Frédéric Ozanam, A Layman For Now

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INTRODUCTION

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history.¹

These opening lines of Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" established the intimate bond which should exist between the Church and humanity. The scope of the Church’s

*This article is a condensation, made with the authors permission, of an excellent pamphlet by Rev. Shaun McCarty, s.t., Frederick Ozanam, A Layman For Now.

concern embraces everything that is human. And these human persons are called into a community which is led by a Provident God on a pilgrim journey through history to salvation.

Frédéric Ozanam was one such human person who gave illumination and inspiration for today's world to face the challenge of modernity. In a brief but productive life (1813-1853), Ozanam responded to the call of his own era in France by joining ideas and action in a life's task of reconciling past and future, faith and reason, Church and world, rich and poor.

Specifically, there are current issues today that confront American Christians with a challenge to their ministry and spirituality for which a search of the past might provide the illumination and inspiration that is needed. Many challenges face all the nations — among those that are paramount are: (1) social justice; (2) sharing ministries; and (3) spiritual discernment.

In 1979, in Paris, the International Assembly of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul noted that Social Justice is paramount for the followers of Frédéric Ozanam. Their preliminary discussions revealed that: (1) theoretical research on how to define Justice and Charity was of little value; (2) that they must preserve the character of Charity proper to their Society and avoid going astray toward aims at variance with its vocation and possibilities. The areas of Sharing of ministries and Spiritual Discernment also pose questions relative to spiritual growth and apostolic effectiveness.

In seeking illumination and inspiration for the pursuit of answers to these questions, certain presuppositions provide a point of view and color the process of selection from the thoughts of Ozanam: (1) That ministry and spirituality are closely related in the practice of an

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apostolic spirituality, that is, one suited for an active Christian in the world; (2) that genuine Christian spirituality is the lived Gospel in response to a contemporary cultural situation; (3) that the contemporary relevance of any Christian spirituality is illumined by its past heritage.

How did a young man of nineteenth century France capture the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul who preceded him by almost two centuries? How might his life and work, especially that pertaining to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, illumine and inspire Christians today, especially young adults in the United States? An answer may be found by situating Ozanam in his own times by indicating some of the problems and issues that challenged him to choose among alternatives. A biographical sketch of Frédéric Ozanam provides a context in which specific aspects of his life might be better understood. And a focus is directed upon how the spirit of the Gospel reflected through Vincent de Paul affected both Ozanam and his companions.

A word must be said about the socio-economic scene. The France of Ozanam’s time was marked by increasing numbers of poor people and inadequate measures of assistance for them. The Napoleonic system left public charities to the discretion of each of the nation’s communes, most of which had very limited resources. Cities like Paris had a disproportionate number of very poor people. In 1829, one in twelve was classified as “indigent.” By 1856, the figure had declined one in sixteen.3 Thus there was enormous need and scope for charitable efforts at the time.

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In addition to the more obvious problems of the poor — wages, living conditions, lack of necessities of life — a new industrial, mass society was being born. And its violent birth was met with fear and resistance by the upper-classes.

It was not merely a matter of low wages and long work hours. Living conditions, especially in the rapidly growing cities, were dreadful. Violence, disease, and immorality were rampant.

Furthermore, the plight of the poor was worsened by the greed and indifference of the upper-classes. The power of the State only strengthened the position of the wealthy. The whole spirit of society was hostile to the poor.

In the midst of this exploitation of the wealthy, indifference of the State, and alliance between Church and State, it is little wonder that the workers responded with hatred and violence. And it became imperative for Christians like Ozanam to speak and to act so that the Church could be a Church incarnating Jesus in a modern world.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Frédéric Ozanam was born on April 23, 1813 in Milan, Italy. He was the fifth child of fourteen born to Jean-Antoine-François and Marie Nantas Ozanam, ardent French Catholics of middle-class circumstances. His father had served with distinction as an officer under Napoleon, retiring early to become a tutor and, later, to practice medicine. When the city of Milan fell to the Austrians in 1815, the Ozanams returned to their native city of Lyons in France where Frédéric spent his early years.

At seven he suffered the loss of his sister, Elsie, which came as a great grief to him because they had grown close as she patiently helped him with his early lessons. Frédéric
became a day student at the Royal College of Lyons where he quickly showed an aptitude for and an interest in literature and where he would later become editor of a college journal, *The Bee*.

In a letter written when he was sixteen he said he was considered a very gentle and docile child, probably because there were periods of his early life marked by feeble health. His mother and father, along with his sister, provided him with tender care during his illnesses which created a very close family spirit among them. Following the illnesses of his youth, he said he became more industrious, a spirit which he carried into his later years.4

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

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

In the Spring of 1831 Ozanam published his first work of any length, “Reflections on the Doctrine of Saint-Simon,” which was a defense against some false social

teaching that was capturing the fancy of young people at the time. His efforts were rewarded with favorable notice from some of the leading social thinkers of the day, including Lamartine, Chateaubriand and Jean-Jacques Ampère.

