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Frédéric Ozanam — Beneficent Deserter: Mediating the Chasm of Income Inequality Through Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity

BY
REVEREND CRAIG B. MOUSIN

Frédéric Ozanam’s death in 1850 left a legacy of unfinished work. He had prophesized for years that the tragic chasm between those with much and those with little would lead to chaos and social violence. Despite his pleas and despite the founding of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Ozanam died with the chasm still wide; it has grown larger today. The contributions of the Society revealed Ozanam’s gifts in mobilizing students and laypeople for an organized charitable response to human needs. His public advocacy and political engagement, however, suggests an additional path to address the challenges poverty presented.

Skilled in the academic rigor of the Sorbonne, Ozanam threw himself into that chasm of income inequality as a mediator between opposing sides. Sustained by his faith in Providence and persuaded that all are created in God’s image, Ozanam’s advocacy employed faith and reason to engage the powers of civil life to expand the common good. The architects of the French Revolution had undermined the monarchy and the Church with the secular language of the Revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ozanam and his colleagues challenged this ownership and recaptured liberty, equality, fraternity, not as modern terms supplanting the old religious order, but as Christian principles. He balanced human freedom with state intervention to overcome egregious exploitation, while expanding liberty and freedom for the working poor to join trade associations and earn natural salaries sufficient to care for families and provide comfort when too old or ill to work. Ozanam’s proficiency at interpreting the Gospel within a secular political environment provides both language and a strategy for those seeking to minimize the great chasm between the wealthy and the poor and the resulting inequality in our pluralistic democracy today.

Born in 1813, Ozanam lived through tumultuous economic times and the continuing battles of revolution and restoration. The dovetailing

1 This paper was presented at DePaul University’s St. Vincent de Paul Lecture “In Our Times, the Unfinished Work of Frédéric Ozanam” on 28 September 2006 in conjunction with a conference on “The Living Wage — Vincentian, Catholic, and Urban Responses to Labor Issues in Our Times: Vincent and Ozanam’s Legacy.” It has been expanded for publication. I am grateful to Reverend Edward R. Udovic, C.M., and DePaul’s Office of Mission and Values for the invitation to present the lecture. I thank Meredith Lohbeck for her research assistance. I am indebted to Maribeth Conley for her editorial assistance.
of laissez-faire capitalism with the expansion of the Industrial Revolution in France forced many from the countryside to Paris, expanding the numbers of urban poor. He witnessed the inequitable distribution of wealth generated by the Industrial Revolution with its lack of government regulatory oversight and its prohibition of trade unions.²

Ozanam faced the difficult times with a sanguine spirit. He considered himself blessed to be born into difficult times rather than those of ease and comfort. Writing to his friend François Lallier, he gave:

thanks to God for having brought me into the world in one of those situations on the border of hardship and of ease, which is used to privations without permitting enjoyment to be completely unknown, where one can go to bed with all his wants assuaged, but where one is no longer distraught by the continual clamors of necessity.³

Although empathetic with the victims of war — actual and economic — Ozanam believed strongly that such difficult times also forced humans to bring forth new ideas and solutions. He challenged the theory that:

the arts are born and flourish best in times of peace. If there are, as we have seen, wars of extermination, invasions and tyrannies which crush intelligences beneath the brutal reign of force, it is otherwise with those memorable contests which employ force in the service of great interests, and consequently, in that of great ideas. The human mind delights in struggles which call forth the discussions of great questions; it grows in the midst of perplexities; it needs the severe conditions without which nothing is productive, suffering and sorrow.⁴

Ozanam was well prepared for living that challenge in similarly difficult times.

In grading his competitive tests for a faculty position at the Sorbonne, the judges summarized Ozanam's gifts, saying that he: "[b]y the breadth of his comments and his surveys, by his bold and just views, and by a language which, joining originality to reason, and imagination to gravity, appears to be eminently suitable for public teaching." His work in founding the Society of St. Vincent de Paul provided him with the experience of organizing and educating young students to assist the poor. The Society not only had a great impact on charitable assistance to the poor, but also served as a training ground for young students who endeavored to expand justice while "regenerating France." His debating skills as an advocate for Catholic faith in the academy prepared him for public debate against the evils of unencumbered capitalism and the exploitation of working people. Thomas Bokenkotter called Ozanam one of the first Catholics who addressed social justice issues arising from the profits of the new industrial capitalism. Joseph Moody named him "the
most consistent apostle of Social Catholicism" in his time.\(^8\) His writings on voluntary labor associations, natural salaries, and the rights of workers and their families influenced generations engaged in articulating Catholic Social Teaching.\(^9\) Although Ozanam denied that he was a politician, and suggested the social question of the poor takes precedence over politics, he fully engaged the political questions of his day, but not by simply seeking legislative fiat. Rather, according to Ozanam, Christians are called to place themselves in the center of the chasm of this public tragedy:

