



Our Story, Our Mission

Blessed Frederic Ozanam and Blessed Rosalie Rendu

*Prepared by Sister Margaret Armstrong, Vincentian Leadership Program,
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In this presentation, it may be helpful to revisit some historic facts about these two dedicated and gifted founders whose wisdom and practical insights have deep relevance in our times.

Frédéric Ozanam was born in Milan in 1813 into a middle class professional family. He was one of 14 children, only 3 of whom survived. The family moved back to Lyon, their home country, when he was a small child. From his early years, Frédéric showed an interest in the religious dimension of his life, and for this, in his youth he was stridently challenged by his peers, giving rise to a period of doubt. With support from his mentor, Father Joseph Noirot, he emerged stronger in his faith and gained a lifelong empathy for people who struggled with poverty. In this, he had the fine example of his father, a medical practitioner who was committed to using his skills to support families in poverty.

In 1831, Frédéric began studying Law at the Sorbonne. He also pursued an interest in Literature and in that context, studied the effects of Christianity on the development of European Society. At the Sorbonne, he encountered a atmosphere of palpable hostility against his ideas and sought refuge in the company of like-minded students. Encouraged by



Emmanuel Bailly, a former professor, the group of about eighteen with Frédéric in the lead, took up debating the Social Justice teachings of the Church with other students. During a heated discussion, one participant in the debate challenged the Catholics in the group to address the gap between their beliefs and their actions for people who were poor and destitute: “What is the church doing for the poor of Paris?” he said. “Show us your work and I will believe you.” Several weeks later, having reflected on the verbal assault of the young student, Ozanam had this to say to his fellow students in the History Conference: “What must we do to live our Catholicism?Let us no longer talk so much about charity. Let us put it into practice and go out to assist those who are poor.” (Jacques Lamarche. P. 33) The seed had thus been sown for what was to become the St. Vincent de Paul Society!

Exactly what the students intended to achieve was not clear at this stage. However, we do know that they wished to move beyond words and debate and journey forward to establish some form of organized practical charitable works.

Sr. Rosalie was born, Jeanne Marie Rendu on September 9, 1786, in Confort, a village in Savoy in the Jura Mountains. She was the eldest of four girls, and her parents were small property owners who were well respected by the local people. When Jeanne was three years old, the French Revolution; “The Terror” (1789-1799) began, and from 1790, it became compulsory for Catholic priests to take the oath of allegiance to



the civil constitution. Those who would not take the oath of allegiance were pursued, persecuted and sometimes killed. The homes of Catholic families often became their refuge, and it was there in her family home that young Jeanne learned that one of the family's farm hands was, indeed, the Bishop of Annecy in hiding.

It was in her family of deep faith and at that time of political uncertainty during the "Terror" that Jeanne's strong and constant character was formed. In 1796, the Rendu family suffered the tragic loss of their father on 12th May, followed by the death, two months later, of the family's youngest child at four months of age. The family was deeply distressed, and Jeanne Marie, as the eldest, took up the responsibility of supporting her mother with the care of her younger sisters.

In the days following the "Terror", life settled down and Madame Rendu, concerned about her daughter's education, sent Jeanne Marie to the Ursuline Sisters' school in Gex where she stayed for two years. During this time, Jeanne Marie discovered the local hospital conducted by the Daughters of Charity and with her mother's permission she spent some time there working with the sisters.

On May 25th 1802, at just sixteen years old, Jeanne Marie left Confort for Paris to enter the seminary of the Daughters of Charity in the Rue du Colombière. Here she tried so hard to give her very best to her formation year that her health suffered. It was decided that she should move from the seminary and continue her formation at the house of the Daughters of Charity at Mouffetard, one of the poorest and most destitute areas of



Paris. Here Jeanne Marie remained for the rest of her Seminary formation, and then returned to the Motherhouse to receive the habit and be sent on mission.

The local superior at Mouffetard, Sr. Tardy sent a request to the Motherhouse at the time of Jeanne Marie's missioning: "I am very happy with this little Rendu. Give her the habit, and send her back to me." And so it was that Jeanne-Marie Rendu, now Sr. Rosalie, took her first steps toward becoming the "Apostle of the Mouffetard District"; perhaps the most miserable quarter of Paris, where she would spend the remainder of her life.