Ozanam also found time outside of work to help organize and write for the Propagation of the Faith which had begun in this same city of Lyons.

In the Autumn of the same year, Frédéric was sent to the University of Paris to study law. At first he suffered a great deal from homesickness and unsuitable company in boarding house surroundings. But after moving in with the family of the renowned André-Marie Ampère, where he stayed for two years, he had not only the nourishment of a very Christian and intellectual milieu, but also the opportunity to meet some of the bright lights of the Catholic Revival like Chateaubriand, Montalambert, Lacordaire and Ballanche.

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

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

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

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

After this, the “Conference of History” became the “Conference of Charity” which eventually was named the “Conference of St. Vincent de Paul.” Now, instead of engaging in mere discussion and debate, seven of the group (M. Bailly, Frédéric Ozanam, François Lallier, Paul Lamanche, Felix Clavé, Auguste de Letaillandier and Jules DeVaux) met on a May evening in 1833 for the first time and determined to engage in practical works of charity. This little band was to expand rapidly over France and around the world even during the lifetime of Ozanam.

In the meantime, Frédéric continued his law studies, but kept his interest in literary and historical matters. He was also able to initiate other ventures like the famed “Conferences of Notre Dame” which provided thousands with the inspired and enlightening sermons of Pere Lacordaire. This was another expression of Ozanam’s life-commitment to work for the promotion of the Truth of the Church.

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

In 1839, after finishing a brilliant thesis on Dante which revolutionized critical work on the poet, the Sorbonne awarded him a Doctorate in Literature. In the same year he was given a chair of Commercial Law at Lyons where his lectures received wide acclaim and where, after an offer to assume a chair of Philosophy at Orleans, he was asked to lecture also on Foreign Literature at Lyons, which enabled him to support his mother. She died early in 1840, leaving him quite unsettled about his future. At the time, Lacordaire was on his way to Rome to join the Dominicans with the hope of returning to France to restore religious life. For a while, Ozanam entertained the idea of joining him, but again under the guidance of Abbé Noirot and with the consideration of his commitment to the constantly expanding work of the Conference of Charity which was multiplying around France, he decided against pursuing a life of celibacy and the cloister.

In the same year (1840), to qualify for the Chair of Foreign Literature at Lyons, Ozanam had to take a comprehensive examination which demanded six months of gruelling preparation. He took first place easily with the result that he was offered an assistantship to M. Fauriel, a professor of Foreign Literature at the prestigious Sorbonne. When Fauriel died three years later, Ozanam replaced him with the rank of full professor, no mean accomplishment for a man of his early years. This established him in the midst of the intellectual world of
Paris. He now began a course of lectures on German literature in the Middle Ages. To prepare, he went on a short tour of Germany. His lectures proved highly successful despite the fact that, contrary to his predecessors and most colleagues in the anti-Christian climate of the Sorbonne, he attached fundamental importance to Christianity as the primary factor in the growth of European civilization.

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

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

When the Revolution of 1848 broke out, Ozanam served briefly and reluctantly in the National Guard. Later he made a belated and unsuccessful bid for election to the National Assembly at the insistence of friends. This was followed by a short and stormy effort at publishing a liberal Catholic journal called *The New Era* which was aimed at securing justice for the poor and the working classes. This evoked the ire of conservative Catholics and the consternation of some of Ozanam’s friends for seeming to side with the Church’s enemies. In its pages he advocated that Catholics play their part in the evolution of a democratic state.
At this time, too, he wrote another of his important works, *The Italian Franciscan Poets of the Thirteenth Century*, which reflected his admiration for Franciscan ideals.

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

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

He has been revered since as an exemplar of the lay apostle in family, social, and intellectual life. The work he began with the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul has continued to flourish. At his death, the membership numbered about 15,000. Today it numbers 750,000, serving the poor in 112 countries, a living monument to Frédéric Ozanam and his companions.

The first formal step for his beatification was taken on June 10, 1925. On January 12, 1954, Pope Pius XII signed the decree of the introduction of the cause. He now enjoys the official title, “Servant of God.”

THE SPIRIT OF GOSPEL AND ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

Frédéric Ozanam is appropriately buried in the crypt of the Church of St. Joseph des Carmes which adjoins and serves the students attending the Institut Catholique in Paris. Above his tomb is a mural depicting the parable of
the Good Samaritan. If there is a single significant passage of the Gospel that his life and that of the group he helped to found incarnated, it was this one. He developed the idea in a letter to a friend who was thinking of founding a Conference of Charity in Nîmes.

