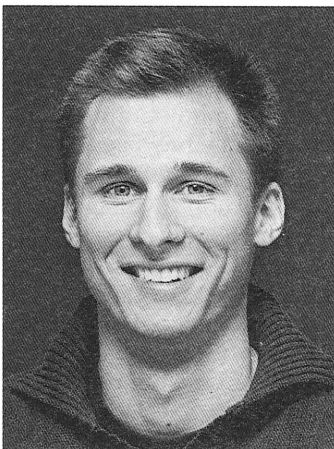


# SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW

## Frederic Ozanam as a Model for Today's Youth



An interview with  
**JULIEN SPIEWAK**

Vice-President for Youth, International Confederation  
of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

John T. Maher, C.M.,  
with Julien Spiewak

### ***Editor's note***

In featuring members of the Vincentian Family who embrace and live the Vincentian charism, VINCENTIANA presents an interview with Julien Spiewak, 28 years of age, who is Vice President for Youth at the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris. As the interview will show, Julien is always on the go, putting his youth and passionate commitment to the Vincentian charism to good use by inspiring young people all over the world.

***Tell about your background, family, education, and your current employment.***

I have lived in Paris almost all of my life, although my parents were from the Bourgogne region of France. My parents divorced when I was very young, and after my father returned to Bourgogne, my mother raised me and Vincent, my twin brother in Paris. He, my mother, and I all live in the same apartment building, although on different floors. So it is nice to be able to visit them with such ease! I graduated from the University of Paris (West) with a degree in Communications. I earned a Master's degree in Communication Science with a concentration in photography from the University of Paris (North). I am a professional photographer, and have worked for a studio and art gallery. My work has been featured in magazines and art catalogues.

Currently, I am Editor of a monthly magazine called *Mission Etrangers de Paris*, published by a religious community of French priests of the same name who work in Asia exclusively as missionaries (they are known as the "MEP" Fathers, due to their initials). Since 2008, I have served as Vice President for Youth at the Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. It involves much work and travel, but I truly love spreading the message of our founder Frederic Ozanam to young people all over the world.

***What led you to become involved with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul? When did you start, and how long have you been a "Vincentian"?***

I am 28 years old. When I was 17, while attending Sunday Mass at the Church of the Holy Spirit in the 12<sup>th</sup> arrondissement where I live, a member of the youth conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul spoke after communion and asked those present to consider becoming members. He spoke of the needs of the poor in our midst, and it stirred up in me a desire to do something more than I had been doing. So after Mass, I volunteered, went to my first meeting of the youth conference of the Society in the parish, and was assigned to visit a woman who was ill, alone, and caring for three children. I made a commitment to visit her weekly, and I learned much about what she was going through, and how difficult life was for her. By visiting and listening, we become friends, and here it is eleven years later, and I am still visiting her.

A few years later, in 2007 to be exact, I became president of the youth conference in the parish, and began to give talks at Mass similar to those that drew me to the Society. I also represented my region nationally at a youth conference of the Society in Salamanca, Spain.

There, I met young people from all over Europe, and I discovered how enthusiastic others were for the charism. In 2008, I was offered the position of Vice-President for Youth at the International Confederation of the Society, and so here I am! My only regret is that I am not able to be as active as I was in the Holy Spirit parish where I started, but I still serve there when I can.

*Describe your work, travels, and your impressions of the youth conferences of the Society.*

As I mentioned, I serve as Vice-President for Youth at the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. It has been exciting to undertake this job. I have visited many places across Europe, Asia, and South America. I go to help found youth conferences of the Society, or if they already have conferences in place, I organize regional meetings to support and strengthen them in their work. I enjoy seeing youth conferences of the Society start up and grow!

In South America, the youth conferences of the Society are dynamic and growing. In Brazil, where I will attend World Youth Day in July, there are over 100,000 young people involved in the youth conferences. At a meeting in Aparecida, there was so much spirit and enthusiasm that I couldn't help but think that if Frederic Ozanam were with us today, he would be very proud of what is being done in these countries by the young people of the Society. They truly have put the vision Frederic Ozanam had for the Society. They put the charism into action.

In Asia, the youth conferences of the Society are active in many countries. Two of the more dynamic areas are the Philippines and India, where the young people are very involved and are supported by the priests, sisters, and the Vincentian Family. In the Philippines, the youth conferences sponsor regional meetings and youth camps. In India, the youth conferences are also growing at an amazing rate, despite the lack of financial resources. Despite the great poverty present in India and other places in Asia, the determination of the young people wishing to serve is inspiring. We have active, vibrant, and growing youth conferences in Indonesia and Thailand.

We had our first regional meeting for the Middle East in Lebanon in December 2012. Our numbers there are smaller, but the youth in these conferences are fervent and dedicated. We had ten Lebanese youth join us, eight young people come from Baghdad, and four from Egypt. We had Syrian youth who travelled despite the danger posed by their civil war. The Egyptians were from various areas of their country, and had not yet met prior to this gathering due to the political and religious situation in Egypt. Now they have made contact and can move forward.

For this meeting, I had some of the letters of Frederic Ozanam translated into Arabic, so they could be read and discussed by the group. The result was amazing! The young people were deeply moved by Frederic's words; they said that they found them to be as relevant to them today as they were two centuries ago. They came away from this gathering not only with a better knowledge of the charism, but an awareness of themselves as a group belonging to the Society. Although a 'minority' in their countries, their enthusiasm and commitment was truly electric.

