Fall 2010

**Faith, Charity, Justice, and Civic Learning: The Lessons and Legacy of Frédéric Ozanam**

Raymond L. Sickinger Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj](https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj)

**Recommended Citation**

Available at: [https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol30/iss1/5](https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol30/iss1/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.
Faith, Charity, Justice, and Civic Learning: The Lessons and Legacy of Frédéric Ozanam
By Raymond L. Sickinger, Ph.D.

Introduction

Throughout the past fifteen years much has been written on the origins of, definitions of, and motivations for doing community service and service learning in the United States, as well as on the connection of both to democracy, civic engagement, and the common good. There has been, however, little scholarship in the field of community service that has identified and defined how the philosophies and practices of service in other countries, especially in the nineteenth century, have influenced the philosophies and practices of community service in the United States. One case worth presenting is that of Frédéric Ozanam, a young nineteenth-century Catholic Frenchman who was deeply interested in issues of service, democracy, and the common good throughout his lifetime (1813-1853). As the founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Ozanam established one of the most successful and enduring faith-based service organizations in the nineteenth century, profoundly impacting not only France, but also more than 130 countries.

throughout the world. Among them is the United States, where the Society flourished at an early date (1845) and where it still actively serves those in need. Ozanam’s insights can contribute powerfully both to current and future discussions in the field of community service learning as he offers an alternative way of thinking about charity and justice, democracy and community, as well as providing some truly progressive ideas for his time about the role and importance of experiential learning. Moreover, both in the past and in the present, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul which he founded represents an exciting alternative to the debate about charity versus social justice, offering an example of the possible linkage of the two informed by Ozanam’s vision of Christian charity firmly grounded in community and democracy.

Ozanam’s Life

When Frédéric Ozanam was born, France was still the most powerful nation on the continent of Europe. The date of his birth, the twenty-third of April 1813, witnessed Napoleon preparing once again for warfare with a growing number of enemies, a situation that would soon reverse his fortunes and cause his star of glory to burn itself out after his humiliating defeat at the Battle of Leipzig. Within the next two years France would see the return of both the Bourbon monarchs who had been ousted from the throne in 1789, and the intractable political, economic, and social problems that had plagued the country since the late eighteenth century. Strained by over twenty-five years of revolutionary politics and incessant war, France would enter the nineteenth century doubtful of its role, disillusioned by defeat, and devoid of a clear destiny.

Revolution and warfare were just two of France’s manifold problems. In its quest for lost greatness in the first half of the nineteenth century, France failed to address not only its political disorders, but also the many social disorders that threatened her people. Immense economic and social changes brought on by the transition from a predominantly rural and agricultural society to an urban and industrialized one threatened to disrupt French life, and were all too often ineffectively addressed by governmental authorities. Recovering from the serious and often deadly challenges to established religion begun in 1789, and often favoring conservative social and political solutions, Church authorities were at first no more successful in either understanding or responding to the desperation of the common working people.

Some groups of intellectuals, such as the followers of the Utopian Socialist, Saint-Simon, began to suggest ways to improve the condition of the poor by forming ideal societies of laborers. They were often severe critics
of both the government and the Catholic Church. Saint-Simon openly challenged the Pope's social conscience: "You must not content yourself with preaching to the faithful of all classes that the poor are the beloved children of God, but you must frankly and energetically employ all the power and all the resources acquired by the Church militant to bring about a speedy improvement in the moral and physical condition of the most numerous class." According to the labor historian, Parker Moon, "Ozanam's entire life might be regarded as a reply to Saint-Simon's challenge, and not a wholly unconscious reply." As early as eighteen years of age (1831), Ozanam openly criticized Saint-Simon's teachings in a published document, because he thought these utopian ideas offered the poor a false hope for, and an equally false path to, a better life.

Two years later (1833), while a university student in Paris, when he was dared to practice what he preached by young followers of Saint-Simon, Ozanam and some other like-minded students formed the Conference of Charity. The charter meeting was held in May of that year. Starting with only eight members, the number soared to more than one hundred in 1834.

---


4 Ibid.
It was Ozanam who believed that the original conference must divide into more units in order to better serve the needy and reinforce the close bonds of friendship among members. By 1835, the Conference of Charity had its own official Rule and a new official name: The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Today, the Society is in more than 130 countries around the world, with its largest numbers in Brazil, while in the United States there are over 4,700 conferences of charity in most of the 50 states.

Frédéric Ozanam lived a short life in one of the most tumultuous periods of history. He would witness two major political upheavals in France during his lifetime — the overthrow of the Bourbon Dynasty resulting from the 1830 July Revolution which brought Louis Philippe to power, and the end of Louis Philippe's "Bourgeois Monarchy" during the 1848 Revolutions. Committed to the principles of Christian Democracy, Ozanam would favor a French Republic that supported the poor, not just the rich. At the time of his death in 1853, however, France was once again an empire and, with the coronation of Louis Napoleon as Napoleon III in 1852, once again ruled by a Napoleon.

