

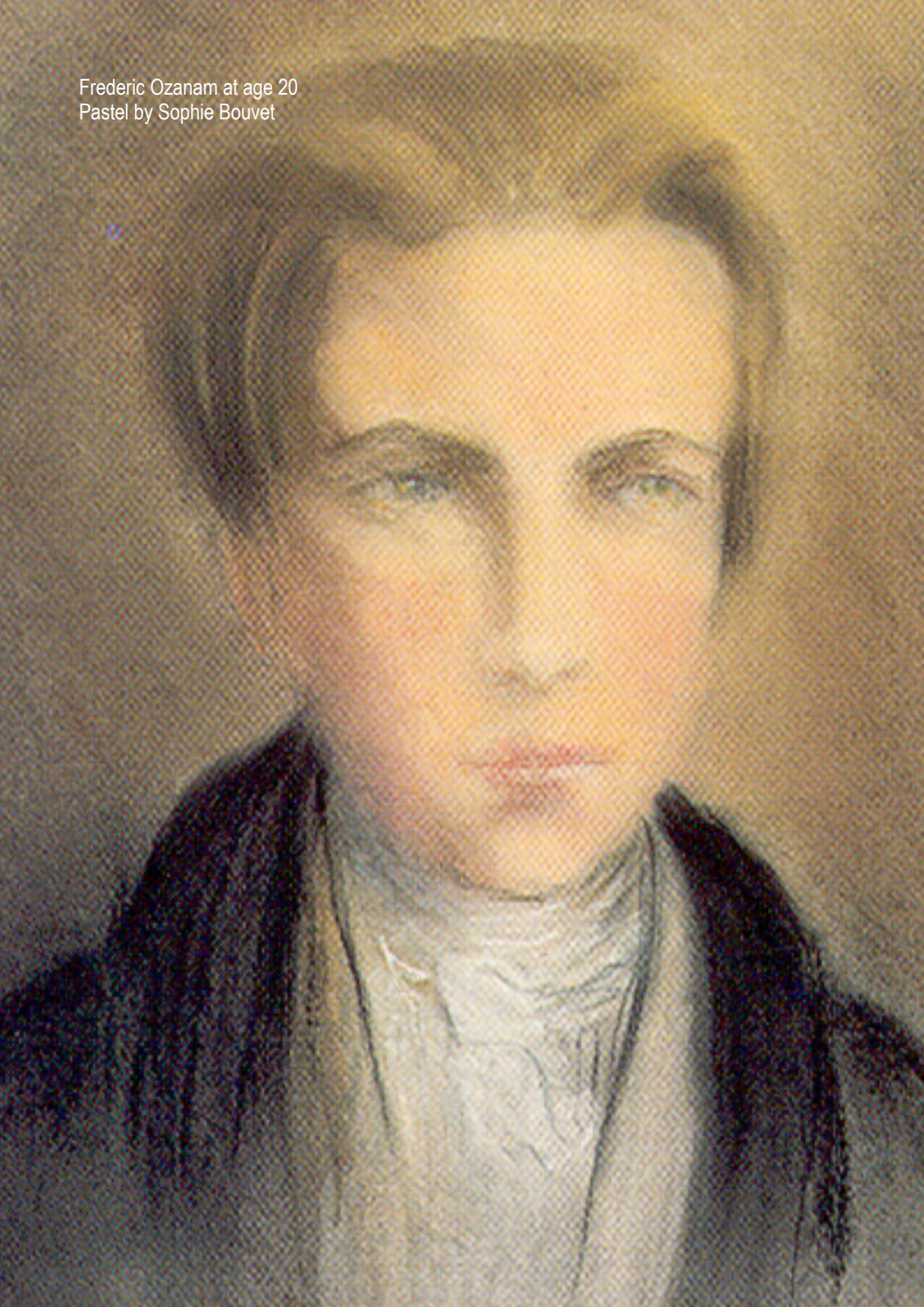
Blessed Frederic Ozanam

A Life in Outline



Kevin Slattery

Frederic Ozanam at age 20
Pastel by Sophie Bouvet



Early life, parental influences

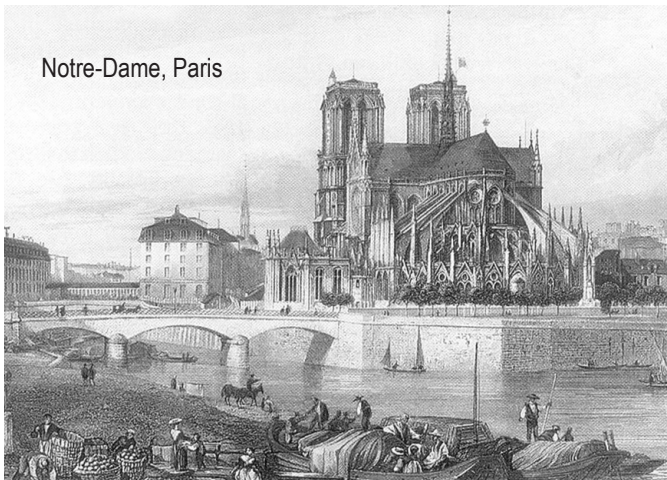
Antoine-Frederic Ozanam was born on April 23rd, 1813, in Milan, which was then occupied by the French. He was the fifth of fourteen children born to Jean-Antoine and Marie Ozanam. Jean-Antoine, who had reached the rank of Captain in Napoleon's army, retired from the services when Napoleon proclaimed himself Emperor of the French. He then studied medicine and qualified with honours as a doctor in only two years. When an epidemic of typhus swept through Milan the Emperor recognized him for his heroism in serving the sick at the Military Hospital. Only four of the Ozanam children survived infancy. Frederic's older brother, Alphonse, became a priest and his younger brother Charles, a doctor. His sister Elizabeth, to whom Frederic was particularly devoted, died at the age of nineteen when he was seven years old.

After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 Milan reverted to Austrian control and the family returned to Lyons where the Ozanams had married in 1800. It was in this city, in central France that Frederic grew up in a loving family environment. His father divided his time between the city hospital and the slums of his parish where he tended to the medical needs of poor people. His mother was similarly tireless in assisting those in need, particularly as a member of the 'Workers', who provided company and comfort to sick, poor people.

