

How would Ozanam respond to the social challenges of today?

Lecturer

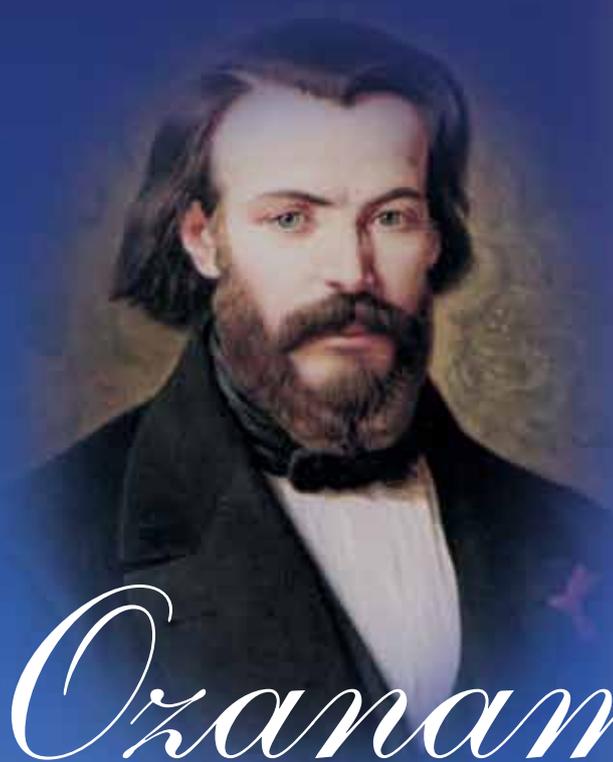
Bernie Geary OAM

Principal Commissioner
Commission for Children
and Young People

Respondent

Frank Purcell

President
Goulburn Valley Regional Council
St Vincent de Paul Society



Ozanam Lecture 2014

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

Sunday 23 February 2014

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 17th annual Ozanam Lecture.

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

This year's Ozanam Lecture *How would Ozanam respond to the social challenges of today?* was presented by Bernie Geary OAM, Principal Commissioner, Commission for Children and Young People.

Bernie shared with us his long and varied experiences with troubled young people, often outside of a nurturing environment. In particular, Bernie challenged Society members to more fully understand the lives and struggles of disadvantaged children, youths and young adults and, through that new understanding, to try to respond constructively to their needs when they seek the Society's assistance.

Our respondent, Frank Purcell, Goulburn Valley Regional 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

Bernie Geary

A short biography

Bernie has worked with vulnerable young people and their families for over 40 years, having been Victoria's first outreach youth worker in West Heidelberg, he then managed the Brosnan Centre, was CEO of Jesuit Social Services and worked with the Society as manager of the Membership & Development department.

Commencing in 2005 as Victoria's inaugural Child Safety Commissioner Bernie worked hard for eight years to enhance the safety and wellbeing of Victoria's children.

In March 2013 Bernie commenced as the Principal Commissioner, Commission for Children and Young People. The role of the Commission is to promote continuous improvement and innovation in policy and practice in relation to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable; and the provision of out of home care services for children.



How would Ozanam respond to the social challenges of today?

Bernie Geary OAM

Principal Commissioner

Commission for Children and Young People

I feel truly honoured to have been asked to deliver this Ozanam Lecture and to be included in such an illustrious group of people who have delivered this lecture in the past. This is far beyond anything I could have imagined when I first started out working with people in dire need of support, particularly young people who are so most often disenfranchised by the systems that control their lives.

I knew so little then about what was the best thing to do to support these young people and their families and in the intervening decades of involvement found that they were the teachers and I was the pupil. I discovered, as so many have before me, including Frederic Ozanam and Vincent de Paul, that people don't really care too much how much you know only how much you care. For me this is what the St Vincent de Paul Society stands for, care and love of others.

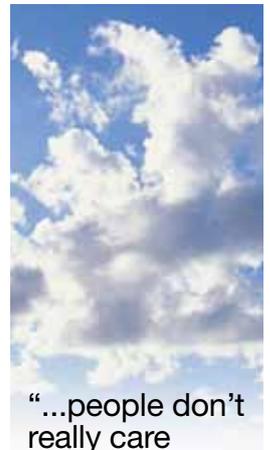
I do have some recent involvement with the St Vincent de Paul Society as manager of Membership & Development and during this time, prior to my current role as Commissioner for Children and Young People, I developed a deep regard for the members of the Society who are inspired to volunteer their time to alleviate the suffering of others in the tradition of Frederic Ozanam and St Vincent de Paul.

