

FREDERICK OZANAM.

CONTINUITY AND RENEWAL OF THE VINCENTIAN SPIRIT.

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Parallel lives.

In spite of the space of two centuries between them, there are, in the biographies of Vincent de Paul and Frederick Ozanam, some interesting similarities, which, perhaps, suggested the title of this essay. Although born far from the city of Paris (Ozanam in Italy), they both spent the greater part of their lives as inhabitants of that city; both were students and graduates of its University of the Sorbonne. However, on this superficial level, the differences between them are more remarkable than the similarities, especially as regards their origin as well as their profession. Ozanam was a middle class citizen; by profession an intellectual, a writer and a professor, while Vincent was of a poor country farming background.

So the difference of social background could well have been a cause, or at least an occasion, of a further parting of the ways which would have made impossible any parallelism between their lives. For while the desire of overcoming the poverty of his origin was on the point of leading Vincent astray into the fruitless paths of ambition, until he was about thirty six years of age, Ozanam was "*thanking God for having been born in a situation between scarcity and abundance.... God knows what dangers the luxury of a wealthy condition would have had for me.*" (Letters, I, 239).

In their lives there are similarities which are much less superficial and more meaningful than those already mentioned. The dedication of their lives to the salvation of the poor, originated in both as a solution to a crisis of faith. The fact that Vincent suffered a crisis after he had reached the age of thirty scarcely matters, while Ozanam had solved his crisis before he had reached the age of twenty. In both cases the result was the same.

There is also a very curious coincidence, although at first sight anecdotal, which resulted in the lives of both men in being an event of decisive consequences. The young agnostic, Jean Broet, effected without being aware of it, a strict parallel in the life of Ozanam, with the so called "*heretic of Marchais*" in the life of Saint Vincent. These two men confronted each of them with the same objection: "*how can the Catholic Church be the true Church of Jesus Christ when it is forgetful of the poor?*" It is true that Ozanam was confronted with this

objection before he ever thought of working for the poor, while Vincent de Paul heard it when he had already spent three years of dedication to the country missions.

However, all the important biographies of Saint Vincent rightly stress the importance of the event for the future planning of his life and work. Abelly, who first brings the event to our notice, devotes four pages in detail to it. (I.I, c. 13, pp. 54-57).

The dedication of his missionaries "to the instruction and sanctification of the poor" transformed them into "*witnesses to the fact that the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church.*" (o.c., p. 57). For both Vincent and Ozanam, active charity to the poor will be from that moment, as well as being the guiding principle of their lives, the greatest proof of the veracity of their faith and the veracity of the Church.

Continuity

From its very foundation, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul recognises the Saint as its Patron, and it is inscribed in a formula of dedication to the poor which draws from and is inspired by the work and spirit of Saint Vincent de Paul. By the same token it does not surprise us that Ozanam and his first companions went to learn a Vincentian spirit and the methods of work for the poor from an outstanding daughter of Saint Vincent named Rosalie Rendu, nor the fact that they found in the Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission, ideas, which at times, they copied almost literally into their own regulations, to inspire them with a simple, humble and charitable style in their activity among the poor.

But in the thought and writings of Ozanam one notices a still more profound continuity; namely a continuity which reaches to the very roots of what we qualify as a "*Vincentian spirit.*" Various modern theories of that spirit have succeeded in pointing out accurately the central and radical place which the Will of God occupies for Saint Vincent as a base and root of his very soul. Abelly himself saw this very clearly: "*The conformity of his will with the Will of God was the general virtue of this holy man, a virtue which poured out its influence over all his other virtues*" (I.3, c. 5); including, of course, over his characteristic "*virtue*" of love for the poor. The "*spirituality*" of Frederick Ozanam had no other foundation

"Up to now I have asked God for light to know His Will. At present... it only remains that He give me the courage to carry it out" (Letters, I 425).

This "*virtue*" or basic attitude must be linked, as for Vincent, with a profound humility:

"Is it possible that there is a vine stock in the vineyard of the Lord that He has not surrounded with great care?... But I, a wicked plant, have not blossomed under the divine breath..., I have not known how to love, I have not known how to work..., I feel that I have piled over my head the responsibility for the graces to which I pay no attention each day" (o.c., I 172).

These words of Ozanam remind us of the pathetic outbursts of Saint Vincent about his own unworthiness, his "*I am worse than the demon*," his "*I am the worst of all men.*" These expressions are so disturbing to the average reader today, without doubt, because he/she does not feel as humble as either of these two men.