From an early age Frederic's health was delicate and, when he was six, he almost succumbed to typhoid fever. His recovery was attributed to the intervention of St. John Francis Regis, a great servant of poor people in 17th century France. The following year, his life was thrown into turmoil with his sister's untimely death. As well as being a second mother to him, Elizabeth had tutored him at home. He admits at this time to becoming headstrong, without control and disobedient. To correct such behaviour and to further his education, he was enrolled at the Royal College of Lyons where he demonstrated a brilliant academic mind and a wonderful capacity for study, excelling particularly in languages and literature.

At fifteen, however, Frederic suffered a debilitating period of doubt, when his faith was sorely tested. He later wrote: 'The muffled din of an unbelieving world reached me. I experienced all the horror of doubt which by day gnaws at the soul without ceasing, and at night hovers over our pillows.' He promised God that, should he be given the light to see the Truth, he would spend his life defending it.

With the support of his religion and philosophy teacher, the Dominican Abbe Noiroi, his doubts disappeared after twelve months and Ozanam began to fulfil his promise. His literary skills were soon evident to a wider public when he began contributing articles on philosophy and history to the review magazine 'The Bee.' A little later he submitted two articles to the journal 'Precurseur' attacking the utopian social theories of the Saint-Simonians – followers of the Count de Saint Simon - who considered Christianity to be outworn and defunct. These articles were developed and enlarged into a pamphlet entitled 'Reflections on the Doctrine of Saint-Simon' which attracted very favourable comment from such French literary giants as Lamartine and Chateaubriand, a remarkable achievement for such a young writer.