In 1833, Frédéric and six of his companions formed a "Conference of Charity", their main aim being to take up "practical works of charity". For some time they searched for ways to do this, and eventually sought the advice of Emmanuel Bailly. Bailly had a deep devotion to St. Vincent de Paul, and he and his wife knew Sr. Rosalie well and shared with her a passion to come to the aid of the poor and destitute people of the Mouffetard District. On hearing the students' concerns, Bailly immediately sent Devaux, the appointed treasurer of the Conference to see Sr. Rosalie. As a result, Sr. Rosalie's guidance and the students' collaboration led to the transformation of the History Conference to a Conference of Charity, and ultimately to the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Over the years, Sr. Rosalie had gained a reputation for working creatively, relentlessly, and effectively under some of the worst conditions



imaginable; significantly, recurring revolutions (1830, 1848) and cholera epidemics (1832, 1849, 1854) as well as the multitude of problems which beset the people living in this ghetto of poverty and destitution. She was “a national hero of social service, admired even by the anti-Church factions of Frédéric’s day.” (McKenna T. 2010)

Sr. Rosalie sent the students two by two to the apartments of poor families in the area. They brought back information about the immediate needs of the families and Sr. Rosalie gave them such practical items as clothes, firewood and food vouchers for follow-up visits. There is no doubt that further contact by the students would have led to referrals to the many health, developmental and educational projects Sr. Rosalie and her Sisters had established in the District.

At this early stage, Frédéric expressed the notion that he and his companions had become “auxiliaries of the Sisters of Charity” (Sullivan p.208). This is, indeed the case since they were very much a part of the Sisters’ house and community at Rue de L’Épée-de-Bois, and they took their earliest steps in practical works of charity under her guidance.

Long before Vatican Council 11, Sr. Rosalie brought the students together for what could rightly be called theological or apostolic reflections. They would come together after their visits and discuss with her their immediate experiences, motivations and insights; always open to her advice.



- ❖ How did I speak with/ listen to this family?
- ❖ Did I help with an attitude of respect, without being patronising?
- ❖ How did my actions and attitudes reflect those of the Gospel?
- ❖ Where was God in this experience? For me? For the persons I visited?
- ❖ What were my reasons for becoming involved in the first place?
- ❖ What connections or otherwise reflected the life of St. Vincent de Paul? (Rosalie gave the students biographies of their founding Saint, knowing that they would benefit from being in touch with Vincent's approach to service of the poor; his values and his spirituality.)

She counselled patience, attentive listening and politeness as values which the young students should honor, telling them that time spent in this way with people living in poverty is never wasted, but will comfort them and uphold their inherent dignity, strengthening relationships of trust. These meetings contributed to the formation of a solid foundation for the Conferences in practice and in Faith. Rosalie welcomed these enthusiastic young men, and often would say to her Sisters: "How good these young people are. Oh, how good they are." (Sullivan L. P. 209)

The Society was not placed under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul until 1834. It was not Frédéric Ozanam, Emmanuel Bailly or Sr. Rosalie who proposed this change, although they certainly influenced it. Jean Léon Prévost, is recorded in the minutes of the February, 1834 meeting as "making himself the interpreter of the wishes of several members who



would ask that the Society would place itself under the protection of Saint Vincent de Paul, celebrate his feast, and in addition, make a prayer at the beginning and end of each meeting.” (Sullivan L. P. 215) The minutes went on to say that “no proposal could be more warmly received by the Society.” In 1838 Ozanam confirmed the Vincentian identity of the Society in these words: “Now, in place of the *Imitation of Christ*, we read *The Life of Saint. Vincent de Paul* so as to be more imbued with his example and traditions. His is a life that we must continue, a heart where we must warm our hearts, an intelligence where we must seek more light.” (Sullivan L. P. 216)

By May 1834, the Society numbered 70 members. No-one could have foreseen a growth so rapid. The meetings were becoming quite cumbersome, and Ozanam suggested the possibility of extending the society throughout France. He tentatively put to Emmanuel Bailly in November of that year the idea of dividing the society into four sections; each one having its own funds. Bailly announced the proposal at the December meeting and it was supported by the seven founding members. There was fierce opposition to the proposal by a number of members, and a heated debate followed. It seemed that a significant number thought that dividing the Society would weaken the support the members so far had enjoyed from each other, and that the commitment to its original purpose would decline. Bailly, exhausted by the level of emotion on this issue, called a truce and scheduled this agenda for the next meeting. At the next meeting, it was decided that the Society could sustain a division



into two conferences; Saint Sulpice, and St. Étienne du Mont. It is interesting to note here, that word had got around that Sr. Rosalie supported the decision, and this took a lot of heat out of the argument! In time, she was to request a Conference for her own Parish of St. Médard, and was granted one. Thus, Frédéric Ozanam's dream that the Society would "encircle the world in a network of charity" had begun to take shape. (Sullivan L. p. 212)

Within twenty years from the foundation of the first Conference, the St Vincent de Paul Society numbered 2,000 conferences; 500 of them outside France.