Both "virtues" are also joined to a boundless confidence in Divine Providence, so remarkable in Saint Vincent. At an early age, Ozanam writes:

"I think that I can affirm that there is a Providence and that this Providence, from the beginning of time, could never abandon its rational creatures to a wicked spirit of evil and error" (o.c., I 34).

Only on the basis of such confidence in Providence could the spirit and the hope of improving the temporal and spiritual condition of the poor be maintained, in the face of the apparent disasters of history.

But the real continuity of spirit between Vincent de Paul and Frederick Ozanam is fully found in that which defines, from a theological point of view, the very essence of the Vincentian "spirituality," namely the identification of Christ with the poor ("*You did it unto Me*"). Here is an important text of Ozanam which reminds us forcefully of that other text of Saint Vincent: "*turn the other side of the medal and you will see, in the light of faith, that the poor represent for us, the Son of God.*"

"We see the poor see the poor with the eyes of flesh; there they are and we can place our fingers in the wounds; the marks of the crown of thorns are visible on their foreheads....

You are the sacred image of the God we do not see; and as we cannot love Him in any other way, let us love Him in your persons.... You are our masters, and we will be your servants" (ibid., p 243).

The last sentence appears to be not only inspired by, but literally copied from another well known characteristic statement of Saint Vincent.

Renewal

A careful reading of the documents of the Mission during the 19th and 20th centuries (General Assemblies, circulars of Superiors' General..., constitutions of 1954) leave the painful impression on the reader of the fact that the Congregation founded by Saint Vincent was trying to maintain fidelity to the spirit of the Founder on the basis of a literal repetition of his words. And that in times of

profound social changes of which, of course, everyone was aware because they were so obvious (revolutions, industrialisation, democratisation...). Besides, these changes were seen by intelligent persons, such as Fr. Etienne, as an excellent historic opportunity for reconstructing, and renewing, what Fr. Etienne called the "building" of the Congregation:

"In this situation, is there not a completely new basis on which the Congregation can be designed and its building reconstructed in conditions favourable to freedom of movement and to the development of its activity?" (Recueil... t. III, p.399)

There was the great opportunity, clearly perceived and expressed. In order to take advantage of it, he believed that the key could be found, as we have said, in the literal fidelity to the words of Saint Vincent:

"The nature of the Congregation cannot be subjected to the changes and alternatives which institutions formed by the hand of man suffer..., one ought not to introduce the smallest change in our rules and Constitutions, for they can be observed with the same fruit and fidelity at the present time as in past ages." (Circular and Assembly of 1849, ibid., p. 135).

But, as often happens, the proposed literal repetition was not as literal as was claimed. The two hundred years between the one who says something and the one who claims to repeat it literally have not passed in a vacuum. Referring to numbers 15 & 16 of chapter VIII of the Common Rules (number which, with good sense, advise the missioner not to spend time or energy on the vagaries of the politics of the time), Father Etienne writes:

"By our vocation we ought to keep entirely remote from the movements of politics, from all changes which take place in the social order" (13th of August 1874; ibid., p.112).

Although the first part of the above quotation would appear, at first glance to coincide literally with the idea of Saint Vincent, the second part (from all changes which take place in the social order), apart from being impossible for any individual and still less for any institution, to follow out in practice, would not have occurred to Saint Vincent, nor even thought of by him. Only many years later, at least one hundred, was it possible for anyone to conceive and express the idea of social change.

Frederick Ozanam was a man who was extremely sensitive to social change. Not only was he sensitive to change, but also to the idea that social change for the Christian means a revision of his ways of understanding the faith, so that facing social change, he can also follow the ancient faith by acting as a leaven in the new society:

"The question which agitates us today is not a question of persons nor a question of political forms, but a social question; it is the violent collision of riches with poverty.... ...our duty as Christians, is to place ourselves between these irreconcilable enemies and to strive to bring about an equality, as far as possible, among these persons, and that charity may bring about that which justice alone would not be capable of doing." (Letters, t. I, p.239).

While he was 17 years of age and very much in line with his middle class family education, he showed himself still as a genuine "legitimist" ("I have seen a poster with the announcement that Charles X ought not to be king, or to reign over us. Since when is the person of the king not inviolable and sacred? I will always be a faithful subject of King Charles X" - ibid., p.27). The years and without doubt also the faith taught him a lot. At the age of 25 he writes:

"Every government appears to me respectable in so far as it represents the principle of divine authority. But I think that along with the power, it must maintain the principle of liberty; I think that one must advise or warn against a power which exploits the power in place of sacrificing itself" (ibid., p. 143).

Immediately after the Revolution, at the age of 35, (1848)

"We have accepted the republic, not as an evil of the times that we have to resign ourselves to, but as progress which we must defend." ("Lo que somos", en L'Ere Nouvelle, n., 16, I, 1st of May 1848).

