

# Spirituality and Charism of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam

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When we consider how St. Vincent de Paul, in 1609, and Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, in 1831, arrived in Paris, interesting similarities and differences emerge. As legend has it, after his ill-fated short-cut across the Gulf of Lyon and his capture by pirates, Vincent was sold into slavery, escaped to France, received an appointment in Rome, and eventually, a new mission at the Court of Henri IV. None of this circuitous route to Paris could possibly have been planned!

Frédéric Ozanam's arrival was, on the other hand, very much part of a plan. His father wanted him to begin studying at the Sorbonne University in autumn 1830, but the July revolution that year prompted a postponement. The irony is that his home city of Lyon soon exposed him to a different kind of challenge. The Saint-Simonians, a new religious sect bitterly opposed to Christianity, decided to concentrate their efforts there. They did indeed win many converts and could be well satisfied until Ozanam had other ideas. Annoyed at the publicity given by a local newspaper, *le Précurseur*, he wrote a complaint to its editor, insisting that his own refutation should receive equal coverage. His article was duly published. Encouraged by friends, he expanded it as a brochure, entitled *Reflections on the Doctrines of Saint-Simon*. The Saint-Simonians had therefore spurred him into completing the first of his many published works, just as they were to jolt him later into dedicating himself to charitable works.

When he did eventually begin his studies in Paris, he joined the History Conference, a university debating society, in which there were also some Saint-Simonian students. One of these admitted that Christians had done much good in the past, but ask what was the Church doing NOW? No one could answer, but Blessed Frédéric later admitted he and his Catholic friends were doing nothing. He persuaded some of them to found a new society to not merely debate, but in which members would perform some kind of Christian action by helping people in need.

They founded the Charity Conference, which soon changed its name to the St. Vincent de Paul Conference. Not only should it have Vincent

as Patron, but his name should not simply be used in the way that a tobacconist's might be named after a saint. Vincent was to be regarded as an example to follow and someone who should be imitated by those identified with his name.

When he responded to the challenge "What is your Church doing NOW?", Blessed Frédéric Ozanam chose to do so in a way alien to most Christian students and intellectuals of the age. Belonging to a revolutionary age, very much in a minority and constantly on the defensive, they were used to "arguing" both in spoken and written word. They were not used to "doing".

St. Vincent de Paul's founding of seminaries sprang from a realisation that many priests were hopelessly ill-equipped to fulfil their mission. Some were woefully ignorant about the Faith and almost incapable of administering the Sacraments. In contrast, others were so erudite that their preaching amounted to no more than a literary exercise, aimed at cramming more Latin quotations into a homily than would be achieved by their ever-watchful, jealous "rivals".

If Vincent had insisted that his priests should preach in a simple style, which must be understood by people of little education, Frédéric was to make a similar plea for more appropriate homilies. He condemned the same kind of irrelevant erudition which had beset the pulpits in St Vincent's 17<sup>th</sup> century and he accused some priests of merely repeating well-rehearsed arguments which were fast becoming obsolete in the industrial 19<sup>th</sup> century. Warning that the Church was under attack from increasing numbers of new enemies, he insisted-Christians must learn to reply by arguments and language more appropriate to the times in which they lived.

On behalf of Catholic students at the Sorbonne, he petitioned the Archbishop of Paris, Msgr. Quélen, to appoint in Notre-Dame a preacher able to relate more closely with the young generation. Fr. Lacordaire, a convert from rationalism and a qualified barrister, was adept at using the rationalists' own techniques to re-state Christian doctrines in a way that remained topical. Archbishop Quélen opted for a group of traditionalist theologians, but Notre-Dame remained almost empty, echoing to the sound of their well-worn oratory. Meanwhile, Lacordaire was attracting capacity congregations at the nearby chapel of the Collège Stanislas. The Archbishop finally granted the wishes of Ozanam and his companions, so Fr. Lacordaire then began to fill the Cathedral and to exert a crucial influence on Catholic revival.

Blessed Frédéric's support for Lacordaire had been based largely on the belief that an "intellectual" approach was required if converts were to be won. He never ceased to stress this need but continued still more to realise the importance of Christian "action" as well. Throughout the rest of his life, Frédéric's emphasis would move more strongly in the

direction of demonstrating his beliefs through acts of charity, rather than in cleverly contrived arguments.