For, if the question which disturbs the world around us today is neither a question of political modalities, 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 it, our duty to ourselves as Christians is to throw ourselves between these two irreconcilable enemies, and to make the ones divest themselves so as to fulfill a law, and the others accept as a benefit; to make the ones cease to demand, and the others to refuse; to make equality as operative as is possible among men; to make voluntary community replace imposition and brute force; to make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do.\(^10\)

To him, the Christian duty seemed obvious: "What is the duty for today?" he asked, "and although it has been written that 'in revolutions, the difficulty is not in doing one's duty, but in knowing it,' we very strongly believe that it is less difficult to know one's duty than to do it."\(^11\) Not prone to paralysis by endlessly debating God's plan for his life, Ozanam asked: "And does it not suffice to us to know our duty and our destiny for the nearest

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\(^9\) Amin A. De Terraza, "Frederic Ozanam, a Lay Saint for Our Times," \textit{Vincentiana} 41:3 (May-June 1997): 132, 141. (Ozanam was one of the first Catholics to develop the idea of a natural salary.) See also, David L. Gregory, "Antoine Frederic Ozanam: Building the Good Society," \textit{3 St. Thomas Law Journal} 21 (2005), 34.


moment of the future, without wishing to extend our regards to the Infinite? If we know what God wishes to do with us tomorrow, is it not enough?"\(^\text{12}\)

Responding to the needs of the working poor, he argued "the first duty of honest people, and especially people with faith, is to enlighten them and to procure for them, as much as possible, the work they need."\(^\text{13}\)

Addressing the clergy, he urged them to expand their engagement, serving not just the poor, but also the working poor. In an 1848 *L’Ère Nouvelle* article, he points out that the Christian duty to assist the working poor transcended parish geography, calling on the clergy to recognize:

> the time is come for you to occupy yourselves with those other poor who do not beg, who live by their labor, and to whom the right of labor and the right of assistance will never be secured in such a manner as to guarantee them from the want of help, of advice, of consolation. The time is come when you must go and seek those who do not send for you, who, hid away in the most disreputable neighborhoods, have perhaps never known the church or the priests, or even the sweet name of Christ.\(^\text{14}\)

Most consistently he sought to mediate between those on both sides of the income chasm. To one friend, he wrote, "when the wave of pauperism finds itself furious and desperate in presence of a moneyed aristocracy whose hearts are hardened, it will be good to have mediators who may be able to prevent a collision of which the horrible disasters cannot be imagined; who may make themselves heard in both camps."\(^\text{15}\)

To Janmot, he wrote, "And our youth and our mediocrity does not make our role of mediators easier than our title of Christian makes us responsible."\(^\text{16}\)

Ozanam believed in non-violent means of using persuasion — using all "honest weapons" — through speaking, writing, and recruiting others to side with the working poor.\(^\text{17}\) In an 1843 lecture he warned, "[w]hen

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\(^\text{13}\) Hess, *Frédéric Ozanam*, 23.


\(^\text{17}\) "Letter to Ozanam’s Father," 6 March 1848, in Hess, *Frédéric Ozanam*, 19.
Christians embark on the painful service of controversy, it is with the firm will to serve God and to gain the hearts of men. We must not, therefore, compromise the holiness of the cause by the violence of the means.”

Although Ozanam believed Christians could operate as neutrals, mediating this clash, he did not see himself as a modern mediator, as a strict third-party neutral. Although at times harshly critical of the bourgeois blindness to poverty, his feelings did not compromise his mediating duty, nor did his anger at the recalcitrance of the rich undermine his consistent belief in human dignity. He stressed “we must never begin by despairing of those who deny.... We owe them a compassion which need not exclude esteem.”

He had seen how violence destroyed lives, yet he also found role models for his own work. In reviewing Ozanam’s scholarship on Dante, Baunard criticized Ozanam for infusing his own personal beliefs and politics into his dissertation and subsequent book. Noting that Ozanam described Dante as an “advocate and a prophet of the coming of democracy,” Baunard questioned whether Ozanam actually “express[ed] his own personal inclinations and convictions” in detailing Dante’s work.

