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Frédéric Ozanam: Systemic Thinking, and Systemic Change

RAYMOND L. SICKINGER, PH.D.

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Introduction

A number of biographies document the true story of how the young Frédéric Ozanam visited a beleaguered Parisian woman with five children on one of the first visits he made in the spring of 1833.¹ She was in desperate need. When her husband drank to excess — which was often — he became terribly abusive to both her and the children. Nearly all of the wages she herself worked so hard to earn were immediately wasted by him on drink, leaving her children to suffer especially, but not only, from hunger. She was at her wits end when Ozanam visited her. After providing her with the necessary material assistance, Frédéric probed more deeply into the details of her situation. As a young law student he hoped to understand exactly what her legal options might be in order to advise her about advantageous courses of action. Fortuitously he discovered through his legal research that she was never officially married, allowing her the freedom to leave this oppressive household. To assure her, he obtained an official decision from the *Procureur du Roi* stating this fact. When he first informed the woman, Ozanam intimated that she should leave the premises to live elsewhere in Paris with her children. But soon after he realized how great the wrath of the foiled husband was, particularly once he learned of the potential loss of drinking income. The man threatened violence. Concerned for the family's safety, Ozanam suggested a legal procedure to force the man to quit Paris. He took the time, however, to listen carefully to the woman's counsel and, based on her recommendation, he instead sought a legal order that would prevent the husband from leaving Paris. Now the woman would be free to live with her mother in Brittany. A collection was taken up for her travel expenses. When she departed with her youngest children, the two eldest boys, eleven and twelve years of age, were apprenticed with Monsieur Bailly's printing establishment and cared for at the Bailly house.² Frédéric had succeeded in working for and with this woman to make the journey out of poverty.³ In his lifetime Frédéric Ozanam neither heard nor uttered the phrases “systemic change” or “systemic thinking.” Yet the story above illustrates a compelling argument that he was committed to helping people move from poverty to a sustainable life, a key element in changing systems that entrap people in poverty.

Thinking about the world as a complex interrelated system rather than as a simple mechanism has been fundamental to modern science, but the actual phrase “systemic change” has most often been applied to the field of education. The term has gradually expanded into other areas, especially the study of poverty and its root causes. It has been

¹ This story is documented in Kathleen O'Meara, *Frederic Ozanam, Professor at the Sorbonne, His Life and Works* (New York: The Catholic Publication Society Company, 1891), 64. Hereafter cited as O'Meara, *Life and Works*. The story is related in at least two other publications: in Right Reverend Monsignor Louis Baunard, *Ozanam in His Correspondence* (Dublin: Catholic Truth Society, 1925), 72. Hereafter cited as Baunard, *Ozanam*; and also in Edward O'Connor, S.J., *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam: Founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, LTD., 1953), 32. Hereafter cited as O'Connor, *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam*.

² Emmanuel Bailly was the first president of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and a member of the initial group of seven that first met in April of 1833.

³ O'Meara, *Life and Works*, 64; Baunard, *Ozanam*, 72; O'Connor, *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam*, 32.



Frédéric Ozanam, in his academic robes, performing a home visit. Painting by Gary Schumer.

Courtesy of the Association of the Miraculous Medal, Perryville, Missouri



attributed by some to Peter M. Senge, Ph.D., who identified systemic thinking as the “fifth discipline”⁴ and inspired the phrase “systemic change.” According to Senge, “Vision without systems thinking ends up painting lovely pictures of the future with no deep understanding of the forces that must be mastered to move from here to there.... Without systems thinking the seed of vision falls on harsh soil.”⁵

At the same time, Senge argues that “systems thinking also needs the disciplines of building shared vision, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery to realize its potential. Building a shared vision fosters a commitment to the long term. Mental models focus on the openness needed to unearth shortcomings in our present ways of seeing the world. Team learning develops the skills of groups of people to look for the larger picture that lies beyond individual perspectives.” He insists, however, that “personal mastery fosters the personal motivation to continually learn how our actions affect our world. Without personal mastery, people are so steeped in the reactive mindset (‘someone/something else is creating my problems’) that they are deeply threatened by the systems perspective.⁶ For Senge, the fifth discipline, systems thinking, “integrates the disciplines,” fusing them into

