A Gift for the Ages

“Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of the human person and the world...and is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith.”  – Pope John Paul II, Easter, 1999

As one stands before the restored 17th century Baroque oil painting now hanging in the Speed Museum of Art, it’s inspiring to contemplate the talent of Gasper de Crayer, the Flemish artist who was commissioned to do the painting around 1650, and the perseverance of Father Charles Nerinckx, the frontier priest from France who somehow brought the massive 9’ x 12’ canvas from Belgium to Bardstown, Ky., somewhere between 1815 and 1820.

But it’s equally inspiring to consider the chain of events that led the painting to be hauled out of storage at the Cathedral of the Assumption in 2002 – it had been out of the public’s view for 30 years – and expertly restored so the Archdiocese of Louisville could loan it to the Speed as a gift to the community in honor of the Archdiocese’s Bicentennial this year. It’s a story of artistic redemption that, in a small way, mirrors the spiritual redemption depicted in the painting.

The painting illustrates an important event in Roman Catholic history – the moment near the end of 1134 when St. Bernard of Clairvaux offered holy communion to Duke William X of Aquitaine to end a schism within the church’s hierarchy – but a viewer doesn’t have to be Catholic to appreciate the painting’s rich beauty or the history behind it.

The painting’s story stretches across more than four centuries, two continents, and almost all the Archdiocese’s 200 years. The spiritual successor to Father Nerinckx, who rescued the painting from the ruins of a church in Belgium that had been sacked during the French Revolution in the early 1800s, is Father William Fichteman, the pastor at the Cathedral of the Assumption who was the catalyst in the painting’s rediscovery, restoration, and relocation in the Speed.

It was with considerable awe and satisfaction that Father Fichteman joined Archbishop Joseph Kurtz in officially presenting the painting to the Speed on May 12. The agreement between the Archdiocese and the Speed calls for the painting to be on loan for five years, but, says Father Fichteman, “I anticipate it will basically turn into a kind of ‘permanent’ loan. There is no place in the Cathedral as it is presently configured for such a huge painting. The Speed is the right place for it.”

The Speed agrees. The painting is an important addition to its Flemish and Dutch collection. When it was first displayed in the cathedral at Bardstown around 1820, it was probably the most important piece of Dutch-Flemish art on the continent north of Mexico City. At least, that’s what Dr. Charles L. Venable, the Speed’s director, told The Record in early May.

“Can you imagine what it was like to go into the fairly young church in Bardstown and see a painting like this?” said Venable in an interview with The Record. “It must have been like it was from Mars.”

The artist, Gaspar de Crayer (1582-1669), was a Flemish painter who was heavily influenced by the masters Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony Van Dyck. In fact, Van Dyck was thought to be the author of the painting that now hangs in the Speed until 1952, when two art scholars, making independent investigations,
concluded that the artist was actually de Crayer, whom art historians generally considered to be a cut below Rubens and Van Dyck in skill and refinement.

Nevertheless, de Crayer was well-known and popular throughout the Netherlands. His paintings were frequently displayed in the most important churches and museums of Brussels and Ghent, and he was respected enough beyond his native land to have works hung in The Louvre in Paris, the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, and the Belvedere in Vienna.

The work that now hangs in the Speed was commissioned sometime after 1650 by Cistercian monks for the women’s abbey in Zwijveke in the Netherlands. The monks asked de Crayer to do a rendering of Saint Bernard offering the Holy Eucharist to William X of Aquitaine, whom Pope Innocent II had excommunicated for supporting monks asked de Crayer to do a rendering of Saint Bernard offering the Holy Eucharist to William X of Aquitaine, whom Pope Innocent II had excommunicated for supporting the anti-pope, Anacletus II, against the will of his own bishops, during the schism of 1130.

“Bernard invited William to the Mass which he celebrated in the Church of La Coudre,” according to the Catholic Encyclopedia. “At the moment of the Communion, placing the Sacred Host upon the paten, he went to the door of the church where William was, and, pointing to the Host, he adjured the Duke not to despise God as he did His servants. William yielded and the schism ended.”

The painting is curved at the top, as if de Crayer did it to fit a specific alcove or altar in a church, and it shows William X collapsed on the church steps as he gazes up at St. Bernard. He’s surrounded and supported by soldiers in armor. In the left corner there’s a chestnut horse with white markings. At the top, two angelic cherubs overlook the scene.

The painting was still in Belgium when the army of the French Republic invaded that country in 1797. Churches were sacked and arrest warrants were issued for outspoken priests such as Father Charles Nerinckx, who had become popular with the working class during his years as Vicar of the Cathedral of Michelin.