But more significant, one might see how Ozanam viewed Dante as a pioneer of his own choices during destructive times. Compare how he described Dante with his self-disclosure of how he perceived himself. He posits that Dante

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18 Schimberg, Great Friend, 163. But he was not averse to acknowledge that “we make progress in the art of plundering the rich for the profit of the poor,” “Letter to M. Lallier,” 15 February 1840, in Coates, Letters of Ozanam, 263. He also once described the Society of St. Vincent de Paul as a “‘Robin Hood’ band.” McCarthy, “Lay Evangelizer,” 25.


20 Schimberg, Great Friend, 163-164.


22 Monsignor Louis Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence (Wexford, Ireland: John English & Co., 1925), 149; See also, John Mooney, in Ozanam, Dante, ix.
was “Led by reason and by faith,” much like he saw himself. Dante used poetry to persuade, as a political tool, again, much as Ozanam saw his own rhetoric and persuasive skills influencing the public debate. Dante, like Ozanam, was born with more privilege than most of his contemporaries, but after witnessing the collisions between the poor and the rich he “embraced the side of the people.” Similarly, Ozanam felt that he found his birth into moderate means kept him from being seduced by wealth, yet also provided him the means to develop academic and professional resources to make a difference when he chose the side of the poor.

Ozanam’s metaphor of working between the entrenched powers and the people also applied to Dante:

The effect of these two differing impulses was not to impel him now one way and now another, in two contrary directions: he followed, not without sundry deviations, but without pusillanimity, the mean line thence resulting. He did not wander, an irresolute deseter, between the two rival camps; he set up his tent on independent ground, not that he might repose in an indifferent neutrality, but that he might fight out the fight alone, with all the strength of his own individual genius.

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23 Ozanam, Dante, 55.
24 Ibid., 56-7.
25 Ibid., 372.
27 Ozanam, Dante, 381-382.
Ozanam saw himself, like Dante, not as an irresolute deserter ignoring both sides, but called by his Christian duty as a "beneficent deserter" charged with doing good and bringing benefit to both sides in eliminating the great divide between the poor and rich. Such choices, however, led both men to lose friends and increase the enmity of those opposed to their actions. Ozanam noted with biblical prose that the exiled Dante possessed "no longer a country here below,"\(^28\) nor feared that his actions would further isolate him with increasing numbers of enemies opposed to his position.\(^29\) Similarly, Ozanam knew that siding with the poor ostracized him — "weak Samaritans, outsiders as we are."\(^30\) Finally, just as Dante dedicated himself to "democratic doctrines,"\(^31\) Ozanam believed society would shift toward democracy to avoid the chaos that would result if the world continued to organize politically through monarchy or tyranny.\(^32\)

Outside of the academy, Ozanam also exercised his writing skills as a journalist to provide an alternative voice to the status quo and persuade those with power to move France and the Church toward democracy.\(^33\) Ozanam wrote to Foisett:

> you will soon understand why *L'Univers* could not remain the sole organ of the Catholics. We must found a new work for these new times, one which will not provoke the same angry feelings and the same mistrust. Moreover, as there are various opinions amongst Catholics, it is better that they should be faithfully represented by various journals, and that, because of their very diversity, the Church of France should cease to be responsible for what passes through the brain of a journalist.\(^34\)


\(^{29}\) Ozanam, *Dante*, 382.

\(^{30}\) McCarthy, "Lay Evangelizer," 9, citing an Ozanam *L'Ére Nouvelle* article. McCarthy later concludes that Ozanam's service to the poor "cost him the opposition of conservative adversaries and the misunderstanding or confusion of friends." *Ibid.*, 27.


\(^{33}\) O'Meara, *Professor at Sorbonne*, 230.

He worked with other French Catholic liberals to awaken the public to the chaos that poverty would inflict. Such collaborations added a public voice to urge both the Catholic Church and the government to turn towards democracy, giving voice to all people. He worked with Félicité de Lamennais on L'Avenir (The Future), the journal whose motto was “God and Liberty.”\textsuperscript{35} The editorial group encouraged the Catholic Church to enter the modern age, arguing that the Church would fare well by siding with the “sovereign people” rather than the monarchy.\textsuperscript{36} Although Lamennais later became the target of the papal encyclical Mirari Vos, and subsequently left the Church, Ozanam found other places to exercise his public advocacy.\textsuperscript{37}