⁴ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 13. Hereafter cited as Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

a coherent body of theory and practice. In the final analysis, he is emphatic that “a shift of mind,” or a change in attitudes, is absolutely crucial to final change.⁷

In 2006, the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, Reverend Gregory Gay, C.M., responded to the growing interest in systemic change that began with Senge’s work; he formed a commission for the promotion of systemic change. The commission’s expressed mandate was: “To help bring about systemic change through the apostolates of the members of the Vincentian Family,⁸ especially those ministering to the oppressed poor.” Once formed, it placed particular emphasis on “self-help and self-sustaining programs,” so that those living in poverty might be “active participants in the planning and realization of the projects envisioned.”⁹ Reverend Gay’s call was to all members of the Vincentian Family, to engage in strategies that would help end poverty through systemic change, and to be faithful to Vincentian virtues and values in the process.

According to the definition developed and adopted by the leadership of the international Vincentian Family, systemic change refers to aid that moves “beyond providing food, clothing and shelter to alleviate immediate needs, and enables people themselves to engage in the identification of the root causes of their poverty and to create strategies to change those structures which keep them in poverty.” Just as Peter Senge had intimated, the Vincentian Family also embraced a belief that systemic change “requires changing attitudes that have caused the problem.”¹⁰ In the case of the Parisian mother trapped in an abusive marriage, Frédéric Ozanam indeed moved beyond providing only for immediate needs. He identified a situation that, if left unchanged, would perpetuate a family’s poverty. Acting on this knowledge, Frédéric informed the mother and, more importantly, listened carefully to her wise advice, consequently engaging her directly in strategies that would bring a solution to her problem. Attitudes, including Frédéric’s, were changed in the process. Moreover, in his short lifetime, there is evidence that Frédéric engaged in what might be referred to as systemic thinking because he developed a clear vision for a more charitable and just world, understood the forces that needed to be mastered to achieve that vision, inspired people to participate in the process, attempted to address the political, social, and economic problems that were obstacles in the path of success, and tirelessly worked to change the attitudes of and toward those living in poverty. He, then, has much to offer Vincentians, and others as well, in their effort both to understand and to achieve systemic thinking and systemic change.

The Vincentian publication, *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change* identifies four distinct groups of strategies: Mission-Oriented Strategies; Person-Oriented Strategies;

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Vincentian Family refers to those groups or organizations that were formed in some way by Saint Vincent de Paul and/or that were inspired by his spirituality and vision. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul falls into this latter category.

⁹ Robert P. Maloney, C.M., “Commission for Promoting Systemic Change,” *Vincentiana* (January-April 2008): 1, at: http://cmglobal.org/vincentiana-novus-en/files/downloads/2008_1_2/vt_2008_01_12_en.pdf (Accessed 15 February 2013).

¹⁰ For this definition see: <https://mission.depaul.edu/VincentianIdentity/systemicchange/Documents/Vincentian%20Family%20History.pdf> (Accessed 26 February 2014).

Task-Oriented Strategies; and Strategies for Co-Responsibility, Networking, and Political Action.¹¹ Within these four groups there are twenty specific strategies that are considered seeds for genuine systemic change. For the purpose of better understanding Frédéric's contributions to a discussion of systemic change, both the twenty strategies in *Seeds of Hope* and Senge's thoughts will serve as the framework. In light of the Vincentian Family desire to foster systemic change, Ozanam is especially relevant, providing us with consistent evidence of both ideas and ideals related to systemic change, as well as possible strategies to achieve it. Much like the twenty strategies, Ozanam's contributions to this discussion as evidenced in his thought and his work may be likened to early seeds of systemic change and systemic thinking.

