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Frederick Ozanam: Lay Evangelizer

BY
SHAUN MCCARTY, S.T.

His Life

Frederick Ozanam was born on 23 April 1813, in Milan, Italy, the fifth child of fourteen born to Jean-Antoine-François and Marie Nantas Ozanam, ardent French Catholic parents of middle class circumstances. His father had served with distinction as an officer under Napoleon, retiring early to become a tutor and later to practice medicine. When the city of Milan fell to the Austrians in 1815, the Ozanams returned to their native city of Lyons in France where Frederick spent his early years. At seven he suffered the loss of his sister, Elisa, which came as a great grief to him. They had grown close as she patiently helped him with his early lessons. Frederick became a day student at the Royal College of Lyons where he would later become editor of a college journal, The Bee. In a letter written when he was sixteen we have something of an autobiographical account of these early years.

They say I was very gentle and docile as a child, and they attribute this to my feeble health; but I account for it in another way. I had a sister, such a beloved sister! Who used to take it in turns with my mother to teach me, and whose lessons were so sweet, so well-explained, so admirably suited to my childish comprehension as to be a real delight to me.

At seven years old I had a serious illness, which brought me so near to death that everybody said I was saved by a miracle; not that I wanted kind care; my dear father and mother hardly left my bedside for fifteen days and nights. I was on the point of expiring when suddenly I asked for some beer. I had always disliked beer but it saved me. I recovered, and six months later, my sister, my darling sister, died. Oh! what a grief that was. . . . I was being educated by a kind father and a kind mother and an excellent brother; I loved them dearly, and at this period
I had no friends outside my family. . . . This is a true portrait of me as I was first going to school at nine and a half years old. By degrees I improved; emulation cured my laziness. I was very fond of my master; I had some little successes, which encouraged me. I studied with ardor, and at the same time I began to feel some emotions of pride. I must also confess that I exchanged a great number of blows with my companions. But I changed very much for the better when I entered the fifth class. I fell ill and was obliged to go for a month to the country, to the house of a very kind lady, where I acquired some degree of polish, which I lost in great part soon after. . . . It was then that I made my first Communion. O glad and blessed day! May my right hand wither and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I ever forget thee! I had changed a good deal by this time; I had become modest, gentle, and docile, more industrious and unhappily rather scrupulous. I still continued proud and impatient.¹

At sixteen the young Ozanam started his studies in philosophy. He suffered doubts of faith for about a year but was able to survive the ordeal with the help of a wise teacher and guide, Abbé Joseph Mathias Noirot, who was to exercise a strong influence on Frederick throughout his life. In the midst of this crisis, he made a promise that if he could see the truth, he would devote his entire life to its defense. Subsequently he emerged from the crisis with a consolidation of the intellectual bases for his faith, a life commitment to the defense of truth, and a deep sense of compassion for unbelievers.

Despite a leaning toward literature and history, Frederick's father decided on a law career for him and apprenticed him to a local attorney, Monsieur Coulet. But in his spare time the young man pursued the study of language and managed to contribute historical and philosophical articles to his college journal.

In the spring of 1831 Ozanam published his first work of any length, "Reflections on the Doctrine of Saint-Simon," which was a

defense against some false social teachings that were capturing the fancy of young people at the time. His efforts were rewarded with favorable notice from some of the leading social thinkers of the day, including Alphonse de Lamartine (poet and social thinker of the day), François-René de Chateaubriand (noted author and leader of the Catholic revival), and Jean-Jacques Ampère. Ozanam also found time outside of work to help organize and to write for the Propagation of the Faith which had begun in this same city of Lyons.

In autumn of the same year, Frederick was sent to the Sorbonne in Paris to study law. At first he suffered a great deal from homesickness and unsuitable company in boarding house surroundings. He was invited to move in with the family of the renowned André-Marie Ampère, Jean-Jacques’s father, where he stayed for two years. Here he had not only the nourishment of a very Christian and intellectual milieu but also the opportunity to meet some of the bright lights of the Catholic revival such as Chateaubriand, Charles-Forbes Montalembert (a brilliant liberal Catholic who saw promise in Ozanam’s journalistic work), Lacordaire, and Ballanche.

It was at this time that Frederick’s attraction to history took on the dimensions of a life’s task: as apologist, to write a literary history of the Middle Ages from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries with a focus on the role of Christianity in guiding the progress of civilization. His aim was to help restore Catholicism to France where materialism and rationalism, irreligion, and anticlericalism prevailed. He made plans for the extensive studies he would need to equip him for his life’s task.

It was not long before Ozanam found the climate of the university hostile to Christian belief. So he seized the opportunity to find kindred spirits among the students to join in defending the faith. Among them was one who was to become his best friend, François Lallier.

Under the sponsorship of an older ex-professor, J. Emmanuel Bailly, these young men revived a discussion group called a “Society of Good Studies” and formed it into a “Conference of History” which quickly became a forum for large and lively discussions among the students. Their attention turned frequently to the social teachings of the gospel.

At one meeting during a heated debate in which Ozanam and his friends were trying to prove from historical evidence alone the truth of the Catholic Church as the one founded by Christ, their adversaries declared that, though at one time the Church was a source of good, it no longer was. One voice issued the challenge, “What is your church
doing now? What is she doing for the poor of Paris? Show us your work and we will believe you!" In response to this, one of Ozanam's companions, Auguste Le Taillandier, suggested some effort in favor of the poor. "Yes," Ozanam agreed, "let us go to the poor!"

After this, the "Conference of History" became the "Conference of Charity" which eventually was named the "Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul." Now, instead of engaging in mere discussion and debate, seven of the group (Monsieur Bailly, Frederick Ozanam, François Lallier, Paul Lamanche, Félix Clave, Auguste Le Taillandier, and Jules Devaux) met on a May evening in 1833 for the first time and determined to engage in practical works of charity. This little band was to expand rapidly over France and around the world even during the lifetime of Ozanam. In the meantime, Frederick continued his law studies but kept up his interest in literary and historical matters.

At the time, the renowned Henri-Dominique Lacordaire was on his way to join the Dominicans with the hope of returning to France to restore religious life. For some time Ozanam entertained the notion of joining him. Again, under the guidance of Abbé Noirot and considering the expanding work of the Conferences of Charity, he decided against pursuing a life of celibacy and the cloister. He would, however, at a later time initiate the famed Conferences of Notre Dame, which provided thousands with the inspired sermons of Lacordaire.

In 1834, after passing his bar examination, Frederick returned to Lyons for the holidays and then went to Italy where he was to gain his first appreciation of medieval art. After this he returned to Paris to continue studying for his doctorate in law. When he finished, he took up a practice of law in Lyons but with little satisfaction. His attention turned more and more to literature. When his father died in 1837, he found himself the sole supporter of his mother which kept him in the field of law to make a living.