With Jean Baptiste Henri Dominique Lacordaire, Abbé Henry Maret, and Charles de Coux, Ozanam launched the journal L'Ère Nouvelle in 1848, proclaiming their goal to:

reconcile religion and the democratic Republic, to demand from the Republic liberty of education, liberty of association, amelioration of the condition of the workingmen, and protection of “the peoples who have lost their nationality by unjust conquests which time cannot rectify, and those other peoples which, following our example from afar, aspire to achieve their own political and moral emancipation.”\textsuperscript{38}

His journalistic acumen and persuasive skills led him to run for the National Assembly in 1848. Although unsuccessful in the election, his platform gives insight to how he proposed to bridge the income divide, and reveals his balance of the appropriate role of the state with voluntary advocacy for liberty for all citizens, especially the working poor:

I will also support the rights to work; the independent work of the laborer, of the artisan, of the merchant who remains master of his work and salary; the associations of workers among themselves, or of workers and contractors who voluntarily join together their work and their capital, finally the works of public service undertaken by the State and offering a home to laborers who are out of work or resources. I will forward with all my efforts the measures of justice and


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 146.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 148-149.

\textsuperscript{38} Moon, The Labor Problem, 35.
foresight which will alleviate the sufferings of the people. In my opinion, all these means are not too much in order to resolve this formidable question of work, the most pressing question of the present time and also the most deserving to occupy great-hearted people.39

He opened his platform with these guiding principles of his support for the working poor:

For me, the revolution of February is not a public misfortune to which one must resign oneself; it’s a progress that one must support. In it, I recognize the temporal advent of the Gospel expressed by these three words: Liberty, equality, fraternity.

Thus, I want the sovereignty of the people. And, as the people are made up of the universality of free men, I want above all else the sanction of the natural rights of man and of family. In the constitution one must put, above the uncertainty of parliamentary majorities, freedom of people, freedom of speech, of teaching, of associations and of religions. Power must not, entrusted to the instability of parties, ever be able to suspend individual freedom, to intrigue in questions of conscience or to silence the press.40

Similarly, in his first Sorbonne lecture after the February 1848 revolution, he stated:

You have always known me to be passionately in favour of liberty, in favour of the legitimate triumphs of the people, in favour of reforms which elevate, and in favour of those dogmas of equality and fraternity which are but the introduction of the Gospel into the temporal domain.41

For Ozanam knew liberty, equality, and fraternity were more noted by their absence than presence in mid-nineteenth-century France. Income inequality

39 “Letter to the Constituents of the Department of the Rhone,” 15 August 1848, in Hess, Frédéric Ozanam, 52.
40 Ibid., 51.
41 Baunard, Correspondence, 261.
undermined liberty, equality, and fraternity as the working poor could not sustain their families, and therefore, fully flourish as humans. In discussing the French working poor, Parker Thomas Moon converted French wages and costs into dollars and found:

In 1832... an industrial workingman might be able to earn, at thirty cents... a day, about ninety dollars... a year. The cost of supporting his family (counting three children to the normal family) would be, at a conservative estimate, over 170 dollars... making no provision for sickness or accident, or for saving. In other words, his wages would pay little more than half the cost of the bare necessities of a hand-to-mouth life.42

Other scholars have suggested that thirty cents a day was actually low, and wages frequently failed to cover the annual costs of a family in Paris.43

One solution advocated by Ozanam called for employers to pay all workers a natural salary. He had worked with many French Social Catholics in his journalistic endeavors, including Jean Paul Villeneuve-Bargemont. Called a precursor to Ozanam,44 Villeneuve-Bargemont published Économie Politique Chrétienne in 1834,45 contending that justice for workers was a first priority in the economy. Villeneuve-Bargemont defined the necessary elements constituting a natural salary. First, the wage had to "exist fitly," providing necessary nourishment, adequate clothing, and a home properly sheltering a family from the exigencies of weather. Next, wages had to support a family of at least a spouse and two children. Third, a wage should enable a worker to care for parents, including health care, and finally, sufficient to provide a good life upon cessation of work including daily sustenance and

42 Moon, The Labor Problem, 8.
43 Ibid. See also, Louise Sullivan, D.C., Sister Rosalie Rendu: A Daughter of Charity on Fire With Love for the Poor (Chicago, IL: Vincentian Studies Institute, 2006). Virtually all working families in Paris at that time were incapable of providing sufficient support for a family on the worker's wages alone. Ibid., 68.
44 Sr. Mary Ignatius Ring, Villeneuve-Bargemont: Precursor of Modern Social Catholicism, 1784-1850 (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1935), xii. See also, Ozanam's letter to his parents informing them that he would be spending some time with followers of Lamennais, including Villeneuve-Bargemont with whom he collaborated for over a decade. 'Letter to his parents,' 1 May 1836, Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam, Lettres de Jeunesse (1819-1840), Léonce Célier, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, Didier Ozanan, eds., Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul (Editions Klincksieck, Paris, 1961), 217.
coverage for any health issues. Sister Mary Ignatius Ring concluded that for Villeneuve-Bargemont “if wages cannot give these returns to the worker... they do not conform to the laws of nature, of justice, of charity, or even to the dictates of common political prudence.” Ozanam agreed, calling less-than-natural wages unjust.