In reflecting on the words of those who have gone before me I was struck by the reflection of last year's orator, Robert Fitzgerald, who pointed out that Frederic Ozanam originally was not so moved by the needs of the poor but rather the need to defend the Church's relevance in the face of strident criticism against its alignment with the political and aristocratic classes.

It was in fact a fellow member of his theological discussion group who challenged Frederic to "do something" about the issues he so eloquently debated. His move to practical support was born out of this challenge and this is something that resonates for me.

In all my time working with those in need of support I have always had the words of Luke's Gospel in the back of my mind, "faith without good works is dead" and I note that last year in response to Robert Fitzgerald, Michael Liddy pointed out that Frederic Ozanam did not accept the conditions as they were in Paris and France in 1833, he responded and reacted to them.

This challenge still exists for us, not to just accept the conditions we find exist for those in need, the necessary consequence of the tight financial and fiscal conditions of our time. Not



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Bernie Geary

to accept the interpretation of the conditions of those in need from the various political and social commentators, that prevail in our electronic and print media.

In the vein of TS Elliot we must find ourselves back in the place where we first started and see it yet again for the first time a consequence of our constant questioning of ourselves and our environment. In the spirit of Frederic Ozanam we must “not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis”. Rather we must “study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long term improvement”.

The question I have been asked to address is “How would Ozanam respond to the social challenges of today?” Firstly I am sure, from my reading of his life and times, he would be driven by the need to first understand rather than judge.

A friend of mine, who was ordained a priest in the late sixties and worked in parishes in the 1970s before leaving and pursuing another vocation, told me of his training for the role of “preacher” which he said was based on four solid foundations, Koinonia Fellowship, Diaconia Service, Kerygma Message and Eucharistia Communion and sharing. In other words before anyone is able to receive your message you must first establish a relationship, then provide some meaningful service after which not only can you share the message but you can ensure that your message is relevant to them because it is informed by the basis of the relationship.

There is then something to share and celebrate. This is why the street corner preachers have so few people around listening to what they have to say. As in all therapeutic interventions, the relationship is everything and in the face of the rapport that is established anything is possible but for me the real message is “do something” that will make a difference in the lives of those we serve. Be generous in support and refrain from judgements.

We must never forget how hard it is for people to “receive” without the ability to give back. We know from our own experiences that it is often much more difficult to receive than it is to give, so in seeking to understand let us appreciate the place that those in need find themselves, being dependent upon the generosity of others.

So Frederic would first want to “know” firsthand the difficulties that people face and their

circumstances. My best guess would be that he would be asking a lot of questions about the issues such as indigenous disadvantage and why it is still far more likely that indigenous Australians in 2014 live in poverty, die younger and be imprisoned, than anyone else in Australia.

He would be asking why in a country as affluent as Australia, 1 in 100 Australians need to use government funded specialist homelessness services.

He would also want to question the way in which the elders of our society, our aging, are treated and would find it hard to understand the language of policy makers that use terms such as “the burden of aging” and fail to acknowledge the value of old people and source their wisdom and understanding.

He would be bemused by the political handling of asylum seekers and be asking why it is that a country such as Australia could be so apparently lacking in compassion and driven by xenophobic fear.

He would be strong and compassionate in his call for a substantial response to the needs of those with mental illness and the need to find a better way to assist.

He would exhort us today much the same way he did in 1833 “Yours must be a work of love, of kindness, you must give your time, your talents, yourselves” reminding us that “the poor person is a unique person of God’s fashioning with an inalienable right to respect”.

Frederic Ozanam would ensure that the focus of the Society was one based on compassion. He would not be waiting for the poor to come to him, he would be out among those in need, he would respond from what he heard firsthand from those in need, not be driven so much by the social commentators but driven by the understanding developed from walking a mile in their shoes. I can imagine him exhorting the members to:

“Imagine if you had to live on the streets with no reliable source of income because of your inability to get a job; imagine the feelings generated by your own inability to present yourself as others do, because of your lack of access to a shower and regular change of clothes.”



“Imagine living day to day with the stigma you felt by the condition you found yourself in; imagine feeling constantly patronised and looked down on unable to look others in the eye for fear of being judged or set upon.”