Charity, Community Service, and Social Change

In the field of community service learning, most are familiar with the contributions and thoughts of John Dewey and Jane Addams. Both of these seminal American thinkers had a generally negative assessment of charity, its purpose, and its effects. For Dewey, charity was more of a curse than a comfort. In 1908, Dewey claimed that charity may "serve to supply rich persons with a cloak for selfishness in other directions... Charity may even be used as a sop to one's social conscience while at the same time it buys off the resentment which might otherwise grow up in those who suffer from social injustice. Magnificent philanthropy may be employed to cover up brutal exploitation." Indeed, he feared that charity "assumes the continued and necessary existence of a dependent 'lower' class to be the recipient of the kindness of their superiors." Influential on the thinking of Dewey, Jane Addams was equally critical of the world of charity. The person who visits those in need, according to Addams, exercises "a cruel advantage" and often thinks "more of what a man ought to be than of what he is or what he may

---

5 O'Meara, Ozanam, 17-42; Sickinger, "To become better," 13-14. For a fuller discussion of French politics from 1815-1848, see Breunig, Age of Revolution, 216-228.
7 Ibid., 348.
become...." According to the social historian Roy Lubove, in the late nineteenth century charity "was essentially a process of character regimentation, not social reform...." Poverty was not the fault of society; "the charitable agent really blamed the individual for his poverty." The person receiving charity was "less an equal... than an object of character reformation" who had been undone by "ignorance or deviations from middle-class values and patterns of life organization: temperance, industriousness, family cohesiveness, frugality, foresight, moral restraint." 

Frédéric Ozanam’s view of the nature and value of charity was radically different from that of Dewey and Addams, as well as from those of many of his contemporaries. Indeed, Ozanam would not have considered the "charity" of which they were critical worthy of the name. For him true charity was an essential step toward the regeneration of society, not a step toward bringing the individual into conformity with it. In a letter written in November of 1836, Ozanam asserted that the poor are not in the least inferior. In fact, in confronting poor people, "we should fall at their feet and say... Tu est Dominus et Deus meus. You are our masters, and we will be your servants. You are for us the sacred images of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love Him otherwise shall we not love Him in your persons?"

The method of service he chose was to visit those in need aided by the advice and input of those rooted deeply in the community. This method had been suggested to him by an older teacher and advisor, Emmanuel Bailly, who would remain an important guide for the young group of men serving with Ozanam. It was Bailly who recommended Sister Rosalie Rendu to Ozanam. With the wisdom and direction of Sister Rosalie, a Daughter of Charity and respected figure among Parisian workers, Ozanam and his young friends learned when, where, and how to perform their visits. In all cases, according to Ozanam, the visit should provide help both that honors rather than humiliates and which removes all barriers that normally separate those served from those providing service.

---

9 Ibid., 177.
12 Lubove, *Professional Altruist*, 16.
Help is humiliating when it appeals to men from below, taking heed of their material wants only, paying no attention but to those of the flesh, to the cry of hunger and cold, to what excites pity, to what one succors even in the beasts. It humiliates when there is no reciprocity.... But it honors when it appeals to him from above, when it occupies itself with his soul, his religious, moral, and political education, with all that emancipates him from his passions and from a portion of his wants, with those things that make him free, and may make him great. Help honors when to the bread that nourishes it adds the visit that consoles...; when it treats the poor man with respect, not only as an equal but as a superior, since he is suffering what perhaps we are incapable of suffering; since he is the messenger of God to us, sent to prove our justice and charity, and to save us by our works. Help then becomes honorable because it may become mutual....

A person's good works provided in a spirit of genuine charity could help one grow in holiness, and through active cooperation with God's grace contribute to one's salvation. Ozanam certainly knew the biblical passage in James 2:26: "For even as the body without the spirit is dead; so also faith without works is dead." Every person from the most powerful ruler to the poorest commoner must demonstrate their faith by putting it into action to grow in holiness and hope for salvation. In his opinion, those who are poor are less in need of redemption than the person providing service and society as a whole.

Especially for young people, Ozanam argued, charity constituted an active form of service that leads over time to greater engagement in the struggle for social change. At the age of twenty-one (1834) he wrote to his friend and distant cousin, Ernest Falconnet: "But... we are too young to intervene in the social struggle. Should we remain inactive therefore in the midst of a suffering and groaning world? No, there is a preparatory path open to us; before taking action for the public good we can take action for the good of individuals; before regenerating France, we can solace poor persons." He does not, however, conceive of this service experience as a haphazard undertaking by merely a few: "I would further wish that all young

14 Quoted in O'Meara, Ozanam, 176-177. Original French text can be found in Antoine Frédéric Ozanam, Œuvres Complètes, Vol. 7 (Paris: Simon Raçon et Compagnie, 1872), 192.
15 Dirvin, Life in Letters, 47.
people might unite in head and heart in some charitable work and that there be formed throughout the whole country a vast generous association for the relief of the common people."16 Ozanam envisioned France’s transformation through engaging young university students in active service for the common good. As he exhorted in 1835:

Cast your eyes on the world around us... The earth has grown cold. It is for us Catholics to revive the vital beat to restore it, it is for us to begin over again the great work of regeneration, if necessary to bring back the era of martyrs. For to be a martyr is possible for every Christian, to be a martyr is to give his life for God and his brothers, to give his life in sacrifice, whether the sacrifice be consumed in an instant like a holocaust, or be accomplished slowly and smoke night and day like perfume on the altar. To be a martyr is to give back to heaven all that one has received: his money, his blood, his whole soul. The offering is in our hands; we can make this sacrifice. It is up to us to choose to which altars it pleases us to bring it, to what divinity we will consecrate our youth and the time following, in what temple we will assemble: at the foot of the idol of egoism, or in the sanctuary of God and humanity.17

In his vision that intimately linked charity, justice, and service, young people who would eventually enter their various fields of professional endeavor would learn to think less of themselves and more of others, to understand better the nature of social problems, and to foster closer, more harmonious relations among the different social classes. It is interesting to note Ozanam’s reference above to being “martyrs.” The root meaning of the word martyr is “witness.” In an article by Keith Morton, a Dominican priest is quoted as saying that “the essential nature of service is witness... involving oneself in activities benefiting others and, if necessary, laying down one’s life; challenging structures that are not life-giving. Service always means an encounter with powers out there: confronting conditions that make service necessary in the first place.”18 Ozanam would not only understand but would wholeheartedly endorse this statement about “service as witness.”

