

Would Ozanam join the St Vincent de Paul Society today?

*Reimagining his call
to faith, service and
advocacy in our times.*

Lecturer

Robert Fitzgerald

Productivity Commissioner
Adjunct Professor
Australian Catholic University

Respondent

Michael Liddy

President
Eastern Central Council

Ozanam Lecture 2013

Held at
Australian Catholic University
Central Hall, 20 Brunswick Street,
Fitzroy

Sunday 24 February 2013

The lecture is held annually in honour
of the St Vincent de Paul Society's founder



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

Blessed Frederic Ozanam
1813-1853



A message from the State President

Dear Friends

It is with pleasure that I present this printed version of the 16th annual Ozanam Lecture.

The lecture celebrates our founder Frederic Ozanam's spirit and the charism of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

This year's Ozanam Lecture *Would Ozanam join the St Vincent de Paul Society today? Reimagining his call to faith, service and advocacy in our times* was presented by Robert Fitzgerald, Productivity Commissioner and Adjunct Professor, Australian Catholic University.

Robert's lecture explores and identifies in both Frederic's time and his own, the challenges, the need and the resulting fundamental themes of leadership.

Our respondent, Michael Liddy, Eastern Central Council President, complemented the lecture bringing his own knowledge and experience of working within the Society.

We commend this publication to you.

God bless you all.

Tony Tome
State President – Victoria
St Vincent de Paul Society

Mission Statement

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

Our Vision

The St Vincent de Paul Society aspires to be recognised as a caring Catholic charity offering 'a hand up' to people in need.

We do this by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope, and encouraging them to take control of their own destiny.



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works



Robert Fitzgerald

A short biography

Robert Fitzgerald has recently been appointed as the Chair of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Advisory Board.

He has had over 30 years voluntary involvement in the community sector including formerly as National President of the Australian Council of Social Services. Previously he was NSW State President of the St Vincent de Paul Society having joined the Society whilst at university and has been a diocesan, regional and conference president. He is currently a pastoral care volunteer at Matthew Talbot Hostel in Sydney.

He holds an honorary doctorate from the Australian Catholic University where he is also an Adjunct Professor.

Would Ozanam join the St Vincent de Paul Society today?

Reimagining his call to faith, service and advocacy in our times

Robert Fitzgerald AM

Former NSW State President

Adjunct Professor Australian Catholic University

It is a great joy for me to be with you once again in Melbourne and it is a great honour to be asked to present this, the 16th annual Ozanam Lecture.

Without doubt in all my roles and in all the talks I am asked to present, it is in the company of Vincentians that I truly feel at home. I congratulate Tony Tome, State President and members of the State Council for continuing this great tradition in honour of our founder. I also wish to thank Michael Liddy, President, Eastern Central Council for being respondent to this paper.

Let me start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land and elders both past and present. This is especially important because of the St Vincent de Paul Society's long association with indigenous peoples. In doing so it is necessary to also acknowledge the enormous challenges that confront all of us as we struggle to reduce the level of indigenous disadvantage in our country and in this State. As a nation we will and should be judged on our commitment to rectifying the unacceptable conditions for indigenous Australians. Past and present wrongs remain to be addressed.

The Church and Society has a role to play in this national task both through advocacy and action, solidarity and support.

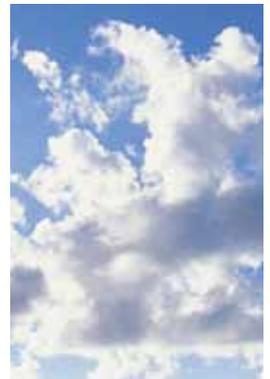
Given the extraordinary work the Society already undertakes you may well ask why do we need to re-imagine Frederic Ozanam's call to faith, service and advocacy? Why should we reflect on whether Ozanam would join our ranks if he were with us today?

The answer lies in the Society's need to continue to evolve and adapt to the changing circumstances of our times yet also to be faithful to the vision of our founder and the call of the Gospel.

To reflect and act in new ways requires both a commitment to progress yet a desire to remain faithful to the spirit and aspirations of our founders.

Embracing progress

Over my many years involvement with the Society I have always been amazed and often disappointed at the reluctance of some to critically analyse our performance as a faith-



“We can not be apathetic to the changing nature of poverty in our nation and the need for new approaches”

Robert Fitzgerald AM



“...Ozanam grew to love the poor because of the work he did and the relationships he formed.”

Robert Fitzgerald AM

based organisation and to adopt reforms when the evidence to do so is clear. Too often progress is seen as a threat or a negative reflection on past activities of members. Yet progress is the one thing that has allowed this great Society of men and women to grow into the international body that it is today.