Neither Frédéric nor Vincent simply threw up their hands in an empty gesture of horror at what they saw. They each reacted positively by first organising practical charity and “applying first-aid to the wound”. Yet they were not content to offer charity as the initial but only solution. For them Charity must be a prelude to Justice. Vincent had witnessed the horrors of battle in the Thirty Years War and during the Fronde. Working behind the scenes, he pleaded with the Queen Regent and with Cardinal Mazarin to restore peace. Each day, at Saint-Lazare, at least one priest, one lay-brother and one cleric used to fast and pray for peace.

Ozanam may have been an idealist, hoping that 19<sup>th</sup> century France would listen once more to the voice of the Church, but he was also a realist, knowing that the State must intervene by just laws. In the early part of his career he lectured in commercial law and, eight years before the revolution of 1848, told his students that:

*“Public charity should have a rôle to play in moments of crisis. But charity is really only the Samaritan pouring his soothing ointment on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is for the law to prevent such attacks”<sup>1</sup>.*

Not remaining content with providing charity to the poor, Vincent had also been determined to persuade the rich and powerful that it was natural justice for the poor to enjoy standards of health and living conditions worthy of their human dignity. He set the example of care provided by Daughters of Charity whom he sent to work in overcrowded hospitals. By pricking consciences, he was able to establish confraternities wherever the need arose to supplement and, he hoped, to succeed in eventually reforming the inadequate services offered by the State. He also used as propaganda missionaries’ letters describing appalling conditions throughout France. From Lorraine, a Vincentian priest described how the people lived on a form of bread made from straw.

When Ozanam complained about the conditions in which poor families were forced to live, he did not want their poverty relieved solely by alms-giving. He also suggested improvements in the economic structure which caused poverty. When lecturing on commercial law, he encouraged students to regard their profession not in isolation, but to

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<sup>1</sup>Notes d’un cours de droit commercial, XXIV<sup>e</sup> Leçon: *Des Ouvriers*, A.F. OZANAM, *Œuvres complètes*, Lecoffre, Paris 1872-1873 (9 vols., 2 volumes of letters added, 1881), t. VIII, p. 586.

feel an integral part of the whole society. Their training should not be aimed simply at acquiring a professional status. Law must be more fully appreciated as a truly vocational service.

While politicians discussed ways of alleviating the suffering caused by poverty, Blessed Frédéric asked if they truly understood the causes of human misery. He begged them not to be concerned only with material conditions, but drew their attention to how a fundamental lack of spiritual purpose was responsible for much of the unhappiness. When writing or lecturing about working-class conditions, he really knew what he was talking about. One of the few people belonging to the educated middle class who had seen at first-hand what he described and analysed, he continued, in both Paris and Lyon, to visit the poor in their own homes.

We have seen how Ozanam's approach developed from being mainly intellectual to showing an increased concern for good actions as well as good arguments. At the same time, he was also becoming aware that political solutions would never solve problems associated with the industrial revolution. He knew that religious and social questions were much more important than changes of political government.

He saw Christianity as the most important basis for any solution. He believed the Church should show concern for poor workers, because of the tradition which had been handed down:

*"The One Who was to regenerate the world hid for thirty years His Divine Person in the workshop of a carpenter"*<sup>2</sup>.

Christianity had restored the dignity of work. Blessed Frédéric emphasised that members of religious orders had never been afraid to undertake manual work. Workers could therefore be persuaded that there was a personal dignity in whatever they did.

Yet, no matter what good some members of his St. Vincent de Paul society might have done, Blessed Frédéric never considered his own work a very significant contribution to even the most elementary needs. He simply offered the example of his charitable society for other Christians to follow. When he proposed legal reforms, he thought they would only be effective if a greater spirit of charity already existed before such laws were passed.

Realizing that merely to appeal for the natural generosity of the public was an action obviously doomed to failure, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam sometimes altered his approach. Instead of appealing, he issued stern warnings. As if anticipating Pius XI's thoughts – that he

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<sup>2</sup>Notes d'un cours de droit commercial, XXXIV<sup>e</sup> Leçon: *Des Ouvriers*, o.c., t. VIII, p. 579.

greatest tragedy of the Church in France during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the loss of the working classes – Frédéric criticised not just employers but also some clergy:

*“If a greater number of Christians, and especially of clergy, had concerned themselves with the working classes during the last ten years, we would be more sure of the future; and all our hopes rest on the little which has been done so far”<sup>3</sup>.*

This was written in a letter to his brother Alphonse, a priest himself. It was written only a month after the climax of the 1848 revolution but Blessed Frédéric was by no means criticising Alphonse who had, in fact, been giving an excellent example of how priests could help the poor. In his parish in Lille, he had organised evening classes to teach reading and writing. That was the kind of work which Frédéric also arranged as part of his SVP activity in both Paris and Lyon.