Although his first apostolate was an intellectual one as a student, professor and writer, alongside this was an accompanying compassion for the masses and a practical program to work for them in the realm of action as well as ideas. This he pictured in terms of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In interpreting it for his own times, he saw help to the poor coming under the guidance and care of the Church rather than according to current schemes of social reform, yet being accomplished by laymen because people feared the clergy:

Society today seems to me to be not unlike the wayfarer described in the parable of the Good Samaritan. For, while journeying along the road mapped out for it by Christ, it has been set upon by thieves of evil human thought. Bad men have despoiled the wayfarer of all his goods, of the treasures of faith and love, and left him stripped and broken by the wayside. The priests and the Levites have passed him by. But this time, being real priests and true Levites, they have approached the suffering, wretched creature and attempted to cure him. But in his delirium he has not recognized them and has driven them away. Then we weak Samaritans, outsiders as we are, have dared to approach this great sick patient. Perhaps he will be less afrighted by us? Let us try to measure the extent of his wounds in order to pour oil into them. Let us make words of peace and consolation right in his heart. Then, when his eyes are opened, we will hand him over to the tender care of those whom God has chosen to be guardians and doctors of the soul.5

Ozanam believed that the exercise of charity would do more to reclaim the lapsed than controversy or apologetics. In this he claimed St. Vincent de Paul as an example of someone whom even the revolutionaries admired.

Even when the Socialists taunted Ozanam with confining his efforts to the alleviation of individual suffering without getting at the causes, he countered that society can only be reformed by first reforming the character of the individuals making up society. He went on to attack the Socialists for breeding hatred and war in contrast to the Church’s approach of building a new world by fostering justice and charity.

It is interesting to note that the parable of the Good Samaritan is often associated with the life of St. Vincent de Paul whose patronage Ozanam and his followers chose after beginning their Conference of Charity, later to be named the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.6 Vincent had captured that aspect of the Gospel call for his own generation; thus it is not surprising that Ozanam and his companions would consider themselves heirs to his spirit two centuries later in the France of their day. Ozanam felt that St. Vincent recognized not only the poverty of his own day but that he foresaw the poverty of the 19th century and many years in the future.

In approaching the poor, Ozanam made the sentiment of St. Vincent equally applicable to the work of the

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6The idea of re-naming the Conference of Charity as the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul came on February 4, 1834, apparently at the suggestion of Leon le Provost. This confirmed a practice which had been the group’s from the beginning of invoking the Saint’s patronage at each meeting. (Cf. Charles K. Murphy, The Spirit of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. [New York: Longmans Green, 1940], p. 17). It has been suggested elsewhere that perhaps M. Bailly had suggested the name since devotion to St. Vincent had long been a tradition in his family. (Cf. Albert P. Schirnberg, The Great Friend: Frederic Ozanam. [Milwaukee: Bruce, 1946], p. 68.)
Society in saying, "We must indeed admit with St. Vincent de Paul that . . . they are our superiors. "The poor of Jesus Christ are our Lords and our masters . . . and we are unworthy to render them our poor services!""

When the Rule for the fledgling Society was drawn up, based not on theory but on the actual practice of the already existing Conferences, we find the Introduction inspired by the sermons and writings of St. Vincent. Monsignor Baunard comments:

> It is instinct with the spirit of humility, unity and charity that ought to reign among brothers as well as with a sense of duty to ecclesiastical authority. The lawgiver of the Society . . . is St. Vincent de Paul himself.8

It was almost a passion with Ozanam to encourage fidelity to the primitive spirit of the Society which he saw to be the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul with humility as the first virtue.

He would say later, "Sons of St. Vincent de Paul, let us learn of him to forget ourselves, to devote ourselves to the service of God and the good of men. Let us learn that holy preference which shows most love to those who suffer most."9

On another occasion, when the names of Richelieu and St. Vincent were mentioned in contrasting political action with charitable works, Ozanam remarked:

> The great Minister certainly played a glorious part, but who could, and would if he could, continue it today. Richelieu was but a man of one country, of one period, of a few years. St. Vincent de Paul, on the other hand, was a man for all lands and for all time. His name is celebrated

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8Ibid., p. 114.

9Ibid., p. 273.
wherever the sun illumines the crucifix on a Church tower. His spirit visits the hospitals and schools of our faubourgs (streets) in the persons of his Sisters, as well as the missions of Lebanon, China and Texas, which are manned with his sons. His work never grows old: who does not wish today to continue it? If we have courage and faith, gentlemen, what will keep us back!\textsuperscript{10}

Toward the end of his life, Ozanam had the opportunity of making a pilgrimage to the place of Vincent's birth and early years, once Pouy and later named Berceau de St. Vincent in Gascony. In a letter to A. Dufieux of December 7, 1852, he acknowledged a debt to Vincent's patronage saying, 'I do indeed owe that to the beloved patron who saved me in my youth from so many dangers, and who has showered such unexpected blessings on our little Conferences.'