Indeed, Ozanam’s ideas are more closely related to those of Dorothy

---

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 64.
Day than to those of either Dewey or Addams, while his influence on Day and the Catholic Worker Movement is especially noteworthy. In her 1939 book, *House of Hospitality*, Dorothy Day acknowledged: “I have been reading a lot of Ozanam lately.” Day found Ozanam’s thoughts and actions compelling because both she and Peter Maurin felt “that the work is more important than the talking and writing about the work. It has always been through the performance of the works of mercy that love is expressed, that people are converted, that the masses are reached.”

Citing several significant passages taken directly from Ozanam’s writings, Day concluded that “In season and out of season, he [Ozanam] pleaded for the annihilation of the political spirit in the interests of the social spirit.”

Ozanam’s impact on the Catholic Worker Movement extends beyond Day’s comments in her 1939 book. For example, Peter Maurin was profoundly influenced by the thought of Emmanuel Mounier to whom “we owe Peter and Dorothy’s emphasis on personal responsibility in history (as opposed to withdrawal from the world). Peter Maurin’s French roots and language helped him to keep abreast of all that was happening in the vital renaissance in the Catholic Church in France, of which personalism was so much a part. He was able to... make the religious revival of France immediately present in the United States.”

In turn Mounier was profoundly influenced by Frédéric Ozanam. It was as a member of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Grenoble that Mounier first actively experienced poverty and gained a deeper understanding of the terrible conditions in which many workers lived.

Mounier openly praised Ozanam for being one of the few to recognize that the Church had to embrace the issue of poverty. The language Ozanam used to suggest that the Church should go to the masses “strikingly anticipated not only the general judgment but the precise language of Mounier a century later.”

In his article, “The Irony of Service: Charity, Project and Social Change in Service-Learning,” Keith Morton maintains that there are three paradigms of service — charity, project, and social change. According to Morton, each paradigm can be done with or without integrity or, as he terms it, in a thick or thin manner: “[T]hick versions of each paradigm are grounded

20 Ibid., 55-56.
22 Ibid., 103.
in deeply held, internally coherent values; match means and ends; describe a primary way of interpreting and relating to the world; offer a way of defining problems and solutions; and suggest a vision of what a transformed world might look like. At their thickest, the paradigms seem to intersect, or at least complement one another. Insisting on the humanity of another person in the face of sometimes overwhelming pressure to deny that humanity can be a motive for charity, for project and for social change.”

From the evidence already presented, I think it fair to argue that Ozanam represents the thickest version of service, wherein the three paradigms intersect or complement one another. This argument will be further reinforced by the evidence presented in the remainder of this paper.

**Christian Democracy, Civic Engagement, and the Common Good**

Ozanam was absolutely clear that knowledge of history eventually led him “to the conclusion that in the nature of mankind democracy is the final stage in the development of political progress, and that God leads the world in that direction.” His views on democracy, however, developed over time. In a letter of 1832 to Ernest Falconnet, the young Frédéric Ozanam (18 at the time) indicated that he was supportive of the idea of monarchy:

I do not believe that French society has yet come of age. I do not believe that it can be left to itself without peril to its own proper growth. I believe its character to be such that it needs a monarchical regime to direct it in its wanderings and the heredity of the throne to maintain stability in its progress and unity in its diversity. I believe finally that, for the national destinies to be one, for the tradition of the past to be perpetuated in the future, it is necessary for a family to be its symbol and the scepter not pass from its hands. The king is then for me the symbol of national destinies, the old French idea presiding over the development of society, the representation of the people par excellence. On his forehead shines the glories of France ancient and modern.

Yet, just sixteen years later (1848), he would firmly maintain: “I still believe in the possibility of Christian democracy; I don’t believe in anything else in

---

What transformed his thinking in such a radical way? I would suggest that it was his experience of service, and his deep reflection on that experience, that led him to embrace a democracy which was responsive to Christian principles of personal dignity, freedom, and the common good. Of course, he recognized that some of the poor were prone "to sloth and vice," but he saw these more as the consequence rather than the cause of the poverty he witnessed, cautioning others that "there is no room for that ready excuse of the hardhearted, that the poor are wretched by their own fault." His experiences visiting the poor as a friend led Ozanam to confront the essential dignity and nobility of the common person:

Among these inhabitants of the Faubourgs, whom it is the custom to represent as a people devoid of all faith, there are very few who have not a cross at the head of their bed, ...In these foul cellars and garrets, ...we have often come upon the loveliest domestic virtues, on a refinement and intelligence that one does not always meet under gilded ceilings; a poor cooper, of past seventy years of age, tiring his infirm arms to get bread for the child of a son who had died in the flower of his age; a deaf and dumb boy of twelve, whose education has been carried on by the self-devotion of his poor relatives with such success that he begins to read.... We shall never forget one poor room, of irreproachable cleanliness, where a mother, clothed in the threadbare costume of her native place, Auvergne, was working with her four daughters, modest young girls...; but the faith which these honest people had brought with them from their native mountains illuminated their lives....

