

THEME:

Reflections on the Life of Frederic Ozanam

The Family: The 'Other' Ozanam Legacy

Amelie, Marie, Laurent, Frederic, and Francois

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Opening Comments

On 23 April 2013, the Vincentian Family celebrated the 200th anniversary of the birth of Blessed Antoine-Frederic Ozanam. In collecting data for Frederic Ozanam's canonization, those involved in the process were concerned primarily with his person; in particular, two questions that must be answered. Did Frederic Ozanam demonstrate a life of heroic virtue? Can this be substantiated by witnesses or other sources? Once this, *de facto*, was achieved, Frederic Ozanam was declared "Blessed" at World Youth Day in Paris on 22 August 1997 by Blessed Pope John Paul II in Notre Dame Cathedral. Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris, implored the Holy Father to advance Antoine-Frederic Ozanam to beatification.

Many of us in the Vincentian Family know of the life and exploits of this remarkable and holy man. Daily, we still reap the benefits of his accomplishments, and are inspired by his word and example. Frederic was truly a man for others, one who mastered the arts of multi-tasking and organization. His star shines brightly in the galaxy of our Vincentian saints, blessed, and heroes.

But what about his wife Amelie and their daughter Marie? What about his older brother Alphonse and his younger brother Charles? These people were all mentioned in the process of canonization, but little, if anything was included about them after Frederic's death and

burial. Whatever happened to them? An in-depth look at his wife Amelie and daughter Marie reveal to us two extraordinary women whose true character did not emerge until after Frederic's death. They are exemplars for us as was Blessed Frederic. They are Ozanams!

In this article, I will center attention on Amelie, her grandson and one of her great-grandsons, and Marie and her husband Laurent.

Mme. Marie-Josephine-Amelie Ozanam

L'Industrie, the ship carrying the Ozanams left Livorno, Italy at the end of August, 1853. Frederic's biographer, Father Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, tells us that God granted Frederic calm weather and gentle waves as they crossed the sea. Frederic was able to rest on the deck and enjoy the sea-air. When he saw the shores of Provence, he experienced a sigh of relief in seeing his beloved France again and the certainty of dying in his beloved country.

Upon arrival at the port of Marseille, Friday, 2 September 1853 with its one-hundred and ten passengers on board, a deep peacefulness enveloped him, a gift that he had once described to Amelie as the greatest of all of God's graces to him. Upon disembarking, Amelie immediately rented a house at 2 rue Mazade, located in a pleasant part of the city. Marseille was home to her family ("Soulacroix" was her maiden name); Amelie had been born and raised in Marseille.

Frederic said to those who met them that he had completed one journey, only to begin another. He was returning Amelie to them. God would do with him what he willed. The family Ozanam were not alone. Amelie's mother, Zelie Soulacroix, Frederic's two surviving brothers, and several members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul were there to assist in any way.

On 5 September, some confreres and members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul accompanied the priest of the local parish as he brought Frederic viaticum; they witnessed him receiving Extreme Unction. These men were deeply moved by Frederic's calm gentleness as he welcomed death. After administering the sacraments, the priest thought that he needed to give Frederic words of encouragement as he faced death. Frederic immediately replied: "Why would I fear God? I love him so much".

He would have liked to have seen Paris again, the City of Light where he had so many dear friends and which held so many fond memories, but this was not to be.

Frederic died 8 September, Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, someone very dear to his heart. A funeral service, held at Marseille was celebrated by Father Jean-Baptiste Leautier, priest of Saint-Charles, and then the body was transported to Lyon, the beloved

city of the Ozanam family. Here, at the Church of Saint-Pierre, where Frederic had received his First Holy Communion, a service was held. Many in Lyon wanted Amelie to have Frederic's body buried there with a promise of a monument, but she said "I preferred to keep him near me in Paris". From Marseille, Frederic's remains were taken to Paris, where Mass and a final commendation were celebrated at the Church of Saint-Sulpice on 15 September. The coffin was placed in the subterranean chapel beneath the chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Workers renovating an area of this church wanted no part in having a coffin there; they complained to the priest, who requested that Amelie remove the body to another location. The Ozanams had lived in walking distance of the church and frequently attended daily Mass there. Amelie knew of her husband's reverence for the vocation of priesthood and those priests who had given their lives for the faith. She had Frederic's body transferred from the Church of Saint-Sulpice to the crypt of des Carmes where it now rests. Frederic's remains are entombed in the room adjacent to where the skulls and bones of the priest-martyrs are located.