Notre-Dame, Paris

Once Frederic's secondary schooling in Lyons was complete, in keeping with his father's wishes he moved to Paris to study Law at the Sorbonne. Paris at the time was in turmoil; a city where scepticism was triumphant and poverty everywhere.

At the end of 1831, lonely in a boarding house, he wrote to his friend Falconnet, 'Paris displeases me for there is no life, no faith, no love: it is like a dead body to which I, full of youth and energy, am tied. Its coldness chills me and its corruption is killing me.'

The only person he knew in Paris was Andre-Marie Ampere, the great scientist and devout Catholic, whom he had previously met in Lyons. On a visit to his home, Frederic greatly impressed Ampere who invited him to board with him. Their nightly chats over the dinner table reinforced Ozanam's Christian belief. Daily his belief was tested as he pursued his studies in an environment where the scorn and ridicule of Christianity was the fashion of the day.

The first Conference of Charity

Although shy and retiring, Ozanam's cheerful personality and breadth of learning soon drew to him a wide circle of friends. He was affronted by the constant attacks on the Church and its teaching and he decided to establish a Catholic discussion group where fellow students could be encouraged to confront critics of the faith.

He persuaded many of these to join what was to be called the 'Conference of History', a type of debating society where matters of literature, history, philosophy and religion were discussed. Its president was the saintly, greathearted Catholic layman, Emmanuel Bailly, with Frederic as his deputy. It was open to all-comers regardless of political or religious affiliation, or lack of such.

It was in this forum that the relevance of the Church to France in the 1830s was constantly raised. The young Catholics were articulate and passionate spokesmen for their faith but, they were asked, what were they doing for the poor? Roused by these taunts, Ozanam and his companions determined to establish what they called a 'Conference of Charity', again with Bailly as president. Immediately following this decision, Frederic and his friend Taillandier brought what was left of their own firewood to a destitute person in the neighbourhood.

At the first historic meeting of the Conference of Charity on April 23rd, 1833 - Ozanam celebrated his 20th birthday that day - Bailly presided over six students aged between nineteen and twenty-three.

As well as Ozanam, there was Francois Lallier, Jules Devaux, Felix Clave, Auguste Le Taillandier and Paul Lamache. The meeting was held over the road from the parish church of St. Sulpice at the office of the 'Tribune Catholique', which M. Bailly edited. These young men resolved, with much passion, to respond to Christ's call by dedicating themselves to the poor, after the example of 'Monsieur Vincent'. Sister Rosalie Rendu, a revered Daughter of Charity - known as the 'providence of the poor' - was approached for addresses of families in difficulty. They began by bringing these families some bread



Frederic Ozanam's crucifix



Emmanuel Bailly

wood and above all, much friendship. The financial resources for this work came primarily from savings from their scholarships and payments for their contributions to the 'Tribune Catholique'.

The little group was mocked by some, in particular the Saint-Simonians: 'What can you hope to accomplish? You are eight poor men, and it is with such resources that you undertake to succour the misery of a city like Paris! We, on the other hand, are busy in the development of ideas and systems which shall reform the world and obliterate misery for ever. In one moment we shall accomplish for humanity all that you could possibly do in many generations.'

Initially the Conference remained a tight group, reluctant to admit new members. Slowly this changed and by the end of 1834 membership numbered one hundred and the Conference was split, after heated discussion, into three branches. In 1835, as members graduated and found employment outside Paris, conferences were founded in Nimes and Lyons and even beyond France, in Rome.



The first Conference of Charity

The reluctant lawyer

Ozanam completed his Law degree in 1834 whilst continuing to read widely in his preferred fields of foreign literature and history. Further studies in law followed his graduation and he became one of a select group to take out the degree of Doctor of Laws which qualified him to lecture at the University. Having more than fulfilled his father's ambition for him in the field of law, he returned to Lyons to begin his law practice at the Royal Court of Lyons and to be with his aging and ailing parents. The daily grind of working as a barrister, which he disliked, was relieved by a short holiday in Paris, in May 1837.