By following in Vincent’s foot-steps, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam tried to imitate not his exact same works so much as his spirit of Charity. If he had tried indiscriminately to copy only the deeds themselves, he would have looked for galley-slaves in the centre of Paris. That would not have been to follow in foot-steps, but would have meant trying mechanically to fit his ownfeet into someone else’s foot-prints.

If today we tried slavishly to match Ozanam’s foot-prints, we would find ourselves carrying firewood to families in high-rise flats. No, we try to walk truly in the foot-steps of both Vincent and Frédéric by identifying the needs of our own time and developing works of charity appropriately answering the needs of our own poor.

Blessed Frédéric Ozanam realised that many practices must develop differently if the Gospel were still to mean anything. In other words, he was in favour of Systemic Change. The Gospel itself never changes but our application of its precepts can never remain exactly the same.

If the Gospel is “Good News”, then not only must it be good for us but it must also be NEW. If ever it ceased to be new, it would no longer be “NEWS”. It would be “history”. As something new, the Gospel will be fresh and capable of helping us to find new ways of living it ourselves and of proclaiming it to others. Both St. Vincent and Blessed Frédéric found new ways of serving Christ in the poor.

If one of the charisms of both Vincent and Frédéric was to care for poor people, the care of souls was always an important part of their mission. The Congregation of the Mission had been founded not just to provide material assistance, but to preach the Gospel. St. Vincent de Paul saw people’s greatest need to be a religious one. Blessed Frédéric

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<sup>3</sup>To abbé Alphonse Ozanam, Paris, 25 March 1848, *o.c.*, t. XI, p. 228.

gave this same message to members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Reporting to Council-General about the work undertaken in his home city of Lyon, he stressed that material aid was not the most important part of their service to the poor:

*"To report, indeed, how many Christians we have brought back to the fold"*<sup>4</sup>.

In this same account, Ozanam expresses concern about the extent to which Catholics had a shallow knowledge of their Faith. Their practice of it also lacked commitment:

*"They all possess the Faith, but a Faith which is lukewarm; they still practise their religion, but often without understanding it. We must bring light into this semi-darkness, warm up this chill; edification, rather than conversion, is the chief necessity. There is no lack of Catholics among us. We must mould them to sanctity"*<sup>5</sup>.

Our St. Vincent de Paul Society in England & Wales suffered a very sad blow, last year, at the sudden death of Steve Whitley, who had been manager of our national holiday centre, which provides respite for needy families. Steve was not a Catholic and his family organised a humanist funeral, which many of us attended. Have you ever experienced such an occasion during which God is never mentioned and where there is a total absence of all the consolations from religious belief, which our Christian funerals can so often provide? I quote the remark made by Monica, one of our former Diocesan Council Presidents, who has given many years of service to the Society: "I feel so ashamed at all the chances I missed to teach more lessons about the Faith". It was as if she blamed herself for this total absence of God from a funeral. But how many of have sat back and allowed the absence of religious belief or, at least, religious indifference to prevail?

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul warns us against this danger of accepting things as they are:

*"Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect"*<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>Lyon, 27 April 1838, quoted in SVP National Council of England & Wales, *Manual*, 1938, p. 160 et surtout combien de chrétiens rendus à leurs devoirs. *Manuel de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul*, 22<sup>e</sup> édition, 1941, p. 212.

<sup>5</sup>Lyon, 27 April 1838, *Manual*, loc. cit., p. 161.

<sup>6</sup>Romans 12:2.

I think, like Monica, that many of us could have felt equal guilt at modelling ourselves so readily on the behaviour of the world which surrounds us. Do we find it perhaps much easier to relieve poverty than to consider the many spiritual needs of the families we visit? Blessed Frédéric never shrank from his responsibility as a Christian to seek, in the words of St. Paul, “what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do”:

*“But the principal object of this assistance is to ensure our moral influence; our task is to put right the interior disorder of the houses of our poor; to arrange for the upbringing of the children and to find them work; to console so many sorrows and, most of all, to destroy vice”<sup>7</sup>.*

Despite criticising this lack of Faith and indifference to religious practice, Blessed Frédéric always remained humble in his charitable work:

*“It is at such a time that we acknowledge, in the words of St. Vincent de Paul, ‘that the poor, who belong to Jesus Christ, are our lords and masters and that we are hardly worthy of rendering to them our petty services’”<sup>8</sup>.*

He also refused to remain content at whatever good work he did, realising that there would be always much more to do:

*“Charity must never look backwards but always to the front, because the number of good deeds already accomplished is very small, while present and future hardships remain infinite”<sup>9</sup>.*

Among the work undertaken by Blessed Frédéric’s St. Vincent de Paul Conference in Lyon was to visit an army barracks. There his members taught the soldiers reading, writing and math. but most of all, they showed them friendship and true Christian charity. This was at a time when the military were often hated by other citizens, especially after riots following unemployment in the Lyon silk industry, during which the army was ordered to control the rioters.

The charitable nature of these visits was not limited to friendship or the teaching of literacy and numeracy. Well aware that, separated from family influence, few of the young soldiers had continued to practise their religion, the St. Vincent de Paul Society visitors provided religious instruction also. They helped the soldiers to pray and even taught them hymns. Not only were some encouraged to resume the practice of their

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<sup>7</sup>Lyon, 27 April 1838, *Manual*, loc. cit., p. 161.

<sup>8</sup>Lyon, 27 April 1838, *Manual*, loc. cit., p. 162

<sup>9</sup>To Léonce Curnier, Paris, 23 February 1835.



Faith but a request for Baptism was received, which would gladden the hearts of all Vincentians:

*"One Jewish soldier expressed the wish to know the Christian Faith and is receiving regular lessons, which will probably end in his Baptism. You may well imagine that he will be called Vincent de Paul"*<sup>10</sup>.

Believing his Society's charism included the saving of souls, he also considered this as his own personal vocation, as a committed layman. One of his closest friends, Jean-Jacques Ampère, was the son of the celebrated scientist and very devout Catholic, André-Marie Ampère. But Jean-Jacques was a non-believer. This greatly worried Frédéric and, in many of his letters, he encourages Jean-Jacques's return to the Faith:

*"You are fulfilling all the duties of Christianity towards men but should you not fulfil them towards God? Should you not serve him? To live in close relationship with him? Would you not find infinite consolations in such service?"*<sup>11</sup>.

We may think it hardly surprising that, after a life of such Christian commitment and concern to save the souls of others, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam contemplated the end of his own life without fear. He died at the early age of 40, after many years of illness, during which he often travelled to warmer countries, in search of a cure.

Four months before dying, he wrote to Alexandre Ferriny-Jérusalem, a convert from Judaism to Christianity. He enthusiastically explained his love of the Psalms, relating this to other Old Testament readings which brought him similar reassurance:

*"God's hand has touched me. It has touched me, I believe, like Job, like Hezekiah, like Tobit, not unto death but until I have been tested for a long time. Unfortunately I do not have the patience of those just men, letting myself be depressed by suffering, and I would not be comforted in my weakness if I did not find in the Psalms cries of pain which David shouts out to God and to which God finally replies by granting him forgiveness and peace"*<sup>12</sup>.

Explaining the relationship between Old Testament books and Christianity, Blessed Frédéric believed the Gospel alone was superior to David's hymns, because it was their fulfilment:

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<sup>10</sup>Lyon, 11 April 1839, *Manual*, loc. cit., p. 164.

<sup>11</sup>To Jean-Jacques Ampère, Dieppe, 24 August 1851.

<sup>12</sup>To Alexandre Ferriny-Jérusalem, San Jacopo, 6 May 1853.



*"All promises, all eagerness, every holy impatience of the prophet find their purpose in the Saviour who sprang from his race. And such is the link between both Testaments that the Saviour himself has no name dearer to him than Son of David. The two blind men of Jericho called him thus and I myself often cry to him like they did: 'Son of David, have pity on us'"*<sup>13</sup>.

After his final journey had taken him to Italy, knowing that death was very near, Blessed Frédéric derived great comfort from the Psalms. Here is a quotation from Fr. Massuco, a Vincentian priest, in Livorno, whom he had asked to become his confessor:

*"The first time I saw him in Antignano, he wanted to know what to do in order to prepare for death. I told him to read the Psalms and to think about the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He was pleased with this advice and put it into practice"*<sup>14</sup>.