In 1839, after he finished a brilliant thesis on Dante which revolutionized critical work on the poet, the Sorbonne awarded him a doctorate in literature. In the same year he was given a chair of commercial law at Lyons where his lectures received wide acclaim. After an offer to assume a chair of philosophy at Orleans, he was asked to lecture also on foreign literature at Lyons with a welcome increase in salary. This would keep him in Lyons and able to support his mother. She died early in 1840, leaving him quite unsettled about his future.

In that same year, to qualify for the chair of foreign literature at Lyons, Ozanam had to take a competitive examination which de-
manded six months of grueling preparation. He took first place easily with the result that he was offered an assistantship to Claude-Charles Fauriel, professor of foreign literature at the prestigious Sorbonne. When Fauriel died three years later, Ozanam replaced him with the rank of full professor, no mean accomplishment for a man of his early years. This established him in the midst of the intellectual world of Paris. He now began a course of lectures on German Literature in the Middle Ages. To prepare, he went on a short tour of Germany where his lectures proved highly successful. This happened despite the fact that, contrary to most of his colleagues in the anti-Christian climate of the Sorbonne, he attached fundamental importance to Christianity as the primary factor in the growth of European civilization.

After years of hesitation concerning marriage, Frederick was introduced by his old friend and guide, Abbé Noirot, to Amélie Josephine Soulacroix, the daughter of the rector of the Lyons Academy. They married on 23 June 1844 and spent an extended honeymoon in Italy during which he continued his research. After four years of a happy marriage, an only daughter, Marie, was born to the delighted Ozanams.

All during this time, Ozanam, who had never enjoyed robust health, found his workload increasing between the teaching, writing, and work with the Conferences. In 1846 he was named to the Legion of Honor. But at this time his health broke down and he was forced to take a year's rest in Italy where he continued his research.

When the Revolution of 1848 broke out, Ozanam served briefly and reluctantly in the National Guard. Later, at the insistence of friends, he made a belated and unsuccessful bid for election to the National Assembly. This was followed by a short and stormy effort at publishing a liberal Catholic journal called The New Era which was aimed at securing justice for the poor and working classes. This evoked the ire of conservative Catholics and the consternation of some of Ozanam's friends for seeming to side with the Church's enemies. In its pages he advocated that Catholics play their part in the evolution of a democratic state.

At this time, too, he wrote another of his important works, The Italian Franciscan Poets of the Thirteenth Century, which reflects his admiration for Franciscan ideals.

During the academic year of 1851-1852, Ozanam barely managed to get through his teaching responsibilities as a complete breakdown of his health was in progress. The doctors ordered him to surrender his teaching duties at the Sorbonne, and he again went with his family
to southern Europe for rest. It did not deter him from continuing to promote the work of the Conferences.

In the spring of 1853, the Ozanams moved to a seaside cottage at Leghorn, Italy, where Frederick spent his last days peacefully. Though not fearing death, he expressed the wish to die on French soil. So his Vincentian brothers came to assist him and his family to Marseilles where Frederick died on 8 September 1853.

Ozanam has been revered since as an exemplar of the lay apostle in family, social, and intellectual life. The work he began with the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul has continued to flourish. At his death, the membership numbered about 15,000. Today it numbers 870,000, serving the poor in 130 countries, a living monument to Frederick Ozanam and his companions. The first formal step for his beatification was taken in Paris on 10 June 1925. On 12 January 1954, Pope Pius XII signed the decree of the introduction of the cause. He then enjoyed the official title "Servant of God." Pope John Paul II published the decree on the heroicity of Ozanam's virtues on 6 July 1993. He is now called "Venerable." The processes and report of verifying the miraculous cure of a child in Rio de Janeiro in 1923 have been completed. Frederick Ozanam's beatification appears now to be imminent.

**His Inspiration**

Frederick Ozanam is appropriately buried in the crypt of the Church of Saint Joseph des Carmes which adjoins and serves the students attending the Institute Catholique in Paris. Above his tomb is a mural depicting the parable of the Good Samaritan. If there is a single significant passage of the gospel that his life and that of the group he helped to found incarnated, it was this one. He developed the idea in a letter to a friend who was thinking of founding a Conference of Charity in Nîmes. Although his first apostolate was an intellectual one as student, professor, and writer, these pursuits were accompanied by a compassion for the poor and as a practical program to work for them in the realm of action as well as ideas. This ministry he imaged in terms of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In interpreting the parable for his own times, he saw help to the poor coming under the guidance and care of the Church rather than according to current schemes of social reform. Yet he saw this being accomplished by lay people because people feared the priests. He wrote:
Society today seems to me to be not unlike the wayfarer described in the parable of the Good Samaritan. For, while journeying along the road mapped out for it by Christ, it has been set upon by thieves of evil human thought. Bad men have despoiled the wayfarer of all his goods, of the treasures of faith and love. . . . The priests and the Levites have passed him by. But this time, being real priests and true Levites, they have approached the suffering, wretched creature and attempted to cure him. But in his delirium he has not recognized them and has driven them away. Then we weak Samaritans, outsiders as we are, have dared to approach this great sick patient. Perhaps he will be less affrighted by us? Let us try to measure the extent of his wounds in order to pour oil into them. Let us make words of peace and consolation ring in his ears. Then, when his eyes are opened, we will hand him over to the tender care of those whom God has chosen to be the guardians and doctors of souls. 

Ozanam believed that the exercise of charity would do more to reclaim the lapsed than controversy or apologetic. In this he claimed Saint Vincent de Paul as an example of someone whom even the revolutionaries admired for they “considering the benefits he had bestowed upon the people, forgave him the crime of having loved God.” Even when the socialists taunted Ozanam with confining his efforts to the alleviation of individual suffering without getting at the causes, he countered that society can only be reformed by first reforming the character of the individuals making up society. He attacked the socialists for breeding hatred and war in contrast to the Church’s approach of building a new world by fostering justice and charity. He says:

Certainly we must endeavor to go the root of the evil and by wise and social reforms try to reduce the widespread distress. But we are convinced that a knowledge of the reforms . . . is to be learned not so much by pondering

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3Henry Hughes, Frederic Ozanam (Saint Louis: Herder, 1933), 58.
over books or by discussions among politicians, as by
going to visit the garrets in which the poor live; by sitting
at the bedside of the dying, by feeling the cold which they
feel, and by learning from their own lips the cause of their
 woes. When we have done this, not simply for a few
months, but for many years, when we have studied the
poor in their homes, in the schools and in the hospitals,
not only in one, but in many cities, then we really begin
to understand a little of this formidable problem of pov-
erty. Then we have the right to suggest reforms which,
instead of putting the fear of God into their hearts, would
bring peace and hope to all.4