"Regeneration of society"

At the age of twenty-one, Ozanam identified the crisis in France that would shape his life: "The earth has grown cold. It is for us Catholics to revive the vital beat to restore it, it is for us to begin over again the great work of *regeneration* [my italics]..."¹² After years of revolution and with the onset of industrialization, France faced a difficult future and daunting prospects for resolving its religious, social, political, and economic problems. But Ozanam believed that genuine change could occur, as it had in the past, if there was a profound change in the minds and hearts of his countrymen. Regeneration was his first cherished vision; the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul that he helped to organize was one of the essential efforts to realize this regeneration. Its youthful character was a genuine benefit, and he saw it "situated at the schools' gates, that is, at the wellsprings of the new generation, that generation destined one day to occupy positions where influence is exercised, can give such happy stimulation to our poor French society, and through France, to the whole world."¹³

After reiterating to his cousin, Henri Pessoneaux, in 1840,¹⁴ his commitment to the great work of "regenerating French society," he better defined his vision one year later to his fiancé, Amélie Soulacroix. To her he spoke of "a community of faith and works erasing little by little the old divisions of political parties and preparing for a not-too-distant future a new generation which would carry into science, the arts, and industry, into administration,

¹¹ Rev. James Keane, S.J., ed., *Seeds of Hope: Stories of Systemic Change* (St. Louis, MO; The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul for the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change, 2008), 43-48, 76-85, 118-126, and 162-169 respectively. Hereafter cited as Keane, *Seeds of Hope*. See also the Vincentian Family News Blog's *Systemic Change: Seeds of Change* series. This twenty-week series was offered by the members of the Commission for Promoting Systemic Change. It highlights the most significant strategies. The series may be accessed at: http://www.famvin.org/wiki/Systemic_Change:_Seeds_of_Change Any further reference to this series will be simply cited as: *Seeds of Change* series.

¹² "Letter to Léonce Curnier," 23 February 1835, in Joseph I. Dirvin, C.M., trans., ed., *Frédéric Ozanam: A Life in Letters* (St. Louis: Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Council of the United States, 1986), 64. Hereafter cited as Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*. For the original French text see Léonce Célier, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, and Didier Ozanam, *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam: Lettres de Jeunesse* (1819-1840) (Paris: Bloud and Gay, 1960), v.1, n° 90, 166. Hereafter cited as *Lettres*, v.1.

¹³ "Letter to François Lallier," 7 February 1838, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 131. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 169, 295.

¹⁴ "Letter to Henri Pessoneaux," 13 March 1840, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 178. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 227, 394.

the judiciary, the bar, the unanimous resolve to make it a moral country, and to become better themselves in order to make others happier.” He readily acknowledged to her that these were “ambitious dreams...”, but also admitted that they consoled him and brought him closer to her.¹⁵ He confessed that every day he witnessed his vision of regeneration becoming a reality. After one celebration of the Society, when he learned that thirty other conferences¹⁶ “in the farthest removed sections of the country” had participated in this solemnity, Ozanam joyfully proclaimed:

How can there not be given some hope to such a strength of association, exerted mainly in the large cities, in every law school, in every enlightened home, upon a generation called to fill a variety of offices and influential posts? And if formerly immorality befell the upper classes, the academies, the judiciary, the military chiefs, the politicians, among the middle class and the people, can we not believe without too much madness that divine Providence calls us to the moral rehabilitation of our country when eight years are enough to raise our number from eight to two thousand, when several of us without the help of intrigue and favor already move in the highest levels of society; when on all sides we invade the bar, medicine, the courts, the professorships; when a single one of our conferences is composed of nearly a third of the École Normale and the brightest students of the École Polytechnique?¹⁷

According to *Seeds of Hope*, systemic change strategies should establish “structural and institutional models, where communities can identify their resources and needs, make informed decisions, and exchange information,”¹⁸ as well as “construct a shared vision... toward change.”¹⁹ It was upon this perceived need for “regeneration” that Ozanam constructed his vision and model of an association dedicated to reviving France morally, spiritually, politically, economically, and socially. Authentic regeneration, a complete change in the system, would result only from a dramatic change in the hearts and minds of Frenchmen, not simply from some external program of action. By forming true bonds of “friendship, support, and example,”²⁰ an indisputable transformation could occur. Those

¹⁵ “Letter to Mademoiselle Soulacroix,” 28 February 1841, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 224. For the original French text see *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam: Premières années à la Sorbonne, 1841-1844*, Édition critique de Jeanne Caron (Paris: Celse, 1978), v.2, n° 290, 88. Hereafter cited as *Lettres*, v.2.