Meeting the poor face-to-face dispelled any false notions and foolish stereotypes about them, convincing Ozanam that both his country and his Church had to support them.

Ozanam's political views were formed gradually after significant study, multiple experiences, and deep reflection on both. At the age of twenty-one and after some three years of service experiences, he had not

28 O'Meara, Ozanam, 246; Original French text in Ozanam, Œuvres Complètes, 268.
29 Ibid. and Ibid., 269 respectively.
yet completely abandoned monarchy as a viable form of government, but his views had begun to change, enabling him to argue comfortably and convincingly: “I declare neither for nor against any government combination, but accept them as instruments for making man happier and better. If you want a formula, here it is: I believe in authority as a means, in liberty as a means, and in love as the end.”\(^{30}\) He had come to recognize that there were two primary types of government inspired by two diametrically opposed principles: “There is either the exploitation of everyone for the good of a single person, the monarchy of Nero, a monarchy I abhor. Or there is the sacrifice of a single person for the good of all, the monarchy of Saint Louis, which I revere with love.” Ozanam, however, did not stop with monarchy, noting other possible forms of government moved by either of these two principles: “There is either the exploitation of all for the good of the few, the

republic of Athens and that of the Terror, and such a republic I condemn. Or there is the sacrifice of a few for the good of all, the Christian republic of the primitive Church at Jerusalem... Humanity cannot attain a higher state.”

Although Ozanam condemned the Reign of Terror in France (1794-1795), increasingly he came to appreciate the value of and necessity for democratic reform if France was ever to be resurrected from the ashes of the Revolution. According to Catholic Church historian Thomas Bokenkotter, Ozanam interpreted the French Revolution “as humanity’s cry for greater freedom, and as a key figure in the short-lived Christian democracy of 1848 he tried to move the Church to hear that cry and join the struggle.” In fact, Ozanam published a powerful public call to embrace the masses in 1848. “In saying: let’s go to the people, I ask that instead of embracing the interests of an egotistical bourgeoisie, we take care of the people who have too many needs and not enough rights and who justly demand a more complete role in public affairs, guarantees for work and against misery.” He quickly clarified to his audience that he and his supporters were not socialists; they did not want “the overthrow of the society...,” but instead they anticipated the advent of “a free, progressive Christian reform of it.” Yet Ozanam was severely critical of those who continued to ignore the cries of the poor. “If a greater number of Christians, and especially clergymen, had looked after the workers for ten years, we would be more sure of the future.” In April of 1848, using strong words of admonishment, Ozanam begged the Church to “take care of the workers like the rich people; it is from now on the only way to salvation for the Church of France. The priests must give up their little bourgeois parishes, flocks of elite people in the middle of an immense population which they do not know.”

Valuing civic engagement, Ozanam took seriously his duties as a citizen of France. In the late 1840’s he served in the National Guard, and he regularly voted in elections. As a kind of civic duty he engaged in the significant journalistic venture of writing articles on political and social matters in the newspaper L’Ère Nouvelle, intending to influence minds and persuade people to support democratic reforms. Moreover, when approached to stand for election as a representative in the new assembly to

---

31 Ibid., 46-47.
33 Quoted in Hess, Cahiers Ozanam, 19.
34 Ibid., 21.
35 Ibid., 27.
36 Ibid.
be formed following the revolution that had unseated Louis Philippe in 1848, Ozanam agreed to offer his name as a candidate. He stated publicly that he always had “the passionate love of my country, the enthusiasm of common interests,” and that he longed for “the alliance of Christianity and freedom.”

Although his personal wishes were against running for office, he felt it was his civic duty to do so. He was not elected, but he left us a clear record of his mature political beliefs, nurtured by his service experiences from 1833 to 1848, in the form of a public statement issued on the 15th of April to the constituents of the Department of the Rhône. In it he declared that Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity — the catchwords of the French Revolution — were a signal of the “temporal advent of the Gospel....” The French Revolution of 1789 had been bloody and violent precisely because it had forgotten its religious heritage, a Christian heritage that could and should embrace the people in a loving way.

In the case of Liberty, Ozanam declared: “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.”

In the case of Equality, he affirmed: “I want a republican constitution without a return to royalties which are henceforth impossible. I want it with equality for all, therefore with universal suffrage for the National Assembly.... I... reject all thoughts of a federate republic. But, at the same time, I reject an excessive centralization which would still enlarge Paris to the detriment of the departments, the cities to the detriment of the country, and which would bring back inequality among those whom the law makes equal.” Finally, in the case of Fraternity, he confirmed:

I want fraternity with all of its consequences. I will defend the principle of property. But without touching this foundation of all civil order, one can introduce a system of progressive tax which would lessen the consumption taxes: one can replace the concession rights and insure a cheaper life. I will also support the rights to work; the independent work of the laborer, of the artisan, of the merchant who remains the

---

37 Ibid., 51.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
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 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....

Completing his public statement with a strong message about foreign policy, Ozanam argued that “Fraternity does not know boundaries,” and he expressed a sincere hope that France would have both the courage and the will to help deliver “nations suppressed by an unjust conquest, and which restore themselves while renouncing foreign domination.”

One biographer of Ozanam, Thomas Auge, has argued that Ozanam’s “advocacy of democracy places this moderate, gentle, scholarly man among the radicals of nineteenth-century French Catholics.” Whether Ozanam fully recognized the radical nature of his views is perhaps open to debate, but that he was firmly convinced by 1848 that Church and State should be separate, that democracy was the best future form of government for France, and that the Church must embrace the masses, is beyond doubt.