It is interesting to note that the parable of the Good Samaritan is
often associated with the life of Saint Vincent de Paul whose patron-
age Ozanam and his followers chose after beginning their Conference
of Charity, later to be named the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. The
idea of renaming the Conference of Charity as the Conference of Saint
Vincent de Paul came on 4 February 1834, apparently at the sugges-
tion of Léon le Provost. This confirmed a practice which had been the
group’s from the beginning of invoking the saint’s patronage at each
meeting.5 It has been suggested elsewhere that perhaps Monsieur
Bailly had suggested the name since devotion to Saint Vincent had
long been a tradition in his family.6 Vincent had captured that aspect
of the gospel call for his own generation; thus it is not surprising that
Ozanam and his companions would consider themselves heirs to his
spirit two centuries later in the France of their day. Ozanam wrote:

Vincent de Paul was not the man to build on sand or for
the moment. The great souls who draw nigh unto God
have something of the gift of prophecy. Let us then not
hesitate to believe that St. Vincent had a vision of the evils
and the needs of our times. He is still making provisions;
like all great founders he never ceases to have his spiritual
posterity alive and active amid the ruins of the past . . . To

4Ibid, 60.
5See Charles K. Murphy, The Spirit of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (New York: Longmans
Green, 1940), 17. See Albert. Schimberg, The Great Friend: Frederic Ozanam (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1946),
68.
6Hughes, Frederic Ozanam, 63-64.
choose a patron saint, does not mean simply adopting a figurehead which will help us to cut a good figure in the religious world. A patron saint is a model whom we must try to imitate, as he strives himself to imitate the Divine Model, Jesus Christ. It means trying to carry on the work he has started endeavoring to acquire something of his warmth of heart, attempting to catch up the threads of the thoughts which were in his brain. A patron saint provides a model for us to copy on this earth and a protector who will watch over us in heaven.7

It was for the good of the members as well as for the benefit of the poor that the idea of a Conference of Charity emerged. As one author observes, “It was the novel and original idea of Ozanam to give to young men . . . a chance of doing work similar to that done by the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul. . . . A widening and softening process will take place in the young man’s heart as he strives to imitate the charity of his patron, St. Vincent de Paul, who on his part endeavors when on this earth to imitate the charity of Christ.”8

In approaching the poor, Ozanam made the sentiment of Saint Vincent equally applicable to the work of the Society in saying, “We must indeed admit with St. Vincent de Paul that . . . they are our superiors. The poor of Jesus Christ are our lords and our masters . . . and we are unworthy to render them our poor services!”9 When the rule for the fledgling Society was drawn up, based not on theory, but on the actual practice of the already existing Conferences, we find the introduction inspired by the sermons and writings of Saint Vincent de Paul. One biographer comments, “It is instinct with the spirit of the humility, unity and charity that ought to reign among the brothers as well as with a sense of duty to ecclesiastical authority. The law giver of the Society . . . is St. Vincent de Paul himself.”10

It was almost a passion with Ozanam to encourage fidelity to the primitive spirit of the Society which he saw to be the spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul with humility as its primary virtue. He wrote, “I agree with your intention of emphasizing . . . the necessity for remaining

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7Ibid., 64.
8Msgr. Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence. Translated by a member of the Council of Ireland of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (Australia: National Council, 1925), 127.
9Ibid., 114.
10Ibid., 130.
obscure. It would be well to lay down this principle: that humility is as obligatory on associations as on individuals; and to support it by the example of St. Vincent de Paul, who reprimanded a priest of the Congregation of the Mission for calling his Association 'Our Holy Congregation.' Our guiding rule should be neither to force ourselves on the public gaze, nor to conceal ourselves from those who may wish to find us.”

He would say later, “Sons of St. Vincent de Paul, let us learn of him to forget ourselves, to devote ourselves to the service of God and the good of men. Let us learn of him that holy preference which shows most love to those who suffer most.”

On another occasion, when the names of Cardinal Richelieu, the powerful minister of King Louis XIII, and Saint Vincent were mentioned in contrasting political action with charitable works, Ozanam remarked:

The great Minister certainly played a glorious part, but who could, and would if he could, continue it today? Richelieu was but a man of one country, of one period, of a few years. St. Vincent de Paul is, on the other hand, for all lands and for all time. His name is celebrated wherever the sun illumines the crucifix on a church tower. His spirit visits the hospitals and schools of our faubourgs in the persons of his Sisters, as well as the missions of Lebanon, China and Texas, which are manned with his sons. His work never grows old. Who does not wish today to continue it? If we have courage and faith, gentlemen, what will keep us back?

Toward the end of his life, Ozanam had the opportunity of making a pilgrimage to the place of Vincent's birth and early years, once called Pouy and later named Berceau de Saint Vincent. In a letter to Alexandre Dufieux of 7 December 1852, Ozanam acknowledged a debt to Vincent's patronage, saying that he owed a debt to the beloved patron who saved him in his youth from so many dangers and who had showered such unexpected blessings on his little conferences. He

11Ibid., 273.
12Ibid., 275.
found in the ancient oak where Vincent took shelter and prayed as a youth a symbol of the heritage Vincent left. Ozanam observed, "That fine old tree is now held to the soil only by the bark, which is eaten into with age. But the branches are superb and, even at the advanced season when we were there, the foliage was beautifully green. I saw in it the type of the foundations of St. Vincent de Paul, which have no apparent bond of union with the earth, but which nevertheless triumph over time and grow strong during revolution."14 Frederick subsequently had a branch of the oak cut and sent to the Council General of the Society.

After Ozanam died, Monsieur Léonce Curnier, a friend and correspondent, wrote, "I seem to see him in heaven between St. Vincent de Paul and St. Francis de Sales, whose faithful disciple he was."15 It was in the gospel spirit of the Samaritan captured by Saint Vincent de Paul before him in his native France that Frederick Ozanam was to embody the same spirit. It would be shaped by the influences and challenges of his own time and culture. Since Saint Vincent was the patron of the group, it was natural to turn to one of his followers for direction in finding and helping the poor. The young men were somewhat perplexed at first from not having any poor people to visit. Monsieur Bailly suggested that they go to Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity who lived and worked in the Mouffetard district of Saint-Marceau, a poor neighborhood of ill repute. Jules Devaux, one of the original band of seven, was sent to see her. She gladly advised them as to how to deal with the poor. She gave them a list of needy families to visit and equipped them with bread coupons.16 From this time on "the destinies of Frederick Ozanam and Sister Rosalie mingled in their love for the poor, thus forging lasting bonds between the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the . . . Daughters of Charity."17 It has been further said: "It is scarcely imaginable to retrace the life and work of Frederick Ozanam without evoking the memory of Sr. Rosalie in so much as their collaboration was close in the service of the poor. . . . The providential convergence of these two destinies will have marked the history of charity in the nineteenth century."18

14Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence, 406.
15O'Meara, Frederic Ozanam: His Life and Works, 62.
16Cahiers Ozanam, 73.
17Ibid., 71.
18Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence, 20.
His Emerging Vision

When he was barely eighteen years old, Ozanam began what was to become his life's task. By word and witness he would be an advocate for the Catholic faith. His life would be devoted to the service of "Eternal Truth" in the realm of ideas and to the service of the poor in the realm of action. At this young age, he wrote a series of articles against Saint Simonism, a false but seductive doctrine. It was especially attractive among the young by claiming to be the new religion with extravagant promises of social reform and liberal theories of equality. It called for a return to certain primitive "Laws of Humanity." He attacked this teaching as based on a foundation foreign to Christian faith, that it was unhistorical, illusory, self-contradictory and ultimately as impeding human nature on its journey to perfection. His efforts were rewarded with favorable notice from such notable Christian social theorists as Lamartine and Chateaubriand. In this attempt he will later see "the seed of what is to occupy my life."19

His "life's task" took shape in what his biographers consider an extraordinary letter to two friends and fellow students dated 15 January 1831. In it we find (1) a commitment to a life's task of working in the realm of ideas for the transformation of society; (2) a notion of development of society, the principles and elements of which are to be discovered by a search in our past heritage; (3) a belief in the continued presence of divine providence in history and the need for religious ideas for continued development; (4) a strong declaration of his Catholic faith both as the solid ground on which he can personally resist doubt and as a force to lead civilization to happiness; (5) a desire to attach himself to others of like mind in pursuing this task; (6) the realization of the necessity of studies that would equip him for the task. He speaks of the strength and persistence of his call, "When an idea has seized upon you for two years and takes the first place in your thought, impatient as it is to spread itself without, are you master to hold it back? When a voice cries to you without ceasing, 'Do this, I will it!' can you tell it to keep silence?"20

In another letter the following month he echoed his plans and expressed the great principle that was to dominate his outlook: the

19Ozanam to M. Hippolyte Fortoul and M. H., from Lyons, 15 January 1831, Letters, 18-22.
20From Lyons, 21 February 1831, ibid., 22-24.
Catholicism of religious ideas as well as the great joy of being alive in his own age. He wrote:

When my eyes turn toward society . . . the prodigious variety of events excites in me the most different sentiments . . . joy . . . bitterness . . . happiness . . . desolation. . . . I tell myself that the spectacle to which we are called is grand; that it is great to assist at so solemn an epoch; that the mission of a young man in society is today very grave and very important. . . . I rejoice at being born at an epoch when perhaps I shall have to do much good and I feel a new ardor for work. . . . And I see more clearly for the last result the great principle which at first appeared to me through so many clouds—the perpetuity, the Catholicism of religious ideas, the truth, the excellence, the beauty of Christianity.21

Later that same year he again asserted the absolute necessity of religion for intellectual and moral development, that reason alone was not sufficient. Referring to his notion of development (palingenesis), he says, “If, then, it is true that society is to undergo a transformation at the end of revolutions which it experiences, we must acknowledge that the elements of this definitive synthesis are to be found in the past. . . . In the same way as a flower contains in its bosom the innumerable germs of flowers which must succeed it, in the same way the present, which comes from the past, contains the future.”22

Thus Ozanam was launched on a life’s work of defending Christianity. This is revealed in his subsequent historical writings.

It was about this time that we hear him beginning to express a desire to join with kindred spirits among the students. “How much I have desired to surround myself with young men feeling, thinking as myself; now I know that there are many such—but they are scattered abroad as the gold on the dunghill, and difficult is the task of him who would unite the defenders around one flag.”23 To his cousin again in February 1832 he mentioned that he was responsible for conferences given by Abbé Philippe-Olympe Gerbet who laid open for the young

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21Ibid., 25-30.
22Ibid., 47.
23Ibid., 53.
students the philosophy of history of Lamennais. The following month, he described an episode involving some successful efforts of Catholic students in defending the Church against the attacks of a rationalist Professor Jouffroy and rejoices in "God's work being done by young men."25

In October of the same year he again spoke of a new era for Europe when Catholicism will once more be understood and with the task of bringing Christianity to the Orient. "This redoubtable crisis will probably be decisive, and on the ruins of the old and broken nations a new Europe will arise. Then Catholicism will be understood; then Europe will be given the task to carry Christianity to the Orient. This will be a magnificent era; we shall not see it."26

As the new year of 1833 began, the young man of ideas became a man of action. He began to link action to theory in describing his Conference of History. "Let's not relegate our beliefs to the domain of speculation and theory; let's take them seriously, and let our life be the continual expression of them."27 Then, in March, his desire for a working group again surfaced. "You know that I aspired to form a reunion of friends, working together at the edifice of science, under the standard of the Catholic idea."28 His vision of the future appears as a glorious parade of history: "The future is before us, immense as the ocean . . . above us religion, a brilliant star which is given us to follow; before us the glorious track of the great men of our country and our doctrine; behind us our young brothers, our companions—more timid—who wait for an example."29

A month after the first meeting of the newly established Conference of Charity, he wrote to his mother describing a public manifestation of faith on the part of the young men at a Corpus Christi procession in the town of Nanterre, home of St. Genevieve. He spoke of the day as "one of the most charming of my life."30

As 1834 dawned, he wrote to his cousin, Ernest Falconnet, a plan to show Christianity as "the formula necessary for humanity."31 He

\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24}}Ibid., 55.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{25}}Ibid., 60-62.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{26}}Ibid., 63-67.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{27}}Ibid., 70.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28}}Ibid., 72.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{29}}Ibid., 75.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{30}}Ibid., 84.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{31}}Ibid., 85-86.}\]
also demonstrated a humble recognition of his own leadership among the Catholic youth even as he struggled with the uncertainty of his vocation. He referred to himself as

a sort of chief of the Catholic youth of these parts. . . . I must be at the head of every movement. . . . A crowd of circumstances, independent of my will, besiege me . . . and draw me out of the line that I traced for myself. . . . I do not tell you this by self-love. For, on the contrary, I feel my weakness so much. I, who am not twenty-one years old, that compliments and praises rather humiliate me, and I almost feel the desire to laugh at my own importance. . . . I suffer incredible annoyance when I feel that these fumes rise to my head . . . and may make me wanting in that which, until now, has seemed to be my career. . . . Nevertheless, this concourse of exterior circumstances may it not be a sign of the will of God? I know not; and in my uncertainty I do not go before, I do not run after; but I let things come—I resist—and if the attraction is too strong, I allow myself to follow.32

By April his conversion from the world of ideas to the world of action took a sharp turn.

