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Thomas McKenna C.M.

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Frédéric Ozanam’s Tactical Wisdom
For Today’s Consumer Society

By
THOMAS MCKENNA, C.M.

One of the ways a “classic” is identified is through its aptitude to speak to ages beyond its own. Despite being the product of a specific era it has the ability to offer insight to the concerns of many others. On that score, Frédéric Ozanam and his founding work are surely classics in that they offer practical wisdom that translates well in our times. This article explores one of those intersection points, namely his vision of a century-and-a-half ago and certain challenges that press us today. In particular, his Gospel-based approach to the social conditions of his time can be used to address the phenomenon of consumerism, a pervasive and often toxic influence in contemporary culture that threatens to blunt the power of not only the Christian message, but indeed of any religious or humanitarian outlook.

The element in Frédéric’s thought I will examine is his conception of how a religious tradition should engage its surrounding society. His insights were both extensively theoretical and concretely practical, or better, they fused the two into an amalgam that brought about both effective action in the short term and salutary shifts in basic attitudes for the longer run.

There are two relevant sub-headings to this topic, both of which interested Frédéric from the beginning. The first is a background one, the constructive influence that traditions, for him the Christian tradition, can have on society. He spent the bulk of his scholarly life defending the truth of Christianity in a hostile ethos. He did so through original research into the up-building influence the Church had been on Western civilization in past ages. More immediately relevant to our purposes is his second interest: Frédéric also laid out concrete proposals and programs whereby the generous, other-directed charitable energies in such a tradition could continue to be that leaven in his day.

I propose to draw this component in Ozanam’s writings into conversation with a force in modern western society that commentators claim is severely weakening the generous spirit and altruistic outreach of most all world-views. And that, again, is consumerism. More precisely, it is the commodification process that a consumerist mentality sets in motion and continues to accelerate. From the writings of a number of historians, social scientists and theologians, I will lay out a picture of how the consumer mentality is negatively affecting the attitudes of a whole generation toward the traditions into which they were born.¹

¹ A lucid overview of this literature can be found in Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., “Moral Notes:
All this suggests an outline. First, will be a brief overview of Frédéric Ozanam, his life, works, and then some relevant factors in his views and approaches. Second will come a description of some of the smothering effects consumerism is having on the other-directed, civic minded impulses, not only on Christianity but on all traditions, particularly on how such generous impulses get translated into practice. Finally, I will suggest some elements in Frédéric's approach that might serve as counter-balances to that pressure.

I. About Frédéric

A) His Life

Frédéric was born in Milan in 1813 to a professional middle class family. When he was still young they moved back to their home in Lyon, France, because of worsening political conditions in Italy. Frédéric was one of fourteen children, only three of whom survived. As a boy he was sickly and for the remainder of his relatively short life he struggled with poor health. His parents were what we might term today strong and practicing Catholics.

From early on, young Frédéric showed a bent for the religious dimension in life. In adolescence, while attending a school in Lyon where he encountered some strident opposition to his Catholicism, he underwent a hurtful period of doubt. With the help of a mentor, Father Joseph Noirot, professor of philosophy, he emerged on the other side with firmer convictions in his faith, a resolve to defend the truth of his religion, and a goal to make the underlying vitality of his Church more influential on French society. From the pain of his own bewilderment during this faith crisis, he gained a life long sympathy for others who struggled with their faith, and indeed for those people who just struggled, the poor.

Though his interests ran to literature and history, he followed his father's wishes and took up law. However, while pursuing his legal studies at the Sorbonne he kept up his initial interests, particularly the role Christianity had played in the advance of European society. In this early period he even managed to publish some articles and gained a bit of a reputation as boy genius.²

In the university world Frédéric found an atmosphere even more

² Gérard Cholvy underlines Frédéric's abiding curiosity, observing how "The young Ozanam proposed to his school friends... that they seek out signs of early religion, and therefore of Catholicism, in the traditions of every nation. He himself... restricted his own research to the medieval period." "Frederick Ozanam and the Challenge of The Times," Society of St. Vincent de Paul Bulletin of News (13 February 2009).
hostile to religion. Searching for support, he sought the company of like-minded students. Encouraged by Emmanuel Bailly, a former professor with a life-long love for Saint Vincent de Paul, Frédéric took the lead in setting up a discussion group. Shortly he and his compatriots were debating the social doctrines of the Church, particularly what they thought was needed to bring these teachings into more vital contact with modern conditions. It was then, in a heated discussion, that one participant pressed the Catholics in the group to address a gap he saw between their beliefs and their actions. Their words about the self-forgetfulness and practicality of the Gospel came across very thinly, he charged, when they were not backed up with deeds. “What is the Church doing for the poor of Paris?” he said. “Show us your work and I will believe you.” The taunt got to Frédéric, and so along with some others he responded: “Yes, let us go to the poor.”

