

FEATURE

Comedy pokes gentle fun at Catholic schools of old



Photo courtesy of Vicki Quade

Maripat Donovan (in photo at right) originally wanted to do a comedy routine about the lives of the saints until she and "Late Nite Catechism" co-author Vicki Quade (above) began reminiscing about their days in Catholic schools.

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Sister, the only character in the play "Late Nite Catechism," made sure her audience knew the difference between a venial sin and mortal sin.

"Venial sin: I lied to my grandmother," she said. "Mortal sin: I killed my grandmother."

As it did throughout the evening of March 23, the audience roared with laughter at this and several other catechetical explanations offered by Sister, played by Mary Zentmeyer. "Late Nite Catechism" opened March 20, and is being staged in the Apollo Room of the Auditorium Center through April 8. The play was co-written by actress Maripat Donovan and Chicago-based writer, poet and editor Vicki Quade.

"It's a love letter to the nuns who took care of us when we grew up," said Quade in a phone interview.

She noted that she sends her three children to Catholic schools and doesn't want the comedy to be misinterpreted as an attack on the Catholic Church or on women religious.

"If we ever get any negative comments, it's from someone who hasn't seen the show," she said.

She added that she has stacks of complimentary letters from bishops, priests and women religious who enjoyed the show. She also said that she and Donovan have regularly consulted with women religious and clergy to ensure the play is catechetically correct, although it's obvious that many of the answers are bent a bit for humor's sake.

Just before the play ends, Sister wistfully

recalls the pre-Vatican II church when nuns and priests were plentiful, and notes that there are fewer and fewer nuns each year. Quade said this one truly serious moment in the play is designed to remind audience members that many older nuns have or are about to retire. She added that they are doing so without any assurance that their financial and residential needs will be met in their old age. Each performance of the play ends with Sister soliciting donations from the audience to go to the retirement funds of various women's religious orders. To date, "Late Nite Catechism" has raised more than \$500,000 for such funds, she said.

Harkening back to pre-Vatican II Catholic classrooms, "Late Nite Catechism" is set in a classroom at St. Bruno's School and consists of an ongoing exchange between Sister and her audience. Sister is a gentle teacher, but not afraid to impose discipline. For example, one woman in the audience was chewing gum and was spotted by Sister who walked off stage to remove the wad from the woman's mouth and place it on her nose for all to see.

"Are you hot, dear?" Sister said to another woman. "Offer it up."

Audience members received such prizes as glow-in-the-dark rosaries for answering questions.

Quade said the play originally grew out of a desire by Donovan to do a stand-up routine Quade had written about the lives of the saints. The two women got to talking about their mutual Catholic school experiences and came up with "Late Nite Catechism" instead. The play is a celebration of both women religious and "cultural Catholicism," Quade said.



Photo courtesy of Rochester Broadway Theatre League, Inc.

"Sister" uses both scripted material and improvisational audience interaction.

"It puts you back in third grade ...," Quade said. "I think it helps you appreciate that these women gave their lives (to us)."

The two playwrights thought their creation would have a short run when it opened in May 1993, but it is still playing in two separate venues in Chicago as well as in 10 other cities including Seattle, Los Angeles, Baltimore and Detroit. Donovan is currently on an international tour of the play and has acted as Sister in Toronto, London and Dublin as well as in the United States.

For her work in "Late Nite Catechism," Donovan was nominated for the Outer Critics Circle Award in New York for solo performances.

Actresses hired to play Sister have more than 10 hours of material to draw on for their performances, which are a combination of scripting and improvisation, Quade said. At the March 23 show, Sister used both material unfamiliar to even a Catholic-schooled audience,

as well as a variety of take-offs on jokes and stories many Catholics probably have heard. She poked fun, for example, at the custom of burying statues of St. Joseph upside down in front of a house to be sold in order to expedite the sale.

"Think about it. If you were upside down in the mud, you'd make sure the house was sold pretty fast."

She also pointed that what distinguished people from animals was the fact that people have "immortal souls" and "aren't afraid of the vacuum cleaner."

Sister also poked fun at the differences between the various orders of women religious.

"Two Carmelites could take three Sisters of St. Joseph, no problem," she said, adding: "Mercy nun? That's a misnomer right there."

She also teased audience members whose parents didn't send them to Catholic schools, instead packing them off to those public schools where children were "wild."

"I guess your parents didn't really care about you," she said.

At one point in the play, Sister goes through a list of saints on the chalkboard, asking the audience to help her decide which of them should be removed from the list of canonized saints. She noted that removal is what happened to St. Christopher, patron of travelers, in the late 1960s when the church had concluded he probably never actually existed. Various saints were kept on or kicked off the list, but Irish readers will be happy to know St. Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, wasn't in danger for even a moment.

"I'm not going to be responsible for shutting down all those (Chicago) taverns," she said.

For information on obtaining tickets to "Late Nite Catechism," call 716/222-5000. You can visit the "Late Nite Catechism" Web site at www.late-nite-catechism.com.

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