In the book “The Spirit of the Society of St Vincent de Paul” published in Ireland in 1944 Charles Murphy said,

“Tradition and progress are simply two facets of the one problem. The spirit of progress provides the new works of a living body. The spirit of tradition infuses the old spirit into them. In retrospect all are seen to fit into one another to make one entity and one pattern, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle”

This notion is reflected well in our rule which calls us to embrace renewal:

Rule 1.6 Adaptation to a changing world

Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty...

Ozanam, a conservative in so many ways, was always conscious of the changing social and political context of his times. He embraced progress when he saw it as necessary to empower the poor and allow the Society to respond more effectively to the changing circumstances. From its inception the Society has been in a state of constant change as it has grown across the globe, responding to ever changing needs of the world’s most poor and the aspirations of its members and volunteers.

Today we can not afford to be apathetic in the face of new challenges both from governments and the community at large. We can not be apathetic to the changing nature of poverty in our nation and the need for new approaches. We can not remain unresponsive to the challenges facing our Church and its people.

We need to support leadership that can allow us to move forward with confidence, imbued by the tradition but not constrained by it. As Society members, employees and volunteers in Victoria are you prepared to move forward, to enthusiastically embrace a spirit of renewal and breathe new life into this community of faithful men and women?

Yet faithful to our founder’s call

To understand the true legacy of Ozanam, one needs first to understand the times within which he lived. We are aided in this task by the book, play and now movie Les Miserables. Written by Victor Hugo in the 1860s this tale portrays vividly the social, economic and political times

in which Ozanam was born and grew to adulthood. Ozanam was born after the first French Revolution of 1792 and died shortly after the final French Revolution of 1848. Interestingly Les Miserables depicts the unsuccessful June Rebellion of 1832, just one year before the founding of the St Vincent de Paul Society or, as it was then known, the Conference of Charity.

There was no nobleness in being poor, with poverty and criminality closely linked. The poor were either totally outcast or were enslaved in horrid conditions of the Industrial Revolution.

Importantly the masses rose up against not only the political establishment but also against the Catholic Church that was perceived to be as corrupt and oppressive as the ruling political and aristocratic classes. Whilst certain religious congregations had been formed to serve the needy such as the Daughters of Charity, the Church remained aloof from the common needs of the poor. The movement against the Church grew in strength as Ozanam entered university.

There are three remarkable points I wish to make about Ozanam, each of which is relevant today.

First, Ozanam’s motivation for forming the Society was not initially a love of the poor rather a determination to demonstrate the relevance of the Catholic Church in the face of sustained opposition. At first Ozanam gathered with friends as a Conference of History to promote a greater understanding of the Church. It was Sr Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity, who urged the service of the poor upon them, as they struggled to defend the Church and the group became the Conference of Charity.

However, my point is that Ozanam grew to love the poor because of the work he did and the relationships he formed. Indeed it is now clear that Ozanam’s great legacy was his desire for right relationships with his family, with his confreres and with the poor. His love of God and Church was strengthened because of his engagement with the poor. He grew in love and so too today men and women, young and old, grow in love through their relationships with each other and with the most vulnerable.

What are the relationships we seek to form?

Second, Ozanam commenced his life as a very conservative, devout Catholic. He lived at a time where the laity had no say and clericalism was absolute. Pope Leo XIII amply demonstrates this when he said, *“It is beyond dispute and quite unambiguously clear that two ranks exist in the Church that are of quite different nature, the pastor and the flock, in other words the leader and the people. The first of these two ranks has the rank of teaching, governing and directing people in life and establishing the necessary rules. The other has the duty of submitting itself to the former, obeying him, carrying out his orders and paying him honour.”*



Yet the Conference of Charity established by Ozanam was run by the laity. It was never under the control of the Bishops although Ozanam always sought their spiritual guidance. It was above all a democratic institution. Today, we can say that it reflected the spirit of the 2nd Vatican Council that was meant to revolutionise the Church more than 130 years later. In essence, it represented a model of Church where all the faithful were the People of God, even though Ozanam never used that term.

Perhaps the new Code of Canon Law of 1983 says it all, *“The Christian faithful are those who have been incorporated into Christ through Baptism, have been constituted as the People of God. For this reason, since they have become sharers in God’s priestly, prophetic and royal office in their own manner they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfil in the world, in accordance with the condition proper to each one.”*

We are Church and we are called upon to witness to the world the saving love of Jesus Christ. We are called to model a Church in which all are treated equally, sharing the responsibility for the Church and its future.

What is the model of church we wish to develop and demonstrate?