Frédéric Ozanam may have been willing to stand for election in 1848, but he did so not as a member or a leader of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, but rather as a concerned Catholic citizen. Ozanam had two clear positions on politics relevant to this study. First, although he desired that all members be civically responsible and civically engaged in the France of his day and saw this engagement as a sacred duty, Ozanam thought that the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul itself should neither become embroiled in politics nor favor one political party. From its inception the Society was intended to be “an association of mutual encouragement for young Catholic people where one finds friendship, support, and example; ...But the strongest tie, the principle of true friendship, is charity ...and good works are the food

---

40 Ibid., 51-52.
41 Ibid., 52.
43 Ibid., 86-87.
of charity.” In the Rule of the Society to this day, members are advised that the Society “does not identify with any political party and always adopts a non-violent approach.” While recognizing that there is much good that can come from the political vocation of members who “bring Christian values to political matters,” and while encouraging them to be good and active citizens, The Rule clearly states: “those members who hold political offices will be asked, always with charity, not to hold any mission of representation in the Society during their term of political office.”

While cautious about political connections, the Society, its leaders, and its members, have always been encouraged to seek social justice, engaging openly in advocacy for those who otherwise have no voice. Article seven of the Rule speaks to this latter issue. The Society wants to identify the unjust structures that cause need: “it is, therefore, committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination.” Its members “envision a more just society in which the rights, responsibilities and development of all people are promoted.” Ultimately, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul “helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those ignored.”

One cogent example in Frédéric’s early career in the Society helps to illustrate this point. In 1833 he visited a woman with five children whose husband, an alcoholic, was terribly abusive. Not only did he provide her with material assistance, but he also recognized that she was unaware of certain courses of action that were open to her because she was not legally married to the man. Ozanam, himself a law student, helped her to take appropriate legal action to protect herself and her children and arranged for her to leave her abusive partner to begin a new life outside of Paris. He helped her find her voice by speaking on her behalf to the authorities.

Without necessarily embracing one political position or ideology, the Society can succeed through encouraging both its members and those served to become more engaged in advocacy and more knowledgeable of civic life.

Ozanam’s second position on politics arose from a conviction that the most pressing questions of his day were social, not political, in nature.

The problem that divides men in our day is no longer a problem of political structure; it is a social problem; it has to do with what is preferred, the spirit of self-interest or the spirit of sacrifice, whether society will be only a great exploitation

46 O’Meara, Ozanam, 64.
to the profit of the strongest or a consecration of each individual for the good of all and especially for the protection of the weak. There are a great many men who have too much and who wish to have more; there are a great many others who do not have enough, who have nothing, and who are willing to take if someone gives to them. Between these two classes of men, a confrontation is coming, and this menacing confrontation will be terrible: on the one side, the power of gold, 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.47

According to the historian Jay Corrin the above quotation "displays Ozanam's prescient sociological analysis as well as his faith in charity." Although Ozanam never embraced the ideas of Marx or of any of the nineteenth-century socialists, nevertheless Corrin argues that at least ten years before Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Ozanam already "recognized that divisions between men were linked to economic disparities and warned of class warfare unless social programs were initiated to mitigate such inequities."48

It took Ozanam time to fully understand the serious desperation that leads to such violent acts. As a young student, he was horrified by one of the first scenes of violence he witnessed while away from home. During that incident, sparked by a cholera epidemic in Paris (1832), he wrote to his mother: "Last Sunday I saw revolutionary rabble. Never was there seen so frightful a mob.... It was a great pity to see this race of accursed men of whom the tallest was not 5 feet, with weak and ugly bodies, pale faces, sunken eyes with shifty glances, and the women who followed crying like the furies, nothing more hideous than those women!"49 But, as he came to know the poor of Paris through charitable community service, his opinion of them changed and the cause of their physical appearance became apparent. He would always abhor insurrection, no longer because of the unruly and unsightly mob, but rather because he knew that insurrection's violence was born of a profound exasperation which served no purpose other than to harden hearts and minds. Indeed, it is significant that the language Ozanam chose to describe the situations he confronted shifted from physical beauty

as the primary indicator of moral or social integrity, a prejudice shared by
many in Ozanam’s day: “In these foul cellars and garrets, ...we have often
come upon the loveliest domestic virtues, on a refinement and intelligence
that one does not always meet under gilded ceilings.”

In 1834, he wrote that “opposition is useful and admissible, but not
insurrection; active obedience, passive resistance.” Again in 1837, Ozanam
returned to this topic lamenting that “Alas! We see each day the schism
started... become deeper: there are no longer political opinions dividing men,
they are less opinions than interests, here the camp of riches, there the camp
of the poor.... [B]etween the two, an irreconcilable hatred, rumblings of a
coming war which will be a war of extermination.” According to Ozanam,
the interposition of Christians between the two camps would provide the
“only means of salvation.” The members of the Society of Saint Vincent de
Paul could travel “from one side to the other doing good, obtaining many
alms from the rich and much resignation from the poor, ...getting them used
to looking upon one another as brothers, infusing them with a bit of mutual
charity....” He genuinely hoped for the day when “the two camps will rise
up and destroy the barriers of prejudice, throw away their angry weapons,
and march to meet each other, not to battle, but to mingle, embrace, and
become one sheepfold under one shepherd.” This kind of reconciliation
could never be achieved simply through political agendas or political
gatherings; Ozanam clearly understood that only a transformation of the
human person and of society as a whole would lead to true equality, liberty,
and fraternity. And in 1848 he again warned his countrymen, “Behind the
political revolution [of 1848], there is a social revolution.... One must not
think he can escape these problems.”