Some of his commercial law lectures and later, in some of his newspaper articles, we may read a vociferous Ozanam condemning the injustice of employers who treated their workers not as partners, but as instruments from which to draw the highest profits at the lowest possible costs.

It is nevertheless surprising to find equally strong language in a letter to Fr. Tommaso Pendola. This priest was a teacher among whose pupils were children of very wealthy parents. Blessed Frédéric's invective is a warning against the moral dangers which those boys were risking, if they did not learn to appreciate the sufferings of poor people. He seems to give advice with great urgency, not wasting time on couching his language in social niceties. This urgency may be explained by the fact that he was writing with less than two months to live:

*"You have some rich children. Oh, Father, in order to educate those pampered hearts, the best lesson would be to show them the salutary spectacle of Our Lord Jesus Christ not only in pictures painted by the greatest masters or on altars glittering with gold and light, but to show them Jesus Christ and his wounds in the persons of poor people! The pupils are like that because something is lacking in their education. There is something they have not been taught, something they know only by name and which they must see other people suffering in order to learn how to suffer it when it will come sooner or later. That thing*

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<sup>13</sup>To Alexandre Ferriny-Jérusalem, San Jacopo, 6 May 1853.

<sup>14</sup>SSVP National Council of France, Cahiers Ozanam, édition spéciale consacrée à Frédéric Ozanam, janvier/juin 1974.

*is pain, it is privation, it is need. These young lords must know what hunger is, thirst, the emptiness of an attic. They must see such wretches, sick parents, children in tears. They must see them and must love them. If such a sight does not awaken some beating of their hearts, then this generation is lost*"<sup>15</sup>.

It is often said that the approach of death concentrates the mind. The letters which Ozanam wrote, during his final weeks, certainly illustrate very vividly the fear of death, repentance, hope of a cure but frustration at the failure of medical treatment and finally resignation and peace. His widow, Amélie, described how his reading of Sacred Scripture had been her husband's constant daily practice:

*"Almost from infancy, he dedicated himself to the defence of truth, and began studying Hebrew to read, in the original text, the fundamental truths of the Faith. Despite his endless work, each morning found him reading a passage from Scripture"*<sup>16</sup>.

His meditations on the Bible brought consolation for himself but could also be a gift to others. He annotated many of the readings, in the hope they might later help others suffering like himself. This is how Amélie understood such preoccupations:

*"He found great pleasure in thinking that this work would, someday, comfort poor sick people like himself"*<sup>17</sup>.

Amélie reviewed these notes, after his death, and the collection was published five years later, in 1858, entitled *Le Livre des Malades*, variously translated as *The Book of the Sick*, *The Bible of the Sick* and *The Companion of the Sick*. A revised French edition was published in 2006. Amélie described how, at the end of his life, Frédéric's fear gave way to an amazing calm and great confidence in God's mercy. His two brothers, Fr. Alphonse and Dr. Charles, helped him return to France, where he died in Marseille. The local priest, Fr. Pignatel, prepared him for death, with the words: "Take courage, my son, with confidence in God".

Blessed Frédéric's reply was simply:

*"Why should I fear God? I love him so much!"*<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup>To Fr Tommaso Pendola, Antignano, 19 July 1853.

<sup>16</sup>*Bible of the Sick*, Fédération française de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, 2006, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup>*Bible of the Sick*, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup>*Bible of the Sick*, p. 16.

The current Archbishop of Paris, André Vingt-Trois, has written a Foreword to *The Bible of the Sick*, mentioning an aspect of Blessed Frédéric's life which we should not overlook:

*"The Bible of the Sick, In its new edition, introduces us to a special dimension in the history of his life: illness. He lets us discover how the long illness was also a road to sanctification"*<sup>19</sup>.

This statement confirms what Amélie also had written:

*"When the bad days returned and his body was stricken with illness, his soul, thus strengthened and magnified, was raised up by the very thoughts with which he had fed it. As the disease progressed, his piety was still evident and simply grew stronger, so I can bear witness that he was constantly living in the presence of God"*<sup>20</sup>.

He even saw his suffering as a form of service to God. When eventually unable to practise the charitable works which had been so much the centre of his more active life, this kind of service seemed all that remained:

*"Finally and above all, dear friend, pray for me, so that, if God does not want me to serve him by working, I might resign myself to serving him by suffering"*<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> André Vingt-Trois, Archbishop of Paris, Foreword to *The Bible of the Sick*, 2006, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Bible of the Sick*, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> To Joseph Arthaud, Paris, 3 November 1849.