

Frederic Ozanam, Grand Apologist of the Faith in the 19th Century

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In April 2013, Vincentians all over the world celebrated the bicentennial of the birth of Blessed Frederic Ozanam. The Council General International of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris organized a celebration of this event, greatly important to the Conferences of Charity and for the entire Vincentian Family. Like all anniversaries, this one also must be observed in profound gratitude for the preservation of the spirit of this grand thinker and principal founder of the Society. His life must be the subject for reflection in order to live his spirit in the future. As his close friend, Jean Baptiste Henri Lacordaire said, "*Ozanam was the Saint Peter of the dark Upper Room*". Besides being a great defender of the Faith in 19th century France, it is justice owed that makes Ozanam stand out as a singular figure in this "Year of Faith" in the Catholic Church.

Frederic Ozanam is known for the work of charity he left as his legacy to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Nevertheless, he is not as well known for that which should constitute the dynamic force of all his pressing ideas and goals, as well as his lifelong vision, that is: *To be a missionary of the faith in the world of science, missionary of the faith in the heart of the Society*. That is where, little by little, Frederic wished to be and the destination at which he brilliantly arrived. Toward that end, he formulated the central plan of his life. To the point, we can say that the vision and commitment of the plan of his life was to bring about the renewal of society under the guidance of the Catholic Church. The proclamation of his plan encompasses an extremely ambitious charge – nothing easy, even utopian – but it shows the youthful aspirations of Frederic Ozanam were motivated by the sweeping force of his faith.

In a letter close friend and confidant Alexandre Dufieux, Frederic wrote, "*I have desired, without doubt, to consecrate my life to the service of the faith, but I consider myself a useless servant, a last minute worker*". And that is what he did. After being granted a Licentiate in Letters in 1829, he consecrated his life in service to the Truth, promising to make

a “*demonstration of the Catholic religion by way of the antiquity of historical beliefs, religious and moral*”. The conditions that happened to bring him in his years as a student to the Sorbonne impelled him to the quest for the truth.

At that time, professors used their academic positions as a platform to expound on their rationalist ideas, often in opposition to the Catholic Church. Confronted by that situation, his faith demanded a militant and even combative attitude. A great master of speech since his younger days at university, Frederic knew how to valiantly defend the fundamental truths of the Faith. He presented the Catholic Church as a paradigm for the restoration of society in his time. On his lifetime agenda, Frederic positioned his faith as the point of origin to obtain the principal objective of his actions. In an 1852 letter to his friend Charles Hommais, he declared:

“I am profoundly convinced of the interior reasoning of Christianity. I call on this daily experience that causes me to encounter, in the faith of my infancy, all the strength and all the light of my now mature age, all the sanctification of my domestic happiness, the consolation of my sorrows”.

In this same letter, is found one of his most famous quotes: “*We have two lives, one to look for the Truth and defend it, and the other to practice it*”.

For Frederic Ozanam, just as for Vincent de Paul – his master and patron – the key to their thinking resides in their profound faith, the faith they always considered a corollary to charity, without which, faith makes no sense. For that reason, when he directed himself to his young friends, Frederic’s counsel turned into a reprimand:

“The earth has gotten cold; it is we Catholics to whom corresponds the task of cheering on the vital warmth that dies out; it is us to whom corresponds the responsibility of initiating anew the great work of regeneration; it is us to whom corresponds the renewal of the era of the martyrs. Do we remain inert in the middle of a world that suffers and moans? And we, my dear friend, shall we do nothing to resemble those saints whom we love?”.

In that epoch of incredulity in which the ecclesial institution was deprecated, Frederic’s solidly anchored faith reaches its fullness in the bosom of the Church, or “**my Church**” as he loved to say. Faith and Charity are one, and the same can be said for that Church in which the poor consider themselves the stars, because they reveal the face of Christ. “*They are, for us, the images of that God we do not see, and since we know not how to love in another manner, we must love him in his people*”.

Frederic Ozanam was a wise man, in the broadest sense of the word. But in him, the enthusiasm for wisdom is equal with his desire to put this wisdom at the service of Christian Truth and, even better, to demonstrate by his efforts and in his university teachings, the natural alliance between faith and modern science. In 1830, at the age of 17, he revealed the first-fruits of his literary work "*The French Bee*", publishing, in five presentations, a study of "*The Truth of the Christian Religion*", examined through the testimony of all beliefs.

As all professors do, Frederic dreamed of a grand work to put forth the best of his ideas and beliefs. This opus was to be called "*The History of Christian Civilization among the Germans*" and the "*Establishment of Christianity in Germany*". In his own words, it deals with "a grand thing": it lays open Christianity by "*civilizing the barbarians with his teachings, conveying to them the inheritance of antiquity, creating – with the religious life – the political life, the arts, philosophy and the literature of the Middle Ages*". A second volume would be called: "*The State*" or the "Constitution of the Empire, from Charlemagne to Hohenstaufen and the Letters", with discussion of the formation of monastic schools and flowering of ecclesiastic literature. Both volumes were united with the common title of "*Germanic Studies*", and in 1849, the Gobert Grand Prize of the Academy of Inscriptions and Fine Arts was bestowed on this work.