Ozanam believed that serious social problems such as poverty
generally develop when any individual pursues only her/his interests, or
the interests of a small group, to the detriment of the Common Good. Yet, he
never entertained the simple notion that poverty would be eradicated simply
by fulfilling individual material needs. In his view, poverty destroyed the
very soul of people who need to know, and to believe, that they have value
as human beings, that they can genuinely contribute in positive ways to their
community. They need food for the soul as much as they need food for the
body. In many cases, it is not the bread or the clothes that are given, but the
hand extended in true friendship as an equal, not as a superior, that is the

50 O’Meara, Ozanam, 246; Original French text in Ozanam, Œuvres Complètes, 269.
51 Quoted in O’Meara, Ozanam, 83.
52 Dirvin, Life in Letters, 106.
53 Quoted in Hess, Cahiers Ozanam, 19.
most vital part of the charitable home visit. Those members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul who visit people in need in their home form a true communion with them in that they both see Christ in those served and reflect Christ to those served.

There is no doubt that Frédéric Ozanam believed the Catholic Church held out hope for both social and spiritual salvation and he wished it would flourish. But he was neither a single-minded, nor a close-minded missionary. For him service to others was to be based solely upon need, not upon creed. In one famous reported case, a Protestant congregation provided a substantial amount of money to Ozanam and his conference for the relief of the poor. Other members of his conference suggested that the sum should first be used to help Catholics. In an impassioned speech, Ozanam informed his companions that if they were to do this then they would not be worthy of the confidence of the donors. He refused to be a party to such dishonorable action. Moreover, he was always tolerant of others and their differing views. As a person deeply interested in and knowledgeable of history, he was aware that religion can be both a help and a hindrance when addressing social problems. As one of his earliest biographers, Kathleen O'Meara, claims, "It was... a deep reverence for souls which taught him to respect the mysterious relationship between God and his creatures — a tender humility which forbade him to sit in judgment on others...."

For Ozanam, the regeneration of society was to be accomplished first and foremost by forming true community and building just, caring relationships between the different social classes who ultimately shared the same goals for society: peace, order, and happiness. He believed that his Catholic faith had much to offer to those who might be willing to listen and engage in dialogue.

As stated earlier, Ozanam spoke of the need for "much resignation from the poor." The word "resignation" needs to be clarified or else Ozanam might be perceived as someone counseling the poor to know their place and to accept their lot in life. That would be a complete misreading of the man. A word rich in meaning, resignation should be understood in this present context in three ways. First, it signifies forbearance. Ozanam wanted those in need, those with genuine grievances, to refrain from resorting to violence that would most likely worsen rather than better their prospects. Second, he wanted those in need to comprehend that in an actual pitched battle with the rich the prospect of defeat loomed large and, therefore, he hoped the poor would refuse to follow this doomed and dangerous course of action. Third,

54 O'Meara, Ozanam, 175.
55 Ibid., 173.
56 Dirvin, Life in Letters, 106.
Ozanam understood that resignation implies a giving up of oneself to God. Trusting in Divine Providence to reveal the best way to resolve a given crisis, he wanted those in need to understand that God hears the cry of the poor and responds, not necessarily by direct divine intervention (miracles), but rather in moving other people to act out of charity and justice for their neighbor, like the Good Samaritan of the Gospel. Ultimately, Ozanam wanted to remove from the rich any excuse to inflict more violence upon the poor; “to make equality as operative as possible among men; to make voluntary community replace imposition and brute force; to make charity accomplish what justice alone cannot do.” He genuinely thanked God for placing him, and his fellow Vincentians, “by Providence on neutral ground between the two belligerents, to have paths and minds open to both.”

Community Service as a Learning Experience

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Ozanam believed in the value of experience thoughtfully reflected upon. As a young student at the Sorbonne, Ozanam participated in the conference of history, where ideas were discussed and debated outside the classroom by students eager to plumb the depths of what they had learned, eager to raise further questions to explore and resolve. These discussions often questioned and probed personal values. It was in this conference context that Ozanam was challenged to live out the religious faith he had been defending so eloquently in words. As a direct result of this challenge Frédéric helped to form the conference of charity, which provided a venue for reflecting on and discussing charity based upon the actual experiences of service in the streets of Paris. He came to firmly believe that those who provided service learned vital lessons from those they served. First, they learned about the nature and extent of poverty through visiting those in need. The words that follow are not the result of literary imagination, but of the actual experience of visitation:

[In Paris alone the number of individuals out of work amounts to two hundred and sixty-seven thousand. They get assistance, it is true, and this fact lulls your conscience and your alarms to sleep; but those who have the privilege of distributing the public help... go... to the twelfth arrondissement, one of the strongholds of insurrection, and out of about ninety thousand inhabitants they find eight thousand families inscribed on the list of the benevolent fund,