Third, was the growth in Ozanam’s quest for justice. Ozanam was not born into a church where social teachings were ever taught. Individuals may have proclaimed the Gospel message of justice but the Church had no set of social teachings and was obsessed by the rituals,

devotions and the exercise of clerical power and privilege. It was not until long after Ozanam’s death that Leo XIII in 1891 issued the famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, extolling the rights and dignity of the worker. This was the first of the great social teachings of our era.

Despite this Ozanam became a champion of social justice especially towards the end of his life, reflected in his writings in his magazine *The New Era*. His desire to raise controversial issues was not welcome by some conservatives within the Church but his relationship with the poor, the continued oppression of the weak and the impotence of the State moved him to speak out. To address the causes of poverty, to seek pensions, to stop injustices. As he said *“You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis: you must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of long term improvement.”*

What are the injustices we wish to put right?

Ozanam was motivated by the twin goals of love and justice, through a Church fully engaged with the poor. He believed that salvation was found in encountering Christ in the poor and it was in serving them in love and justice that we serve and honour our God. He believed in power of loving relationships. He believed in a loving Church.

Would Ozanam find in us today a Society of women and men who believe in love, justice and faith as evidenced in and through our relationships with each other and the most disadvantaged?



“Ozanam was motivated by the twin goals of love and justice, through a Church fully engaged with the poor.”

Robert Fitzgerald AM



“You know that our society is a divided society with too many living on the economic and social margins and too many struggling with the day to day challenge of surviving.”

Robert Fitzgerald AM

Our vocation

These notions are demonstrated in the purpose of the Society as reflected in the rule.

Rule 1.2 The Vincentian Vocation

The vocation of the Society’s members is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love ... Vincentians serve in hope.

For Vincentians we do this through worship, advocacy and service. The guiding principles are those given to us by Ozanam and articulated by the prophet Micah...*to act with justice, to love with tenderness and to walk humbly with your God.*

We are a faith-based body of men and women who believe that Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection has meaning in our own lives and the world today. We centre our belief in the Eucharist and come together as a Eucharistic community. In addition as a community of believers we are called by the Gospel to be a people of service. Put simply as the people of God we are Church, present to each other, present to the most vulnerable, present to the world.

At the heart of our works rests the notion of justice and love.

Frederic Ozanam said, *“The order of society is based on two virtues, justice and charity. However, justice presupposes a lot of love already for one needs to love a man a great deal in order to respect the rights which limit our rights, and his liberty which hampers our liberty. Justice has its limits whereas charity knows none.”*

Sr Rosalie Rendu said, *“Be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor.”*

Respect is a prerequisite for justice and love.

Empowering relationships

Do we respect those with whom we engage in our services and works? Do we really believe that they have within them and through our support the capacity to take control of their lives and make worthwhile choices for themselves and their families? Do we really want them to stand free of dependency on charities such as Vinnies?

The greatest challenge for the St Vincent de Paul Society is to build capacity and resilience within those we engage, not merely to provide aid and assistance in a manner that helps to sustain them in poverty and at the margins of society. In some ways the Society, like welfare systems generally, can become part of the problem rather than the solution. In particular we can increase dependency and reduce the capacity and resilience of those with whom we

engage. It is about seeking to identify the real causes of disadvantage in the lives of people not simply rendering first aid on an ongoing basis, as important as that might be from time to time. It is giving the necessary tools to people to allow them to make choices in their lives that will improve their welfare and wellbeing.

Rule 1.10 Promotion of self sufficiency

Vincentians endeavour to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and those of their local community

To achieve the above we must be open to forming empowering relationships where and as appropriate. Our rule calls on us to do so.

Rule 1.9 Empathy

Vincentians endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship....their hearts beat with the heart beat of the poor

When is the last time your heart beat with the heartbeat of the poor?

We must place relationships at the core of our work. Ozanam showed us that relationships are at the centre of our ministry and mission. Relationships grounded in love, justice and respect. The measure of the success of our works will be the quality of our relationships.

What is the nature of the relationships we seek with vulnerable families and children?

What are the relationships we wish to form with those experiencing homelessness or living with mental illness?

What are the relationships we seek with the lonely, the house bound and the socially isolated?

Breaking down social isolation

There is much debate in our nation about the true level of poverty and how we should measure it. Yet, you know the reality of poverty in this State, within which you live and work. You know the difficulties low income families face and the traumas associated with long term unemployment, the single greatest cause of poverty. You know that our society is a divided society with too many living on the economic and social margins and too many struggling with the day to day challenge of surviving.