“Imagine living every day with the dark cloud of depression casting a shadow over every aspect of your life.”

“Imagine the feeling of inadequacy of a father out of work and unable to provide for his family.”

“Imagine the despair of a young person whose family is disintegrating and is placed in the care of the State, who is moved from residential care settings and has no constant adult reference point.”

“Imagine if you can the hopelessness of those in our community who live from day to day, hour to hour, with no sense of security and the constant fear of being abused and assaulted by others.”

Frederic Ozanam would be challenging the Society to “live the compassion needed” and to speak up and speak out in solidarity with those in need most of community support. He would be reminding us that it is when we are criticized for our uncompromising views on the

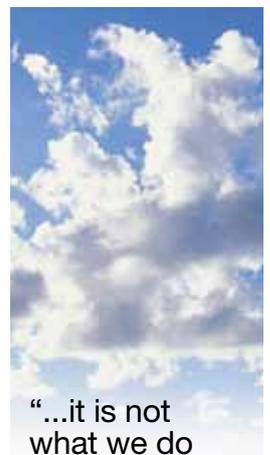
needs of the poor that we are most likely to be “doing the work we are called to do”.

I can say with absolute conviction and after 30 odd years working in this area that it is not what we do that matters as much as why we do what we do. Mother Teresa reminded us once that “the need for love in the world is greater than the need for food”. The St Vincent de Paul Society that was founded over 160 years ago is based on that truth and not only that but the thing that will constantly drive our efforts is our own need to “make a difference”.

I cannot recall a time when I really knew what the answers were for the people I worked with, but I can vividly recall the feelings of gratitude expressed to me when I just let myself respond to others in an open and non-judgmental way seeking the answer from them.

Frederic Ozanam was a model of this behaviour and he was careful in the language he used when talking of those in need. This I believe is a lesson for us all, because the language we use is determined by the thoughts we have and lead in turn to the actions we take, which form our habits, which create the brand we live by and is observed by those around us.

We cannot fake it then, we must only respond to those in need from our heart,



“...it is not what we do that matters as much as why we do what we do.”

Bernie Geary



“Something I experienced myself recently impressed on me how important it is to “leave” people with hope.”

Bernie Geary

our compassion is what connects us to those we serve. We need every now and then to go within ourselves and ask honestly, “Why am I doing this?” and “What are my true beliefs about those I find myself assisting?” The answers to these questions will set the way in which we respond and will be also the way we are perceived by those we serve.

Something I experienced myself recently impressed on me how important it is to “leave” people with hope. Often it is the last thing you say that stays with the other and either enhances the words you have said earlier or discounts them.

If I think of the constituency that I now represent, the vulnerable young people and children of our society I cannot help but think that Frederic Ozanam would have been agitating for change and would be saying that there is no reason why these young people should expect less than others. He would be asking:

“Why is it that these young people are over-represented in the juvenile justice system?”

“Why do we not invest the necessary money in their welfare that we know is needed?”

“Why can we not provide the family environment for them that they so crave?”

He would challenge us to be constantly unsettled by accepting anything less for these young people.

So Frederic Ozanam would be challenging us to look within, not to wait for the poor to come to us or ring on a helpline, he would be challenging us to go out and seek out those in need, to feel their pain and respond from the compassion that this sympathy inspires. He would be demanding that the Society challenge those with the power to address the needs of those marginalised in our society and hidden from view. He would be shining the spotlight on those areas in an affluent society that cause most discomfort. He would want his Society to exacerbate that discomfort, to stand alongside the disenfranchised and provide the support they so desperately need.

His is not a call to comfort. His is a call to push the boundaries of a comfortable society in the name of those in need. The Society he formed is to be a beacon for those overlooked and disregarded.