After hiding out for four years, Nerinckx escaped to the United States in 1804 and was assigned by Bishop John Carroll to assist the Rev. Stephen Badin, the only priest in Kentucky. With a focus on Catholic education, Nerinckx founded the Sisters of Loretto in 1812 and, in 1824, the first congregation of black religious women in America.

After settling in Kentucky, Nerinckx twice returned to his native Belgium to retrieve works of art and church artifacts so he could bring them to Bardstown. On one of his trips, either in 1815 or 1820, he bought the painting of St. Bernard and William X from a church that had been ravaged by the French.

It boggles the mind to think of the cost and work involved in moving such a huge painting from Belgium to Bardstown. Yet somehow Nerinckx got it done, and the painting was displayed in the St. Joseph Cathedral from around 1820 to 1841, when Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget was ordered to move the diocese from St. Joseph Cathedral to St. Louis Catholic Church in Louisville.

When the new Cathedral of the Assumption replaced St. Louis as the cathedral of the diocese on Oct. 3, 1852, the painting was displayed prominently in the church until 1972, when it was moved to an out-of-the-way area due to the Cathedral’s renovation project. “It was hung on the wall without much, if any, attention paid to it, I suspect,” says Father Fichteman.

For 30 years, the painting remained in obscurity until it caught the attention of Christy and Owsl ey Brown, the philanthropists and art patrons who had spearheaded the Cathedral’s renovation. Noting that the canvas was in poor condition, they had it shipped to the McKay Lodge Fine Arts Conservation Laboratory in Oberlin for an estimate on what a restoration would cost.

After it was determined that the painting was legally the property of the Archdiocese, Father Fichteman and Father Dale Cieslik, the archivist for the Archdiocese, went to Archbishop Thomas Kelly with the idea of getting the painting restored and having it loaned to the Speed as a gift from the Archdiocese in honor of the 2008 Bicentennial celebration.

The museum had told Father Fichteman that it would love to display the painting, but had no money available for restoration. This is when Christy and Owsl ey Brown donated $40,000 to make the project a go.

The restoration, which took a year, was done by Stefan Dedecek, the paintings conservator at the McKay Lodge Fine Arts Conservation Laboratory. It had been more than 50 years since the painting’s most recent restoration, and Dedecek found himself confronted by a restoration artist’s nightmare.

“The picture had probably gone through several past ‘restorations’ and such work of the past was typically harsh and took its toll on paint and canvas,” said Robert Lodge, the company’s founder. “The canvas was extremely damaged by thinning and losses of paint. The canvas losses were filled with the hard gray adhesive and the paint losses were painted over with discolored old oil paints.”

“We looked at what we could do and it was not simple,” Dedecek told  

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Volunteers at Help Ministries

Cathedral members Brian Vance and Brooks Senn have raised the bar for the rest of us. Together, they have served a total of 19 years as weekly volunteers for Help Ministries of Central Louisville. Vance has worked the Tuesday shift since 1997; Senn has manned the Wednesday desk since 2001. Unquestionably, they’ve been a gift to Help Ministries. But one suspects, after a brief chat with each man, that volunteerism has its earthly rewards.

“Volunteering is a way of life,” says Senn, who was active in civic and church affairs even before he “retired” from his law practice in 1992. (He is quick to point out he is still working part time, as a consultant for the Kentucky Banker’s Association.) He is an active member of the Rotary Club, and a longtime member (and current Chairman) of the Cathedral finance committee.

For Vance, volunteering is also a life habit. “I was volunteering at the Cathedral kitchen when it was in the alley,” says Vance. Though he no longer serves free lunch at the Cathedral, Vance serves a weekly shift at St. John’s Day Center, a day shelter for homeless men.

“Help Ministries is hands-on,” Vance says of his interaction with visitors to the agency. “It makes me feel good to know I’m making someone’s life better – not every day and not every client.” In any case, he attempts to “treat someone with respect who ordinarily does not get respect.” Personal interaction is an essential part of volunteering at HELP, whether the visitor receives direct assistance or referral. “People are appreciative,” says Senn.

HELP is one of the oldest community ministries in the City of Louisville. Created by ministers of downtown churches in 1968 “to respond in a structured way” to requests from needy people, HELP continues to receive financial and volunteer support from seven downtown churches, including the Cathedral and our covenant churches. Emergency services are designed to “prevent eviction and utility cut-off” and assist individuals and families with emergency food items. HELP also takes applications for LG&E Community Winterhelp funds and FEMA emergency housing funds for neighbors in the service area.