I have found that Christianity had been for me, until now, a sphere of ideas, a sphere of worship, but not sufficiently a sphere of morality, of intentions, of actions. . . . I want to speak of faith! . . . Religious ideas can have no value if they have not a practical and positive value. Religion serves less to think than to act; and if it teaches to live, it is in order to teach to die. . . . The value of Christianity is in this, and not in the attraction which its dogma may present to men of imagination and of mind.33

It is in July 1834 that we find his belief at the time was that the Church need not consider democracy as the only true form of government. (His complete espousal of democracy would not be articulated

32Ibid., 96-98.
33Ibid., 107ff.
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Until 1848.) In this same letter we can perceive a further expansion and integration of action and ideas. He proposes a social scheme in which work for the poor is seen as a kind of school for the young who will regenerate France.

We others, we are too young to intervene in the social struggle. Will we then remain inactive, in the middle of a world that is suffering and moaning? No, a great preparatory way is open to us! Before doing public welfare, we can try to do some good for people; before regenerating France, we can assist some of the poor. Also, I would like all young people with judgement and spirit to join together for some charitable works and to form throughout the country a large, generous association for the help of the common classes. I will tell you what we do in Paris in this matter, this year and last year.\textsuperscript{34}

When faced with the crisis of expansion or restriction of membership in the Conference of Charity, Ozanam took a firm stand on the side of expansion as indispensable to growth. He wrote to Monsieur Bailly, “Don’t you think that our charitable society itself, in order to last, must modify itself, and that the spirit of friendship on which it is founded, and the enlargement it must accept, would only know how to reconcile themselves by dividing into sections which would have a common center?”\textsuperscript{35}

He thought unity with the Conference in Paris would not necessarily be by way of doing the same works but by sharing a common spirit; namely, unity in friendship which was more important than numbers. Speaking of this harmony of spirit he said to a new Conference in Nîmes:

The end which we have in view in Paris is not, I think, absolutely the same as that which you have in mind in the country. . . . You are breathing a pure atmosphere. You are living in the midst of good traditions and good example. The world is not crumbling under your feet. Your faith and virtue do not need organization for their preserva-

\textsuperscript{34} Cahiers Ozanam, 60-62.
\textsuperscript{35} Letters, 117ff.
tion, but rather for their development. I do not know if I have expressed myself clearly. I would like to draw your attention to the differences in aim, since it calls for a difference in means.\textsuperscript{36}

In February of the following year, we find a striking expression of his dynamic and historical understanding of Christianity and his commitment to the cause of modernity.

The faith and charity of the early centuries? It is not too much for our age. Aren’t we like the Christians of the early times, thrown in the middle of a corrupt civilization and a crumbling society? Glance at the world which surrounds us. The rich and the happy, are they worth much more than those who answered St. Paul? “We will listen to you at another time!” And the poor and the people, do they enjoy more well-being than those to whom the apostles preached? . . . the earth has grown cold and it is up to us Catholics to begin the era of martyrs again . . . to be a martyr is to give one’s life for God and one’s brothers . . . it is to give Heaven all that we have received from it; our gold, our blood, our entire soul. This offering is in our hands, we can make this sacrifice.\textsuperscript{37}

He drew an important distinction between charity and philanthropy: “Philanthropy is a proud dame for whom good actions are a kind of adorning and who loves to look at herself in the mirror. Charity is a tender mother who keeps her eyes fixed on the child she carries at the breast, who no longer thinks of herself, and who forgets her beauty for her love.”\textsuperscript{38}

The following month he evidenced an attack by his “noonday devil” in a letter to Dufieux:

At this very moment, when the call from above is sounding in my ears, when I feel inspiration withdrawing from me as it were in warning . . . I cannot will, I cannot do, and

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 123-27; see also footnote 34.
\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., 128-31.
I feel the weight of daily neglected responsibility gathering on my head. . . . I fell into a state of languor from which I cannot rouse myself. Study . . . now fatigues me. . . . I can no longer write. Strength . . . is not in me. I am blown about by every wind of my imagination. Piety is a yoke to me, prayer a mere habit of the lips, the practice of Christianity a duty which I accomplish with cowardice.39

Yet, as he will indicate later, he was able to carry on precisely because of the support of his friends whom he perceived as an expression of divine providence. “I am always the same . . . abundant in words and poor in works, always suffering from my powerlessness . . . finding neither strength nor response, except in friendship, the lessons and the example of others. Providence has not willed that this succour should fail me. It has given me excellent friends.”40

He spoke further of the benefits of association in good works as he acknowledged the beginning nature of the work they have begun. “Good is done, above all, among us, who mutually sustain and encourage one another. We are yet only in our apprenticeship in the art of charity.”41

Ozanam’s aspirations were not limited to the Conferences. He wished to infuse a Christian spirit also in the world of artists and poets. He wrote in reply to a friend who had formed an association of artists and who had asked Frederick to be an officer. In the letter his commitment to orthodoxy is clear. “Let us be convinced . . . that orthodoxy is the nerve center, the vital essence of every Catholic society.”42

His persistent dependence upon providence in reference to both his own life and the life of the Conferences continually appears as it did in a letter to his mother in June 1836. He wrote, “I am now very much persuaded that in the case of charity works, one must never worry about pecuniary resources, some always come along.”43 In a letter to Lallier on 5 November 1836, Ozanam expressed his gratitude for having been born and raised in moderate circumstances and articulates for the first time the primacy of the social question and the

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39Ibid., 138.
40Ibid., 146.
41Ibid., 154ff.
42Cahiers Ozanam, 120.
43Letters, 167ff.
duty of Christians to mediate between the rich and the poor so as to establish equality. Even this mediation he saw in terms of God’s providence:

I desire to give thanks to God for having caused me to be born in one of those positions on the limit of embarrassment and ease . . . where one cannot slumber in the gratification of all one’s desires, but where at the same time one is not distracted by the continual solicitation of want. God knows . . . what dangers there would have been for me in the soft indulgences of riches, or in the abjection of the indigent classes.

For if the question which today disturbs the world around us is neither an individual question nor a question of political forms, but a social question; if it is the struggle of those who have nothing with those who have too much; if it is the violent shock of opulence and of poverty which makes the soil tremble under our tread—our duty as Christians is to interpose ourselves between these irreconcilable enemies, and to bring about that the one may despoil themselves . . . and that the other may receive as a benefit; that the one may cease to exact and the other to refuse; that equality may operate as much as is possible among men; that voluntary community may replace taxes and forced loans; that charity may do that which alas justice knows not how to do. It is a happy thing, then, to be placed by Providence on a neutral ground . . . to act as mediator.⁴⁴

He once again emphasized the primacy of the social question the following week to Louis Janmot, an artist friend of Ozanam’s who did his portrait. Like Saint Vincent and Saint Francis of Assisi, Ozanam reflected here a spirituality of seeing God in the poor. “It seems that one must see in order to love, and we only see God with the eyes of faith. . . . But men and the poor, we see them with human eyes; they

⁴⁴Ibid., 173ff.
are there, and we can put our finger and our hand in their wounds . . . and we should fall at their feet and say to them with the apostle . . . You are my Lord and my God."\(^{45}\)

Then, speaking of Christ as reflected in Francis, he wrote:

Alas! If in the Middle Ages the sickness of society could not be cured by the immense effusion of love—which was made above all by St. Francis of Assisi. If later, new troubles called for the helping hands of . . . St. Vincent de Paul—how much are not needed now of charity, of devotion, of patience to heal the suffering of those poor people, more indigent now than ever, because they have refused the nourishment of the soul, at the same time that the bread of the body is failing them! The question which divides the men of our day is no longer a question of political form; it is a social question.\(^{46}\)

In March 1837 he again mentioned the social importance of charity and the value of a "community of charity" in addressing social needs.

