

Memorial of St. Peter Claver
and
A Celebration of Blessed Antoine-Frederic Ozanam
Founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul
Bishop Barres Homily¹
September 9, 2020

As we celebrate the Memorial of the great Jesuit priest St. Peter Claver, we also remember that September 9th is a date that is special to our St. Vincent de Paul Society on Long Island and to St. Vincent de Paul Societies around the world because today we celebrate their founder Blessed Antoine-Frederic Ozanam.

Blessed Antoine-Frederic Ozanam (1813-1853), was beatified by Pope Saint John Paul II on August 22, 1997 at the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris during World Youth Day Festivities in Paris.

Pope St. John Paul II intentionally held up Ozanam as a model for youth for many reasons. Ozanam lived heroically the Beatitudes we just heard proclaimed from Luke 6. His holy life could be considered a commentary on the Beatitudes and together we pray for his canonization today.

Ozanam was a Renaissance man who had doctorates in law and literature and taught literature at the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris.

Ozanam had struggles with faith as a young man. He questioned many aspects of the faith and worked through many difficulties. He credits a philosopher-priest mentor Abbe Noirot with helping him confront his difficulties and grow

¹ This homily has been adapted from Bishop Barres May 2019 *Long Island Catholic* column.

in his understanding and capacity to articulate the faith. Ozanam writes: “It was then that the teaching of a philosopher priest saved me. He put my thoughts in order and light; I thought now with an assured faith, and received a rare benefit; I promised God to devote my life to the service of the truth that gave me peace.”² Catholic Faith and Reason mentors like Abbe Noirof are critical for the faith development of young people.

The Holy Spirit led him in his search and with his characteristic sincerity and openness the Spirit helped him to resolve them.

It also gave him an empathy and understanding of his young peers who were atheists, agnostics or simply having trouble with faith. Ozanam is a great model and intercessor for young people struggling with the existence of God and the truth claims of the Catholic Church. He teaches us to be sincere and tenacious in searching for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the ways of Truth that always set us free.

The Universities in Paris were hostile to Catholicism and religion in general. Ozanam and a group of his friends began holding debates at these universities in which they defended and explained the teachings of the Church in hostile territory.

At one debate, one of his opponents went on the offensive and said that Ozanam and his debate partners could explain the Catholic faith but what did they actually do to live and express it?

This challenge was a great moment of conversion and growth for Ozanam and resulted in him founding the St. Vincent de Paul Society³ in the streets and poor homes of Paris and very soon in streets and poor homes all over the world.

The Vincentians, living the contemplative and Good Samaritan spirit of St. Vincent de Paul and their founder Blessed Ozanam, are known to this day for their charitable visits to poor homes and families and the caring material

² See Sickinger 34.

³ I wish to offer a special thanks to The Society of St. Vincent de Paul of Long Island, Board President Robert Meekins, CEO & Executive Director Thomas J. Abbate, Spiritual Advisor Msgr. Gerard Ringenback and all the dedicated Vincentians who serve the needs of the poor and those in crisis on Long Island. This homily is dedicated to you and your inspirational *dramatic missionary growth* efforts on Long Island.

assistance they share with a great reverence for the dignity of the poor they serve.⁴

This young intellectual with his great capacity for reasoning through and explaining his Catholic faith diversified and strengthened his faith by combining his commitment to Faith and Reason with a radical and generous commitment to the Corporal Works of Mercy. His Catholic witness ignited.

Ozanam teaches us to allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate breadth and depth in our Catholic faith. Every dimension of our Catholic faith is strengthened when we open ourselves to new dimensions of the faith.

An intellectual approach to Catholicism is strengthened by a spiritual and contemplative approach to Catholicism. A Social Justice approach to Catholicism is strengthened by a Gospel of Life approach to Catholicism. Every dimension of Catholicism is interdependent with every other dimension and a constant spirit of adventurous discovery during the course of our lives helps us to grow in holiness and a commitment to Catholic Church's *dramatic missionary growth*.

Ozanam was an agent of the Corporal Works of Mercy (feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the prisoners, bury the dead, give alms to the poor) and the Spiritual Works of Mercy (counseling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, admonishing the sinner, comforting the sorrowful, forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently, praying for the living and the dead).

Through his contemplative spirit and his commitment to the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy he became an instrument of positive social change. He realized that his commitment to the Works of Mercy and the social change that occurs through the Works of Mercy could only be sustained and enriched through prayer, silence, contemplation and a commitment to daily *lectio divina* of the Sacred Scriptures.

⁴ For instance, on Long Island, in 2018 as they celebrated their 70th Anniversary, 1,316 Vincentians in 63 Conferences in 57 Long Island communities provided assistance to thousands of Long Islanders suffering the effects of poverty. See *The Society of St. Vincent de Paul of Long Island 2018 Annual Report*, 4.

Frederic Ozanam and his wife Amelie shared many letters between them which are touching for their humanity, their aspirations to grow in holiness together as husband and wife and their commitment to Catholic theology and spirituality. Their letters bring to life a living Catholic Spirituality of Marriage.

Frederic and Amelie realized individually and together that their intimacy with each other could only grow and deepen if their intimacy with Father, Son and Holy Spirit was growing and deepening. There are many beautiful human touches in their letters of affection, heroic sacrifice, forgiveness, patience with each other's faults, and the desire to keep their relationship strong, fresh and growing in holiness.

Ozanam's life also illustrates the critical role of parents in the Catholic formation of their children. In a sense, Frederic's father Dr. Jean-Antoine-Francois Ozanam was the co-founder of the St. Vincent de Paul since he was a Catholic doctor devoted to the Eucharist who took care of countless poor people not only physically but spiritually. He prayed with his patients and turned the hearts of his patients to the Divine Physician.⁵

Ozanam's mother Marie passed on to Frederic her gracious and gentle personality as well as an understanding of the wounds the French Revolution had left in France (her 19 year old brother Jean-Baptiste had been put to death by the revolutionaries and her family often had to go into hiding).

Ozanam's life, message and charism were prophetic in regard to the development of Catholic Social Teaching later in the 19th Century with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and in regard to the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the Apostolate of the Laity and the baptismal call to holiness and mission of the laity.

Just as the spirit of St. Vincent de Paul in the 17th Century inspired and animated the witness of Frederic Ozanam in the 19th Century so too Ozanam's beatitudinal witness has inspired and animated the witness of countless Catholic saints, mystics and theologians including Dorothy Day and many others.

⁵ See Sickinger, 12-16.

Blessed Frederic Ozanam's tomb is located in the lower crypt of St. Joseph-des-Carmes Church in Paris near the remains of 114 priests massacred during the French Revolution in September 1792.

The epitaph on his tomb reads:

**Here rests in peace Frederic Ozanam,
Who stirred the young into action in the
Service of Christ, Principal founder
Of the Society of Saint-Vincent de Paul.**

**By science, history, eloquence, poetry and charity,
He consecrated himself to transforming everything
In Christ's name. He enclosed the whole world
within a network of charity.**

**His name shall be invoked
From generation to generation.
Nations will celebrate his wisdom
And the Church shall praise him.⁶**

⁶ See Sickinger, 269-290.