The great thinkers and apologists of our time live in a society dominated by crude, prejudicial, and even dangerous ideas, more so than those which floated in the environment in which Frederic Ozanam lived in his years as a student and professor at the Sorbonne. This context offers a consideration to examine his thinking, doctrine and determined disposition, the model apologist of current truth. One such person, well versed in the thinking of Frederic Ozanam and having labored in his Archdiocese of San Francisco, California as Spiritual Advisor to the Conferences (and later as successor to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Prefect of the Congregation for the Defense of the Faith namely, William Cardinal Levada, declared recently at a gathering of those who seek to defend the Catholic faith:

"There has been no one to so eloquently articulate prayer, charity and intellectual clarity (apologetics) in defense of the Catholic faith in the 19th century, as Blessed Frederic did. And for that, he well merits being proclaimed today 'the patron of all apologists', since with his intercession; the combination of intellectual clarity and his testimony to charity make him an axis for the new evangelization".

Lacordaire had said of Frederic that "God desired for him a clerical heart in a life as man of the century. In the France of our time, no Christian loved the Church more than he, none felt more for its needs, nor

cried with more bitterness for the faults of its followers. None developed a more authentic and profound apostolate”.

Frederic Ozanam and the young group of founders quickly became aware that for the beloved Church in France, the ‘first daughter of the faith is charity’ and without it faith has no reason to exist. From that conviction came the Conferences of Charity preceded by the Conference of History. The first platform was created for venting passions against the enemies of the Church, and then developed into a group whose founders charged its batteries to kindle the faith with the light of charity. They began by recognizing that the worst poverty in the French society of their time was not material poverty – even though they knew it existed – but the poverty of faith. For above the material, intellectual and cultural miasma, society was immersed in a deep poverty of faith. For that reason, Frederic and his companions saw poverty in a wider range of needs and convinced themselves that all of those needs should be kept in consideration for the planning of new activities regarding the founding of the New Society that he described in one of the initial meetings as being:

“A Catholic, but laical Society; humble, but numerous; poor, but overloaded with those to console; and above all – at a time in which charitable associations have a mission so great to fulfill in behalf of awakening the faith, for support of the Church – the pacifying of the hatreds that divide mankind”.

Since its start, this association markedly bore immutable elements that stayed with Frederic Ozanam throughout his life and were incorporated into the principal objectives of the Conferences of Charity. And those elements were:

- “The plan to restore society under the guidance of Catholicism;
- the vision of an association of friends committed to work toward that goal;
- the decision to make charity and love the fundamental standard of life so as to strive through these for holiness;
- and without stipulating it explicitly, the self-contemplation by each member as a simple, but zealous, Christian, that is to say, a Lay person”.

For that reason, the vocation of the Vincentian, in the eyes of Ozanam was nothing more than to live the Gospel, in the way of profound faith and charity as a layperson.

For the lay concept of Church which he lived, defended and left for our legacy in his masterpiece called Conferences of Charity, he is regarded as the “*precursor of the present theology of the Laity*”, faithfully

following the one who was his mentor, St. Vincent de Paul, who was a precursor of the same concept in the 17th century Church. His great love for the Church, his engagement of the laity which he lived all his life, and passed on to us today, has continued and has been ratified by the present-day Church.

A current author, seen as an authority on Vincentian spirituality and history, noted in one of his recent writings: "***The Conferences of Charity were, in the 19th century, the appropriate lay version of the Congregation of the Mission***". In the opinion of Lacordaire, no one other than Frederic Ozanam knew how to comprehend and expound on the role of the laity in the Church, especially in an era when the Church still had not taken a position on this particular subject. Today, the Church has taken a forceful position on his matter, beginning in Vatican II under Pope Paul VI, and continued by Pope John Paul II in his exhortation *Christifideles Laici*.

The result is something allegorical that the principal founder of the Conferences of Charity (whom Lacordaire classified as a great lover, admirer and faithful servant of the Church in 19th century France) would so strongly assert himself for the preservation of that lay character in all his works. He demonstrated it clearly when he elected, for his state in life, to better the Church by serving as a simple lay person than as a minister of the priesthood. He greatly cherished his role as a lay man in the Church. And to its defense, he devoted himself to this work of the Church completely throughout his life, dedicating all his human resources from his place in society.

In this Year of Faith, Frederic Ozanam could well be proclaimed the ***Patron of Apologetics and Apologists***, for his labor in defense of the Truth and the Faith, and for his love for the Church within his special Lay standing, without lessening the summit of his ministerial nature.