¹⁶ The conference is the basic unit of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, modeled after the first conference of charity formed by Ozanam and his friends in 1833. These are not to be confused with the conferences associated with Saint Vincent de Paul.

¹⁷ “Letter to Mademoiselle Soulacroix,” 1 May 1841, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 243. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.2, n° 310, 137.

¹⁸ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 118-119; 77 and 83. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 4 and 14.

¹⁹ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 164-165. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapter 18.

²⁰ “Letter to Léonce Curnier,” 4 November 1834, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 55. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 82, 154.

living in poverty, however, were not to be excluded from these bonds of friendship. As Ozanam wrote in 1834, “But the strongest tie, the principle of true friendship, is charity, and charity could not exist in the hearts of many without sweetening itself from the outside. It is a fire that dies without being fed, and good works are the food of charity... and if we assemble under the roof of the poor, it is at least equally for them as for ourselves, so as to become progressively better friends.”²¹

Peter Senge warned that although a vision is important because it fosters long-term commitment, it can prove fruitless if one does not understand the forces that must be mastered.²² The Vincentian Family also cautioned that when dealing with those living in poverty, systemic change strategies should always “start with a serious analysis of the local reality, flowing from concrete data and tailor all projects to this reality.”²³ Ozanam anticipated these concerns. Because he was such an exemplary scholar, one might expect that Professor Ozanam would have believed that poverty could best be grasped deductively by applying a grand theory on how society is constructed and functions. But Frédéric understood the serious limitations and implications of such an approach, one that many socialists of his day employed. Monsignor Baunard, the translator of much of Ozanam’s correspondence, argued that Frédéric knew that “all social theories from Plato to Muncer and John Leyden, have only resulted in visionary Utopias, disorder and violence.”²⁴

Instead, Ozanam embraced an inductive approach based on experience as the only viable way to get a thorough understanding of the complexity of poverty: “The knowledge of social well-being and reform is to be learned, not from books, nor from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor’s man garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secret of his lonely heart and troubled mind. When the conditions of the poor have been examined, in school, at work, in hospital, in the city, in the country... it is then and then only, that we know the elements of that formidable problem, that we begin to grasp it and may hope to solve it.”²⁵ For Ozanam, the regeneration of society would help to eliminate poverty and would be accomplished only by forming authentic community and building just, caring relationships between the different social classes who ultimately shared the same goals for society: peace, order, and happiness. He believed that his Catholic faith had much to offer on this subject to those who might be willing to listen and engage in dialogue. Ozanam’s vision of complete “regeneration of society” then has a connection to systemic change strategies and thinking. It is his first contribution, or the first seed.

²¹ *Ibid.* For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 82, 154.

²² Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 13.

²³ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 118-119.

²⁴ Baunard, *Ozanam*, 278.

²⁵ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 279. See also Albert Paul Schimberg, *The Great Friend: Frederick Ozanam* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1946), 210. Hereafter cited as Schimberg, *The Great Friend*. See also Reverend Henry Louis Hughes, *Frederick Ozanam* (Saint Louis: B. Herder Book Company, 1933), 60.



Portrait of Rosalie Rendu, D.C.
(1786-1856).