In 1833 he and six friends began a “Conference of Charity” which, most likely at the suggestion of a certain Daughter of Charity, soon became the “Conference of St. Vincent de Paul.” This saint was a national hero of social service, admired even by the anti-Church factions of Frédéric’s day. The young companions resolved to take up what they termed “practical works of charity,” and searched for ways to carry out their resolve. It was Monsieur Bailly who led them to the above mentioned Daughter of Charity, Sister Rosalie Rendu. Over the years she had gained a city-wide reputation for working innovatively in the worst slums of Paris. Sister Rosalie promptly sent the students, two-by-two, to the apartments of poor families. For follow-up, she gave them clothes, fuel, and food vouchers to distribute.

In addition to sending them out to visit we have reason to believe that Rosalie brought the volunteers back to her convent to reflect on what they had just done. How to speak with these families? How to help, without stepping on their dignity? What connections were there between what they were doing and the message of the Gospel? What echoes and dissonances did they find between what they were doing and the life of Vincent de Paul? (She provided them with biographies!) What were their underlying reasons for getting involved in this work in the first place? Today, we would call such sessions theological reflection, a purposeful attempt to not only become

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5 The work spread rapidly. Less than twenty years later the Society numbered 2,000 local units (Conferences), with 500 of them outside of France. Today there are over 600,000 members, divided into 47,000 Conferences active in 132 countries. John E. Rybolt, C.M., “The Virtuous Personality of Blessed Frederick Ozanam,” *Ibid.*, 42.
more competent in one’s charity work, but also to make the bigger connections; i.e., the ones between service and beliefs, between what these young men were doing and the religious tradition in which they stood. Mentoring of this sort, in both practice and faith, seems likely to have been a part of these early gatherings.

In these same years Frédéric’s career took a number of turns. He returned to Lyon and opened a law practice, but in a few years he grew weary of that profession. After his parents died he was able to go back to his first loves, literature and history, and again took up studies in Paris, this time for a doctorate in that field. On the strength of a first place award in a national competition, he was offered a teaching position in foreign literature at the Sorbonne. In short time his lectures were drawing crowds, and Frédéric’s reputation as both a literary historian and religious thinker spread nationally and internationally, especially through his professional publications.

Frédéric married in 1844, and four years later became the delighted father of a little girl. In his letters, he often gushed about the joys of his new life, grateful to his wife, Amélie, and their daughter, Marie, for being the lights of his life.

In his mid-to-late thirties Frédéric ran into stormy professional waters, stirred up by his stance on how religious traditions should relate to their surrounding society. Even under pressure from the conservative ecclesial-political backlash to the revolution of 1848 he never gave up hope for a rapprochement between the Christianity identified with the wealthy and
bourgeoisie, and a newer one that sided with the working classes.\textsuperscript{6} Closer to home, he envisioned a key role for his own Vincent de Paul Society as a bridge over the troubled and sometimes violent waters roiling between rich and poor.

Because of his chronic medical problems, and perhaps also because of his ever increasing workload (editor, writer, lecturer, chronicler of the Society's activities, father and husband), his health broke down while still in his thirties. On a doctor-advised sabbatical to Italy in 1853, his strength finally ran out. Surrounded by his family and a number of brothers in the Society, he died in Marseilles, only 40 years old.

With this brief account of his life, we turn now to his attitude toward the culture of his day. Frédéric had many thoughts on how his faith should relate to society, but we will limit ourselves to a select few which concern our topic.

B) Ozanam's Tactics

Frédéric's context for viewing civic issues derived from the manner in which he thought members of his Church should relate to their socio-economic surroundings. His heritage was Catholicism, but his approach can be extended to how any tradition should connect to the civic arena. There are a number of possibilities for their correlation, ranging from complete separation to total overlap. In Frédéric's day stances fell all along the spectrum, and because of the clash between hierarchically popular restorationism and anti-Church secularism the issue had polarized dramatically. Anyone proposing a mediating position could expect to take heat from both left and right.

On the far left there was a call to eliminate all Church influence, the Catholic establishment being seen as a mouthpiece for the old regime, as a friend of the rich and enemy of the lower class. The conservative wing tended to view efforts to reduce the socio-economic gap as outcroppings of Godless philosophies bent on excluding religion.

