurring themes and hard questions.”

But for this moment, at least, it would be good for students to recall the vivid counsel of our university’s patron, St. FRANCIS DE SALES, who famously writes in his Introduction to the Devout Life that

With the single exception of sin, anxiety is the greatest evil that can happen to a soul. ... Anxiety proceeds from an inordinate desire to be freed from a present evil or to acquire a hoped for good. Yet there is nothing that tends more to increase evil and prevent enjoyment of good than to be disturbed and anxious. Birds stay caught in nets and traps because when they find themselves ensnared they flutter about wildly trying to escape and in doing so entangle themselves all the more. Whenever you urgently desire to escape from a certain evil or to obtain a certain good you must be especially careful both to put your mind at rest and in peace and to have a calm judgment and will. Then try gently and meekly to accomplish your desire, taking in regular order the most convenient means.

In other words, do all that you can do without worrying about what you cannot control. Work hard, study a lot, complete the assignment ... and then get some sleep!

It’s good advice beyond the classroom, too.

20 May 2011

“Is this the end!?"

Long ago, the prophet Ezekiel was once told to “blow the trumpet and warn the people” as any good sentinel would do. Using, instead, vehicular horns and fashion designs and billboard advertising, contemporary world-watchers have again taken up the doomsday cry: tomorrow the world as we know it begins to come to an end!
So claims Harold Camping and members of his radio audience, who have banded together to form “Project Caravan” as a way to let us all know that judgment day is upon us. Apparently, it starts tomorrow (May 21) with a global earthquake tomorrow and will culminate in a cataclysmic grand finale to earthly existence after 153 days of death and horror (on October 21). It’s no fluke; “the Bible guarantees it” ... or so they say.

There’s no denying their passion! Giving up families and fortunes, these confident campers are dedicated to their task of bringing such “awesome news” to the rest of us in the certitude that, as one adherent says, “it’s so much better to know.”

But passion does not preclude error; presumption cannot pass for knowledge.

As with any fundamentalist reading of sacred texts, the error begins with a mistaken assumption. In this case, the misstep is to consider the Bible as a cosmic calendar. Some err at the start, as if all existence began at a specific point in time “in the beginning” (which actually should be translated “in a beginning”). Today’s town criers err at the end, supposedly discovering some divine numerology in the calculation of 7,000 years from the time of the flood (making 2011 the year of the apocalypse) and 722,500 days from the date of the crucifixion (making May 21 the day of judgment).

Notwithstanding their mathematical imagination, today’s prophets of doom predicate their message on a broader, cultural fallacy by reading a text of the Ancient Near East through the lens of a Western conception of time. The former, biblical view of time is eventful, while the latter, modern notion is chronological. The “beginning” in the Bible is a foundation, not a first day; the “end” is a purposeful culmination, not a threatening prediction.

Still, we human beings have always been fascinating with wishing to know the future. Bettors gamble on it. Investors bank on it. Students look forward to it! We wish we could know so that, supposedly, we could put everything in good order and prepare for it or benefit from it.

But, for better or worse, we simply don’t know; we can’t grasp what hasn’t yet happened. Trying to do so only jeopardizes what we do have and puts in peril what we could be. Instead, as St. Francis de Sales repeatedly wrote to those seeking his prophetic wisdom, we can benefit more from the present than the future: “Look straight in front of you and not at those dangers you see in the distance. ... Let us think only of living today well, and when tomorrow comes, it also will be today and we can think about it then.”

“Then” in this case starts on May 22!
Memorial Day may well be my favorite national holiday ... and not just because it unofficially marks the beginning of Summer! This holiday, when rightly celebrated, discloses a distinct power that can give shape to human living.

Among our many characteristics, human beings have a propensity to forget. Sometimes a good thing (as when we put troubled times behind us), this ability to forget is more often a casual occurrence. With all that goes on in our lives now, and the innumerable possibilities for our future, we simply don’t think about the past. As such, we often live as if the past is gone and the present is the only thing to which we must attend.