Agreeing with French advocates such as Villeneuve-Bargemont through articles in L’Ere Nouvelle and through his electoral platform, Ozanam advocated for a natural salary and the rights to organize. Ozanam’s ideas influenced natural salary theories and subsequently found nurture in Pope Leo XIII’s Encyclical, Rerum Novarum, which introduced the concept of “just wage” into Catholic Social Teaching in 1891. Subsequently in the United States, Monsignor John Ryan introduced many of Rerum Novarum’s ideas into national social policy. Ryan wrote, for example, that each worker has a right to a decent livelihood such that the worker would receive “so much of the requisites of sustenance as will enable him to live in a manner worthy of a human being.” These ideas found seed in many of the New Deal’s protections of the workplace, including the introduction of minimum wage laws.

Critics today, however, point out that many minimum wage laws fail to serve the needs of the working poor. Proponents of living wage ordinances suggest that minimum wage laws fail to meet basic needs and cities and states should enact legislation calling for living wages which would permit the working poor to not only escape poverty, but to fulfill their human potential and be full participants in family and civil life. From 1997

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46 Ibid., 76.
47 Ibid.
48 Moon, The Labor Problem, 124.
53 William Quigley defines living wage as: “If a person works full-time, she should not have to raise her family in poverty. Advocacy for enactment of a living wage is summed up in that simple statement.” William Quigley, “Full Time Workers Should Not Be Poor: The Living Wage Movement,” 70 Mississippi Law Journal 889 (2001); Helen J. Alford and Michael J. Naughton define living wage as: “...the minimum amount due to every independent wage earner that takes into account the fact that she is a human being with a life to maintain and a personality to develop” (italics...
to 2007, a federal minimum wage worker earned $5.15 per hour or $10,712.00 per year covering approximately 60 percent of annual living costs. Even after Congress increased the minimum wage in 2007, workers earning $5.85 per hour still fell almost 18 percent short of the poverty line for a family of three. Indeed, of the 3066 counties in the United States only four had living standards sufficient for a federal minimum wage worker to cover housing and utilities for a four person family without going into debt.

In contrast, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the wealthy simply became wealthier as "the share of aggregate income going to the highest-earning 1% of Americans has doubled from 8% in 1980 to over 16% in 2004" and the share "going to the top one-hundredth of 1% has quadrupled from 0.65% in 1980 to 2.87% in 2004." The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported "two-thirds of the nation's total income gains from 2002 to 2007 flowed to the top 1 percent of U.S. households, and that top 1 percent

held a larger share of income in 2007 than at any time since 1928." Federal Reserve Commission Chair Ben Bernanke acknowledged that the degree of inequality in this nation has increased. Indeed, the degree of economic inequality in the United States is greater than in other developed nations. Charles Morris fears that this great divide has become a permanent part of our national life, challenging Ozanam’s goal on providing a natural salary, let alone just any salary. Such a divide can only further drive a deeper wedge between equal participation in civic life, as a minimum wage earner would have to work for six centuries before equaling the pay of some of the best paid workers in the United States. It further challenges institutions such as DePaul University that seek to reduce poverty by increasing access to