Frédéric took the harder-to-articulate middle view. He defended Christianity against the stereotype that it was class-identified and out to cement the economically imbalanced status quo in place. But he went the additional mile of speaking up for bottom-of-the-ladder working people, especially those in the rapidly industrializing cities. He proposed that the Church also cast its lot with just these individuals.\textsuperscript{7} It should stand with them in their misery, he wrote, throw its energies into redressing the social inequities that


\textsuperscript{7} Auge, \textit{His World}, 106.
not only burdened these unfortunates, but was also ripping apart an entire society.

In a hard-hitting statement of this conviction, he wrote to a friend in 1836:

For if the question which disturbs the world around us today is not a question of political approaches but a social question, if it is the struggle between those who have nothing and those who have too much, if it is the violent clash of opulence and poverty which shakes the earth under us, then our duty to ourselves as Christians is to throw ourselves between these two irreconcilable enemies. We are to make the one side divest itself... and the other to accept what is given. We are to make the one stop demanding and the other stop refusing. We are to make equality as operative as possible among peoples, to make free cooperation take the place of coercion and brute force, to make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do.8

Frédéric advocated engagement. Rather than retreat inside a fortress, Christians are to remain in the field. Operating from their core convictions, they should wrestle with society’s issues. The precise wrong move, he would say, is to disengage from the class struggle, or to stand with only one side of it and cut off dialogue with the other. It is only from within, he contended, that political, economic, and cultural solutions will emerge. Some of Frédéric’s most memorable appeals to the members of his Association plead with them to stand in the breech, translating the poor to the rich and vice versa.

Between these two classes a confrontation is coming and this looming clash will be terrible. On the one side, there is the power of gold, and on the other the power of despair. We must cast ourselves between these two enemy armies, if not to prevent, at least to deaden the shock... It is good to have mediators who can prevent a collision whose terrible disasters cannot be imagined, who can make the two camps listen. [These are mediators...] who can bring to the one side words of acceptance and to the other counsels of mercy, and

Frédéric brought two luminous talents onto this field of struggle: rigorous analysis and practical action, each infusing the other. He was an intellectual, an internationally recognized one at that. A full-time professor at the Sorbonne, a controversialist and op-ed contributor to the Parisian newspapers, a peer-acknowledged author of scholarly volumes, editor of the Vatican’s *Chronicles of the Propagation of the Faith*, a university star under consideration for the Académie Française, Ozanam was a bona fide academic. He was someone who searched for both the big picture and the internal patterns, a far-seeing thinker who sought out the more encompassing background against which the shifting foreground came to make sense.

But he was also sensitive to an occupational hazard of academics — thinking while looking out the window of an ivory tower. From early on he realized that one cannot know the issues unless in some way he is down on the mat wrestling with them. Though his first contact with the slum dwellers

of Paris came from a challenge to practice what he preached, over time he
came to appreciate how much this face-to-face contact with poor families
was adding flesh to his thinking and profoundly reshaping his perceptions.
Frédéric came to value both speculative and practical knowledge. Perhaps
more accurately, he increasingly prized that fuller, more concrete and tex-
tured kind of knowing that comes only from interpersonal contact.

Perhaps because it is so omnipresent in his writings, another of
Frédéric’s building blocks might be overlooked. He placed prime impor-
tance on connecting the activity of members with the wider traditions within
which their service was embedded, in his case the Christian Gospel. When
writing about the tone of their assistance, the pitfalls members can stumble
into, the politics within and between the local associations, outside public-
ity, improved organizational structures, fund raising — most everything
— Frédéric explicitly referenced its Christian framework. The meetings,
the internal leadership style, and the visits with the poor are all to be nour-
ished from their underlying matrix, the wellsprings of their faith. In turn,
Christianity’s beliefs, creeds, and symbols (including the example and teach-
ings of Vincent de Paul) are fleshed out through the Society’s practices.

This theory-action relationship opens onto another aspect of
Frédéric’s approach, the gift of reciprocal benefit, or better, reciprocal salva-
tion. During the transaction between member and client, changes for good
happen not only in the poor person being helped, but also inside the helper.
The generosity of the member if rightly motivated and channeled breaks
back on him or her, deepening convictions and filling out faith. More specifi-
cally, for Frédéric the personal visit to the poor person was prized, in Gerard
Cholvy’s felicitous phrase, “as the point of mutual exchange,” where both
participants are the beneficiaries.10

One final element might also be passed over due to its obvious na-
ture. Frédéric believed and worked with others. The very beginning of his
association grew out of a need for support and collaboration in a religiously
cool world. Even with his solid Catholic upbringing he realized he could
not live out the Gospel injunctions on his own, especially the calls to honor
the dignity of the least of his brothers and sisters. Often, he highlighted the
strength each member instilled in the rest. In particular, he noted the unique
benefit that support across generations supplied, the younger members men-
tored by the older and the old encouraged by the energy of the young.