The building and the area surrounding the Church of Saint-Joseph-des-Carmes was holy ground. The church dated to 1620, and had served as a prison for priests who refused to take the required civil oath during the revolutionary days. One-hundred -sixteen priests were massacred from 2-7 September 1792.

What was evident is the specialness of Amelie Ozanam; she was a woman of strong character and personality. There was a real spunkiness about her that surfaced immediately after Frederic's death and burial. Amelie's mother, Zelig, the Ozanam family, Fr. Alphonse, and Dr. Charles told her to have him buried in the Montparnasse Cemetery and to do it immediately. In their opinion, Amelie's hope would never be realized, but she would not give in.

Thanks to the assistance of Father Henri Lacordaire, O.P., and Mr. Hippolyte Fortoul, a former fellow student of Frederic in Lyon and later in Paris and Minister of Public Instruction, Amelie was able to have Frederic's remains entombed in Chapel of Saint-Joseph-des-Carmes. Amelie wrote, "Early in the morning, my brother-in-law Charles and Monsieur. Fiot had the coffin transferred to the Carmelite Church where it was received by the Dominican Fathers and placed in the crypt. There I felt it would remain". Auguste Fiot had entered the Dominicans in 1847 and went by the religious name of Brother Thomas.

However, the crypt was inside a male monastery where women were not allowed; it meant that she could not visit her husband's tomb. Amelie was determined to get this restriction lifted. She did not bother proceeding through indirect channels; by-passing all red tape, she appealed directly to the pope. At the end of 1855, with her mother and

daughter, she had an audience with Pope Blessed Pius IX and received such permission! "Pius IX, so kind to me and so moved by the death of Frederic, immediately granted my request..." (Amelie Ozanam).

Pius IX had met Frederic and knew of his scholarship and ministry with the poor through the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Frederic, in turn, admired the Holy Father and all he had been doing. Upon their return to Paris from Rome, Amelie had some work done on the area where he was entombed. A staircase was built to give easy access to the crypt; Amelie and Marie now were able to come and go as they pleased, to pray and place flowers at the tomb whenever they wanted. Some decorations and inscriptions for the tomb were added.

Amelie Ozanam was only thirty-two years old when Frederic died. At such a young age, it would be understandable had she considered remarriage; she certainly was eligible, but she did not. She said, "Having spent two-thirds of my life in the intimacy of such a remarkable man and holy man and such a good friend, I feel the need of still living with him by his memory and all that is connected with his memory that is dear to me" (*Disquisitio*, p. 1005).

Amelie devoted her life to overseeing the education and upbringing of their daughter Marie Josephine, along with promoting good causes, including Peter's Pence, the missionary work of Cardinal Charles Martial Lavigerie, Archbishop of Algiers, and founder there of the Missionaries of Africa (1868), and the "Oeuvre du Bon-Pasteur" of the Archdiocese of Lyon.

Amelie became close friends with Jeanne-Adelaide Recamier, the wife of her doctor. The doctor, Joseph-Claude-Anthelme Recamier, was chief physician and at Hotel Dieu de Paris, and a renown medical expert and professor at the College de France. Even today, terminology he coined at that time is used, such as the use of the word "metastasis".

Jeanne-Adelaide Recamier was the mother of four children. Amelie and Marie were frequently invited to the doctor's home, and also to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Leon Cornudet. Before Blessed Frederic died, he had entrusted his daughter Marie to Leon as her protector. Leon was an active member in the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, and Frederic knew him well. At one period of time, both had been co-international-vice-presidents of the Society.