“Every once in a while you have someone come through who is really in some hard way.” Vance describes a man who came in recently who was working two jobs for minimum wage, until he broke his wrist. “He couldn’t go back to his regular job.” The loss of income meant he was unable to pay his rent. He had lost his car. “While he was sitting there talking to me, pulling at my heart strings, he tells me a couple of days ago his father died and he didn’t have a suit to wear to the funeral.” Vance called Calvary Episcopal Church, one of Help Ministries’ supporting churches, and he procured a sport coat from their clothes closet. As a result of the direct assistance and referral, the gentleman was able to pay one month’s rent, and attend his father’s funeral.

Volunteering helps put life in perspective. “You forget about the things that are really important.” Talking to these two super-volunteers, one gets the impression that interacting and/or helping people in need nurtures the volunteer as much as it helps the client. As Vance says, “[Volunteering] keeps my life flowing.”

-Kimberly Cram

The Courier-Journal: “It had been badly overpainted on top when it was attached to a plywood panel. The lead (glue) was clumped, almost crystallized into snowflakes, plugs. Some were a quarter-inch around – and hard.”

Wearing a face mask, gloves, and a protective suit, Dedecek went to work. His tools included a circular saw, chisels, surgical scalpels, oil paints, and brushes. The work was delicate and tedious. Back in Louisville, Father Fichteman, the Browns, and the people at the Speed waited with mixed feelings.

The finished product took their collective breaths away. “I was overawed when I saw the beauty of the painting and the restoration,” said Father Fichteman. “It gave me a real sense of satisfaction in having had a part in making this happen. The whole thing was more fun than I ever expected.”

At the unveiling ceremony at the Speed, Archbishop Kurtz, who succeeded Kelly in 2007, noted Pope John Paul’s 1999 Easter message about the relationship between art and faith.

“The arts have always had a very special role in our Roman Catholic tradition,” Archbishop Kurtz said. “As we celebrate our heritage during this special year, we are very pleased to be able to make a contribution to the arts in our community.” Somewhere Gaspar de Crayer and Father Charles Nerincx must be pleased, indeed.

-Billy Reed
Serving With the Underserved

The Cathedral of the Assumption’s urban location and its commitment to social ministries are the reasons I joined the church. And I have not been disappointed. As a member of the Social Concerns steering committee, I have been fortunate to serve as part of a vigorous and creative social ministry. We are a versatile group: a psychotherapist, three social workers, a health care administrator, a couple of businesspersons, two urban planners, two English teachers, a school counselor, a retired elected city official and administrator, a religious sister and a sports writer.

In spite of our differing life experiences, each committee chair is drawn to serve on the Social Concerns Committee for similar reasons: “To create positive change and to help those in need; to reflect the major principles of Catholic social teaching; to provide education about social issues; to serve our parish and the surrounding community; and to advocate for social justice.”

“What does it mean ‘to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?’” The verse from Micah 6:8 in the Old Testament was cited by the Rev. Jean Hawxhurst, the pastor of Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church at our May quarterly meeting. Rev. Jean led us in a discussion of what Scripture tells us about charity and justice.

Recently, we have been encouraged to think a bit differently about our response to the needs of the poor. At the April Cathedral seminar about poverty, sponsored by our Respect Life Committee, Archbishop Kurtz stressed that Catholics should not simply “serve the poor” but “serve with the poor.” This simple preposition now guides the Social Concerns Committee in both formal and informal discussions about our work on behalf of groups we serve through fund-raising, direct service, legislative action and education.

We want to support activities that provide suste-
Mary Blandford, Cathedral Star’s Roving Reporter, asks parishioners:

When should one not use a cell phone?

Marty Favorite
It’s really poor judgment to use a cell phone when driving a car. Also, when in a public place try to keep your voice subdued. If you’re in line to be waited on, you need to give respect to that person.

Loretta Davidson
The most important thing is if you’re having dinner with someone and they talk on their cell phone...I don’t think that’s appropriate. And, of course, the danger of talking on cell phones while driving.

Michael Ray
Cell phones are inappropriate to use in church, restrooms, etc. Unfortunately we have become so plugged into technology as a society that we have allowed cell phones to control our lives. How did we manage ten years ago to get along without them?

Edith Graft
#1 – Drivers using cell phones while driving and not paying attention to driving.
#2 – During Mass, especially after we have been asked to silence the phones.
#3 – Public restroom booths – that seems to be going over the top!