It was the interaction of all these elements, so firmly rooted in a tra-
dition, steadily put into practice, and done with like-minded compatriots
that lay beneath the long term resilience in serving the poor which came to
mark Ozanam’s Vincent de Paul Society.

10 Cholvy, “Ozanam and the Challenge,” 2.
In this second section, I touched briefly on four components to Frédéric’s approach that presently will enter back into the conversation. These were that the individual should: 1) address and engage the inequalities in society, especially its political-economic imbalances; 2) do that by historically solid analysis and practical on-the-ground action; 3) firm up those beliefs and actions by embedding them inside a long tested tradition; and 4) sustain them over time by common commitment and activity. Behind each of these is Ozanam’s desire that Christians should be leavens in the social arena. He was convinced that through this interweaving of belief and action, citizens should put their oars in the water on the side of what today we would call distributive justice.

With such convictions in his heart, Frédéric looked out at his world and took measure of those societal forces which opposed this vision. And here lies the junction point for our present conversation: what, in a given time, thwarts the ripening of convictions such as these? In his assessment of nineteenth-century European culture, Frédéric singled out certain impeding factors, and then lined up his strategies against them. In like manner we ask ourselves what the obstructions are in our era, and what contributions can Frédéric’s approach make to moving past them?

II. A Pervasive Filter on Culture: Commodification

I want to reflect briefly on a cultural factor that, while only one of many operating today, is especially powerful because of both its pervasiveness and its subtlety. It is what commentators have called commodification. By that they mean the process whereby the range of meanings that any cultural object (physical or verbal) can carry gets narrowed down to only those which gain the attention of the consumer.

While commodification does not fully overlap with two other frequently noted features in today’s ethos, individualism and the culture of the therapeutic, it is indeed their close cousin inasmuch as it both feeds off their energies and multiplies their effects.

Critics point out the mostly unnoticed ways the commodification genie weakens the hold which traditions have on people. They describe various backstage mechanisms by which this mentality drains the deeper meanings from a person’s world-view, especially from his or her religious

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world-view. And because this process, by tamping down the ardor of attachment to beliefs, symbols, and practices, trains the populace to admit only certain dimensions of reality into their field of vision, it thereby lessens ethical demand. Shallower perceptions evoke correspondingly superficial moral responses; narrowed intake makes for weaker obligation.

It works this way. In thousands of messages everyday advertising tells us that fulfillment can be gained by owning some product or other, by buying some commodity. Not only will this purchase satisfy a utilitarian need (“This car will get me to work comfortably and reliably”), but it will also bestow a much wider array of social benefits, such as personal attractiveness and class mobility (“This car will not only make me attractive to women, it will also tell the neighbors that I am ‘moving up’”).

Looking through this grid day-in and day-out, I am increasingly conditioned to believe that the main and foundational value of things is to be calculated through their salability and aptitude for being put on the market; i.e., by their capacity to be turned into commodities. Placing prime importance on marketability, I develop a disposition to assess the worth of everything, material and otherwise, by how well it can present itself as an exchangeable good.

When I regard the world primarily through the commodity lens, its dimensions shrink. The range of meanings that any given reality can carry is narrowed down. The “what counts” of anything gets constricted to its consumerable aspects, to those features that can be commercialized. Conversely the many rich qualities in that object, no matter of what order, that are not likely to move the product off the shelves get pushed to the side.

Among the meanings that step forward to displace the less commodifiable ones are:

A) Appearance

Selling spotlights whatever it is that strikes my senses first, what catches my attention and breaks through the clutter. Primacy is put on the sizzle and glitter in the product, how sexy it is. A well known example is the Andre Agassi billboard of the tennis player touting the message, “Image is everything!” The most important quality of any reality is the allure of its packaging. Over and over, image trumps substance.

As a result I am progressively conditioned to focus on the outside of things, on their surfaces. After some time, my interest shifts from whether there is truth in an object to whether it is interesting. The deeper, more foundational instinct to look for solidity beyond appearances gets blunted.

Over time, I develop a kind of psychic hide, what might be termed a “pre-emptive skepticism.” This defense mechanism builds up as a reaction
to being fooled so many times in my presumption that the symbol presenting itself to me in the ad (e.g. the sexually hot car) actually contains what it is symbolizing. In time, this skepticism can thicken to the point where I stop even caring whether there is any truth in the packaging, so long as the product is attention-getting.