*Image collection of the Vincentian
Studies Institute*



“Let us go to the poor”

When challenged in the early conference of history to identify what he and his friends were doing for those in need, Ozanam spontaneously responded: “We must do what is most agreeable to God. Therefore, we must do what Our Lord Jesus Christ did when preaching the Gospel. Let us go to the Poor.”²⁶ The initial group that formed was at first simply called the Conference of Charity. It was composed of only seven members: Augustus Le Tallandier, Paul Lamache, François Lallier, Jules Devaux, Félix Clavé, Frédéric Ozanam, and Joseph Emmanuel Bailly. It was Joseph Emmanuel Bailly “who would become the first President General of the flourishing Society,” and Frédéric Ozanam who would become its “radiant source of inspiration.”²⁷ Just as systemic change strategies in *Seeds of Hope* now recommend, Ozanam and his friends designed “projects, creative approaches, policies and guidelines that flow from... Christian and Vincentian values and mission.” The purpose of these was exactly what *Seeds of Hope* now emphasizes: to “evangelize while maintaining a profound respect for local culture, thus enculturating Christian and Vincentian charism and values in that culture.”²⁸

²⁶ Quoted in Baunard, *Ozanam*, 65. For the original French text see Antoine Frédéric Ozanam, “Discours à la conférence de Florence,” *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Simon Raçon et Compagnie, 1872), t.2, v.8, 4. Hereafter cited as Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*. See also C.-A. Ozanam, *Vie de Frédéric Ozanam* (Paris: Librairie Poussielgue Frères, 1879), 187. Hereafter cited as C.-A. Ozanam, *Frédéric Ozanam*.

²⁷ *Rule of the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul* (2003), I, 6. Hereafter cited as *International Rule*.

²⁸ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 44-7. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 2 and 3.

With the guidance and mentoring of Sister Rosalie Rendu, Frédéric and his young companions not only began to live out the Christian imperative to bring succor to those in need, but also to become imbued with the Vincentian charism. According to Armand de Melun, Rosalie Rendu's collaborator and biographer, Rosalie "recommended to them patience, which never considers time spent listening to a poor person as wasted, since this person already takes comfort in the good will that we demonstrate by attending to the recitation of his sufferings; understanding, more inclined to pity than to condemn faults that a good upbringing did not ward off; and finally, politeness, so sweet to a person who has never experienced anything but disdain and contempt."²⁹ Sister Rosalie further admonished her young Vincentians to "love those who are poor... The world says, 'It's their fault. They are cowardly... ignorant... vicious... lazy. It is with such words that we dispense ourselves from the very strict obligation of charity. Hate the sin but love the poor persons [who commit it]. If we had suffered as they have, if we had spent our childhood deprived of all Christian inspiration, we would be far from their equal."³⁰ Her words took seed and rooted deeply in Frédéric.

With a profound understanding of the importance of what he was undertaking, Ozanam eloquently articulated the need that awaited him and his friends in the streets of Paris:

Cast your eyes on the world around us... The earth has grown cold. It is for us Catholics to revive the vital beat to restore it... if necessary to bring back the era of martyrs. For to be a martyr is possible for every Christian, to be a martyr is to give his life for God and his brothers, to give his life in sacrifice, whether the sacrifice be consumed in an instant like a holocaust, or be accomplished slowly and smoke night and day like perfume on the altar. To be a martyr is to give back to heaven all that one has received: his money, his blood, his whole soul. The offering is in our hands; we can make this sacrifice. It is up to us to choose to which altars it pleases us to bring it, to what divinity we will consecrate our youth and the time following, in what temple we will assemble: at the foot of the idol of egoism, or in the sanctuary of God and humanity.³¹

Indeed, his recognition that egoism or selfishness was a serious problem to be overcome is a good example of what Senge terms "personal mastery."³² Ozanam was aware of how human behaviors, including his own, impacted the world.

²⁹ Quoted in Louise Sullivan, D.C., *Sister Rosalie Rendu: A Daughter of Charity on Fire with Love for the Poor* (Chicago, Vincentian Studies Institute, 2006), 210-211. Hereafter cited as Sullivan, *Sister Rosalie*. See also Armand de Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie, Fille de la Charité*, 13e edition (Paris, 1929), 99-100.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "Letter to Léonce Curnier," 23 February 1835, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 64. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 90, 166.

³² Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 13.

Poised to bring Christian and Vincentian values to a desperate France, Frédéric saw his role, then, as a true evangelizer through commitment to action and example. Moreover, the projects, approaches, and policies that flowed from the young Society were genuinely inspired by Christian and Vincentian values. In a letter to his mother dated 23 July 1836, Ozanam recounted some of the works with which he and his companions in charity were engaged: "...we maintain a house of apprentices for printing where we lodge, feed, and instruct ten poor children, nearly all orphans. We pay two charitable persons a wage equal to a half-pension for each of them... Several of our colleagues have been charged by the president of the Civil Tribunal with visiting children detained at the request of their parents."³³ Again, in another letter to her in April of 1837, he proudly reports that "a lottery was drawn which realized three thousand and six francs for our adopted children."³⁴ Indeed, Saint Vincent de Paul had also made use of such a lottery to raise funds for his orphans.³⁵ In a third letter to his intended, Amélie Soulacroix, dated February of 1841, Frédéric enthusiastically proclaimed that "1500 families here in Paris alone have been helped, the daily bread brought under the needy roof, wood assured for many a dismal home. Besides twenty boys educated for free in a paternal household, a truly large number supervised, protected, and encouraged, apprenticed in reliable shops, brought together each Sunday for divine service, corrupt fathers have been brought back to an ordered and frugal life...."³⁶

In December of 1837 a ministry to soldiers was created in Lyon. To counteract "the perverse temptations of idleness" and the "evil temptations of a great city," the members established a special work — a library of books. As Ozanam faithfully reported to Paris, "we have distributed a large number of leaflets to inform the soldiers of our existence. During the last five months 268 soldiers have attended and have chosen reading matter, according to their taste and their intelligence..."³⁷ The list of deeds inspired by Christian faith and Vincentian values could easily be expanded. It is no wonder that Frédéric pronounced with conviction in 1837 that "Our little Society of St. Vincent de Paul has grown large enough to be considered a providential fact..."³⁸ The second seed is then contained in Ozanam's advice to his colleagues: "Let us go to the poor."

³³ "Letter to his mother," 23 July 1836, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 76. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 121, 220.

³⁴ "Letter to his mother," 11 April 1837, in *Ibid.*, 110. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 146, 260.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 4, 111.

³⁶ "Letter to Mademoiselle Soulacroix," 28 February 1841, in *Ibid.*, 224. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.2, n° 290, 88.

³⁷ "Letter of Frédéric Ozanam," December 1837, in *The Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul*, 21st ed. (Dublin: The Superior Council of Ireland, 1958), 223-224. Hereafter cited as the *Dublin Manual*. For the original French text see "To the General Assembly of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul," 8 December 1837, in *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam: Supplément et Tables*, Édition critique sous la direction de Didier Ozanam (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1997), v.5, n° 1369 [164 bis], 64. Hereafter cited as *Lettres*, v.5. The location of this report is Lyon. The original French report indicates 266 soldiers rather than 268.

³⁸ "Letter to François Lallier," 5 October 1837, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 120. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 160, 283.

“The poor are our masters”

The third seed is represented in Ozanam’s belief that the poor are “our lords and masters,” a belief deeply grounded in the words of Saint Vincent de Paul, who first uttered them,³⁹ and who served as an inspiration to Frédéric and his young companions. In a letter written in November of 1836, Frédéric eloquently stated that the poor are not in the least inferior: “We should fall at their feet and say... *Tu est Dominus et Deus meus*. You are our masters, and we will be your servants. You are for us the sacred images of that God whom we do not see, and not knowing how to love Him otherwise shall we not love Him in your persons?”⁴⁰ According to *Seeds of Hope*, systemic change strategies are predicated upon a deep respect for the dignity of the human person. One must “listen carefully and seek to understand the needs and aspirations of the poor, creating an atmosphere of respect and mutual confidence and fostering self-esteem among the people.” And one must “involve the poor themselves....”⁴¹