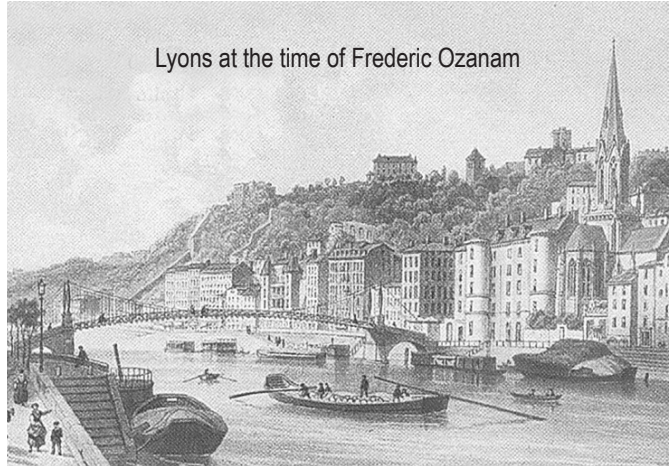
It was during this time that he received news from Lyons that his father was gravely ill. He had fallen down a steep flight of steps while visiting a poor patient in one of the tenements of the city. By the time Frederic reached home, his father had died.

The Ozanam family finances were surprisingly meagre. It was later discovered that the doctor had given his services free to almost a third of his practice. Frederic then assumed the responsibility of providing for his dying mother and his twelve year old brother Alphonse. This he did from tutoring a few young men in the Law.

Economic security was only to come in 1839 with his appointment to the foundation Chair of Commercial Law in Lyons. Whilst tutoring Ozanam kept himself well occupied.

Apart from writings relating to Law ('Church Property' and 'The Beginnings of French Law'), he

resumed his studies in earnest for a Doctorate in Literature, preparing theses on 'Dante and Catholic Philosophy in the 13th Century' in French and 'On the Descent of Heroes into Hell Frequently met with in Ancient Poets' in Latin. These were defended, most skilfully, at the Sorbonne, in 1839.



Lyons at the time of Frederic Ozanam

Later that year, Ozanam's beloved mother died. Some time after he wrote: 'When I have the happiness of receiving Holy Communion, when Our Saviour comes to visit me, it seems to me that she follows Him into my poor heart, even as she so often followed Him in the Holy Viaticum into the rooms of the poor.'

Two months later, he began lecturing in Commercial Law to overflow audiences.

His lectures were witty and wide-ranging and wherever possible he allowed himself to digress into history, philosophy or literature. Law he had studied to please his father. To support his mother he had accepted the professorship at Lyons. Now, with both his parents dead, he confessed to feeling 'a void which neither friendship nor intellectual work fulfils.'

Professional fulfilment, marriage

The void was soon to be filled. Ozanam was invited to compete for the Chair of Foreign Literature at the Sorbonne, a truly demanding examination in the literatures of three ancient and four modern languages. He was placed first, becoming acting Professor of Foreign Literature at the age of twenty-seven, in October 1840.

His personal life was also to undergo a dramatic change. Shortly after the death of his mother he briefly considered a vocation to the priesthood, but was steered towards married life by his confessor, Abbe Noirot. He married Amélie Soulacroix, daughter of the rector of the Lyons Academy on June 23rd, 1841. It was an extraordinarily happy union. On the 23rd of each month until his death twelve years later, Amélie received a bouquet of flowers from Frederic, a continual demonstration of the great love and respect in which he held his wife. Their honeymoon in Italy was crowned by a visit to Rome and an audience with Pope Gregory XVI.