The moral cost is high. I become less and less troubled by disconnects between what a thing claims to be and what it actually is. I grow more tolerant of artificiality and not overly bothered by tidy surfaces that hide cluttered cabinets. When sensing the hollowness in objects placed before me, I am conditioned to tell myself that this is simply the way of the world. My insincerity threshold grows and grows.

B) Ability to Entertain

The significance of things is measured by how intensely they stir up my sensibilities and engage my emotions. How vivid and kinetic an effect does it have on my psyche? Commentators speak of “The Cult of Celebrity,” evidenced by the run away popularity of People Magazine and its spin-offs. As one wag said to an interviewer, “How well do you think a show called The Lifestyles of the Poor and Unknown would do against The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous?” Does this product give me a good feeling, or better, does it deliver an intense feeling, whether good or bad? What is the “rush factor” or “impact quotient” in the object?

One of the casualties of this narrowed perception is the potency of my motivation to take effective action against moral evil. Shallow perception evokes superficial response. For instance, I can delude myself into thinking that I am taking a brave and principled stance on the genocide in Rwanda simply because I have allowed myself to be stirred by the media’s graphic presentation of the slaughter there. When I have been conditioned to take in everything, including evil, as entertainment, my response to it (my response-ability) becomes weakened.

C) The Thirst for Novelty

Because the actual possession of a commodity always falls short of the expectation its presentation created in me, I eventually turn to something new. It has always been the case that my deep desires will eventually outstrip whatever I have in hand. But the commodity atmosphere, dripping hourly on my psyche, sets me up to believe that the next product in line will, in fact, satisfy—or at least come closer to doing so. Some have called this “the cult of the next new thing.” I recall being with a well-off family on summer vacation and listening to the steady whining of their children wandering through the luxurious seaside house asking, “What are we going to do next? I’m bored!”
A victim of this perpetual dissatisfaction is long-term commitment, the ability to persevere in the pursuit of a goal, particularly a hard-to-define social one. When I tire of the present activity, I move onto the next new thing. I am less able to stay with something. I am not as disposed to sustain a project, to hang in for the long haul.

One commentator, Vincent Miller, argues that this chronic sense of disappointment points to the source and substrate of all the other dynamics in a consumer world. And that is, "the misdirection of desire." By constantly presenting me with so many meaning-promising possibilities, the marketer keeps stirring up the very energy of my desiring and will not allow it ever to settle. But then, he redirects this longing for the infinite to a finite commodity. If you buy this fragrance called "Ecstasy," soul-filling ecstasy will in fact be delivered to you. Miller contends that such constant whipping up of desire with nothing proportionate to fulfill it is the fundamental cause of the emptiness and meaninglessness so many feel today.

D) Customization
Not satisfied with things anybody else can own, I can tailor the commodity to my personality, to my unique style. This is the relatively recent "Niche Marketing" sales strategy whereby I customize my purchase so as not just to satisfy my likes, but to get the additional pay-off of carving out a distinctive social identity. It is the lure of "Have it Your Way." Living in this uniform world of generics it suggests I am still able to retain my individuality. By walking up to the counter at Starbucks and ordering a triple shot, mocha, 2% milk, no foam, espresso grande, I not only get a pleasing taste, but make a statement about my signature style.

One of the casualties here is my willingness to engage in common projects, my capacity to cooperate with others in a group endeavor. Why put up with the compromises and negotiations needed for effective collaboration when I can mark my contribution with my personal stamp, tailor the work to my own likes and talents? Why put my shoulder to the bigger wheel when I can design a "boutiqy" one better fit to my particular shoulder? Combined with the individualism caught in Robert Putnam's metaphor "Bowling Alone" (documenting the demise of bowling leagues), or described as "Sheilaism" by Robert Bellah (Sheila's moral obligation is only

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12 Miller, "Desire and the Kingdom of God," chapter 4 in Consuming Religion.
to herself and her immediate circle), it further tamps down impulses to come together for a wider cause.

E) Abstraction

A general category for understanding all of these processes is the notion of abstraction. This entails pulling a particular reality away from its fuller context for use in another setting. To abstract is to lift something out of its wider, more deeply rooted and concrete surroundings, oftentimes to give it a more universal purpose. A math formula is a good example, extracting the quantifiable aspects of some reality from their fuller qualitative context.