Ozanam found in the ancient oak where Vincent took shelter and prayed as a youth a symbol of the heritage Vincent left. He observed:

That fine old tree is now held to the soil only by the bark, which is eaten into with age. But the branches are superb and, even at the advanced season when we were there, the foliage was beautifully green. I saw in it the type of the foundations of St. Vincent de Paul, which have no apparent bond of union with the earth, but which nevertheless triumph over time and grow strong during revolution.\textsuperscript{11}

He subsequently had a branch of the oak cut and sent to the Grand Council of the Society.

After Ozanam's death, M. Leonce Curnier, a friend and correspondent of Ozanam, wrote, "I seem to see him in heaven between St. Vincent de Paul and St. Francis de

\textsuperscript{10}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 275.

Sales, whose faithful disciple he was.”12

It was in the Gospel spirit of the Good Samaritan and in that same spirit captured by St. Vincent de Paul before him in his own native France that Frédéric Ozanam was to embody a kindred spirit in terms of his own spiritual journey shaped by the influences and challenges of his own time and culture.

Since St. Vincent was the patron of the group, it was natural to turn to one of his followers for direction in finding and helping the poor. The early Vincentians (the name by which the members of the Society are generally known) were somewhat perplexed at first from not having any poor people to visit. M. Bailly suggested that they go to Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity who lived and worked in the Mouffetard district of Saint-Marceau, a poor neighborhood of ill repute. Jules DeVaux, one of the original band of seven, was sent to see her. She gladly advised him on how to deal with the poor, gave him a list of needy families to visit, and provided bread coupons to distribute.13

From this time it is said, “... the destinies of Frédéric Ozanam and Sister Rosalie mingled in the love of the poor, thus forging lasting bonds between the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the... Daughters of Charity.”14 It is further said:

It is scarcely imaginable to retrace the life and work of Frédéric Ozanam without evoking the memory of Sr. Rosalie in so much as their collaboration was close in the service of the poor. . . . . The providential convergence of these two destinies will have marked the history of charity in the nineteenth century.15

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13 O'Meara, op. cit., p. 62.
14 Hess, op. cit., p. 73.
15 Ibid., p. 71.
THE EMERGENCE OF OZANAM’S VISION: BEING CHRISTIAN IN A MODERN WORLD

When he was barely eighteen years old, Ozanam began what was to become his life’s task — that of being an apologist for the Catholic faith in a life devoted to the service of “Eternal Truth” in the realm of ideas and to the service of the poor in the realm of action.

At this time he wrote a series of articles against Saint-Simonism, a false but seductive doctrine especially attractive among the young. It claimed to be the new religion with extravagant promises of social reform and liberal theories of equality that called for a return to certain primitive “Laws of Humanity.”

Ozanam attacked this teaching as based on a foundation foreign to Christian faith, as unhistorical, as illusory, as self-contradictory, and as ultimately impeding human nature on its journey to perfection. His efforts were rewarded with favorable regard from such notable Christian social theorists as Lamartine and Chateaubriand. In this attempt he later saw “the seed of what is to occupy my life.”

His “life’s task” took shape in what his biographers consider an extraordinary letter, dated January 15, 1831, to two friends and fellow students. In it we find: (1) a commitment to a life’s task of working in the realm of ideas for the transformation of society; (2) a notion of development of society, the principles and elements of which are to be discovered by a search in our past heritage; (3) a belief in the continued presence of Divine Providence in history and the need for religious ideas for continued development; (4) a strong declaration of his Catholic faith both as the solid ground on which he can personally resist doubt and as a force to lead civilization to happiness; (5) a desire to attach himself to others of like mind in pursuing this task; (6) the realization of the necessity of studies that would equip him for the task.
He speaks of the strength and persistence of his call:

When an idea has seized upon you for two years and takes the first place in your thought, impatient as it is to spread itself without, are you master to hold it back? When a voice cries to you without ceasing, "Do this, I will it!" can you tell it to keep silence?¹⁶

He also spoke of the encouragement he had received in the project from his friend and guide, Abbé Noirot.

In another letter the following month he echoed his plans and expressed the great principle that was to dominate his outlook — the Catholicism of religious ideas as well as the great joy of being alive in his own age. He said:

When my eyes turn towards society . . . the prodigious variety of events excites in me the most different sentiments: . . . joy . . . bitterness . . . happiness . . . desolation . . . . I tell myself about the spectacle to which we are called is grand; that it is great to assist at so solemn an epoch; that the mission of a young man in society is today very grave and very important . . . . I rejoice at being born at an epoch when perhaps I shall have to do much good and then feel a new ardor for work . . . . And I seek more clearly for the last result the great principle which at first appeared to me through so many clouds — the perpetuity, the Catholicism of religious ideas, the truth, the excellence, the beauty of Christianity.¹⁷

Later that same year, he again asserted the absolute necessity of religion for intellectual and moral development, that reason alone was not enough. He again referred to his notion of development saying:

If then it is true that society is to undergo a transformation at the end of revolutions which it experiences, we must acknowledge that the elements of this definitive synthesis are to be found in the past. In the same way as a flower contains in its bosom the innumerable germs of flowers which must succeed it, in the same way the present, which comes from the past, contains the future.\textsuperscript{18}

His thought was influenced by some German comparative mythologists who pointed out that dogmas of Christian belief could be seen in the myths of all nations, indicating a common parentage.