Amélie Ozanam and
daughter, Marie

The newlyweds moved to Paris. After several miscarriages, their daughter Marie was born in 1845. During this time they stayed briefly in three different apartments, before the family settled happily in Rue de Fleurus, near the beautiful Luxembourg Gardens.

These gardens with their great trees, spectacular fountains and colourful flowerbeds, were a constant delight when on rare occasions they were able to stroll, as a family, away from the grime and noise of Paris. The natural environment had always been a source of enormous pleasure and wonder to Frederic. A lifelong friend, Leonce Curnier, vividly describes in his recollections 'Ozanam's Youth' how the seventeen year old Ozanam was enraptured by the scenery around Lyons: 'We often had delightful walks together on the charming banks of the Saone, the beauty of which threw him into poetical ecstasy. A picturesque site, a landscape with an infinite horizon, a river with a graceful sinuous course would ever entrance him. The fields and the woods, the verdure and the flowers held for him ineffable delight, which evoked expressions of thanks and homage to the Creator.'

Ozanam was a remarkable teacher. This tribute was offered by Hersart de Villemarque: 'God alone knows the immense good that Ozanam brought through his lectures, which cost him so much wear and tear. He knew how to inspire a youthful audience... he was cheered passionately, he was loved even more. When he would leave the Faculty, everyone rushed to have a word with him, to hear him again; they escorted him along the paths in the Luxembourg Gardens which he crossed on his way home. He was exhausted but often brought home with him the joys he prized above the most enthusiastic applause.'



The Sorbonne where Frederic Ozanam studied and taught

The energy with which he worked as an academic - involving the most scrupulous research - his ongoing work with the Society which included fund raising for the relief of the Irish Famine, and his writing in defence of the Church, all contributed to a steady deterioration in his precarious health. Seriously ill with pleurisy in 1846, he suffered a complete breakdown in 1847 which forced him to spend a period of prolonged rest in Italy.

His body may have slowed down but his mind was incurably restless. While there he discovered documents which shed new light on the Middle Ages and he gathered material for another work, 'The Franciscan Poets', which continues to be read in France.

The events of 1848

His return home in August 1847 coincided with the build up of tensions which led to a revolution in the following February. The 1848 revolution saw the end of the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830-1848) and the establishment of the Second Republic. Under pressure from friends, Ozanam agreed to stand for the Rhone department in the election for the National Assembly, held under universal suffrage for the first time. Several ideas which formed part of his policy platform were visionary. He is considered one of the first to formulate the idea of a 'natural

salary', to claim compensation against unemployment and accidents, to suggest that pensions be guaranteed to workers. Forty-three years later, in 1891, many of his ideas were to be found in Leo XIII's papal encyclical 'Rerum Novarum' (Of New Things). The electors of 1848 considered them to be too generous and daring and his foray into politics was unsuccessful.

Ozanam's political ideas were henceforth to find a voice in the many articles he contributed to the newspaper 'L'Ere Nouvelle' (The New Era), launched on April 15th, 1848. His idea of a Christian democracy, in harmony with the principles of justice and charity, was to be lived out in the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

In June 1848 a bloody insurrection led by Paris workers saw Ozanam in the uniform of the National Guard alongside an aging Bailly. Great misery and poverty resulted from the upheaval and the Government sought the assistance of the St. Vincent de Paul Society to distribute relief grants to the many people in need. Ozanam was never President-General of the Society but in the latter part of 1848 he acted in the position whilst the incumbent, M. Baudouin, recovered from serious injuries incurred during the fighting. At a meeting of the Council-General presided over by Ozanam, it was reported that there were then 393 conferences and societies, with their numbers increasing almost daily. In early 1849 Ozanam, accompanied by one hundred and twelve Society members, cared for two thousand people struck down by the dreaded scourge of cholera which swept through Paris.

Subsequently, new elections resulted in the rise to power of Louis Napoleon, nephew of the great Bonaparte.