Whilst financial poverty is real and must be addressed, the greatest poverty in Australia today is the poverty of exclusion. Those who do not feel they fit within mainstream Australia, unable to access the economic and social



benefits of this nation. People with mental illness, isolated and home bound aged persons, indigenous youth and families, newly arrived refugees, homeless men and women and people with disabilities make up just some who are overrepresented at the margins.

Some in community see them as 'helpless and hopeless'. We do not. We reject absolutely this despairing and diminishing approach. They are our neighbours and our fellow citizens entitled to fully participate in all that this prosperous nation has to offer. They have a right to be treated with respect and dignity

Rule 1.3 Any form of personal help

No work of charity is foreign to the society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation, and promotes dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions

Of course for many who are isolated in the community through loneliness and a lack of family or friendship support, the giving of our companionship is the most important gift we can give. Mental health issues now dominate the causes of distress seen by Society members on a daily basis. Often they need our acceptance and friendship, as well as good quality support and services. They need to be referred to sources of support where necessary.

However even in these circumstances, a greater effort to bring these people into contact with surrounding community activities, build up community connections and integrate them into

the life of the neighbourhood could be even more beneficial. Breaking down exclusion and isolation should be at the heart of our endeavours. Engagement with and inclusion in the community should be our goal.

Person centred support

Today there is much angst about our involvement in home visitation but for me what we are really talking about is support and assistance provided to families and individuals wherever we encounter them. That is what I call Person Centred Support. Ideally that is within their own home, where we meet families and individuals on their terms and in their environment yet increasingly this encounter may initially or always be at the centre, in a special work or another setting altogether.

What is essential is that we must place the person or family at the centre of our attention. It is about ensuring that they not us are at the heart of our concerns. It is actively listening to their story, hearing their real needs, and responding in meaningful ways.

We know that today mental health issues, family breakdown, drug addictions and social isolation are at the heart of many of the calls for assistance we receive. Many have suffered trauma, violence and oppression in their countries of origin. Many live their lives in isolation and loneliness.

Yet often our responses seem routine, pre-conceived and only aimed at dealing with



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the symptoms not the cause. Too frequently it seems that our engagement is one-off and very transactional in nature. There is a role for emergency assistance and this role has always been part of the works of the Society. Providing material support matters and helps but what underlies that request for assistance may be far greater and more significant. We must therefore be open to allowing those issues to emerge.

In this context it is sometimes appropriate to say no to a particular request where to fulfil that request simply builds unhealthy dependency or allows the person to diminish their dignity and self-respect by perpetuating a falsehood. This is not about being judgemental. It is about ensuring our support is founded on mutual trust and respect, as well as good stewardship of the resources entrusted to the Society. Importantly we must be honest in our dealings and prepared to explain our reasons.

Ultimately it is about bringing people hope, as well as help. It is about enabling them to break free of the cycle of disadvantage, not just coping with a barely sustainable form of existence. It is about seeking to ensure that they are a part of, not apart from, the rest of society and the economic and social life of this nation. It is about enhancing their dignity not their dependency.

These are some questions I often have asked Vincentians to consider about their encounters with those in need;

- Do we respond to their needs or our preconceived views of their needs?
- Do we make people feel better about themselves and more hopeful?
- Do we empower people to take greater control of their lives?
- Do we build capacity, skills and confidence in people?
- Do we build resilience in people to withstand the hard times?
- Do we reduce the level of exclusion and isolation?
- Do we support and nurture people through the darkest of times?
- Do we celebrate their joys and victories?

Even greater challenges await

If I may, I wish to push the boundaries of our thinking just a little further. In Melbourne, where we meet today, there is a wonderful charity Winteringham that provides integrated services to those experiencing homelessness. The founding principle as I understand it is simple yet breathtaking ie *No one who encounters their service need ever experience homelessness again*. On this basis a whole of person, whole of life service has been developed. How would our

services change if we too were to ask such questions?

How would our approach change if we said that no isolated elderly person who encounters the Society need ever experience loneliness again?

How would our works change if we said that no child that is seen by the Society need ever go hungry again?

How would our approach change if we said that no person living with mental illness and pushed to the margins of society who contacts the Society need ever be without friendship and support again?

I believe the next phase for our Society is to ask these big questions and to find new and creative ways to respond. However we should only be so brave if we are prepared to re-imagine our works and services, to engage in empowering relationships and to be joined by new volunteers, members and employees who will challenge us at every turn.

Our advocacy

Just as faith and service is central to our charter, so too is advocacy. Advocacy is an essential characteristic of the Society and has its roots in the advocacy of Ozanam.

He challenged existing doctrines and policies of his time that caused poverty and disadvantage. He rallied against those who sought to undermine Christian values and the Catholic Church. He sought a society based on what we now refer to as the common good of mankind.