Do you not find that it is marvelously pleasant to feel your heart beat in unison with the hearts of two hundred other young people scattered over the soil of France? . . . And independently of the present employment which results from this community of charity, are there not great hopes for the temporal future? . . . We see every day the schism . . . in society become deeper. . . . Here is the corps of the rich, there the camp of the poor. . . . One only means of safety remains—it is, that in the name of charity the Christians interpose themselves between the two camps . . . that they obtain from the rich such alms, from the poor such resignation . . . that they accustom them to regard themselves anew as brothers: that they communicate to them a little mutual charity . . . to make them but one fold under one shepherd.\(^{47}\)

\(^{45}\)Ibid., 173ff.
\(^{46}\)Ibid., 182ff.
\(^{47}\)Ibid., 193ff.
A few months later when he wrote to Jean-Jacques Ampère, he spoke of his father’s death and remembered him as a “servant of the poor” and, as such, exerting an influence on Frederick.48

When he wrote to Lallier in October 1837, he distinguished various levels of life. For him, the highest was the Christian life “which draws us out of ourselves to lead us to God, where henceforth we find the central point of all our thoughts—the central support of all our works.”49

Another letter to Lallier the following April gives us some indication of his attitude favoring a separation of Church and state. In his own words, “For us a great thing has happened: the separation of two great words ... throne and altar.”50 Another theme that kept asserting itself in Ozanam’s writings as he spoke of concerted and concrete actions for the poor is that of individual and corporate humility. But for him it meant a genuine brand, one that avoided a “modesty which keeps a man from doing good.”51 He was insistent on the secular nature of the Conferences. Writing in July 1839 he said, “One wants the Society to always be neither a party, nor a school, nor a brotherhood, but deeply Catholic without ceasing to be secular.”52

To Montalembert he likewise confided his desire to keep religion separate from politics as well as his aspiration of reconciling past and future. “The reconciliation of the past and the future, the separation of the religious principle from among the political ideas with which it is involved, the work, in a word, to which you have concentrated such generous energy, begins to be accomplished even in our city.”53 Later that same year we have some indication of the influence of his mother in shaping his notion of church and providence as he writes to Henri Reverdy about her death, “It was she whose first teachings had given me faith; she who was for me a living image of the holy Church—our mother also: she who seemed to me the most perfect expression of Providence.”54

On Christmas Day 1839 he had occasion once more to speak of the mediating and reconciling role his Society had in the social division of their times. He pictured it as a kind of a holy “Robin Hood” band:

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48Ibid., 200ff.
49Ibid., 211-14.
50Ibid., 214ff.
51Ibid., 214ff.
52Cahiers Ozanam, 17.
53Ibid., 18.
54Letters, 248ff.
55Ibid., 262ff.
The little Society of St. Vincent de Paul subsists and develops. . . . We make progress in the art of plundering the rich for the profit of the poor. . . . But how little is all this, my friend, in the presence of a population of 60,000 working people, demoralized by work and by the propagation of bad doctrines! Freemasonry and Republicanism take advantage of the troubles and the passions of this suffering multitude, and God knows what future awaits us if Catholic charity does not interpose to arrest the slave-war which is at our doors.55

From Germany in 1842 he wrote of his conviction that that nation’s greatness consists “in the fact that Germany is indebted for her genius and her entire civilization to Christian ideals.”56

When he was attacked by conservative Catholics as a “deserter” from the Catholic struggle, he wrote to Monsieur Dufieux in June 1843 without recrimination. The letter closes with a plea for prayers that he “shall never fail in the fraternal mandate from my friends, to defend the inseparable interests of religion and true Science.”57

When Ozanam visited Italy in 1847, he wrote to Lallier of finding great consolation in visiting the tombs of the martyrs and also of being present at the inauguration of Pope Pius IX whom he greatly admired because of his progressive policies.58 He again incurred the wrath of conservatives in 1848 when he expressed his views on democracy. “Conquer repugnance and dislike and turn to democracy, to the mass of the people to whom we are unknown. Appeal to them not merely by sermons but by benefits. Help them, not with alms which humiliate, but with social and ameliorative measures, which will free and elevate them. Let us go over to the barbarians and follow Pius IX.”59

We have in the same year a couple of letters in which he expressed his love for the workingman and for the ideals of equality and fraternity and exhorted others to go over to the side of the poor.60 Yet he repudiated socialism and distinguished it from the Christian reform of society when he said, “We are not . . . socialists in the sense that we do

55Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence, 195.
56Ibid., 214.
57Ibid., 249.
58Ibid., 254.
59Ibid., 255.
60Cahiers Ozanam, 21.
not want the overthrow of society, but we want a free progressive Christian reform of it . . . one cannot avoid the social issues; precisely because they are formidable God does not want us to turn them aside. We must lay a bold hand on the core of pauperism. . . . I am afraid that if property does not know how to freely strip itself, it will be sooner or later compromised.”

The extent to which he had been converted to democracy is clear when he said, “I believe, I still believe in the possibility of Christian democracy. I don’t believe in anything else in political matters.” All this time, while the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul had been going to the poor, Ozanam was launching a journalistic effort by way of The New Era to try to elicit the sympathy of the public. The articles embraced the whole doctrine of Christian economics. One in particular expressed the need for concrete action for the poor, that deeds are superior to words. He repeated to his friend, Dufieux, in 1851 his conviction that politics were inadequate in effecting conversion as was the government in carrying out the Church’s mission. He said, “We do not have enough faith, we want the re-establishment of religion by political means. . . . No, conversions are not made by laws, but by consciences which must be besieged one by one. Let us not ask God for bad governments, but let us not try to give ourselves one of them which releases us from our duties, while taking upon itself a mission that God did not give to it in the service of our brothers’ soul.”