The events of 1848-1849 caused a further decline in Ozanam's health. He was committed to an extraordinary schedule at the Sorbonne, lecturing and continuing his writing and research. Added to which was his ongoing involvement with 'L'Ere Nouvelle' and tireless work for the Society. Yet it was the mental suffering caused by the bitter personal attacks of the Catholic Party which really drained him. His republican principles, and his support for the workers and poor people were anathema to the party's leaders.

Compassion for people who are poor

On medical advice he went to recuperate outside Paris. The summer of 1851 saw him in Dieppe 'in search of sea breezes'. It was while here that he was persuaded by Jean-Jacques Ampere, son of the renowned scientist, to cross the Channel to see the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London. As always, Ozanam's first thoughts in a new city turned towards the Society which had been established in England in 1844. Ampere was disappointed, though not surprised, that Ozanam was less interested in the Great Exhibition than he was in the plight of the most destitute of the city. As Ozanam observed, they were Irish Catholics, driven from their homeland by famine, reduced to living in the worst London slums. He was shocked by their poverty.

The Ozanam story is full of such instances of his compassion, concern and respect for poor people. It is said that when he used to go into a home amidst the squalor of the Paris slums, his first action was to take off his hat and say, 'I come as your servant, may I present myself at your service.'

Often when poor people got to know him, they would be knocking on his door at home interrupting his studies. They weren't made to wait outside on the doorstep. Every visitor was shown right through to his book lined study and received there the courtesy equal to any he extended to his colleagues at the Sorbonne.



A poor neighbourhood in 19th century Paris

Like many Vincentians, Ozanam too experienced the sense of being used by people. There is the well-recorded anecdote of an Italian man whom he had previously helped, and for whom he had obtained employment, betraying the confidence Ozanam had placed in him. Having fallen into destitution again the man returned to Ozanam for help. Ozanam lost his temper, turned him out and told him never to return. He had hardly left when Ozanam reflected on what he had done. He told himself that it was a bad thing to drive anyone into despair, that one day he would need God's pardon which he had just refused to give to someone made in His likeness. He snatched his hat and ran after the poor man, whom he found walking aimlessly in the Luxembourg Gardens.



Frederic Ozanam, aged 30

Ozanam's attitude to poor people may be summarised in this communication to his artist friend Louis Janmot: 'If we do not know how to love God as the saints did, it is certainly because we see God with the eyes of faith alone; and our faith is so weak. But the poor we can see with the eyes of flesh. They are present. We can put our fingers and our hands into their wounds; the marks of the crown of thorns are visible on their heads. There is no place for unbelief there. We should fall at their feet and say with the Apostles My Lord and My God! You are our masters, we shall be your servants; you are the visible image of the God whom we do not see, but whom we love in loving you.'

Final years

At the end of 1851, a coup d'etat saw Louis Napoleon become Napoleon III and the beginning of the Second Empire. A temporary rally in Ozanam's health at this time enabled him to return to lecturing at the Sorbonne. He battled on bravely until the following Easter when he was struck down with a fever. Thin and worn out he delivered one final lecture 'with unparalleled eloquence and power'. The penalty was a bout of pleurisy which brought him to death's door. The Sorbonne and the students he loved were not to see him again. After some time confined to bed, he was able to travel to the Pyrenees for treatment

which lessened his respiratory problems but did little to curb the pain and stiffness in his back and joints. Soon after, another rally in his health induced him to make the trip to Spain which resulted in the masterpiece 'A Pilgrimage to the Country of Cid'. The Society was never far from his mind. Wherever he travelled, Ozanam either visited and encouraged existing conferences or founded new ones.

His final trip to Italy – a country he loved - was the result of a commission from the French Minister for Education, Hippolyte Fortoul, to study the origins of Italian villages from the 8th century onwards.

