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Vincentians bringing founder's life to stage

by Joseph Kenny, Review Staff Writer

A group of St. Louisans will bring the beginnings of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to life at a mid-year meeting of the society's national conference this weekend.

The meeting began in St. Louis April 23, the birthday of the society and its founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam.

The largest lay Catholic charitable organization in the world was founded 175 years ago by Ozanam, a French college student. On April 23, 1833, his 20th birthday, he and his classmates began the society to put their faith into action through service to the poor.

A group of actors from St. Louis will perform "The Dawning of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul" by Gregory J. Marino at a banquet Saturday, April 26, at the close of the meeting, which includes various workshops and presentations for society leaders from across the country.

Marino is coordinator of the Good Works Program sponsored by the St. Louis Council of the society. The program helps older residents maintain independent living by providing basic home maintenance and repairs through volunteer labor and materials and supplies obtained through grants. He also operates a professional theater company, the Leavenworth Players Group, that performs family-friendly murder mystery comedies primarily at the Bevo Mill restaurant in South St. Louis.

For the short play at the meeting, he cast some of the professional actors he works with and some high school students who have volunteered with the Good Works Program.

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The cast also includes Daughter of Charity Sister Kieran Kneaves, national formation director, playing Sister Rosalie Rendu.

The play provides insight into the founding of the society and the thinking of Ozanam and his colleagues.

"I have already spoken to you of the vast, generous organization that I have dreamed of for so long," the actor who plays Ozanam says in the play. "This will give us students an opportunity to actively practice our Catholicism, to draw closer to our Lord and to share our blessings with others."

Other statements that provide a look at his philosophy include: "By drawing closer to the poor, we draw closer to God"; "In addition to material assistance, you must give moral assistance — be ready to give aid to the spirit as well as the body"; and "There is so much that we can learn from the poor."

Marino noted that the serious, historical piece is different from other plays he writes. He first researched the subject "to ensure what we related would be factually grounded, historically guided and engaging." Some of the research involved source materials owned by the society, he noted.

He was fascinated by what he learned about the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. "It was founded by a bunch of college kids. Today it seems that all efforts to change society emanate from the government, agencies, hierarchies and structures. But one person really can make a difference," Marino said.

His play shows the college students having a good time, "just like we do in the Good Works Program, kidding each other and all that. That’s the way these guys were — happy, earthy, real. People will see them as regular guys who put together this extraordinary structure with an extraordinary vision," Marino said.

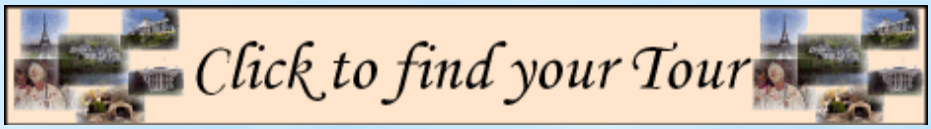
The play illustrates that good ideas can come from anywhere and properly carried through can lead to greatness, he said.

Also at the April 26 banquet program will be a performance of LaSalette Father Edward Richard’s Holy Mountain Music band. Father Richard teaches at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in Shrewsbury.

Known for its thrift stores and food pantries and the personal visits of its members to the homes of the poor, the society today has more than 690,000 members in 142 countries and 115,000 U.S. members.

Some 2,500 Vincentian volunteers work in parishes of the archdiocese. They reach out to their neighbors in need to provide food, clothing, furniture, rent and utility assistance, hospital visits, prison ministry and more.

For more information on the national council, see its website at www.svdpusa.org. For information about the Society of St. Vincent de Paul of St. Louis, call (314) 881-6000 or see its website at www.servingthepoor.com.



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