Thus Ozanam was launched on a life’s work of a defense of Christianity which is revealed in his subsequent historical writings.\textsuperscript{19}

Later that same month, to his cousin, Ernest Falconnet, he expressed his conviction that all knowledge is included in religion, his admiration for the thinking of Ballanche (though later he will recognize errors in his thought),\textsuperscript{20} and his approval of a traditional rather than psychological approach to truth.

In this Ozanam was rejecting the thinking of people like Rousseau whose rationalist thought was represented by certain professors at the Sorbonne. He aligned himself with the thought of people like Chateaubriand, Ballanche,

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., pp. 25-30.

\textsuperscript{19}Sr. Emmanuel Renner, The Historical Thought of Frederic Ozanam (Doctoral dissertation, CUA, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 1959), p. 3. The author states—“Through his contact with liberal Catholics and social Catholic movements in France and as a result of his knowledge of the sweep of history, Ozanam came to look for the gradual establishment of the Christian principles of liberty, equality and fraternity in the political and social order. By the time of the Revolution of 1848 he had become convinced that democracy was the natural goal of political progress and that Providence was leading mankind in that direction.” (pp. 74-75).

\textsuperscript{20}O’Meara, op. cit., p. 8.
Lamennais and the Germans, Schlegel and Goerres. We hear him beginning to express a desire to join with kindred spirits among the students:

... how much I have desired to surround myself with young men feeling, thinking as myself; now I know that there are many such — but they are scattered abroad as the gold on the dunghill, and difficult is the task of him who would unite the defenders around one flag.  

To his cousin again, in February 1832, Ozanam mentioned that he was responsible for conferences given by Abbé Gerbet who was laying open for the young students the philosophy of history of Lamennais.  

The following month he wrote to his cousin once more expressing interest in the political economics of de Coux and that he was reading Ballanche. He also described an episode involving some successful efforts of Catholic students in defending the Church against the attacks of a rationalist Professor Jouffroy and rejoiced in “God’s work being done by young men.”  

In October of the same year he again spoke of a new era for Europe when Catholicism would be once more understood and with the task of bringing Christianity to the Orient:

This redoubtable crisis will probably be decisive, and on the ruins of the old and broken nations a new Europe will arise. Then Catholicism will be understood; then Europe will be given the task to carry Christianity to the Orient. This will be a magnificent era; we shall not see it.

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21 Coates, op. cit., p. 47. Letters are the main source of Ozanam’s ideas and ideals. Thus, the frequent references to Coates, the main source of Ozanam’s letters.

22 Ibid., p. 53.

23 Ibid., p. 55.

24 Ibid., pp. 60-62.
As the new year of 1833 began, Ozanam, the young man of ideas, became a man of action as he linked action to theory in describing his Conference of History: "Let's not relegate our belief to the domain of speculation and theory; let's take them seriously, and let our life be the continual expression of them."25

Then in March, his desire for a working group surfaced again: "You know that I aspired to form a reunion of friends, working together at the edifice of science, under the standard of the Catholic idea."26 He spoke of Montalembert as he said: "... another source of life are the assemblies of the young and the excellent Count de la Montalembert."27 And his vision of the future appeared like a glorious parade of history:

The future is before us, immense as the ocean... above us religion, a brilliant star which is given us to follow; before us the glorious tract of the great men of our country and our doctrine; behind us our young brothers, our companions — more timid — who await for an example.26

A month after the first meeting of the newly established Conference of Charity, he wrote to his mother describing a public manifestation of faith on the part of the young men at a Corpus Christi procession in the town of Nanterre, home of St. Genevieve. He spoke of the day as "one of the most charming of my life."29

As 1834 dawned, he wrote to Falconnet of a plan to show Christianity as "the formula necessary for humanity."30 There was also a humble recognition of his own

26 Ibid., p. 70.
27 Ibid., p. 71.
28 Ibid., p. 72.
29 Ibid., p. 75.
30 Ibid., p. 84.
leadership among the Catholic youth even as he struggled with the uncertainty of his vocation. He referred to himself as:

... a sort of chief of the Catholic youth of these parts... I must be at the head of every movement... a crowd of circumstances, independent of my will, besiege me... and draw me out of the line that I traced for myself... I do not tell you this by a self-love. For, on the contrary, I feel my weakness so much. I, who am not 21 years old, that compliments and praises rather humiliate me, and I almost feel the desire to laugh at my own importance... I suffer incredible annoyance when I feel that all these fumes rise to my head... and may make me wanting in that which, until now, has seemed to be my career... Nevertheless, this concourse of exterior circumstances may it not be a sign of the will of God? I know not; and in my uncertainty I do not go before, I do not run after; but I let things come — I resist — and if the attraction is too strong, I allow myself to follow.31