Fortoul, a friend of Ozanam's since their student days in Lyons, also thought the trip might benefit his health. In January 1853 he sailed from Marseilles to Genoa with Amélie and Marie in very rough weather: it was a painful experience. The family settled in Pisa. Here he was able to pursue



Pisa in the 19th century

his research and contribute where possible to the growth of the Society. The pain continued to worsen, and his mood became more and more melancholic. He could no longer walk without a cane.

In August his two brothers, Alphonse and Charles, were called to his bedside. Ozanam realised the end was near. It was his wish that he die in his homeland. They sailed back from Livorno to Marseilles, this time making a smooth, rapid crossing. Relatives living there provided the family with accommodation. Ozanam requested the last rites. Fr. Alphonse urged him to offer his soul to God 'confidently, trustingly, without fear.' 'Why should I fear him?' asked Frederic, 'when I love Him so!'

Late on Thursday, September 8th, the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, his struggle finally ended. He was surrounded by his family and relatives. A group of Vincentians from a local conference prayed silently in an adjoining room. He was forty. Services were held for him in Marseilles, and in Lyons at the Church of St. Pierre, where he had made his First Communion. His funeral took place on September 24th

in the Church of St. Sulpice, in Paris, only a short distance from the office where he and his seven friends had founded his beloved Society 20 years before. Opposing Ozanam's request that the ceremony be a simple one, the Dean and all the Faculty of Letters at the Sorbonne attended in academic gown.

Ozanam's remains were placed temporarily in the crypt at St. Sulpice before being moved to a crypt at the Carmelite Church in the Rue de Vaugirard then under Dominican supervision. It was here that he had attended Mass daily in the latter part of his life in Paris.

A model of the Christian Life

On March 5th, 1854, six months after Ozanam's death, the first Australian Conference was founded at St. Francis' Church in Melbourne.

The cause for his beatification began on March 15th, 1925, in the Diocese of Paris, and in Rome on January 12th, 1954. Pope John-Paul II proclaimed him 'venerable' by the decree of July 6th, 1993, on the 'heroicity of his virtues'. Four years later, following the recognition by the Pope of a miracle obtained through the intercession of Ozanam, he was beatified by the Pope at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on August 22nd, 1997.

In 1983, in a speech marking the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Society, the Pope declared that we should 'thank God for the gift he has made to the Church in the person of Ozanam. We are amazed by all that was undertaken for the Church, for society, for the poor, by this student, this professor, this father of a family, of intense faith and inventive charity, during the course of a life too quickly consumed! His name remains associated with that of Saint Vincent de Paul who, two centuries earlier, had founded the Ladies of Charity, before an equivalent institution for men could be established. How could we not wish that the Church should also place Ozanam among the blessed and the saints?'

Acknowledgements

The author, Kevin Slattery is one of the Society's honorary archivists in Victoria and a long serving member of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

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The first conference drawing is by Sally McDowell from the booklet No Time Like Now, 1997, St. Vincent de Paul Society NSW.

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Frederic Ozanam's tomb

Last Will & Testament

Today, the 23rd of April 1853, at the moment of completing my 40th year ... I write in brief my last will and testament.

I commit my soul to Jesus Christ my Saviour.

I die in the bosom of the Catholic Church ... all my life has convinced me that there is no rest for the mind and the heart except in the Faith of that Church and under her authority .

My supreme prayer to my wife, my child, my brothers, brothers-in-law and all those who may be born of them is that they persevere in the faith in spite of humiliations, the scandals and the desertions they shall witness.

To my tender Amelie, who has been the joy and charm of my life ... I thank her.

I bless her. I await her. It is only in heaven that I shall be able to give her back all the love she merits.

I give my daughter the blessing of the Patriarchs ...

I implore the prayers of my relatives and my friends of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and of my friends in Lyons. Let not your zeal be slackened by those who say, "He is in heaven". Sustained by your prayers, my beloved friends, I shall leave this world with less apprehension.

I firmly trust that we shall not be separated and that I shall remain in the midst of you until you reunite me.



St Vincent de Paul Society

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