As we become privy to the emerging consciousness of Frederick Ozanam through his letters, we see the ideals of youth move from the realm of theory to practice and both theory and action interweave and mutually influence the other. His dream, to some extent, was tempered by the realities of life yet was never compromised. Not only did he never waver in his determination to mediate in favor of the poor, rather it grew stronger, even when that cost him the opposition of conservative adversaries and the misunderstanding or confusion of friends.

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61Ibid., 127; see also footnote 92.
62Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence, 291.
63Cahiers Ozanam, 27.
64Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence, 10.
His Decisions

As Ozanam attempted to respond to the providential unfolding of his life's work of being an apostle of the Church in a modern world, he had to face a succession of crises in which decisions had to be made between alternative courses of action whereby he could best pursue his life's work. These included crises of faith, career, and state in life.

Concerning his first significant crisis of faith in adolescence, he wrote to a friend in January 1830 about the interior struggle he had experienced in his fifteenth year. "After constantly listening to unbelievers and to expressions of unbelief, I commenced to ask myself why I believed. I began to entertain doubt."65 Two years before his death he referred to the same crisis in his preface to Christian Civilization in the Fifth Century. "In the midst of an age of skepticism, God gave me the grace to be born in the true faith."66 That grace, as we have already seen, was mediated through the wise and understanding help of Abbé Noirot, his teacher and lifelong guide. His brother-biographer observed that it was this experience that helped Frederick become compassionate toward unbelievers.67

As we reflect on Frederick's struggle and its subsequent resolution, certain facts become evident. The influence of environment and culture on his faith, for good or ill, was strong. Likewise were the influences of his loving Christian family, the Ampère family, and his wise and holy guide crucial to the resolution of such a struggle with faith. Yet such struggle and suffering that accompanied it proved to be a time of testing that preceded genuine grounding and growth for his faith. The fruit of such a crisis brought heightened compassion for others who would undergo the same kind of experience.

Frederick also experienced a more protracted crisis of career in which he was torn between his parents' desire for a career in law and his own leanings toward letters. It was not uncommon in the culture of his time for a young man's profession to be chosen by his parents. (As a matter of fact, even today, the pressure of family preference is especially strong among middle and upper class French families.) Filial docility would have prompted compliance. Thus it was that Frederick was to undergo eight years of anguish over his parents'
wish that he enter the law profession. They were wary of the "temp­tations" of literature, a pursuit which did not seem to them to lead to
any practical end.\textsuperscript{68} He wrote in January 1834 of his resistance to a law
career, "I am experiencing what must be one of the greatest trials of
my life."\textsuperscript{69} At the same time he was experiencing an attraction to a
literary career not just through his own natural leanings but also
because of outside recognition that his gifts in this direction were
receiving. He wrote, "I am put forward. . . . I am not saying this out
of self-pride."\textsuperscript{70} But his uncertainty had not ended. He consulted his
brother and realized it was not time for a change of direction. He went
on to finish his law studies, eventually was awarded a doctorate and
became a barrister in Lyons. Having to leave science and literature
brought him much sadness. He wrote in 1837, "I am suffering from an
uncertainty of vocation. I am to see the stones and the dust of every
walk of life, but the flowers of none. The Bar especially holds less and
less attraction for me."\textsuperscript{71} Ozanam then came in touch with the seamy
side of the law profession as he observed the methods used and said,
"There is scarce any case, no matter how good it may be, wherein
there is not something wrong, and in which a just advocate would not
have to admit a weakness. But that is not the way in which the case
comes before the court. . . . The Bar has thus grown accustomed to
invective, hyperbole and suppression, which even the best members
employ, and to which one must grow accustomed!"\textsuperscript{72} He was also
shocked at the insincerity and excess with which many claims were
made and exclaimed, "I shall never get acclimated to the atmosphere
of chicanery."\textsuperscript{73}

Yet he still found in his law career a chance to defend the poor. In
one of his first cases, he was appointed to defend a person too poor to
afford a lawyer. He undertook the case with great energy and sincer­ity. For this he was ridiculed by the prosecution for taking the case too
seriously, to which he replied that he was amazed to find a responsible
official making so little of the dignity of the court. He asked, "Was the
defense of the poor mere comedy and the position of the judge that of

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., 180.
\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{71}Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{72}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73}Ibid., 133.
an actor?" The judges smiled approval and one shook his hand. What emerges here is that, even in his distaste for a law career, his deeper life commitment to truth and to the poor remained evident.

Still later, when he became a professor of law, he declared that he was interested in explaining law by using the two basic ideas of justice and utility. One author points to his social theory even in his lectures on law. "Much of his emphasis was on morality in the field of jurisprudence and social economy. His twenty-fourth lecture is particularly noteworthy, for he encouraged the association of laborers, payment of just wages, and government intervention against individualistic economy."75

Perhaps the most arduous and persistent of Frederick's crises was that of deciding between the married/lay state and the celibate/clerical state. Early in adulthood he seemed to have had a disregard (or fear) of marriage. At age twenty-two, he wrote teasingly to one of his comrades "who is inclined to light candles at the altar of hymen with hundred thousand franc notes!" He went on to say, "To fortify myself against such a fate, and to inoculate myself against such a contagion, to steep myself in the love of solitude and liberty, I have just concluded a pilgrimage with my brother to the monks of the Grand Chartreuse!"76

He began to experience the awakening of passion and desires for affection beyond the friendships he had enjoyed. Yet at this point he seemed to idealize woman:

Although my age is the age of passion, I have scarcely felt their most distant tremors. My heart has, so far, known only the sentiments of comradeship. . . . Yet I seem to begin to experience symptoms of another order of affection, and I begin to be afraid. I feel a void growing within me, which neither friendship nor intellectual work fills. I do not know what will fill it. Will it be the Creator? Will it be a creature? If the latter, I am praying that she may come when I shall have made myself worthy of her. I am praying that she may be . . . good looking . . . she may

76Sister Emmanuel Renner, "The Historical Thought of Frederic Ozanam." Doctoral Dissertation, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, The Catholic University of America, 1959, 121.
75Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence, 177.
76Ibid., 178.
bring great virtue in a great soul . . . that she may elevate me . . . be as brave as I am often fearful, as ardent as I am lukewarm in the things of God, sympathetic, so that I will not have to blush before her for my unworthiness.\(^{77}\)

Two years later the attraction for religious life had come to compete with the call to married life. He wrote, "It is not that I have to distrust the inclinations of my heart, but I feel there is such a thing as a male virginity, which is not without honor and charm."\(^{78}\) He thought of joining the Dominicans because his friend, Lacordaire, had plans for reestablishing the Dominicans and other religious orders in France. Ozanam expressed the need for guidance in this uncertainty concerning his vocation. He turned once again to the Abbé Noirot who advised marriage.