In April Ozanam’s conversion from the world of ideas to the world of action took a sharp turn:

... I have found that Christianity had been for me, until now, a sphere of ideas, a sphere of worship, but not sufficiently a sphere of morality, of intentions, of actions... I want to speak of faith!... religious ideas can have no value if they have not a practical and positive value. Religion serves less to think than to act; and if it teaches to live, it is in order to teach to die... The value of Christianity is in this, and not in the attraction which its dogmas may present to men of imagination and of mind.32

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

31 Ibid., pp. 85-86.
32 Ibid., pp. 96-98.
democracy was not articulated until 1848. But at this time he said to Falconnet, "I do not despise any form of government." In this same letter we can perceive a further expansion and integration of united action with ideas of a social scheme in which work for the poor is seen as a kind of school for the young who will regenerate France:

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

His admiration for Lamartine as the embodiment of genius and virtue is evident in a letter of October 1834 to Lallier whom he described as "a great man who has brought civilization into these places."

When faced with the crisis of expansion or restriction of membership in the Conference of Charity, Ozanam took a firm stand on the side of expansion as indispensible to growth. He wrote to M. Bailly:

Don't you think that our charitable society itself, in order to last, must modify itself, and that the spirit of friendship on which it is founded, and the enlargement it must accept, would only know how to reconcile themselves by dividing into sections which would have a common center ...

33 Ibid., p. 107.
34 Ibid., pp. 107 ff.
Unity with the Conferences in Paris would not necessarily be by way of the same works, but by way of sharing a common spirit, namely, unity of friendship which is more important than numbers. Speaking of a harmony of spirit, he said to a new Conference in Nîmes:

The end which we have in view in Paris is not, I think, absolutely the same as that which you have in mind in the country . . . . You are breathing a pure atmosphere. You are living in the midst of good traditions and good example. The world is not crumbling under your feet. Your faith and virtue do not need organization for their preservation, but rather for their development. I do not know if I have expressed myself clearly, I would like to draw attention to the differences in aim, since it calls for a difference in "means."

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

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

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36 Costes, op. cit., pp. 117ff.
37 Ibid., pp. 123-27; cf. also footnote 19.
He drew an important distinction between charity and philanthropy:

Philanthropy is a proud dame for whom good actions are a kind of adorning and who loves to look at herself in the mirror. Charity is a tender mother who keeps her eyes fixed on the child she carries at the breast, who no longer thinks of herself, and who forgets her beauty for her love.38

It is in this letter also that Ozanam presented the parable of the Good Samaritan as paradigm for the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul which has been dealt with earlier.

The following month he evidences an attack by the "Noon-day Devil" in a letter to Dufieux:

... At this very moment, when the call from above is sounding in my ears, when I feel inspiration withdrawing from me as it were in warning ... I cannot will, I cannot do, and I feel the weight of daily neglected responsibility gathering on my head ... I fell into a state of languor from which I cannot rouse myself. Study ... now fatigues me ... I can no longer write. Strength ... is not in me. I am blown about by every wind of my imagination. Piety is a yoke to me, prayer a mere habit of the lips, the practice of Christianity a duty which I accomplish with cowardice ... 39

Yet, as he indicated later, he was able to carry on precisely because of the support of his friends which he perceived as an expression of Divine Providence:

... I am always the same ... abundant in words and poor in works, always suffering from my powerlessness ... finding neither strength nor repose, except in friendship, the lessons and the example of others. Providence has not willed that this succor should fail me. It has given me excellent friends. 40

38 Ibid., p. 124.
39 Ibid., pp. 128-31.
40 Ibid., p. 138.
He spoke further of the benefits of association in good works as he acknowledged the fledgling nature of the task that had begun: “Good is done, above all, among us who mutually sustain and encourage one another. We are yet only in our apprenticeship in the art of charity.”

Ozanam’s aspiration were not limited to the Conference. He wished to infuse a Christian spirit also in the world of artists and poets as he wrote in reply to a friend who had formed an association of artists and who had asked Frédéric to be an officer. His commitment to orthodoxy was clear as he said: “Let us be convinced ... that orthodoxy is the nerve center, the vital essence of every Catholic society.”

His persistent dependence upon Providence in reference to both his own life and the life of the Conferences continually appeared as it does in a letter to his mother in June of 1836: “I am very much persuaded that in the case of charity works one must never worry about pecuniary resources, some always come along.”