He always acted but he also advocated.

So too must we act and advocate. There are many issues that should concern all of us today: house affordability, entrenched long term unemployment, mental health services, growing inequality, treatment of asylum seekers and refugees.

The Society's advocacy can be a powerful voice provided it is always:

- Based on sound research and contemporary knowledge
- Informed by the experiences of the Society's works and members
- Shaped by the Christian values of the gospel and the church's social teachings
- Driven by the common good not political aspiration
- Respectful of others views and the challenges facing decision makers

Most importantly in our advocacy the dignity of those we serve must be upheld and promoted. Our respect for them, must be evident. Our belief in them, unambiguous. Our love of them, unfaltering.



Conclusion

The answer to the opening question as to whether Frederic Ozanam would join the Society today is one that only each of you can respond to. For you are the Society, just as you are Church. As Ozanam lived, shaped by his tumultuous times, in politics, Church and the State he increasingly saw faith, justice and love as inseparable. He saw them as fundamental to the emergence of a relevant Church and a new

society. He wrote of them often in his publication, *The New Era*.

If you believe that faith, justice and love are central to your work as a Vincentian and if these are present in your works and Vincentian activities then surely he would join us. However if they are not present then surely the reverse must be so.

May the love of God sustain and enrich each of you and the visions of Frederic Ozanam inspire and faithfully guide you in the doing of His works.



“...for many who are isolated in the community through loneliness and a lack of family or friendship support, the giving of our companionship is the most important gift we can give.”

Robert Fitzgerald AM

St Vincent de Paul Society – Excerpts from the modern Rule

Rule 1.6 Adaptation to a changing world

Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty

Rule 1.2 The Vincentian Vocation

The vocation of the Society’s members is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love... Vincentians serve in hope.

Rule 1.8 Reverence for the poor

Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listen to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity

Rule 1.3 Any form of personal help

No work of charity is foreign to the society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation, and promotes dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions

Rule 1.9 Empathy

Vincentians endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship... their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor

Rule 1.10 Promotion of self sufficiency

Vincentians endeavour to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and those of their local community

Rule 1.11 Concerns for deeper needs and spirituality

Vincentians are sincerely concerned with the deeper needs and the spiritual wellbeing of those they help, always observing a profound respect for their conscience and the faith they believe in, listening and understanding with their hearts, beyond both words and appearances...

Rule 1.12 Gratitude to those we visit

Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognise that the fruit of their labours springs not from themselves, but especially from God and from the poor they serve.



“If you believe that faith, justice and love are central to your work as a Vincentian and if these are present in your works and Vincentian activities then surely he [Ozanam] would join us.”

Robert Fitzgerald AM

St Vincent de Paul Society – Reimagining Our Works

Family and Person Centred Support

Whenever we encounter families or individuals, whether in their home, our centres or elsewhere, in our engagements:

- Do we respond to their needs or our preconceived views of their needs?
- Do we only concern ourselves with the symptoms or are we open to explore the causes of distress?
- Do we place the family or individual at the centre of our concerns?
- Do we make people feel better about themselves and offer hope?
- Do we empower people to take greater control of their lives?
- Do we build resilience in people to withstand the hard times?
- Do we reduce their level of exclusion and isolation?
- Do we have the courage to say no with honesty?
- Do we have the courage to trust?

To respond to these questions we may well need to do things differently

- Why can't we develop ways so that families and individuals do not have to retell their stories, over and over again to strangers?
 - Why can't we develop conferences which do different tasks some doing short term assistance others concentrating on long term support and follow up?
 - Why don't we develop better networks with other agencies that can help people we are unable to or work in collaboration with others who can provide specialised ongoing support or services?
 - Why can't we give people something special just for them, when they are feeling down and out, as a mark of our regard and respect eg money for a new dress, or a hairdo or a night out? Something just to make them feel better. Not something they have had to ask for?
 - If we want to help children in families, rather than giving vouchers and food parcels over time why don't we provide a scholarship for children to meet certain costs especially at the beginning of school terms?
 - Are we prepared to offer spiritual support where appropriate and are we prepared to accept the risk of friendship with those we encounter?
- Are we prepared to undertake the training and formation necessary to increase our skills to be even more effective in our work?