In contrast, let us see what Father Etienne wrote, only a few months later:

"The cause of all revolutions, which overturn thrones and destroy empires, is found in those words of Scripture which are placed on the tongues of the wicked: 'I will not serve, nor will I submit.' The foundation on which the social order rests is the respect for authority" (Recueil, t. III, p.141, Circular of 1849).

It is scarcely possible to find a sharper contrast of opinions about the same historical phenomenon. Both opinions proceed from men inspired by Saint Vincent. Both wish to express attitudes inspired by Christian faith. But the attitude of Etienne, unlike that of Ozanam, although based on Biblical reasons, poorly conceals the reality of a nostalgia for the old regime at a time when it was already dead and buried.

But these nostalgias for the past can only lead to a rejection of the present and an escape into "Winter quarters." This was a posture which a good part of the Church and a good part of the Congregation of the Mission adopted for about one hundred years. This was inspired in large measure by the one who is rightly considered as the re-founder of the Congregation, Father Etienne.

The leaven does not become effective while it is carefully stored in the larder. What happened in the Church before the brutal event of the universal

proletarianisation of the masses of European citizens? The attitude of isolation and of taking refuge within herself, faced with the problems created by the new industrial-capitalist society produced, as Pope Pius X came to realise at the turn of the century, the loss to the Church of the working class.

This would not have happened if attention had been paid to what Ozanam was writing with clear foresight in 1848:

"These masses (of people) so tenderly loved by the Church, because they represent the poverty (poor) which God loves, and the work which God blesses..., let us help them not only with alms which demeans them, but also by our efforts to set up institutions or conditions, which, by making them independent, improve their lot. Let us make way for the barbarians!" (Correspondence, 10th February 1848).

That last phrase caused, as it could not do otherwise, a great scandal among middle-class conservative Catholics (what would Fr. Etienne have thought of it?) a scandal which would not be safely sweetened by the explanations which Ozanam believed he was obliged to give

- to a friend:

"In saying: let us make way for the barbarians, I am seeking that, instead of mollifying the consciences of the egoistic middle class, we devote ourselves to the people. It is among the (poor) people that I am able to see the remains of faith (remember St. Vincent saying: 'among the poor, one finds the true religion, the living faith....') and of morality for saving a society which the upper classes have already lost" (22nd February 1848).

- to his brother, a priest:

"Instead of seeking an alliance with a defeated middle-class, let us seek our support among the working-class poor, who are the real allies of the Church. Poor like them, deprived like them, blessed with all the blessings of the Saviour" (23rd May 1848).

He could not be more explicit, but he was not heeded (certainly not by the Congregation of the Mission) until the "official" Church took heed in the Encyclical "Rerum Novarum" by Pope Leo XIII, almost half a century later. But the "official" Church itself did not completely accept his words till almost a century later with the Second Vatican Council and its preferential option for the poor.

Conclusion

To be able to consider oneself as legitimately Vincentian in fact (and not merely because one belongs to one of the institutions founded by St. Vincent) one must base one's life even today, on the "traditional" virtues lived by St. Vincent and proposed to his followers; fulfilling the Will of God, trust in Providence, simplicity, humility..., a genuine option (not only preferential, but exclusive) for the poor. Without the equipment of these and other virtues it is not possible to live, especially today, in its fullness, the Christian life invented by St..Vincent de Paul (in reality inspired by the Holy Spirit) in the XVIIth century.

But placing continuity in the same spirit on a supposed literal fidelity would result in closing one's eyes to the obvious fact that the later society is not now the society of XVIIth century in which St. Vincent lived. True continuity in the same spirit has to adopt for itself new forms of working for the poor in order to try to respond adequately to the new social situation. Put in an nutshell, the Christian faith and the Vincentian spirit today cannot be blind to the necessary social and political dimensions; dimensions which have now been treated in "Gaudium et Spes" document of Vatican II and elsewhere.. They are being treated with great clarity in the thought of present day theologians. The present day Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission treat of them with sobriety, but with sufficiency (2; 11; 12; 14; 18; 85; 88; Statutes 1; 2; 3; 7; 8; 9; 11; 40).

There had been a certain slowness in the explicit recognition of all those new phenomena in society and in the faith on the part of the Church and on the part of the Congregation of the Mission. Better late than never! But the Vincentian tradition had no reason to wait to these times, and to that (Vatican II) Council in order to try to reformulate its own charismatic vision for post-feudal ages. In fact, Frederick Ozanam, a devoted Vincentian, had already re-formulated it with courage and foresight.

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