57 Ibid., 64-65; O'Meara, Ozanam, 87-88.
58 Dirvin, Life in Letters, 92.
twenty-one thousand nine hundred and ninety-two who receive extra help, making a total of some seventy thousand individuals who are living on the precarious bread of alms. Half of this district, all the Montagne Ste. Geneviève, and all the neighborhood of the Gobelins, is composed of narrow, crooked streets, where the sun never penetrates, where a carriage could not venture without risk, and where a man in a coat never passes without making a sensation, and attracting to the doorsteps groups of naked children and women in rags. On either side of a filthy sewer rise houses five stories high, many of which shelter fifty families. Low, damp, and noxious rooms are let out at one franc and a half a week when they have a fireplace, and one franc and a quarter when they have not. No paper, often not a single piece of furniture, hides the nakedness of the walls. In a house of the Rue des Lyonnais we ourselves saw ten married couples without even a bed. One family lived in the depths of a cellar, with nothing but a handful of straw on the earthen floor, and a rope fastened from wall to wall, from which the poor creatures hung their bread in a rag to keep it out of the reach of rats. In the next room a woman had lost three children from consumption, and she pointed in despair to three others who awaited the same fate.59

Secondly, they learned a deep religious and spiritual lesson from those closest to the suffering Christ. In 1848, in the newspaper L’Ere Nouvelle, he wrote about a particular lesson learned in service to others: “God did not make the poor... God forbid that we should calumniate the poor whom the Gospel blesses, or render the suffering classes responsible for their misery, thus pandering to the hardness of those bad hearts that fancy themselves exonerated from helping the poor man when they have proved his wrongdoing....”60 Of course, Ozanam embraced the Christian ideal of detachment from material goods (“Poor in Spirit”), an ideal reinforced in large part by his scholarly study of and writing on the Middle Ages, and especially on Saint Francis. He understood, however, that poverty — the absence of essential material, physical, and spiritual needs — was something neither to be glamorized nor condoned: “And let no one say that in treating poverty as

59 Quoted in O’Meara, Ozanam, 245; Original French text in Ozanam, Œuvres Complètes, 264-266.
60 Ibid., 248 and 282-284 respectively.
a priesthood we aim at perpetuating it; the same authority which tells us that we shall always have the poor amongst us is the same that commands us to do all we can that there may cease to be any.... Those who know the road to the poor man’s house... never knock at his door without a sentiment of respect.”

Shortly after its formation the conference of charity became officially known as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and a Rule to govern its member’s actions was written and promulgated. That Rule, fundamentally the same today as it was in the nineteenth century, emphasizes the importance of reflection upon service experiences as an essential part of the development and growth of members. Members, known as Vincentians, grow in holiness and lead better lives by visiting the poor "whose faith and courage often teach Vincentians how to live.” By reflecting and meditating on their experiences, Vincentians arrive at “internal spiritual knowledge of themselves, others and the goodness of God,” and transform “their concern into action and their compassion into practical love.”

Although the official name of the organization became the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, according to the Rule, the conference remains “the primary basic unit” of the Society, reflecting its original nature as a forum for the discussion of ideas, the exchange of information, and the reflection upon what is learned both in study and in visits to the poor.

Because he was a fine scholar, one might have expected that Professor Ozanam would believe that poverty could best be grasped deductively, applying a grand theory on how society is constructed and functions. But Ozanam understood the serious limitations and implications of such an approach, one that many socialists of his day employed. Monsignor Baunard, the translator of much of Ozanam’s correspondence, argued that Frédéric Ozanam knew that “all social theories from Plato to Muncer and John Leyden, have only resulted in visionary Utopias, disorder and violence.”

Instead, Ozanam embraced an inductive approach based on experience as the only viable way to get a thorough understanding of the complexity of poverty: “The knowledge of social well-being and reform is to be learned, not from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor’s man garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind. When the conditions of the poor have been examined, in school, at work, in hospital, in

61 O’Meara, Ozanam, 177.
62 Rule of the International Confederation, i, 9.
63 Ibid., 11.
64 Louis Baunard, Ozanam in His Correspondence (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society, 1925), 278.
the city, in the country... it is then and then only, that we know the elements of that formidable problem, that we begin to grasp it and may hope to solve it."65

It was both his service experiences and his reflections on them that suggested to Ozanam certain necessary changes in the lives of the working class. In his course on commercial law (1839-1840), Frédéric incorporated ideas formed not only from scholarly research, but also from his personal experiences of workers' needs. He identified two reasons why workers were paid unjust wages: the employer's inability to pay, and simple exploitation. The first, he suggested, could often be resolved by better knowledge of supply and demand, and by more careful and conscientious business practices. The second was more difficult to address and, unlike the first, required effort on the part of the State, the community, and labor organizations. He was no advocate for a paternalistic government (which often can be as dangerous as an unbridled laissez-faire system), but rather he favored a balance between liberty and authority to benefit all. He preferred labor organizations led by workers that negotiated for worker rights, while understanding the legitimate right of the owner to secure a just profit. In supporting a worker’s right to receive a wage that not only provided for a decent life and the education of his children, but which also guaranteed in some way a dignified retirement, Ozanam anticipated a living wage.66

Ozanam's ideas on labor are in many ways groundbreaking. In fact, one scholar who has written on Ozanam's theory of work remarks that "it is certainly fair to say that Ozanam developed some of the key precepts of fair wages and labor unions that were more fully elucidated in Rerum Novarum."67 Two other scholars who have studied the Church's role in the labor movement have astutely identified Ozanam's service experiences as an essential element in the formation of his contributions to the labor issue: "Ozanam made no pretence to profound economic knowledge.... But we must not forget that he was always closely in touch with the actual life of labor and poverty, and a shrewd observer of all he saw."68 In many respects, his life was truly a model of what we call today "service learning," service reflected upon deeply and thoughtfully.