But we may need to move beyond our current forms of work

- Why can't we operate integrated family support services providing a more holistic approach to the support of families?
- Why don't we create Vinnies Women's Clubs or Networks that could be formed to provide a sense of belonging and connectedness for vulnerable mums and women generally?
- Why don't we embrace Men's' Sheds or similar activities to ease the stress of loneliness and isolation experienced by so many older men living alone.
- Why can't we fund people to attend vocational courses or training programs to help develop their job skills or fund attendances at programs to deal with alcohol, gambling or other addictions?
- Why don't we use Youth camps more frequently for even greater ongoing support of young people and establish state wide mentoring programs and youth support services?
- Why don't we create local support networks for the elderly, to provide community / neighbourhood based support for those experiencing loneliness and isolation?
- Why can't we re-imagine our Centres as centres of community support?
- Why can't we have companion programs for those with mental health disabilities in every part of the State, not just some areas, and develop significant special works for the care of those living with long term mental illness?
- Why aren't we a provider of supported social or community housing or in collaboration with such providers?



Michael Liddy

A short biography

Michael had a 35 year career as a forensic scientist, first in NSW, then in Victoria. He has taught forensic science at three universities (La Trobe, Charles Sturt and Deakin), at each of which he held honorary appointments as Adjunct Professor at various times.

Michael has been a member of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria for over 12 years, as a member of the Donvale Conference. He has been President of the Eastern Central Council for over 3½ years and, as such, a member of the Society's Victorian State Council. His particular interests are in the social justice advocacy role of the Society, enhancing the mission of members of the Society, and supporting initiatives to help those in greatest need in the inner suburbs and through homelessness.

Response to Ozanam Lecture

Michael Liddy

President, Eastern Central Council

Where is Frederic Ozanam living today?

- Just down the road, in one of the Collingwood high rises?
- A bit further south with 15 others in a five room old boarding house in South Melbourne?
- Probably in student digs in the inner suburbs of one of our cities!
- In 'The Block' in Redfern? (I don't mean the TV program: I'm referring to the infamous indigenous housing area in inner Sydney)
- In the Aboriginal camp in the riverbed of the Todd River in Alice Springs?
- Amongst unemployed young people of our newly independent neighbours in Dili, Timor Leste?
- In Soweto township, South Africa?
- In the slums of Mumbai?

What would he think of the state of our society?

I don't think any of us could argue that we Victorians, Australians or citizens of the world live in a just and equitable society. Whilst certain social injustices of Frederic's time may have eased, others have evolved or worsened in ways none of us can be proud of.

Remember: "*The poor you have with you always...*" (Matthew 26:11, also Luke and John)

So what would Frederic do, now that he is living somewhere here in inner Melbourne?

IF he joined a local conference, would he do anything other than home visitations or helping on one of our soup vans?

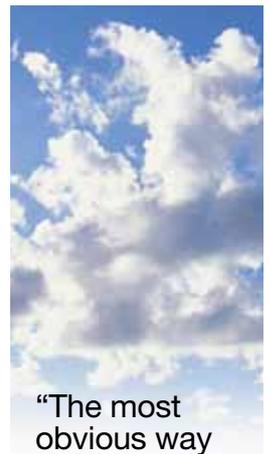
As Robert Fitzgerald highlighted, there are many ways in which Vincentians can live out the challenge of responding to the needs of the poor, disadvantaged, homeless and marginalised of our society.

Embracing progress

Did Frederic Ozanam want the Society he founded with his fellow students to stand still when he died in 1853? Frederic didn't just accept conditions as they were in Paris and France in 1833, he responded/reacted to them, those conditions were catalysts for change. He worked to grow the Society he founded as a 20 year old in 1833 – why? To reach out to even more of the poor, needy, dispossessed and homeless. To better understand the extent of their condition, in order to advocate more effectively for more of them.

To quote Frederic:

"You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis. You must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long term improvement."



"The most obvious way of responding to needy causes is to donate to a charity whose focus is on a specific category of need."

Michael Liddy



“Work for the poor, deprived or suffering is the first dimension. The second dimension is the spiritual development of members, and the third dimension is that of mutual support, inspiration and Vincentian friendship.”

Michael Liddy

So here we have our mission as Vincentians set out for us, as if we didn't already have it identified for us two millennia ago.

Our purpose

The document which guides and informs members of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia, as throughout the world, is called “**The Rule**”. The *Purpose and Scope of Our Service* states very succinctly

“The vocation of the Society’s members...is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love...Vincentians serve in hope.”
(*The Rule*, 1.3)

For Vincentians, we do this through worship, community and service. We are a faith-based body of women and men who believe that Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection have meaning in our own lives and the world today.

Our approach

How accepting of the poor and disadvantaged is Australian society? Certainly governments have a role and responsibilities, at each level from federal to state to local government. We elect them, we pay taxes, we can influence priorities but that's only part of our response.

There are many welfare organisations, each of which endeavours to respond to a particular segment of the population in need, both within our own country and community, as well as in the international community of which we are part. None of us would claim that the job of any of those organisations is anywhere near done.