Karla Katakis
Please don’t use your cell phone in the library, the hospital, work, or in restaurants. People on cell phones don’t realize how loud they’re speaking and private conversations should be kept private.

Stacy Anne Hoehle
As a young lawyer, I often consider whether driving and talking is wise. Obviously it isn’t. Multiple states have banned motorists from using cell phones, and an essay question on the last Kentucky Bar Exam broached this issue. All drivers, including myself, should carefully weigh driving against the risk of becoming distracted.

Dave Puckett
Don’t answer your cell phone when you’re in a meeting or when you’re trying to order lunch.

Carolyn Denning
At any life-changing event: funerals, weddings, baptisms, reunions, or when the police officer pulls up behind your car (unless you are calling your lawyer).

Fr. Tony Leolien, the new pastor of Cathedrale de St-Louis, will visit us from July 31-August 4. Fr. Tony will preach at all the weekend Masses and bring us up to date on what is happening at our sister parish in Jeremie, Haiti. Our Parish Life Committee is now busy preparing for the Belle of Louisville Feastday Fest cruise on Saturday, August 16th. It was a great time last year—purchase your tickets early.

During these summer months, a group of about 40 Cathedral parishioners will be working hard preparing for the Cathedral’s Bicentennial Campaign Building a Future of Hope. This will be a joint campaign with the Archdiocese, which every parish is being asked to do within the next three years. Our Parish Council has decided on a $3.0 million campaign to meet some major parish needs such as a new front plaza, tuck-pointing and sealing of exterior of the Cathedral, window replacement in the residence, finishing the renovation of the Cathedral offices, construction of an improved choir rehearsal room, a bronze statue honoring Mother Catherine Spalding, and several other needs such as enhanced storage space. It has been more than 12 years since there has been a capital campaign, and this just seems like the right time to me. We hope to have the campaign finished by late November.

Finally, with grateful, but sad hearts, we remember several persons who have died recently, who have made a significant impact on the Cathedral: Mildred Dougherty, who worked so tirelessly preserving our heritage; Scott Tichenor, whose tasteful design ideas we enjoy each day in our Cathedral complex; and Peter LaPaglia, the consultant who designed the Archdiocese of Louisville History Center. May they rest in peace!
Colby's Catholic Connection

Almost six-year-old Colby Russ, son of Amy Russ, was lying on the couch in his living room gazing at the television. He signaled his mother to change the channel to his favorite show, Spongebob. He could not speak his choice, but rather used his eyes to tell her what he wanted. Diagnosed at four months, Colby has Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA*), Type 1. There are four types, with Type 1 being the most severe. A recessive gene causes SMA; one in 6400 babies develop it. Because of this neuromuscular disease, Colby cannot talk, swallow, walk, stand, crawl, or sit up.

Colby’s mom does everything she can to prolong his son’s life and make him as comfortable as possible while helping him gain new levels of achievement. “I made the decision to quit my job and stay home and take care of Colby. (However, she does work at home over the weekend as a medical transcriptionist.) I've never regretted that decision for one minute. And here we are six years later – which is a good thing,” declared Amy, followed by loud cheering from both Mom and her friend and helper, Kim Steinbock. “Colby is handsome, charming, and very, very, smart,” bragged his Mom. According to The SMA Support website, “The brain is not affected, and they [children with SMA] have been tested to have at least average to above average intelligence. Please do not make the mistake of treating them as mentally impaired! Their bodies may not be perfect, but their minds are, so be sure to treat them that way!” To be sure, Colby is treated that way. He communicates with eye gaze, eye blink, or changing his tone of voice. Those who work with him understand what he is communicating.

Colby is followed at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital where he sees a pulmonologist, a neurologist, an orthopedist and a cardiologist. He is followed in Louisville by his pediatrician, nutritionist and physical therapist. Colby has had several hospital stays in his lifetime due to respiratory complications. The most severe was when Colby was two and a half, spending 28 days at Kosair Children’s Hospital because he contracted Respiratory Syncytial Virus, RSV. Colby wasn’t supposed to reach two years of age, but he will be six on July 22, and there is a big birthday bash planned with around 60 people invited.

At home his care involves being fed four times a day through a feeding tube and a feeding pump that runs through the night. Because he cannot swallow, he must be suctioned every fifteen minutes or so to remove secretions and prevent choking. He has a wheelchair and uses special braces to support his feet and back. A Bi-PAP machine is used at night to give Colby’s lungs a rest and pull secretions out. Use of a CoughAssist machine helps Colby produce a cough so his secretions can be cleared and his lungs kept free of congestion.