59 Ben S. Bernanke, “The Level and Distribution of Economic Well-Being,” Speech Before the Greater Chamber of Commerce, Omaha, Nebraska, 6 February 2007. Although “average economic well-being has also increased,” if the top one percent of the nation have such a disproportionate amount of the wealth, average well-being may say less about where most citizens fall on the sides of the inequality gap. Ibid. http://www.federalreserve.gov/BoardDocs/Speeches/2007/20070206/default.htm (accessed 2 February 2007).
61 Morris, Trillion Dollar Meltdown, 145.
62 Words such as ‘income chasm’ or ‘divide’ fail to illuminate the enormity of differences between the wealthy and the working poor. On 10 February 2010, The New York Times reported that Goldman Sachs would pay its chief executive, Lloyd C. Blankfein, a cash salary of $600,000 and a bonus of $9,000,000. The article stressed that Goldman was showing “restraint” as estimates had been that Mr. Blankfein would receive up to almost $100,000,000 as a bonus for 2009. Graham Bowley and Eric Dash, “Goldman Chief’s $9 Million Bonus Seen by Some as Show of Restraint,” The New York Times, Business Day, 6 February 2010, B1. In contrast, the current federal minimum wage is $7.25 per hour. Assuming a 2,000 hour work year, such an employee would receive $14,500 per year. At that rate, the individual would have to work 662 years to equal Mr. Blankfein’s compensation of one year. The limitations of eyesight and imagination may make it difficult to comprehend over six centuries of minimum wage labor, but there can be no doubt that the minimum wage laborer and Mr. Blankfein are not equals within the constraints of our democracy, nor can they both feel the full liberty promised them by our society when facing such disparity between their 2009 compensations. Thomas Frank similarly reported that former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welsh, “was paid 1,400 times the average wage earned by his blue-collar workers in the US...” Frank, One Market, 7.
education. Income inequality in the early twenty-first century has reduced the benefit of a college education as college graduates have failed to see their incomes rise commensurately with the rise in productivity.

Although much has changed since Frédéric Ozanam sought a natural salary for workers, too many working poor still fail to meet their family’s needs, especially when the great chasm between those with and those without grows wider. As insufficient income precludes meeting daily sustenance, a society of equals becomes more difficult, if not impossible, to attain. John Ryan pointed out that when society permits workers to work without meeting family needs it sends a message of inequality and makes them “mere instruments of convenience,” which violates the principle of Catholic Social Teaching that workers are not mere commodities. But the harm is not just to the working poor. According to Ozanam, the tragic divide not only hurt the poor, but also posed a threat to the well-off. He encouraged the wealthy not to believe that suppressing the revolution of 1848 solved their problems — rather “you have now to deal with an enemy with which you are not acquainted, which you dislike hearing spoken of, and about which we are determined to speak to you today — misery!”

To avoid that misery, Ozanam sought to enhance liberty, equality, and fraternity to mediate between the upper crust and the working poor, which suggests a strategy to respond to the working poor in our own time. He did not believe in full reliance on the state, nor was he fully committed to socialism, despite his detractor’s claims. Although he favored Christian reform of the state, he acknowledged that “conversions are not made by laws.” He saw only laziness and discouragement feeding the human desire to seek the power of the state to conform others to their side. Liberty stood against the coercive power of the state: “in the face of power there must also be the sacred principle of liberty... its place should be energetically reclaimed, and... the power which exploits rather than expends itself should be condemned with courageous and unyielding voice.”

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65 Ryan, Distributive Justice, 364. See also, Gregory, “Social Teaching,” 913.

66 O’Meara, Professor at Sorbonne, 245 (citing an extract from L’Ère Nouvelle).


68 “Letter to F. Dufieux,” 9 April 1851, in Hess, Frédéric Ozanam, 27. See also, Baunard, Correspondence, 261.

69 Ibid.

Much as he understood individual liberty, he also came to see that throne and altar should not be joined. Separation of church and state was good for the state and good for the church. Indeed, if the Church was to stand with the masses of poor people it could not be united with the state that oppressed them. Ozanam’s ideas evolved from once supporting a monarchy yoked to the Church, to subsequently contending for full separation in the name of liberty. He constantly urged the Church to foster democracy. Although disappointed by the tragic loss of life in the revolution of 1848, saddened by the reinvigorated state demonizing revolutionaries, and upset with the Church in choosing to side with the upper classes, he refused to concede. Instead he contended that Christian principles found their best implementation within democracy, maintaining “I have believed


and I still believe in the possibility of Christian democracy.”73

But for those participants in the Vincentian tradition, Ozanam poses the fundamental Christian question of duty to respond to the degradation of humanity when economic forces debase equality and reduce liberty. Ozanam was unequivocal on the response the Gospel requires. For Ozanam, the law of God serves as the source of all justice.74 Like Saint Vincent de Paul, Ozanam grounded his economic theories in biblical justice. One of Vincent’s favorite biblical passages raised up the Jubilee Year, the year of God’s favor, when God called Israel to eliminate the great divide between the rich and poor, fostering equality.75 The Jubilee recognized that through creation God provided that the earth’s resources should benefit all. Hoarding or building up extravagant wealth could result from human liberty and finitude, but Israel’s social justice egalitarianism stemmed from its understanding the “fruits of the Garden are equally for all to eat.”76 Indeed, Ozanam’s colleague, Lacordaire preached that “the centrality of liberty which he presented as a tree [was] planted by God himself in the Garden of Eden.”77 Although biblical concepts of justice permitted acquisition of wealth, they simultaneously sought to ensure “social equality by placing a premium on the strengthening of relationships within the covenantal community and minimizing extreme advantage.”78