Mlle. – and Mme. – Marie Josephine Ozanam

Marie Ozanam, the apple of her father's eye, was eight years old at her father's death. She grew up to be an attractive young lady, and at eighteen, she met Laurent Laporte from Lyon, who had come to Paris to study law at the Sorbonne, just as her father had done years before.

The couple met at one of the Sunday social gatherings of young people the Recamier family frequently had at their home. General Maxilien Recamier was the son of Dr. Recamier. Marie and Laurent fell in love, but Amelie and Mrs. Gabrielle Recamier thought that the couple was moving too fast and too young to marry, although Marie was eighteen and Laurent twenty-one. It was decided that the two lovers separate for a time.

Laurent went off to the Holy Land with his cousins; however, absence and distance can and did the heart grow fonder! On his return, he and Marie were determined to marry. In their thoughtfulness, the couple solemnized their engagement in the crypt before the tomb of her beloved father in Saint-Joseph-des-Carmes. They pronounced their marriage vows 16 July 1866 in the Church of Saint Sulpice, where her father's funeral had been held thirteen years earlier.

More on Amelie Ozanam and Laurent Laporte

After Frederic's death, Amelie found herself in a strained financial situation. To ease the circumstances, she and Marie moved in with her mother, Zelie Soulacroix.

During the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 and its repercussions in Paris, Amelie Ozanam fled the city with her mother Zelie to Ecully where the Laporte family owned land. They were refugees while her home was taken over by the "Federes", but when Amelie returned, to her amazement, she found most of her keepsakes intact except papers of Father Alphonse Ozanam and the memorable teachings that her deceased mother-in-law, Marie Ozanam, had written during her work with the "Association of Night Watchers" who ministered to the dying at Lyon, and the letters of Blessed Frederic. The "Federes" had burned anything remotely religious.

What became evident in exploring the life of Amelie Ozanam is that she had a sense of the uniqueness of her husband Frederic, and thus wanted to preserve his legacy for posterity. We see this in Amelie's quest for the letters that her husband had written; she knew that the number would run in the hundreds; and friends willingly sent her what they had. Thus, the family was able to recoup most, but not all of numerous letters. Canon Eugene Galopin, priest of the Diocese of Autun, also assisted by gathering copies from those who refused to part with their originals. The Ozanam archives were a family treasure, kept in a special room of one of their homes.

Marie's husband, Laurent Laporte, like his father Claude Laporte, counselor in the Court of Appeals in Lyon, became a successful magistrate in Paris. Laurent had a large complex built in 1880's and divided it into apartments to bring family and friends together. In 1885, Ame-

wanted an accomplished author to write the story of her father's life.

“He had a practical sense about him; he was human, warm, and prudent. He inspired at the same time respect and trust. He was neither chaplain nor friend, but ‘father’ who allowed us freedom to make our own decisions. ‘His listening, his acceptance without judgment, permitted everyone to speak to him. We always appreciated his sensitivity, his joy, his peace, in spite of his physical handicap’. His faith made him see the positive in each one and in the events of the world.

“The rejected people of society, the losers of society, prisoners and prostitutes were comfortable with him. His humility and simplicity made him approachable to all. ‘For all that Francois was to us, we say a great thanks!’”.

The last written tribute is from a close worker-priest friend, Father Henri Lesourd. He left an inspiring memory of the last time he saw Francois. It took place at the Little Sisters of the Poor. “Just before leaving on a trip 29 October, I said to him ‘in any case, you are with the Lord’ and he replied, ‘I hope’. He said it in his usual tone of voice simply and humbly; that was him”.

“I believe Francois became more and poorer in spirit according to the Gospel. That is what I have come to see over the years from the long friendship of more than fifty years. It’s the root of his courage and of everything he did. These are some examples I can recall:

- When he was professor in the seminary of Reims during the time of Cardinal Suhard;
- At the time of JOCF (Young Christian Women’s Workers);
- At the time of the birth of the women’s teams of the Mission de France;
- At the time of his short stay at the Porte d’Italie (the Paris metro stops in the area).