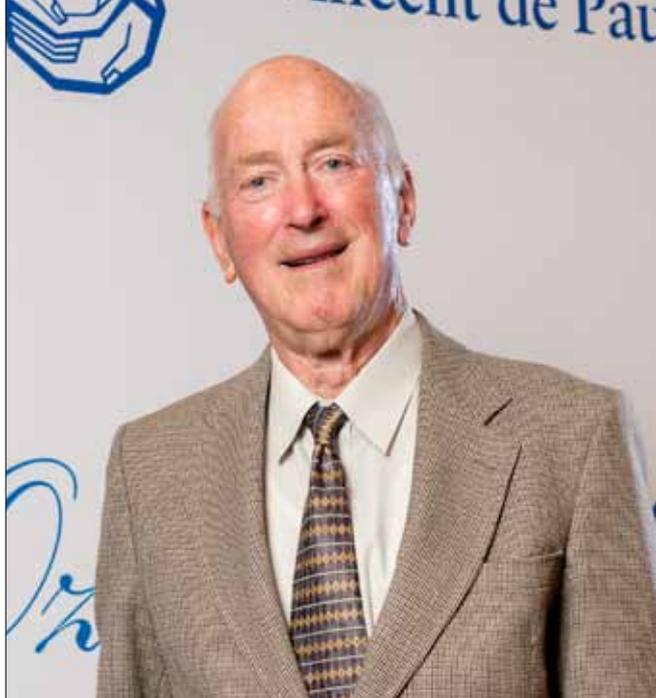
Frank Purcell

A short biography

Frank is currently the President of the Goulburn Valley Regional Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society. He has worked in early childhood development as well as alcohol and drug services for the area of Wallan to the Murray.

Frank has also worked with the Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative in Mooroopna to train service managers from their community.

After retiring from this work and his time as a Catholic priest before that, Frank lectured in politics at the Shepparton Campus of La Trobe University for six years and studied for his PhD, 'The Encounter of Islam with Australian Secular Society: A Comparison with the Catholic Experience'. This study was an attempt to understand why Shepparton has been a successful multicultural community and through this, Frank has become involved in numerous inter-faith activities. Frank has been involved with the Society since 2003.



Response to Ozanam Lecture

Frank Purcell

President Goulburn Valley Regional Council
St Vincent de Paul Society

Let me first congratulate Bernie on a lecture which has sent my mind into overdrive. He has spelt out the basic spirituality which drove Frederic Ozanam's attempt to deal with two crises which bedevilled French society following the French Revolution.

Two Crises in France

The hopes and dreams of the French Revolution were never fully realised as the revolution turned in on itself, spawned the Terror, the Napoleonic Wars and worsened the position of the poor. Politically, France adopted an extremely anti-religious, anti-clerical form of secularism and failed to address the condition of the working people.

Catholicism in France responded in two ways: some laymen and women focused on the struggles of the poor, seeking to offer an alternative to the failed secular revolution's approach. They did this by attempting to engage with the emerging democratic political thinking, and with the world of growing industrialisation and its exploitation of labour. Ozanam was one of the earliest laymen to engage with that new world but for him there was no solution in simply providing emergency help for the poor. For him, as Bernie has pointed out, there had to be a Christ-like respect, care and compassion for the poor, a serious attempt to identify the causes of their poverty, and the courage to speak up

and speak out in ways which empowered them and gave the disadvantaged hope in the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

That spirit in the French church was not fully supported. The nostalgia for the old regime lingered in the ranks of the bishops and suspicion of democracy continued both within France and within the Vatican until the end of World War II. By then the church in France had largely lost the working classes. The leadership of the church was pastorally out of touch.

Two Crises in Australia

In drawing attention to the historical context in which Ozanam founded the Society, Bernie set me to thinking on the situation we face in Australia today: a crisis in the Catholic Church whose credibility has been destroyed by the clerical sexual abuse scandal. Politically, our international reputation has been stained by our successive governments' refugee policies. We are now referred to in the East, according to Fr Michael Kelly SJ, as "the white trash of Asia".¹

The Society's Role in these Crises

Bernie's presentation raises then two questions. The first, what is the relevance of the St Vincent de Paul Society's role in this time of crisis for the Australian Catholic Church?



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Frank Purcell



“The St Vincent de Paul Society does not help people in order to turn them into Catholics. We help them because that is what Jesus did.”

Frank Purcell

Pre-evangelisation

An incident in a Japanese Catholic parish where I was working in the early 1960s may help. The 25 year old son of a leading parishioner was diagnosed with terminal bowel cancer. Although the young man had four Catholic siblings (two of them nuns), he and his father were traditional Japanese Samurai. Knowing his mother, the ailing son asked her not to hassle him about being baptised. “I don’t believe and I don’t want to become a Catholic” he told her. One of his sisters, a nun, came home to nurse him and the parish was invited to pray for him. About three weeks before he died he quietly asked his mother to call the Parish Priest. He wanted to be baptised.