To market an object successfully it is desirable and even necessary to simplify it, to knock the unique irregularities off its rougher edges so it can function more easily as a standardized part. Smoothed down this way it is better able to interlock with other parts (i.e., commodities). In addition, commodification removes objects, particularly cultural objects, from their original contexts. It severs contact not only with the ground that nurtured them but with the surrounding elements that interacted with them and so located and stabilized them.

Vincent Miller\textsuperscript{15} suggests the produce section of a supermarket as an example. I buy bananas not only by price, but also by how close they approximate an image of what I have come to identify as a good banana — bright yellow, no marks, a certain size and firmness. I pass up the "irregulars," the ones with bumps, spots, of smaller size, differently shaped, and off yellow. Additionally, I have no idea where they were grown, what life is like on that foreign farm, nor what families worked under what conditions to tend and ship them. Each of the fruits in the bins present in the same way — a competing item, attractively displayed, almost identical, but abstracted from the conditions of its production. It is food that comes from nowhere that is produced by nobody, in Miller's acid phrase.

The idea of abstraction sheds light on what the consumer process does to world-views, particularly traditions and especially religious traditions. It places them, like stones being polished in a steel tumbler, inside the chamber of the commodification grinder. Out of the bottom come versions of the tradition which are flattened, less connected, and more free-floating. Like machine parts, they are now interchangeable, precisely because they have been smoothed down and excised from the more complex and richer web of their original meanings. They do not carry the same significances, or especially the same depth, and so can be used for other purposes, even ones antithetical to their first meaning.

\textsuperscript{15} Miller, Consuming Religion, 38.
In addition, these abstracted objects now have a greater capacity to take on the market qualities mentioned above. I can mix and match world views (traditions, normative stories) so that the new combination shines more brightly than its competitors, entertains me more thrillingly, feeds my craving for the next new thing, and does a better job of differentiating my voice from the others in the room. But by the same process, these more attractive collages do not ask as much from me. They do not prod me as insistently as the unique original to do such things as take care of the “undeserving” neighbor, inconvenience myself for the interests of another, step off my mapped-out path in life to change some socio-economic arrangement, or cooperate with others responding to like moral challenges.

Let me try to synthesize these processes by way of an example from the Christian tradition. My recall of it might not be totally accurate, but the story carries the point.

Someone once told me about an ad for “Saint Francis Sandals.” They were advertised in a high-end fashion magazine, were placed next to some visuals about New Age religion and the ecological movement, and indeed were a limited edition. The graphic was Saint Francis walking in them through the very “green” Umbrian countryside. The copy claimed that the sandals were identical in appearance and manufacture to Saint Francis’ own
footwear. Made in Asissi of course, from cows whose breeding goes back to the fourteenth century, handcrafted by a specialist in medieval leather-making, and available in different shades of brown. They could be yours in selected stores for somewhere in the two thousand dollar range.

What a distance from the original matrix! The commodification process disconnected them from most every meaning they had when Francis wore them — renunciation of possessions, downward mobility so as to identify with the outcasts, long-term commitment to rebuilding the Church and establishing the Kingdom of Justice on earth, solidarity with the poor, and especially solidarity with the poor Jesus as he hung on the cross.

And see what new appeal these sandals have taken on. They are elegant, with lines and patterns finer than those Birkenstocks everybody wears. They are noble; they elicit feelings of compassion in me for the down and out — and I like to feel that way. They are interesting, certainly more so than the drab pair I have in my closet now that I have to keep polishing and taking for repairs. And that middle shade, the Umbrian tan, is so me! With a little more accessorizing, these sandals will set my feet off from anyone else who has a mind (and a bank account) to buy them.

The most useful point of the story (its underlying critique) is to highlight the very powerful, hidden, and pervasive workings of a consumerist mentality. It unveils a kind of atmospheric training program that shapes the ways I understand reality, disposing me to look out at the whole world as commodity. Commodification places a filter on existence that slips over all other frameworks and displaces them. It locks in a “default setting” of narrowed perceptions through which I ingest reality and interpret what counts and what does not. Finally, it not only separates foundational convictions from their defining contexts, but, as a subset of that also constrains the feedback loop between belief and practice.

III. Frédéric and the Commodity Culture

With these concerns in mind we rejoin Frédéric with the question of how his approach might serve as a buffer to the pressures of commodification. What help can he be in the face of this mostly unnoticed “formation program” for consumer interpretation?