In a letter to Lallier on November 5, 1836, Ozanam expressed his gratitude for having been born and raised in moderate circumstances and he articulated for the first time the primacy of the social question and the duty of Christians to mediate between the rich and the poor so as to establish equality. Even this mediation he saw in terms of God’s Providence:

I desire to give thanks to God for having caused me to be born in one of those positions on the limit of embarrassment and ease ... where one cannot slumber in the gratification of all one’s desires, but where at the same time one is not distracted by the continual solicitation of

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41 Ibid., p. 146.  
42 Ibid., pp. 154ff.  
43 Hess, op. cit., p. 120.
want. God knows . . . what dangers there would have been for me in the soft indulgences of riches, or in the abjection of the indigent classes. For if the question which today disturbs the world around us is neither an individual question nor a question of political forms, but a social question: if it is the struggle of those who have nothing with those who have too much; if it is the violent shock of opulence and of poverty which makes the soil tremble under our tread — our duty as Christians is to interpose ourselves between these irreconcilable enemies, and to bring about that the ones may despoil themselves . . . and that the others may receive as a benefit; that the ones may cease to exact and the other to refuse; that equality may operate as much as it's possible among men; that voluntary community may replace taxes and forced loans; that charity may do that which alas justice knows not how to do. It is a happy thing, then, to be placed by Providence on neutral ground . . . to act as mediator . . . 44

He repeated the primacy of the social question the following week to Janmot. Like St. Vincent and St. Francis of Assisi, Ozanam reflected here a spirituality of seeing God in the poor:

It seems that one must see in order to love, and we only see God with the eyes of faith . . . But men and the poor we see them with human eyes; they are there, and we can put our finger and our hand in their wounds . . . and we should fall at their feet and say to them with the apostle . . . “You are my Lord and my God.”45

And then, speaking of Christ reflected in Francis, he said:

His immense love embraced God, humanity, nature . . . . The characteristic of love is to assimilate itself as much as is in it to the things beloved. Alas! If in the middle ages the sickness of society could not be cured by the immense

44 Coates, op. cit., pp. 167ff.
effusion of love — which was made above all by St. Francis of Assisi; if later, new troubles called for the helping hand of . . . St. Vincent de Paul — how much are not needed now of charity, devotion, of patience to heal the sufferings of those poor people, more indigent now than ever, because they have refused the nourishment of the soul, at the same time that the bread of the body is failing them! The question is no longer a question of political form; it is a social question . . . .

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

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

When he wrote to Lallier in October of 1837, he distinguished various levels of life, the highest of which is the Christian life, "which draws us out of ourselves to lead us to God, where henceforth we find the central point of all our thoughts — the central support of all our works." 48

A letter to the same Lallier in the following April gives

46 Ibid., pp. 173ff.
47 Ibid., pp. 182ff.
48 Ibid., pp. 200ff.
us some indication of his attitude favoring a separation of Church and State. In his own words: “For us a great thing has happened: the separation of two great words . . . throne and altar.”

Another theme that keeps asserting itself in Ozanam’s writings as he spoke of concerted and concrete actions for the poor is individual and corporate humility. But for him it meant a genuine brand, avoiding a “modesty which keeps a man from doing good.”

He was insistent on the secular nature of the Conferences. Writing to M. Arthaud in July of 1839 he said, “One wants the Society to always be neither a party, nor a school, nor a brotherhood, but deeply Catholic without ceasing to be secular.”

To Montalembert he likewise confided his desire to keep religion separate from politics, as well as his aspiration to reconciling past and future:

... the reconciliation of the past and the future, the separation of the religious principle from among the political ideas with which it is involved, the work in a word to which you have concentrated such generous energy, begins to be accomplished even in our city . . .

Later that same year we have some indication of the influence of his mother in shaping his notion of Church and Providence as he wrote to M. Reverdy about her death:

... it was she whose first teachings had given me faith; she who was for me a living image of the holy Church — our mother also; she who seemed to me the most perfect expression of Providence.

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49 Ibid., pp. 211-14.
50 Ibid., pp. 214ff.
51 Hess, op. cit., p. 17.
52 Ibid., p. 18.
53 Coates, op. cit., pp. 248ff.
On Christmas day of 1839 he had occasion once more to speak of the mediating and reconciling role his Society played on the social division of their times. He pictured it as a kind of a holy "Robin Hood" band:

The little Society of St. Vincent de Paul subsists and develops... We make progress in the art of plundering the rich for the profit of the poor... But how little is all this, my friend, in the presence of a population of 60,000 working people, demoralized by work and by the population of bad doctrines! Freemasonry and Republicanism take advantage of the troubles and passions of this suffering multitude, and God knows what future awaits us if Catholic charity does not interpose to arrest the slave-war which is at our doors.\(^{54}\)

From Germany in 1842 he wrote of his conviction that that nation's greatness consisted "in the fact that Germany is indebted for her genius and her entire civilization to Christian ideals..."\(^ {55}\)

When he was attacked by conservative Catholics as a "deserter from the Catholic struggle," he wrote to M. Dufieux, in June of 1843, without recrimination. The letter ends with a plea for prayers that he "shall never fail in the fraternal mandate from my friends, to defend the inseparable interests of Religion and true Science."\(^ {56}\)

When he visited Italy in 1847 he wrote to Lallier of finding great consolation in visiting the tombs of the martyrs and also of being present at the inauguration of Pope Pius IX whom he greatly admired because of his progressive policies.\(^ {57}\)

He again incurred the wrath of conservatives in 1848 when he expressed his views on democracy:

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\(^{54}\) Ibid., pp. 262 ff.