In Europe, we still have much to do, as the involvement of young people in the Society is much lower than in Asia and South America. Here, it reflects the apathy people exhibit toward religion. However, I do see growing involvement in France, particularly in Paris, where over 300 youth are active in the Society. However, there are places that serve as models for the Society in Europe, such as Ireland, England, and Wales. In those places, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is active and vibrant, with active, committed young people. Ireland and England have a unique approach to recruitment: they advertise and emphasize the numbers "18" and "33" that represent not just the age group we seek, but the actual year of the Society's foundation – 1833.

***How do you motivate young people to become and stay involved with the work of the Society?***

While it may seem fairly easy to attract young people because of the timeless message of Frederic Ozanam and the Vincentian charism he espoused, it is not always easy to keep them involved in the Society. The reasons for this vary according to customs, country, and continents. There are many demands on young people today, so when they are under pressure, some can feel as if the work of their conference or the Society is just "one task among so many" to be done.

That is why we emphasize the Society is a place where we gain spiritual nourishment, personal support, and the strength that comes from both our charism and the community we share. The demand for service is always present, but we must help youth discover our charism, our spirituality, and that we are a big family. In my talks, I emphasize that we are all friends, and what we do is not social work, but the continuation of a living movement of nearly two centuries.

When you view the Society as a family that offers friendship and community through our spirituality and Vincentian charism, it creates a lasting bond. We show our youth that it is not just the work, but relationships that develop through our meetings that keep us together. We are meant to be true friends in the Vincentian way, and so our work, meetings, testimonies, prayer, and time together should connect

us more deeply to God, to one another, and to those we serve. We are not just an organization but a community, and one for the good. If a member decides to stop coming, we always emphasize that the person is welcome back at any time. Once our youth truly discover the way of Frederic Ozanam and our charism, it is hard to go back to their old ways of work and life. The Society provides a wonderful place from which we all draw strength.

***What does Ozanam mean to you personally? How does his life inspire you?***

When I think of Frederic Ozanam, I am reminded of St. Augustine's phrase about God: "Ever ancient, ever new". Ozanam's thinking was revolutionary for his day, but contemporary for our day. Although they are almost two centuries old, Frederic's words and ideas are still relevant today. I think that Frederic's enthusiasm, his desire to effect positive change, and willingness to engage the realities of his day in a Christian manner is a wonderful example. And to think it was the life and charism of St. Vincent de Paul that inspired him is even more amazing. Frederic took St. Vincent and applied him to his time, and we see how well this still works today.

Frederic Ozanam inspires me because I believe he did not mean to found an organization, but a movement, one that continues today. His ability to understand and identify with the needs of the ordinary person, his compassion for workers, and his desire to make a difference at a time when there was great hostility to the Church and disregard for the poor inspire me today. The emphasis of the Society as a way to serve the poor, and a place for community and spiritual growth is what creates enthusiasm and commitment among youth. As their small conferences grow and evolve into larger groups and regional gatherings, I realize it is the charism at work.

***What events are you planning this 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary year to recall Ozanam's life and work?***

I am actively involved in planning and participating celebrations for this anniversary year. On the weekend of April 19-21, to coincide with the April 23 date of Frederic Ozanam's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, celebrations were held jointly in Milan and Paris. I was part of the group that organized the Paris conference, held at the prestigious Social & Economic Council, which attracted many members of the Society from all over the world. There were over three hundred young people who attended from Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and South America. The weekend ended with Mass at the Cathedral of Notre Dame celebrated by Cardinal

Vingt-Trois, Archbishop of Paris, who read a message from our Holy Father, Pope Francis.

There are celebrations planned in the year ahead in Ireland, Brazil, India, and the Philippines. I expect our youth conferences to be involved in planning and participating of these events, and I look forward to sharing in them as well. I will also be doing tours of significant places in Paris where Frederic Ozanam and Sr. Rosalie Rendu lived and served the poor. I wrote a guidebook on the history of these sites, and so I expect to be leading pilgrim groups to them from time to time.

One event I am especially thrilled to be part of is World Youth Day in Brazil this July. Last year, we successfully petitioned World Youth organization to add Frederic Ozanam to the list of official “intercessors”, for World Youth Day, so his name will appear in programs, liturgies and prayer services. It will be a great way to not only commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, but to invite young people the world over to join us in the Society. To view this on the web, go to: <http://www.rio2013.com/en/world-youth-day/patrons-and-intercessors>

### ***What can the Church and the clergy of today learn from the life of Frederic Ozanam?***

I think we can all learn a great deal from the life and example of Frederic Ozanam. As I said before, his words are inspiring across generations and in any language. But just as importantly, we can learn much from his simplicity and willingness to engage the laity. As we hear of the “new evangelization” today, Frederic Ozanam is a real model for the Church and clergy. He did wonderful things for the good of people. His legacy was not starting a charitable organization, but a movement to promote service, spirituality, and community. It was not created by the Church for the Church, but by the laity. It is a dynamic movement, always in demand.

I think today’s clergy need to remember that the ‘preferential option for the poor’ goes back to the time of Jesus and St. Vincent. Frederic Ozanam saw a time of need and applied the Gospel and Vincentian charism to meet that need. Today, young people are often led by popular media and society to believe that their work, status in life, acquisitions, and personal happiness come first. What Frederic Ozanam’s writings and his dynamic movement of the Society show us is that we are a community of God’s people who truly discover our deepest selves when we serve.

What I would also like to share here is what I experienced and what I hear from so many of our young people: in following the way

of Frederic and the charism, we receive much more than we give. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is a movement, a community, a way of service like none other. It keeps me centered to remember who I am and who I am called to be.



Julien visits with a woman on a recent trip to India