The most obvious way of responding to needy causes is to donate to a charity whose focus is on a specific category of need. Clearly, that can only ever be a start, no matter what is the quantum of our contribution. Is it a cause that we can or should support by giving of our time? By giving of our talents? Those are decisions for each of us to make in the light of our priorities, our commitment to those in need, and our talents. For some of us, our giving is directed through the St Vincent de Paul Society, sometimes as well as through other agencies. Irrespective of the organisation through which we direct our own efforts, the challenges we face in responding to Christ's call to be charitable remain constant.

If we need some motivation, Frederic Ozanam also said:

“Yours must be a work of love, of kindness, you must give your time, your talents, yourselves.”

In an Annual Report for the St Vincent de Paul Society in South Australia, a home visitor said:

“What I do feel certain of is, that every time I am welcomed into someone’s home, every time I am invited into sharing someone’s story, I know I am privileged to be a volunteer with Vinnies.”

The key words in this statement are **privilege**, **welcome** and **sharing**.

How should we approach those who seek our help?

Again, “**The Rule**” (1.8) helps to inform us:

“Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listen to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity.”

New poverty

Robert Fitzgerald's professional responsibilities have provided him with a rare opportunity to study Australians affected by a range of social injustices and disabilities, and to offer constructive recommendations to governments and to us, the community, as to how these challenges might be addressed. As he has said, *“Whilst financial poverty is real and must be addressed, the greatest poverty in Australia today is the poverty of exclusion... People with mental illness, isolated and home bound aged persons, indigenous youth and families, newly arrived refugees, homeless men and women and people with disabilities make up just some who are overrepresented at the margins.”* I think many of us would recognise such people as figuring prominently amongst those seeking the help of the St Vincent de Paul Society, and of other agencies, here in Victoria, let alone throughout Australia.

If we need any reassurance about the relevance of any form of help that we might personally want to give, “**The Rule**” (1.3) tells us:

*“No work of charity is foreign to the society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation, and promotes **dignity and personal integrity** in all their dimensions”.*

Again, we are reminded to respect those who seek our help. From respect for them as fellow humans we endeavour to understand their condition, so as to better and more effectively offer ‘a hand up, not a hand out’. That hand up can start to be more sustainable if we can advocate to change conditions which give rise to poverty, homeless, unemployment etc. That is no doubt more challenging, particularly for individuals, but advocating collectively does sometimes achieve something. One of the strengths of the St Vincent de Paul Society is its advocacy, at local, state and, particularly, federal



government levels. How involved or participative are we in the research into the situations of the poor, needy and disadvantaged, so that we can identify the effective ways to advocate – who to? Seeking what change? At what cost, both economic and social?

What if social change to improve the lot of the disadvantaged means a cut back in what we benefit from as members of a well to do community or ‘commonwealth’? Sure, all of us ‘donate’ to many causes – at some ‘economic cost’. Does the current public debate about refugees and asylum seekers tell us anything about the preparedness of Australian society to respond to genuine asylum seekers, in significant numbers, from the numerous refugee camps in Africa, the Middle East and Asia?

Re-imagining his call to faith, service and advocacy

It is easy to respond to the call through service, a bit more challenging to do so through advocacy, we tend to leave that to experts but what is the point if we don’t undertake everything we do by being ever mindful of our faith?

It has recently been pointed out to us that all three dimensions of the Society are experienced by members, irrespective of how frequently their conferences meet. Work for the poor,

deprived or suffering is the first dimension. The second dimension is the spiritual development of members, and the third dimension is that of mutual support, inspiration and Vincentian friendship.

Conclusion

So would Frederic join the Society here in Victoria today? I hope so. In fact, I’ve got an application form here for him. I just hope he’s OK with the police security check.

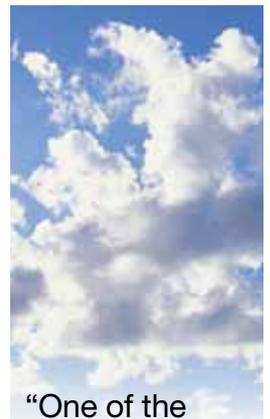
I think Robert Fitzgerald has posed a series of questions for us, the answers to which are not as simple as first they appear. The answers are many and various, at community and personal levels. The start of our answer must come from within – how do I put myself in Frederic Ozanam’s shoes in my bit of Australia, here and now? Having reflected on that, and on the Gospels, how can I participate in significant change, for the better?

Are we building relationships with those who seek our help, so that we can understand their needs?

Again, quoting Frederic Ozanam

“The poor person is a unique person of God’s fashioning with an inalienable right to respect.”