\(^{55}\) Baunard, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., p. 214.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p. 249.
Conquer repugnance and dislike and turn to democracy, to the mass of the people to whom we are unknown. Appeal to them not merely by sermons but by benefits. Help them, not with alms which humiliate, but with social and ameliorative measures, which will free and elevate them. Let us go over to the barbarians and follow Pius IX.\textsuperscript{58}

We have in the same year a couple of letters in which he expressed his love for the working person and for the ideals of equality and fraternity and exhorted others to go over to the side of the poor.\textsuperscript{59} Yet he repudiated Socialism and distinguished it from the Christian reform of society as he said to Dufieux:

We are not . . . socialists in the sense that we do not want the overthrow of society, but we want a free progressive Christian reform of it . . . . One cannot avoid the social issues: precisely because they are formidable God does not want us to turn them aside. We must lay a bold hand on the core of pauperism . . . . I am afraid that if property does not know how to freely strip itself, it will be sooner or later compromised.\textsuperscript{60}

The extent to which he was converted to democracy is clear as he said: "I believe, I still believe in the possibility of Christian democracy. I don't believe in anything else in political matters."\textsuperscript{61}

All this time, while the Society of St. Vincent de Paul had been going to the poor, Ozanam was launching a journalistic effort by way of \textit{The New Era} to try to elicit the sympathy of the public. The articles embraced the whole doctrine of Christian Economics. One, in particular, expressed the need for concrete action for the poor, that deeds are superior to words.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 254.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 255.
\textsuperscript{60} Hess, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 127.
\textsuperscript{62} Baunard, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 291.
He repeated to his friend Dufieux in 1851 his conviction that politics were inadequate in effecting conversion as was the government in carrying out the Church’s mission. He said:

. . . we do not have enough faith, we want the re-establishment of religion by political means . . . . No, conversions are not made by laws, but by consciences which must be besieged one by one. Let us not ask God for bad governments, but let us not try to give ourselves one of them which releases us from our duties, while taking upon itself a mission that God did not give to it in the service of our brothers’ souls.63

In summary, as we become privy to the emerging consciousness of Frédéric Ozanam through his letters, we see the ideals of youth move from the realm of theory to practice and both theory and action interweave and mutually influence the other. The dream, to some extent, gets tempered by the realities of life, yet is never compromised. Not only does he never waiver in his determination to mediate in favor of the poor, but it grows stronger, even when his convictions cost him the opposition of conservative adversaries and the misunderstanding or confusion of friends.

CONCLUSION

What becomes evident in Ozanam’s long vocational struggle is the necessity of being aware of one’s personal needs as well as the direction in which one’s gifts seem to be leading and the commitments one had made. Once again we see that the influences and counsel of one’s friends and guides are important to the decision-making

63 Hess, op. cit., p. 27.
process. But what seems most obvious is the confirmation that a right decision brings peace, contentment and the furtherance of life's commitment; in Ozanam's case, to the service of Truth and the poor.

Ozanam demonstrates a strong compatibility between passionate love for the Church and orthodoxy and yet a profound commitment to a tradition of development of society aided and abetted by Christianity as promoter of growth. At the same time, his was an orthodoxy accompanied by an orthopraxy — right doctrine along with right behavior. Not only was he concerned about the integrity of Truth as preserved in the tradition of the Church, but he was also concerned about how that Truth was lived and practiced — in a spirit of love for the poor to be served and also for those both inside and outside the Church who did not share his views.

His youthful aspiration and accomplishment of so much in such a short span of years is perhaps living proof of the spiritual power of the union of knowledge and virtue effected by a singleness of purpose that lends life an unequivocal sense of direction. Yet his struggle with faith and subsequent decisions about his life while experiencing intensely the human condition in terms of feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, anxiety and the like would seem to make him all the more imitable. His life hardly bears the stamp of unapproachable sanctity.
As long as a man is able to work, the tools of his trade and craft should be purchased for him, and he should not be given any further help. . . . Alms are not intended for people able to work, but for poor, weak, sick people, poor orphans, or poor old people.

St. Vincent de Paul

Those whom God calls to follow His Son should try to become perfect as He was. Their lives must be a continuation of His. What a happiness for eternity!

St. Louise de Marillac

Believe me three men can do more than ten when Our Lord takes a hand in the work, and He always does so when He deprives us of human help and places us in the necessity of doing something that transcends our power.

St. Vincent de Paul