The Jubilee Year acts as a restraint and a corrective when human liberty leads to extreme differences in wealth. It is precisely that extreme disadvantage which leads to economic poverty that the Bible condemns.79 Leslie Hoppe
writes, if poverty perverts the divine will “believers cannot countenance its continued existence.” Hoppe suggests biblical tradition does not abdicate the duty of elimination of poverty to government, but rather, all believers should lend their efforts to that end. Ozanam offered the same argument, that Christians have an unambiguous duty to engage the powers-that-be to end poverty. Poverty results from the choices of people, and therefore, believers can and should work to reduce and end poverty. Charity heals some wounds — witness the Society of St. Vincent de Paul — but individual and community social engagement to convince those with resources to find equitable distribution methods is necessarily part of one’s call to justice.

As Ozanam’s life also demonstrated, fraternity or working in community with others also furthered this Gospel message. Ozanam knew he could not act alone as a solitary figure. Although history cites Ozanam as the principal co-founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, he was reticent to accept the sole honor and instead stressed the collaborative nature of the founding days. Collaboration, whether in establishing the Society or partnering with other scholars and journalists, marked Ozanam’s advocacy. Even as some of his colleagues fell away due to discouragement, fear of the unknown, or illness, Ozanam recognized the need to recruit new allies.

Today’s income chasm reveals that Ozanam’s unfinished work necessitates finding new allies. Those with ‘too much’ still maintain wage inequality has no negative consequences. Those with ‘too much’ still seek to gain more. Reinhold Niebuhr illuminated this historical issue, that the “upper crust” of society will always resist change:

The privileged classes of society form an ‘upper crust.’
This phrase is literally accurate. It is a crust they form. No matter how good privileged people may be, they will be inclined to defend their interests and with it the old society

173. See also, LaCocque, *Innocence*, 34, who writes “From the beginning, Israel has refused to condone poverty as a ‘normal’ social phenomenon.”
80 Hoppe, *No Poor*, 172.
81 Ibid.
82 Moon, *Labor Problem*, 26-27, citing L’Ère Nouvelle, October 1848; O’Meara, Professor at Sorbonne, citing Ozanam’s article on Almsgiving: “the same authority which tells us that we shall always have the poor amongst us is the same that commands to do all we can that there may cease to be any...,” 177.
which guarantees and preserves them. The destructive and constructive forces must come from below.\textsuperscript{86}

Ozanam employed multiple strategies encouraging the state to cure egregious attacks on workers, while also inspiring intellectual and faith resources to find innovative solutions to emerging issues, such as enabling workers sustained by a natural or living wage to support themselves and their families without the need of charity or government largess. He endeavored to prove to a secular world that Christian principles could, when merging voluntary action with state authority, ameliorate the tragedy of poverty without being naive regarding the difficulty of the task. His theories balanced what Reinhold Niebuhr more recently argued: "It is still possible to create and, above all, to reclaim a prophetic religion which will influence the destiny of our era and fall into neither defeatism nor into the illusions which ultimately beget despair."\textsuperscript{87}

Catholic Social Teaching encourages similar prophetic and pragmatic efforts by Catholics and their institutions to reduce poverty. Catholic institutions, for example, can model these goals by adopting the teachings while also articulating how these principles can strengthen a pluralistic democracy and improve the common good — protecting workers’ rights to organize, paying natural or living wages, and investing resources in companies that follow such principles.\textsuperscript{88} Ozanam fought the prevailing intellectual belief that a free market solved all problems; the current economic crisis has revealed the errors of simply following such an


\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 304. See also John Ryan’s prediction of this difficult task: “The rich must cease to put their faith in material things, and rise to a simpler and saner plane of living; the middle classes and the poor must give up their envy and snobbish imitation of the false and degrading standards of the opulent classes; and all must learn the elementary lesson that the path to achievements worth while leads through the field of hard and honest labor, not of lucky ‘deals’ or gouging of the neighbor…” Ryan, \textit{Distributive Justice}, 432-33.

unregulated market ideology. Catholic Social Teaching does not support a free market economy that treats employees as commodities to be bought and sold with no regard to social implications. The current economic crisis invites Catholic academics to explore new and imaginative ways to address poverty incorporating liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Liberty is not just to be enjoyed, but to be used to work to reduce poverty. Ozanam’s ideals have seen fruition at times. As discussed above, Ozanam’s influence on Rerum Novarum seeped into John Ryan’s public advocacy and Roosevelt’s New Deal initiatives, reducing the income chasm and creating greater equality and liberty. The income gaps actually narrowed in the United States between the 1920s and 1950s, when unions had greater involvement in protecting workers and coalitions supported those New Deal protections. Yet as the current crisis undermines those ideals and unemployment expands, obtaining a living wage pales in comparison to maintaining or securing one’s wages.