Thank you, Robert, for a stimulating and thought-provoking presentation this afternoon.



“One of the strengths of the St Vincent de Paul Society is its advocacy...”

Michael Liddy



Ozanam Lecturers and Respondents



Each year a guest lecturer is invited to address an audience and raise their community consciousness on a contemporary social justice issue.

- 1997 Sir James Gobbo** Governor of Victoria
Respondent: Betti Knott, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.
- 1999 Archbishop (now Cardinal) George Pell** Archbishop of Melbourne
Respondent: John Moore, National President, St Vincent de Paul Society
- 2000 Sir Gerard Brennan** Chief Justice, High Court of Australia
Respondent: Susan Campbell, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.
- 2001 Betti Knott** Director Operations, Archdiocese of Atlanta, USA
Respondent: Tony McCosker, Director, Ozanam Community
- 2002 Professor John Molony** Professor of History and Author, Australian National University
Respondent: Morag Fraser, Editor, Eureka Street
- 2003 Helen Johnston** Director, Combat Poverty Agency, Ireland
Respondent: Fr Mark Raper, Provincial, Australian and New Zealand Province of the Jesuits
- 2004 Fr Frank Brennan SJ** Associate Director, UNIYA and Author
Respondent: Sr Libby Rogerson, Co-ordinator of Social Justice and Director of Caritas, Diocese of Parramatta
- 2005 Moira Kelly AO** Executive Director, Children First Foundation
Respondent: Fr Peter Norden, Policy Director, Jesuit Social Services
- 2006 Fr Gerald A Arbuckle SM** Co-director of the Refounding and Pastoral Development Unit, NSW
Respondent: Julie Morgan, Promoter of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation for the Franciscan Friars
- 2007 Dr John Honner** Director, Edmund Rice Community Services
Respondent: Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council
- 2008 Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez SDB** President, Caritas Internationalis
Respondent: Christine Boyle, Barrister and member, St Vincent de Paul Society
- 2009 Dr Rosanna Scutella** Ronald Henderson Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research and The Brotherhood of St Laurence
Respondent: Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council
- 2010 Fr Richard Benson CM** Vincentian Father, USA
Respondent: Catherine Collins, VincentCare Victoria Board
- 2011 Fr Desmond de Sousa CSsR** Redemptorist Priest and Professor of Catholic Social Teaching, India
Respondent: Maria Minto Cahill, Membership and Development Advisory Committee member and Flemington Conference President
- 2012 Janet Buhagiar**
 Director Social Policy, Department of the Chief Minister, Northern Territory Government
Respondent: Teresa Wilson, Director Archdiocesan Office for Youth, Victoria & Director, VincentCare Victoria Board
- 2013 Robert Fitzgerald AM**
 Former NSW State President; Adjunct Professor Australian Catholic University
Respondent: Michael Liddy, President, Eastern Central Council



Ozanam Lecture

The annual Ozanam Lecture celebrates the spirit of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and the good works of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Frederic Ozanam wrote:

"Yours must be a work of love, of kindness, you must give your time, your talents, yourselves. The poor person is a unique person of God's fashioning with an inalienable right to respect."

"You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis: You must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long term improvement."

The lecture is open to the public and welcomes all interested individuals. Each year a guest lecturer is invited to address an audience and raise their community consciousness on a contemporary social justice issue.

The selected lecturer is a person actively involved in practical work with the disadvantaged and marginalised (those God loves most). But is also an advocate for social justice through their words or examples. This is to reflect the charism of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his companions and our patron, St Vincent de Paul.

The Society has been privileged to have a distinguished list of lecturers and respondents over the years. We are grateful to all for sharing their experiences while also raising the social consciousness of us all to our obligations in continuing to journey along Frederic Ozanam's vision.



The St Vincent de Paul Society began in 1833 with a 20 year old French university student named Frederic Ozanam. At that time the people of France were experiencing tremendous political and social upheaval including the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and unjust employment practices.

Ozanam gathered a group of colleagues and began responding in practical ways to the poverty and hardships he saw around him by visiting people in their homes, offering friendship and practical support such as a load of wood. Today this practice of 'home visitation' still remains a core activity of the St Vincent de Paul Society's members and volunteers.

The Society in Australia was founded by Fr Gerald Ward at St Francis' Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne on 5 March 1854. The Society is one of the largest and most cost-effective welfare organisations in Australia.

In Victoria the St Vincent de Paul Society consists of over 12,000 members and volunteers who assist more than 660,000 people in need each year. The specialist arm of the Society, VincentCare Victoria, provides professional assistance to people with more complex needs in aged care, accommodation and support services as well as supported employment for people with a disability.



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