Very little literary evidence exists to suggest that Sr. Rosalie and Frédéric kept in touch after the St. Vincent de Paul Society had been established and there is a degree of difficulty in finding evidence regarding the true nature of their relationship. For Rosalie, Frédéric was one of the founding members of the Society, to all of whom she was deeply committed as a guide and mentor. Sr. Rosalie is not mentioned in any of Frédéric's correspondence. However, we do know that her formation of this visionary young man laid the foundations for his most important life's work; his passion to serve Jesus Christ in the persons of those on the margins of society.

Rosalie understood that Frédéric had many supports for the development of the Society within his networks. She and the Sisters at



Mouffetard, however, still continued to welcome enthusiastic young students from the various colleges in Paris as “auxiliaries” in the service of the poor, and to form them in the Vincentian spirit. Her whole being, of course, was steeped in the charism of Vincentian service, and in this, her inspiration for Frédéric and his friends would have been tangible.

Rosalie was also more than fully occupied, along with the Sisters in her Mouffetard community and other collaborators in managing, funding and organizing the Daughters’ many innovative projects in Mouffetard and surrounding districts.

Rosalie Rendu died February 7th, 1856, following a two year period of declining health. After her funeral rites at her Parish of St. Médard Church, a crowd of 40-50 thousand people followed her to her last resting place at Montparnasse cemetery.

Frédéric completed his law degree and began private practice at Lyon . He soon discovered, however, that his interest was academic and his specialty foreign literatures. He returned to the Sorbonne, gained his first degree in 1835, and a doctorate in 1839. He was appointed to a professorial position at the Sorbonne and then Chair of Foreign Languages in 1844. Frédéric married Amélie Soulacroix on 23rd June, 1841. They had one child, Marie.

In addition to his academic life, Frédéric was also constantly engaged with the rapidly expanding Society of St. Vincent de Paul. He was also called



upon to serve the Church in other ways, being the editor for the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith, and negotiating many confidential matters between the Church and Government After a short and very full life, Frédéric Ozanam died on 8th September 1853. He was 40 years old.

Six months later in March, 1854 St. Francis Church Melbourne opened its doors to the first Australian St. Vincent de Paul Conference under the leadership of Father Gerald Ward. Today the Conference is known as the St Francis Conference. Whilst the St Francis Conference has not always been an active Conference since its founding, in 2014, as part our 160 years of service in Australia, the State Council of Victoria approved the Conference as a Special Work of the Society

Today, the activities of the St Francis Conference include the co-ordination and hosting of the monthly Social Justice in the City series program, supporting the Winter Appeal and continuing to offer a place of spiritual formation for its members.

Frédéric had an exceptional understanding of the critical union between justice and charity which reflected the deep conviction of St. Vincent that “without justice there can be no love.” (CCDs Vol. 8 p.118) He also understood that there was another element which acted like a catalyst in this dynamic. It is solidarity. Frédéric expressed his understanding of solidarity which is integral to the great legacy he has left us. “The knowledge of social wellbeing and of reform is learned not from books, nor from public debate, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man’s garret,



sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind.”

Over two hundred years before Frédéric was born, Vincent articulated the very same spirit in the following words: “What use would it be to carry soup or medicines to poor persons if the motive for such actions wasn’t love?” (CCDs Vol. 9 p. 18)

This is the kind of solidarity to which we are called if we are to listen to and encounter as equals the people we support in our services ; a purely Gospel and Vincentian concept! Ozanam’s and Vincent’s words are as relevant today as they were when they wrote them, clearly expressing the truth that justice and charity can be authentic only if we cultivate solidarity in practice with true compassion for people who live in poverty

There is no doubt that Frédéric Ozanam and Rosalie Rendu were united in their common cause; their passion to serve the poor and address the injustices and oppressive, often violent, chaotic social conditions which exacerbated poverty and its consequences in France and beyond during the 19th century.

Frédéric had first-hand experience of tragedy during the 1848 revolution when he and his companions prevailed upon Archbishop Affre to visit the barricades and petition a ceasefire. The young men intended to accompany the Archbishop, but he preferred to go on alone. He was caught in crossfire whilst negotiating with insurgents and soldiers and was fatally wounded. At the time Frédéric was “caught between remorse and the generosity of God in giving the church such a martyr.” (Honner J. 2007) He lived the rest of his life with this terrible consequence of his involvement in the revolution which tore Paris apart in 1848. Frédéric was not naïve. He knew that there would be intense suffering as an outcome



of his commitment to the reconciliation of entrenched differences in his own life experience and in his work for his turbulent society. He was prepared to follow his chosen path.

Rosalie's gift was to organize charity and challenge those who exploited the poor. In this she was fearless. Frédéric's was to combine political concerns for social justice with a deep love of people, particularly those who were poor, excluded and oppressed. They both lived through revolutions, and could be called "Gospel" revolutionaries in their own right. Our challenge today is to follow in their footsteps and be prepared to live with the consequences.

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