65 Ibid., 279.
68 Ryan and Husslein, Church and Labor, 22.
Conclusion: Ozanam's Legacy and Lessons

Ozanam has left us a valuable legacy of ideas and practices that can enrich discussions of community service. I would suggest that his views of "true" charity, and his assessment of its effects, are profoundly different in several ways from major American thinkers such as Jane Addams and John Dewey, whose ideas have generally informed discussions of community service. First, he is quick to distinguish charity from philanthropy, believing that true charity is always linked to a community built upon bonds of deep friendship and trust. So-called charitable efforts that are outside the boundaries of community (what he would call philanthropy) are often dehumanizing, and performed for individual recognition. According to Ozanam, after but a year of existence most philanthropic societies are nothing but "meetings, reports, summings-up, bills, and accounts; ...they have volumes of minutes and so forth."69 To define the essential difference from charity, Ozanam used a maternal family image that would resonate

---

69 O'Meara, Ozanam, 86.
well with his intended audience. He suggested that philanthropy is like "a vain woman for whom good actions are a piece of jewelry and who loves to look at herself in a mirror...," while charity "is a tender mother who keeps her eyes fixed on the infant she carries at her breast, who no longer thinks of herself, and who forgets her beauty for love." Second, Ozanam’s dilemma is not charity without community, as it was for Dewey and Addams, but rather how to restore authentic relationships (his emphasis on regeneration is precisely related to this) that failed because of the human inability to recognize and fulfill the need for solidarity. Third, Ozanam provides us with a view of charity intimately linked to justice. In fact, he would argue that providing charity is sometimes a matter of justice, especially when the need is an essential one such as food, clothing, or shelter. Moreover, a community service organization does not necessarily have to choose between charity and justice; Ozanam demonstrated a community service organization can and should include both charity and justice in its mission. Indeed, he was opposed to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul becoming just another large bureaucratic organization, because he thought that the essential dignity of the human person would be lost in the process. He offers, therefore, great food for thought for large non-profit organizations that sometimes contribute unwittingly to the very thing they wish to prevent — the stripping away of a person’s dignity.

According to Frédéric Ozanam, regeneration of society or “social change” occurs not simply by rehabilitating the needy, but rather through rehabilitating the society that has become unresponsive to the needs of its people, by opening up opportunities for those excluded from dialogue to enter into an inclusive community open to all voices in a democratic process. His view of democracy is founded upon the essential dignity of the human person, but it does not emphasize individualism to the exclusion of community. Clearly Ozanam recognized that many problems perceived to be political are fundamentally social in nature, representing a breakdown in genuine community. In his world view, serious social problems such as poverty generally develop when any individual pursues only her / his interests, or the interests of a small group, to the detriment of the Common Good. Poverty destroys the very soul of people who need to know and believe that they have value as human beings and can genuinely contribute in positive ways to their community. His answer to this problem was to regenerate society through forming true community and by building just, caring relationships in a spirit of tolerance.

70 Dirvin, Life in Letters, 63.
As Ozanam discovered, those who serve begin to see clearly the true nature of the problem of poverty, because the only way to understand the nature and extent of poverty is through an inductive approach based firmly upon the insights of those who experience it firsthand. Most schemes to solve the problem of poverty have started with a grand theory that is then applied to the circumstances. To Ozanam this deductive approach is seriously misguided because it fails to take into account both the nature and the complexity of the human person. In his vision, service performed well and thoughtfully transforms powerfully those who serve and those who are served, as well as the society in which they live.

Ozanam left a lasting legacy of charitable community service in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Begun in Paris, France, in 1833, the Society spread quickly throughout the globe. In the United States, it found an early home at the old Saint Louis Cathedral along the banks of the Mississippi in 1845. Today, there are over 4,700 conferences of charity in most of the fifty states. The Society annually helps more than 15,000,000 people to the amount of over $400,000,000 in money, goods, volunteer time, and contributed services; it is also actively engaged in advocacy. In the United States, The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul has a National Committee, Voice of the Poor (VOP), which guides members on important issues of social justice, prepares key position papers on issues such as homelessness and wages, and works closely with the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops in advocacy initiatives.

It should be no surprise then that Ozanam has been recognized as a genuine precursor of Catholic social thinking, which reached its fullest development in the 20th century. Both his thought and his life of faithful community service provide a compelling example of the connections among community service, democracy, and the common good, and highlight the powerful role of charity and justice in renewing the face of society. I would contend that the evidence presented clearly demonstrates that Ozanam represents the "thickest" version of service wherein the three paradigms of charity, project, and social change intersect and / or complement one another.

It is perhaps the most appropriate way to end this paper on Frédéric Ozanam by letting him have the last word, imparting advice as relevant today as it was in his own time: "Ah! My dear friend, what a troublous, but what an instructive time it is, through which we are passing! We may perish, but we must not regret having lived in it. Let us learn from it. Let us learn,

---

71 For information on Voice of the Poor (VOP), visit: http://www.voiceofthepoor.org/
72 Bokenkotter, Church and Revolution, 111; Corrin, Catholic Intellectuals, 13; Moon, Labor Problem, 6, 26-27; Rauch, Politics and Belief, 16.
first of all, to defend our belief without hating our adversaries, to appreciate those who do not think as we do, to recognize that there are Christians in every camp, and that God can be served now as always! Let us complain less of our times and more of ourselves. Let us not be discouraged, let us be better."

---

73 Quoted in Baunard, *His Correspondence*, 304.