While the ideas I suggest are directed toward Ozanam’s own Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the lessons are transferable to any group dedicated to the poor. Also, given the massive influence of commodification, I do not regard my suggestions as grand strategies but rather tactics for making some inroads into the problem. You might think of them as counter-insurgency training tools for use within local cells.
A) The Home Visits

Something never to forget is Frédéric's insistence on regular face-to-face contact with the people he would serve. He engaged nineteenth-century society and its flaws very concretely, most especially in his up-close interaction with the ones who benefited the least from it. The knowledge he used as his baseline for writing and organizing was not the pure-and-chaste-from-afar kind, but rather the fleshy brand of knowing born of practical action and personal engagement. His was that fuller, denser wisdom that comes only from interpersonal contact.

His approach was anything but abstract. Interacting with people on a regular basis in their home setting does not allow for much disconnected theorizing about how to help them. Operating so closely to them, I cannot bend or romanticize the conditions of their world. I cannot easily lop off disturbing aspects of face-to-face interaction such that my response is transmuted into mere ethical good-feeling.

In other words, if commodification builds habits of the heart that encourage me to narrow the meanings of things to only what sits on the surface, Frédéric's insistence on concrete encounter pushes in the opposite direction toward depth and substance. To the extent that a market-induced disposition places me in a tower as the "sovereign consumer" who mixes and matches pieces of culture to my taste, rubbing elbows with actual people lowers me down to the ground and makes me deal with things as they intrinsically are.

Once again, when you concretize an abstraction (especially a social one), you also intensify the felt obligation to respond. Eye-to-eye interaction puts a sharper edge on the moral demand to "do something about it."

Frédéric's predilection for the fuller granular knowledge that comes with interaction is a key counter-cultural training principle. It stirs up a more powerful motivation to act, and it puts flesh on what could too easily be very thin wishes for justice.

B) Theological Reflection

Another of Frédéric's practices was the inclusion of reflection, both at the Conference meetings and outside of them. In the face of the forces of disconnection which commodity culture deploys, this too is a move in the opposite direction.

He consistently strove to make and then strengthen the links between the activities of his Association to the seed bed in which they were rooted — which for him was the Gospel of Jesus Christ lived out over many generations. In the company of his fellows, he conversed with that Gospel,
so to speak. For one thing, he made prayer part of his meetings. For another, in his letters and reports, Frédéric characteristically tied in what the members were doing to the symbols, practices, and beliefs of the Christian tradition. And, he regularly incorporated the good works of the Society into the central rituals of his faith, notably the Eucharist.16

Even though he likely would have welcomed the help of those not of his religion, the backdrop for his own exhortations to the Association was not generic (as indeed any tradition never is). His stated purpose was to serve the truth of his heritage, Christianity, and, even more to our point, to enhance the faith by word and deed. Practice and theory wove tightly together for him, but precisely as expression and fruit of the overarching Christian story.

Earlier, I mentioned the informal discussions that took place during those first visits to the poor under the tutelage of Sister Rosalie Rendu. More refined and structured today, and formally named Theological Reflection, the purpose of this practice is to make bigger connections. It is designed to forge links between the religious riches of the Christian inheritance and life’s experience, particularly service experience.

Theological reflection aims to develop these bonds and habituate me to keep strengthening them. It is a tactic that runs counter to the current that transmutes beliefs and symbols into what one writer terms free-floating signifiers; i.e. symbols isolated from their original associations which can then carry any meaning the marketer assigns.17 This reflection process, done regularly and intentionally, is meant to cover the bones of my beliefs with the sinew of concrete experience, and sometimes to even reset those bones. Conversely it helps steer the charitable work I do and also gives it additional staying power.

Theological reflection is a nourishing exercise practiced in the early days of the Society which fights the flattening effects of commodification. Might not its re-introduction into Conference activities, in its more modern form, respond to today’s special challenges?

C) A Communal Effort

In a climate that showcases individualism, the value of working together cannot be taken for granted. Recall that Frédéric sought out compatriots to stand with him in the face of the cultural winds that were blowing in his day. His first attempt to add action to his words was a communal one. Again and again, he thanked God for the building-up each member gave to the others.

17 Miller, chapter 5 in Consuming Religion.
If he were living in this era his instincts for this might well have been even more explicit. “Having it your way,” is just one of the cultural factors which feed my expectation that I am sovereign in the world, that in the memorable image of Tom Wolf’s book *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, I am “The Master of the Universe.” This array of choices and niches that consumerism offers downplays the value of collaboration.

It would be an easy task, using Frédéric’s letters, to show how much he valued the quality and depth of relationships within his Association. He often enthused about the influence older members could have on the younger, about the value of keeping up lively contacts within and between the conferences, and about the joy of working closely together. For him, brotherhood made the crucial difference in the ability to sustain an effort.¹⁸

In this age of “bowling alone” where there is such reluctance to invest in common projects, perseverance suffers. When conjoined with the restless search for the next new thing, a preference for working alone tilts the table toward dabbling rather than long-haul commitment. Frédéric’s wisdom about the communal counters this. He both needed and counted upon the support of his Society members for following through on his convictions. And in this day of systematically entrenched injustices, is not this need for sustenance from the brotherhood even greater?