Two months later at Christmas he mentioned the idea of religious life, but less hopefully, to his friend Lallier. In the spring, after his mother’s death, he decided to postpone a decision pending a year’s mourning. Following that year, with the benefit of further reflection and the advice of Abbé Noirot, he finally decided that he was not fitted for life in the cloister. Rather, he decided that he was called to a lay mission. One commentator thought that the most weighty of the many private and domestic reasons for his decision was that he was not morally free to enter religion since he had contracted an indissoluble bond with the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.\(^{79}\) He recognized not only his own intense loneliness and need for affection beyond that of ordinary friends, but he also could see that good works were not incompatible with marriage.

His comrades in works of charity had married. And, of course, his old friend, mentor, and guide, Abbé Noirot, always felt that Frederick should marry. In fact, the Abbé had someone in mind! He even arranged a “chance” meeting with the daughter of the rector of the Academy in Lyons—Amélie Soulacroix. His first glimpse on entering the room where he first met her was of a young girl attending to a crippled man who was apparently her brother, "It was the charming image of charity that had just appeared to him," says Baunard.\(^{80}\) He paid more frequent visits. They became engaged and eventually mar-

\(^{77}\)Ibid., 198.  
\(^{78}\)Ibid., 164.  
\(^{79}\)Ibid., 182.  
\(^{80}\)Ibid., 183.
ried. He wrote to his friend Lallier on 6 December 1841, “My dear friend, the awful question of vocation, which had been unsettled for so long, has been suddenly solved. At the same moment that Providence called me to the steep moral incline of the metropolis, an angel guardian was given me to console my loneliness.”

The couple then faced the decision of where they would live, Lyons or Paris. He put the question to her. If they stayed in Lyons, it would keep them close to home. But it would mean for Frederick the abandoning of the noble mission that he had dreamed of sharing with her. She expressed confidence in him and a willingness to risk the uncertainties of Paris. At first he went to Paris alone for six months to assume teaching responsibilities at the Sorbonne. He considered this a kind of exile. Frederick returned to marry Amélie on 23 June 1841 at the church of Saint Nizier in Lyons. He was twenty-eight; she, twenty-one. His letters to friends subsequent to the marriage express his intense happiness. They then left for a honeymoon in Italy that reads more like a pilgrimage!

On 7 August 1845, their only child, Marie, was born. Frederick later wrote, “After a succession of favors which determined my vocation and re-united my family, yet another is added which is probably the greatest we can have on earth: I am a father.” Theirs proved to be a very happy marriage. On the twenty-third of each month, the date of their wedding, until the eve of his death, he would present his wife with a bouquet of flowers. When he lectured on “Christian Women in the Fifth Century,” his comments on marriage were inspired by the experience of his own. When his health failed, Ozanam could not thank God enough for his wife’s devotion.

What becomes evident in this long vocational struggle of Ozanam’s was the importance of Frederick’s being in touch with his personal needs as well as the directions in which his gifts seemed to be leading him. He also had to consider the commitments he had already made. Once more it was evident that the influence and counsel of Frederick’s friends and guides were important to his decision-making process. But what seems most obvious is the confirmation that his decision was the right one—that of peace, contentment, and the furtherance of his

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81Ibid., 231.
82Ibid., 322.
life's commitment. In Ozanam's case, that commitment was always to be the service of truth and to the poor.

His Relevance for Today

From the start of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II has made his concern for the mission of the Church clear by his own travels around the globe. In his most recent encyclical on evangelization, *Redemptoris missio*, he echoed what Vatican II had said over a quarter of a century earlier—that every baptized person is called to mission as well as to holiness of life. The church's priority for a new evangelization as we near the third millennium seems clear. Responding to and sharing the Good News of God's reign is the responsibility of all.

In the past, there has perhaps been a tendency to identify evangelizers or missionaries with a special class of persons, usually clerics or religious. In this age of the new evangelization to which all are called, are there any insights to be gained from the life and work of Frederick Ozanam? I believe that this brief glance at his spiritual journey indicates that he is an apt model for lay evangelizers on several counts.

1. He had the conviction and the courage to make Christianity relevant for his own time and culture.
2. He made a conscious choice to respond to a call to mission as a lay (and eventually as married) person as well as a growing clarity around the lay character of the Society he helped found and subsequently led.
3. His life demonstrated a genuine integration of professional and spiritual life, theory and practice, faith and works.
4. Ozanam demonstrated the compatibility of a passionate love for the Church and orthodoxy (right belief) as well as a profound commitment to development and orthopraxis (right practice), especially toward the poor.
5. His dedication to social reform enabled him to challenge lovingly the Church and tradition he cherished.
6. His deep appreciation of the past as the basis for meeting challenges of the present and future allowed his faith and his ministry to be solidly grounded in history.
7. His human struggles with faith and subsequent decisions about the direction of his life would seem to make him eminently imitable.
8. His choices for career and lifestyle were made in light of his fundamental vision and both the gifts and limits he discovered in himself with the help of others.
9. For cultures of pervasive individualism, he models communitarian dimensions of spirituality and collaborative dimensions of ministry. It seems abundantly clear that he never meant to accomplish his great
work for the Church for the cause of truth and service of the poor as a solitary venture. (10) Ozanam's leadership among his brother Vincentians advocated great openness, flexibility, and a diversity kept in unity by sharing the same mission and spirit. (11) His life of holiness and service seems imbedded in the heart of true Christian spirituality; it was mosaic of significant relationships of family, friends, models, mentors, peers, students, and followers. (12) Ozanam speaks to current proponents of social justice in both theoretical and practical ways. As teacher and writer, he sought social reform aimed at causes and systems. As leader of the Conference, he worked tirelessly and concretely to bring aid to those in need. (13) The Vincentian heritage of finding Christ in the person of the poor and the safeguarding of that fundamental charity that informed the works by the practice humility saved their efforts from the contamination of selfish pursuit or ambiguous motivations. (14) For Ozanam, the real school for those who would serve the poor was personal involvement in the lives of those served through visiting them where they lived and struggled. It meant for him not just bringing material aid, but deeper attention to the needs of the spirit. (15) The charity Ozanam and his followers was that of Saint Vincent de Paul. This kind of charity would seem to embrace a biblical and contemporary understanding of justice, that is, sharing what belongs to the poor by right. Seemingly central to a Vincentian spirit is a charity that makes of the poor masters to those who help them.

Perhaps these sentiments attributed to Saint Vincent best summarize the spirit that animated him, was reflected in Ozanam and is worthy of emulation by modern evangelizers striving to make a preferential option for the poor:

you will find that charity is a heavy burden to carry... but you will keep your gentleness and your smile. It is not enough to give bread and soup. This the rich can do. You are the servant of the poor... They are your masters, and the more difficult they will be, the more unjust and insulting, the more love you must give them. It is for your love alone that the poor will forgive you the bread you give them.83

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83 Apparently these words from the script of the film "Monsieur Vincent" are a paraphrase of similar statements made by Vincent in various contexts.