As you can imagine, the funeral was a mixture of grief and joy. A woman who was there that day helping out with refreshments, took a short cut through a room to the kitchen. To her embarrassment she found the doctor who had been treating the young man, sitting there crying. As she turned to leave the room the doctor called her back. He said to her that he had been to hundreds of deaths in his many years as a doctor, but he had never been to a funeral like this. “What is it”, he said. “Tell me.”

The doctor knew his own culture. He knew these people were truly Japanese, but there was something different. “What is it?” He had sensed in that family and the grieving community the hope giving presence of the risen Christ. He was ready to listen to the Good News.

The St Vincent de Paul Society does not help people in order to turn them into Catholics. We help them because that is what Jesus did. We are part of a Catholic community whose way of respect for others, regardless of religious affiliation, of ethnic background or social class should be such that in time, people will begin to ask: “What is it?” When they ask that question, they have come to sense the mystery of the Risen Christ in their midst. It was that kind of Catholicism which saw 50% of the Roman Empire become Catholic within 300 years of the death of

Jesus. It is that kind of Catholicism which will lead to the restoration of the Church’s credibility and its effectiveness in leading people to faith in the Risen Christ, to hope in His triumph over evil, and to love and respect for others in the communities in which we live.

Advocacy

Bernie’s lecture also raised a second question for me. How do we go about seeking out those in need and being willing to speak up and speak out? Jesus was crucified for speaking up and speaking out about poor governance by the religious and secular authorities of his time. Jesus did not ignore the impact that society attitudes and the kind of politics we develop have on the level of disadvantage and inequality in our societies. That is one of the radical elements of Ozanam’s spirituality which I have come to appreciate in the last five or six years.

In rural areas the advocacy potential of the Society is quite surprising. In the Goulburn Valley Region we have a conference in every town of 1,000 people or more. No other assistance agency in the region has a workforce of 120 case-workers.

We have the capacity to be an early identification service, in a position to recognise unmet needs in our towns and able to link people to the less accessible more specialised services that they need and, if such services do not exist, we are in a position to do something about it. Nearly two decades ago the Society established a regional domestic violence service, (the Marian Community) in our area.

We also have a network of daily and weekly newspapers across the region as well as TV channels and radio stations which have significant local news and columns available to draw attention to the challenges facing the disadvantaged. There are plenty of aspiring journalists in our Catholic schools who could help us in such work. Our Social Justice Officers in each Central Council are there for guidance and support.

The Society in rural areas is in a great position to have a deep impact on young people. We have Catholic schools in every sizeable town. In some cases more than



50% of the pupils are non-Catholics, but all imbibe and seem to relish the social justice emphasis which characterises our schools. Currently we have begun a drive to introduce a Mini Vinnies or a College Conference into every Catholic school in our region. When we started I learned that the formation process in Mini Vinnies Conferences is built on the Cardign system - See, Think and Do. Cardinal Cardign, a French speaking Belgian was influenced by the same stream of post revolution Catholicism in France of which Ozanam was a part. The formation program he developed formed leaders who empowered young people to speak up and speak out. It is our hope that the Mini Vinnies members will in turn influence the social justice teams in our secondary schools and parishes to enable the Catholic Church in Australia once again to

regain its influence in building a more just, caring and democratic society.

Conclusion

Only a Catholic spirituality which includes an acceptance of a need to speak out in favour of victims of administrative failures in Church and State will restore the credibility of the Australian Church for its own members and for the wider community.

The St Vincent de Paul Society has the potential to play a major role in that renewal. That is the implication for me of Bernie's lecture on the question: How would Ozanam respond to the social changes of today? I thank him for such a stimulating and substantial contribution to this annual series of Ozanam Lectures.



“The Society in rural areas is in a great position to have a deep impact on young people.”

Frank Purcell

1. Fr. Michael Kelly S.J., UCAN, Feb 19th 2014, at <http://www.ucanindia.in/news/australia-justifies-its-white-trash-of-asia-nickname/23957/daily>



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

Ozanam Lecturers and Respondents

- 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 President, Flemington Conference, St Vincent de Paul Society
- 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, St Vincent de Paul Society
- 2014 Bernie Geary OAM**
 Principal Commissioner, Commission for Children and Young People
Respondent: Frank Purcell, President, Goulburn Valley Regional Council, St Vincent de Paul Society



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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