**D) Marrying Practice and Theory**

One criticism of consumerism is that it can delude a person into thinking that letting himself feel the pain of another is the same as giving real help to the other. Valuing the “rush” above all else, it is enough to be stimulated (perhaps entertained) by the drama in the wrong that was done. We noted how this attitude separates perception from follow-through; I can mouth humanitarian concerns while not acting on them concretely.

Frédéric’s learning was that practice is not only required to legitimate theoretical claims, but that the practices begin to feed back into the theory. The evolution of his ideas about charity and Church-State collaboration happened in the main because of his experience of serving the poor of Paris. A large part of his admiration for Saint Vincent de Paul stemmed from an appreciation of Saint Vincent’s practicality, or in Vincent’s own words, the way in which “affective and effective action” run together.

The on-the-ground flavor which stamped Frédéric’s spirituality is another counterweight to the forces of commodification. Given Frédéric’s

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¹⁸ In an early letter, Frédéric writes, “It is important then to form an association of mutual encouragement... where one finds friendship, support and example.” To Leonce Cornier, 4 November 1834, in Dirvin, *Life in Letters*, 55.
scholarly training and love for things academic, this quality in him is not only striking in itself but can serve as a call to today's Society to consider again the blessings that come from intertwining intelligent theory and effective operation.

E) Eyes on the Unmarketable

This last suggestion is the most general and requires a step back from tactics to catch the broader view. The underlying danger of thoroughgoing consumerism is that it tries to commodify everything. Left alone in the field it would shrink reality to what can be marketed, bought, and sold. In at least three fundamental areas Frédéric resists this process.

Firstly, he esteemed tradition and regarded it as a living and encompassing thing. He recognized that the breadth of this intergenerational wisdom took in far more than he could ever hope to assimilate. He looked to it as a table from which to nourish his mind and heart, and so take him past conventional wisdoms. Frédéric enjoined his companions to eat heartily from this table, to keep making the connections between the service they were giving and the much more fertile ground in which their activities were rooted. Rather than being at his disposal as some commodity, the living tradition embraced him and led him forward.

Emmanuel Bailly (1794-1861);
Co-founded the Society of St. Vincent de Paul with Frédéric,
Félix Clavé (1811-1853), Jules Devaux (1811-1880), François Lallier (1814-1886),
Paul Lamache (1810-1892), and Auguste Le Taillandier (1811-1886).
International Office of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Paris

Secondly, along with Emmanuel Bailly, Sister Rosalie Rendu, Saint Vincent de Paul, and Jesus Himself, Frédéric regarded the poor as priceless, far beyond buying and selling. It was his regular interaction with these men and women that would not let him reduce them to categories, statistics, or noble-feeling causes.

Finally, Frédéric’s Lord was anything but commodifiable. The Mystery to whom he gave himself was not only the living God but the encircling and all pervading source of life period. This God, he confessed, was infinitely beyond his ability to manipulate or pass off as some appealing product a consumer could take, leave, or suit to her tastes.

There are indeed things that money cannot buy, but in these times of being so conditioned to not quite believe that, the reverential spirit of an Ozanam is especially needed. Putting oneself under Frédéric’s tutelage forestalls the shrinking-down tendencies of our consumer society.

IV. Conclusion

Undoubtedly there are other aspects of his approach that could work to counteract the pressures of the commodity mentality. Among them might be the greater sense of religious agency — someone owning his religion as opposed to “handing it off to a specialist; i.e., the clergy” — that involvement in a Catholic lay association such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul can give its members. Another might be the check against the impulse to run after the “next new thing” that sustained contact with the poor can be. Still another might be the simplification of daily life that Frédéric’s Association implied when it solicited its own members for contributions for the poor.

But the overall point is this. A twenty-first century person who imbibes Frédéric’s approach, especially in taking up his style of integrating religiously rooted theory and practice in communal and concrete service of the poor, can be re-tooled to resist the shallowing dynamics of the commodity culture.

Frédéric’s Society, which lives from the action-proven spirituality of Saint Vincent de Paul, provides a training ground for such a task. More widely, any committed, long-term, reflected upon, tradition-grounded, and practical participation in communal endeavors for social improvement proves counter-cultural in its most saving sense.