Memorial Day seeks to correct that and to improve upon our present precisely by calling to mind the past. This holiday weekend is intended to memorialize our understanding of our situation today by an act of collective consciousness that makes us more aware of the fact that our present way of life was made possible, in no small part, thanks to men and women who gave their lives in military service to our nation.

Remembering, in this sense, is not just calling to mind something from the past, something distant, something gone. Rather, it brings the past into the present and re-activates or re-animates an enduring truth. By recalling the selfless sacrifice made by countless military personnel, this “memorial” evokes a deep sense of gratitude and inspires us to protect and preserve what they have given us.

That ability to transcend time – to link past and present and future – reflects a distinctively religious characteristic of human beings. While it may sometimes be advantageous to forget, remembering enables us to keep life in its proper context and to motivate us to build a better future.

St. Francis de Sales clearly recognized this religious character of human existence. In his Introduction to the Devout Life, he writes of it with respect to human connectedness to God through prayer. In his view, all human beings have the ability to “pray” simply by becoming more aware of the divine presence that so routinely eludes us. First, he points out a basic truth: “Unfortunately ... we do not see God who is present with us. Although faith assures us of his presence, yet because we do not see him with our eyes we often forget about him and behave as if God were far distant from us.”

Then he suggests that we often call to mind – to “remember” – that God remains always present in our lives, both around us and within us. On the one hand, the air is all around us; on the other hand, our breath is constantly within us. In both cases, we cannot see these realities, and rarely do we consciously think about them. Yet, without them we cannot exist! So, by making ourselves more consciously aware of this, we become inspired to live “as if” God is present ... because God really is.
10 June 2011

"If you build it, they will come"

Earlier today we witnessed a ground-breaking ceremony for a new building on the campus of DeSales University – the REV. DANIEL G. GAMBET CENTER FOR BUSINESS & HEALTH CARE EDUCATION. In his remarks, the President Emeritus for whom the building is named reminded everyone present of an earlier groundbreaking – for the start of the college that would become a university. That one took place in the midst of 400 acres of corn! Today’s marked the beginning of what will be the 29th building on the sprawling campus.

That remarkable growth in less than 50 years is due in no small part to the vision of Fr. Gambet, as well as his predecessor (Fr. J. Stuart Dooling – the founding president) and his successor (Fr. Bernard O’Connor). Each of these Oblate priests has put his faith where his feet are ... on the ground, with realism, but standing upright, with hope. Each of them also embraces the Salesian spirituality that keeps all this growth and success in perspective.

St. Francis de Sales once wrote to a woman who expressed her worries and concerns to him:

Soon we shall be in eternity and then we shall see how insignificant our worldly preoccupations were and how little it mattered whether some things got done or not; however, right now we rush about as if they were all-important. When we were little children how eagerly we used to gather pieces of broken tile, little sticks, and mud with which to build houses and other tiny buildings, and if someone knocked them over, how heartbroken we were and how we cried! But now we understand that these things really didn’t amount to much. One day it will be like this for us in heaven when we shall see that some of the things we clung to on earth were only childish attachments. (Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 159)

The reference, of course, is simply an image! The University’s building is important (for the growth of strategic academic programs). It will be made of much sturdier materials ... and energy-efficient ones, at that. It actually amounts to much (in terms of the cost). And, pray God, nothing will knock it over!

But the truth remains that in a heavenly perspective, today’s ceremony is but a momentary event and a small joy. For even though the buildings will far outlast those whose names are on them, and will stand as a worthy tribute to the vision and dedication and hard work that made them possible ... still, the greater good will be served if and when the education that takes place in these halls leads the learners to their ultimate goal far beyond this campus and this world.

Then the celebration will be eternal.
Established in 2000, the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University seeks to promote the interaction of faith and culture through academic initiatives that focus on integrating social concerns and gospel values in the tradition of Salesian Christian Humanism. The activities of the Center include research on faith developments in the modern world; dialogue about how spirituality can impact our contemporary life; and partnership with various sectors of the local community to forge the link between faith and culture. Among its institutes are professional societies focusing on ethical concerns in communications, healthcare, law & public policy, and the workplace.