New means of collaboration must continually rise to meet these new challenges. At the 2006 DePaul Conference, The Living Wage, Kim Bobo discussed the known extent of wage theft in the United States and its impact on the working poor as well as all of society. Employees in the United States have failed to receive at least nineteen billion dollars a year in unpaid overtime. Collaborative efforts such as Workers Centers empower workers to seek that which is owed to them. In Chicago, Arise Chicago, an interfaith non-profit, helped establish a Chicago Workers Center which since 2002 has obtained $4,600,000 in stolen wages in forty-seven of Chicago’s fifty Wards.


91 Persons from many faith backgrounds have already begun to address the failure of market ideology and the necessity of re-articulating faith-values in our economic system. See, e.g., Solange DeSantis, “A New, Ethical Financial Order?” The Christian Century (Chicago, IL), 23 March 2010, 14.

92 See text at notes 49-51, supra. See also, Bokenkotter, Church and Revolution, 131-32.

93 Krugman, Conscience, 38-9, 49.


95 Ibid., 8, citing a study by the Economic Policy Institute.

96 Ibid., 88-103.

97 Correspondence from Reverend C.J. Hawking, Executive Director of Arise Chicago, on file with the author.
Portrait of Frédéric Ozanam in midlife.

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The income chasm for women poses significant risks. Increasingly, working women with children have entered the workforce to meet family needs. Sister Rosalie Rendu, Ozanam’s mentor, provided child care for working mothers in Paris, expanding their liberty to work and increase family income. Inadequate child care opportunities today often reduce family income opportunities. Sister Rosalie’s initiative inspires hope for similar innovative solutions to today’s challenges.

Other new challenges arise and confront us today in ways Ozanam never anticipated. Ozanam knew little of the environmental pollution which challenges employment justice in our times. A century ago, however, John Ryan hinted that sustainability could not be achieved on an economic order just beginning to see the impact of the automobile and oil economy. The issue of sustainability in light of current global climate change increases restraints on mediating income inequality. The misery Ozanam predicted may not simply be violent human conflict, but one that threatens the survival of creation and calls for imaginative and effective responses.

98 Shipler, Working Poor, xi.
100 Sullivan, Rendu, 128-29.
102 Ryan questioned whether the economic order could provide an automobile to every worker in 1916, but added, even if that was obtained, “there are indications that the present amount of product per capita cannot long be maintained without better conservation of our natural resources, the abandonment of our national habits of wastefulness, more scientific methods of soil cultivation, and vastly greater efficiency on the part of both capital and labor.” Ryan, Distributive Justice, 432.
But Ozanam also understood that the question of economic justice is more than seeking a single end. He proclaimed “a great country wants to be saved every day.” However, he knew that not only a ‘great country,’ but humanity needs to be saved each day. The struggle against unrestrained greed, within us and within those who deny economic equality, will always remain unfinished business. Ozanam urged his friends to accept that challenge while affirming their faith in the One that sustained them:

Let us pray for each other... let us conquer our boredom, melancholy, and dissatisfaction. Let us go in simplicity where merciful Providence leads us, content to see the stone on which we should step without wanting to discover all at once and completely the windings of the road.

As the recent economic crisis has demonstrated, at the very least, unrestrained laissez-faire capitalism with its free market ideology cannot automatically assure a well-lived life for all, nor guarantee an improved common good. This crisis, however, offers an opportunity to respond to that market failure with a re-articulation of faith principles that fosters the common good. Ozanam encourages those steeped in biblical understandings of justice, of jubilee economies, and Catholic Social Teaching to persuade a public that the chasm between the rich and the poor damages the common good. Extreme inequality leads to violence in our cities, inadequately funded education, insufficient health care, and unmitigated exploitation of creation’s resources. Competing demands still necessitate mediating innovative responses. Ozanam continues to call all in the Vincentian tradition to find new ways to seek the temporal Gospel principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity to revitalize democracy, and with it, encourage the flourishing of humanity.

O'Meara, Professor at Sorbonne, 245 (citing an extract from L'Ère Nouvelle).