His trust was not in himself. He knew how to discreetly and efficaciously serve as a true brother. I saw him daily at the seminary of Pontigny (1963-1967). Before the Lord, St. Francis of Assisi, his patron, will acknowledge him as one of his own. I am certain of this, or as he would say, ‘I hope’. Saint Francis, and Charles de Foucauld, will welcome him. They both love him! And his prayer of abandonment was our last prayer together when I left on that day for my trip.

‘My Father, I abandon myself to you. Make of me what will please you provided that your will is done in me, and in all creatures. I desire nothing else’”.

Frederic Ozanam and Great-Grandson

Frederic Ozanam had a deep concern for the workers of Paris and beyond. He spent hours speaking to the workers in the crypt of the Parisian Church of Saint-Sulpice. Frederic critiqued well the unjust and inhuman working conditions of the working class as seen in his lectures at the Sorbonne. He had first-hand knowledge of these people from his home visits in Paris, Lyon, or wherever he came into contact with them. In 1848, he wrote a series of articles addressing social justice issues with recommendations on how to improve the plight of the workers and way to encourage their advancement.

Little did great-grandfather Frederic know that one day he would have a great-grandson, a priest, Father Francois Laporte, who would be so drawn into the mainstream of the worker-priests' movement, the active involvement of women, and the promotion of Christianization. As great-grandfather Frederic was principal founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, his great-grandson, Francois, was a charter member of the Mission de France and Mission de Paris.

As great-grandfather Frederic held the position of professor of literature at the Sorbonne, Francois held the positions of professor of theology and econome at various seminaries of France beginning at Reims, and later at Pontigny. Blessed Frederic would have been proud of the entire Laporte family, especially of his great-grandson Francois Laporte!

A Few Final Comments

Even a cursory sweep of Frederic's life reveals he was a great organizer and motivator; in but most importantly, like Jesus, he was a man for others. Although he lived but forty-years, he accomplished more in his lifetime than many whose lives are double that lifespan. Also, I find that each of the Ozanams has something to say to us. My hope for the future is to furnish some content on these individuals and show how remarkable they were on their own ways.

Frederic Ozanam had a deep fondness for priesthood stemming from his own long period of prayer, reflection, and discernment in his early twenties. He wondered: "Should I join the Dominican Order at the invitation of Father Jean-Baptiste-Henri Lacordaire or not?". Father Mathias Noirot helped Frederic finalize his decision: marriage.

Frederic's love for the priesthood can be attributed, in part, to his love for his oldest brother, Father Alphonse Ozanam, as seen in their vibrant correspondence. Frederic wrote a good number of letters to "Alp" as he called him. In his letters, Frederic reviewed the role of priests in significant terms: what he thinks that priests should be doing

in order to confront pertinent issues and advance the status of the church in France.

In correspondence to friends such as Leonce Curnier, Frederic refers to priests as “the guardians and doctors of souls to give our errant and famished spirits the holy word for nourishment and the hope of a better world” (Letter, 23 February 1835). At the age of twenty-five, Frederic began editing the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* headquartered in Lyon. Here surfaces Frederic’s endearment for the foreign missionaries and their heroic lives. He spoke often of priesthood in writing to Dominique Meynis, executive officer of the Propagation of the Faith, a correspondence numbering over one-hundred letters!

Much has been written about the life of Blessed Frederic Ozanam. In my opinion, some of the earlier articles and biographies contained significant gaps, often due to the unavailability of all Blessed Frederic’s writings. Sometimes, much of what was written seemed to be a rehash of what others already have presented, rather than new material as a result of deeper research. The more I personally uncover in the life of Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his family, the more I see how little I really know. I believe that we are just starting to unearth the depth of this incredible layman; we all still have much to learn! Blessed Frederic Ozanam is one of God’s treasures to the Vincentian Family!

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