Colby is currently attending summer school at Churchill Park, the Jefferson County Public School’s facility for profoundly special needs children. There are six children in his class, all non-verbal. They have one teacher, two aides, and Colby has his own nurse who monitors and cares for his medical needs. He attends four days a week from 9 a.m. to Noon.

Amy is very optimistic about a communication device they have ordered for Colby. It is a large screen with many choices and sub choices. For example, if Colby is bored, they can ask him if he wants to watch a movie, go for a walk, etc. The choices are both audio and visual. Colby can use a clicking device to make his selection. Another exciting item they have ordered is a power wheelchair, which Colby will be able to operate with a small joystick, giving him the independence he doesn’t have at present. Amy said it will take a while to get it because of the red tape of insurance and Medicaid, but it will eventually come.

Obviously, Amy could use some help. The Cathedral put a notice in the bulletin that Amy needed someone to help her with household chores and running errands. When Kim Steinbock read the ad, she was torn between answering that ad or joining ACT. She decided to answer Amy's call for help. "And thank goodness for that!" Amy adds enthusiastically. Interestingly, Amy and Kim both attend 5:30 Sunday Cathedral Mass although they didn’t know each other before Kim answered the notice in the church bulletin. Kim’s role quickly expanded from housecleaning volunteer to becoming a trusted friend. When other five and six-year-olds were being enrolled in religious education at the Cathedral, Amy contacted Carolyn Denning and Prestina Bacala about classes for Colby. Another Cathedral member had planned on helping with this, but the timing did not work out. "I thought we were
back to square one on trying to find someone to come here and work with Colby," said Amy. That's when Kim volunteered to become Colby's religious ed teacher. "She just spoke right up and said, 'Sure, I'd love to do that for Colby'."

Advised by the Cathedral religious ed people, they make a special area in the apartment. They spread a white cloth over a small table, put up a cross, light candles, play soft music, and use holy water. Colby likes to hold his rosary, a large one with multi-colored beads. Kim talks to Colby about the Hail Mary, the Our Father, and God and Catholicism in general. Kim uses the books Walking by Faith (they are on Chapter 6) and My First Bible. "Kim is always prepared," explains Amy. Colby isn't able to attend Mass yet, but they hope to take him to church some time soon and show him around.

Colby's dad, Chris, was born and raised Catholic and is a member of Holy Family Church. Amy went through RCIA at the Cathedral in 1999 and has been a member here ever since. They are thrilled that Colby is learning the Catholic faith and that Kim is helping. "We're looking forward to the day when we can watch Colby drive up to the altar in his power chair and receive his first Holy Communion," says Chris. There is no particular time frame in mind, just when everything works out. According to Amy, "It's hard for me to believe sometimes that this is happening for Colby. I'm so thankful to the Cathedral for working with us to get Colby's religious education started and, of course, to Kim for offering to do it."

Amy explained that she has had lots of continued love and support from many people. She has a huge amount of help from her parents, both retired teachers. Her dad takes them to Cincinnati for Colby's appointments and watches him on Sundays so she can attend Mass. The Moose Lodge in Sellersburg, where Amy's dad has been a member for many years, has had benefits for Colby to help with medical expenses and a lift for the van. Amy's mom is always there to help with "whatever needs to be done at the time," says Amy. She describes her mom as her compass, always keeping her on the right path. "She'll wash dishes, take care of Colby's needs, hug me when I need it, and give me an attitude adjustment when I need one, too." Amy also tries to get together with her gal pals to play Bunco or just have a glass of wine and a gab session.

It is through family, friends and faith that Colby's mother is joyful, optimistic, cheerful, energetic, dedicated, indefatigable, and so proud of every one of her son's accomplishments. Her friend and son's religious ed teacher, Kim, shares many of the same virtues. One might think that dealing with the hardship of caring for a disabled child would create a disheartened atmosphere, but in this family it is not the case. Here there is fun over little things, a positive outlook, hope for the future, and a shared religious faith.

-Martha Villiger

* Further information about Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) is available on the following websites: www.fsma.org and www.smasupport.com.
Parishioner Sr. Mary Kathleen Sheehan with Archbishop Kelly after receiving her honorary doctor of public service (for her 22 years at St. John’s Day Center) at the Spalding University Graduation on June 2, 2008.

Photo by Barbara Carter

Feastday Fest
Belle of Louisville Cruise
Saturday, August 16

Watch the Sunday Bulletin for details!