“On a Spiritual Note”

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by

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The following essays appear as a feature item in On the Boards – the playbill for the ACT ONE theatre program at DeSales University.

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs
A Christmas Carol
She Stoops to Conquer

Dance Ensemble Concert
Camelot
The image suggested by this show’s title is riveting. “Darkness” speaks to us of unknown mystery, unspoken danger, unresolved fear. Even saints – those typically revered as strong in character and confident in faith – were afraid of the dark!

From his youth, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) appears to have grappled with nocturnal fears. Some think he was a naturally light sleeper. Others point to the lasting influence of two powerful events early in his life (his “crisis” while a student in Paris, of believing he would be damned, and his “near death” experience as a student in Padua) as the reason for his restless agitation. Whatever the cause, the darkness of night presented a challenge to him.

But the fear occasioned by darkness became for him an opportunity to draw closer to God. As he wrote in the Spiritual Exercises which guided his young life during his days at the University of Padua, “If God gives me the grace to wake up during the night, I will immediately awaken my heart” to His presence. “Then, considering the darkness of night as symbolic of the darkness of my soul and that of the souls of all sinners, I will pray.” Echoing the words of the Psalm attributed to King David (“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?”), St. Francis de Sales taught himself to remember that “Neither the sun nor its rays are my principal light, nor does human companionship save me, but only God, who is as benevolent to me during the night as he is during the day.”

Whatever dark we find in our own lives, whether at the top of the stairs or elsewhere, the fear it engenders can be dissipated through the companionship of saintly patrons or good friends who share our human struggles and point us toward a more resolute faith in the God whose providential cares guides us both day and night.

Enjoy the show!

A Christmas Carol  December 1 - 12, 2010

’Tis the season for Dickens! This adaptation of his Christmas classic offers us a magical new look at humanity's perennial search for meaning. In the dramatic trek through past, present and future, the journey from grumpiness to happiness is a common sojourn we all face in life.

For our patron, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Christmas provides us with a map for this spiritual quest. In a sermon on Christmas Eve in 1620, he preached about the revelatory power of the Incarnation, which discloses to humanity all that life is meant to be:
Certainly, in the Incarnation [Our Lord] has made us see that which otherwise the human mind could hardly have imagined or understood, that is, that God was man and man God: the immortal, mortal; the one incapable of suffering, suffering – subject to heat, cold, hunger and thirst; the infinite, finite; the eternal, temporal – in short, man divinized and God humanized in such a way that God, without ceasing to be God, is man; and man, without ceasing to be man, is God.

He concludes with a tender image for us to ponder:

Consider, I beg you, this little newborn Infant in the manger at Bethlehem. Listen to what He says to you. Look at the example He gives you. He has chosen the most biter, the poorest things imaginable for His birth. O God! whoever remains close to this manger during the Christmas octave will melt with love in seeking this little Infant in so poor a place, weeping and trembling from the cold.

And from this scene he draws forth an enduring spiritual principle. Writing to Jane de Chantal about how to handle the troubles of life in this world, which he likens to the contractions and pangs of childbirth, he consoles and counsels her by appealing to her maternal instinct: “It is Jesus whom we must form and bring to birth in ourselves.”

During this sacred season, may the child Jesus bless us with insight to see who we are and who we can be, that we might “be that well” in the new year to come.

Enjoy the show!

She Stoops to Conquer    February 23 to March 6, 2011

In our current cultural climate, with its call for a return to civility in public and political discourse, the play you see before you on our main stage should be delightfully entertaining. Whether you deem it a comedy of errors (based as it is on multiple misunderstandings) or a comedy of manners (in the gap between standards of polite behavior and the realities of actual behavior), this 18th century show maintains its comic appeal for 21st century audiences precisely because it shows us the foibles of human relationships.

Unfortunately, the incivility rendered humorous in this one night at the “inn” is not so funny when it comes to how we present ourselves and how we treat others who are not “like us.” It seems that we are no longer capable of expressing disagreement without adding disdain, of debating ideas without denigrating the thinker, of holding a contrary position without holding the other in contempt.

But this is nothing new since Tucson. Nor is the remedy anything startling. In a letter from December of 1610, ST. FRANCIS DE SALES wrote to a gentleman who was going to live at court (and, presumably, who would work there in the political sphere). Among his pearls of wisdom, he shared this counsel: “I recommend to you the gentle and sincere courtesy which offends no one and obliges all; which seeks love rather than honor; which never rallies any one so as to hurt them.”
This courtesy is, for our patron saint, a distinctively Christian virtue able to be employed in all walks of life. It bases our relationships on truth, not error (“because some make a profession of wishing to be virtuous philosophically who, however, are not so, and can in no way be so”). It lives out those relationships simply and honestly, not according to contrived standards (as do those who “are nothing else but phantoms of virtue, hiding from those who are not familiar with them their bad life and ways by graceful manners and words”).

In so living with the courtesy and civility that always acknowledges the dignity of another person, we may appear to stoop; but this human charity, even amid disagreement, is how we conquer injustice.

Enjoy the show!

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**Dance Ensemble**  
March 18 - 20, 2011

“The druids and magicians put forth all their strength and employed all their incantations to maintain their sway over the Irish race, but the prayer and faith of Patrick achieved a glorious triumph. The druids by their incantations overspread the hill and surrounding plain with a cloud worse than Egyptian darkness. Patrick defied them to remove that cloud, and when all their efforts were made in vain, at his prayer the sun sent forth its rays and the brightest sunshine lit up the scene.”

So reads part of the Catholic Encyclopedia’s biography of St. Patrick of Ireland. Following, as it does, upon the high, holy day on the Emerald Isle, this year’s Dance Ensemble promises to weave its own magical spell. With modern incantations and gyrations, the DSU dancers alight upon the main stage, where their energies and talents shine in the artistic stories they tell.

Although the dances may not be specifically sacred as to genre, they nevertheless display elements of beauty and grace befitting the transcendent. That is because dance, like all true art, has the ability to tap into the powers of the soul and, through inspired and expressive movement, to transport us beyond the confines of our ordinary existence.

The delight we hope you experience in this concert is that spark of the divine that lies within us and that has the power to remove the clouds that may overshadow us ... at least while you’re here!

Enjoy the show!

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**Camelot**  
April 27 to May 8, 2011

Once there was a fleeting wisp of glory / called Camelot ... / Don’t let it be forgot.
For King Arthur, that glory was a quest ... a longing for a new realm of charity and peace, one to be brought about through the efforts of special Knights known by the Round Table at which they plotted goodness (a table, I am told, whose shape represents a world without boundaries). With the idea of “Might for Right,” those Knights sought to change the world’s fortunes.

For Christians the world over, that glory is a reality ... one revealed in the unique event of the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead which is now being celebrated in this Easter season. With the experience of transcending the limits of mortality, this one – the Christ – has brought eternal might to bear on our human fortunes.

Those glories may not yet be fully realized. The vicissitudes of human romance and tragedy, of despair and hope, of conflict and resolution still remain characteristic of our existence ... whether in Camelot or in Center Valley! Still, the voice of hope resounds: He is risen, alleluia!

Our patron, St. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622), expresses this sentiment in his Treatise on the Love of God: “Who now will have any doubt as to our abundant means of salvation since we have so great a Savior, in view of whom we have been made and by whose merits we have been ransomed?”

The words may not make for a melodious title song, but here in our fleeting world – with the ups and downs of everyday life – that, too, is a glorious message not to be forgot.

Enjoy the show!