Frédéric’s genuine love for persons living in poverty inspired him to become a true friend of those he visited, always ready to work with them and defend their interests. The personal visit to the home was intended to empower the person in poverty, and to provide insights into her/his genuine needs. Initially Frédéric listened attentively; then he would attempt to engage the person in the journey out of poverty. Reminiscent of what Senge suggests in his discipline of mental models, Frédéric demonstrated a genuine openness necessary to unearth the shortcomings in how he saw the world, particularly the world of those living in poverty. As the French Dominican priest, Lacordaire, fondly remembered: “His [Ozanam’s] manner towards the poor was one of the warmest and most kindly respect. If they came to visit him, he made them sit in his arm-chairs like distinguished guests. When he went to their homes, after giving his time, his conversation and his money, he never failed to take off his hat and say with the gracious bow that was customary with him: ‘I am your servant.’”⁴²

Spirituality, Friendship, and Service

Since its origination in 1833, the three essential elements of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul were spirituality, friendship, and service. These elements were fundamental to the formation of members. Vincentian systemic change strategies insist on the necessity to “educate, train and offer spiritual formation to all participants in the project.” For success one must “promote learning processes in which the members of the group... speak with one another about their successes and failures, share their insights and talents, and work

³⁹ Conference 164, “Love for the Poor, January 1657,” *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., *et al*, 1-13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1985-2010), 11:349. Hereafter *CCD*.

⁴⁰ “Letter to Louis Janmot,” 13 November 1836, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 96. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 137, 243.

⁴¹ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 76, 78-9. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 10 and 11.

⁴² Reverend H.D. Lacordaire, O.P., *My Friend Ozanam*, trans. by a Discalced Carmelite of Yule Island, Carmel, via Papua (Sydney: The Society of St. Vincent de Paul Ozanam House, 1957), 35. Hereafter cited as *Lacordaire, My Friend*.

toward forming effective multiplying agents and visionary leaders in the local community, servant-leaders inspired by St. Vincent de Paul.”⁴³ From its inception the Society’s early members, and most of all Ozanam, recognized and valued the development of conference members through this trinity of essential elements: “Let us work to increase and multiply, to become better, more tender and stronger...”⁴⁴

In February of 1834 the Society was placed under the patronage of Saint Vincent de Paul, not upon the suggestion of Ozanam but of another member, Le Prevost.⁴⁵ However, it was Ozanam who was most passionate about fidelity to this patron saint. As he informed his close friend François Lallier in 1838, “we are now reading... *the Life of St. Vincent de Paul*, so as to better imbue ourselves with his examples and traditions.” He insisted that Saint Vincent remain as “a model one must strive to imitate... a heart in which one’s own heart is enkindled....” By “appropriating the thoughts and virtues of the saint” the Society could “escape from the personal imperfections of its members... [and] make itself useful in the Church and give reason for its existence.”⁴⁶

Although the official name of the organization did become the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, the conference remained “the primary basic unit” of the group,⁴⁷ reflecting the original nature of the first conference of charity as a forum for the discussion of ideas, exchange of information, and a reflection upon what is learned both in study and through visits to those living in poverty. Although the evidence is far from conclusive,⁴⁸ there is a possibility that members of the first conference were taught the practice of theological reflection⁴⁹ by Sister Rosalie Rendu. When visits concluded, the members may have gathered in her parlour to recount what they did, reflect on their service, and receive both advice and support.⁵⁰ Whether or not Sister Rosalie instructed the first members in reflection, certainly reflection became an essential feature of conference life in the Society.⁵¹

Ozanam remained at the forefront of instructing and encouraging members to improve their lives, and to help others improve theirs as well. In April 1838 he counselled members to meet often because coming together “more frequently we love each other more. The more numerous our meetings in the name of Him Who promised to be in the midst of

⁴³ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 76, 80-1. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 12 and 13.

⁴⁴ “Letter to Emmanuel Bailly,” 22 October 1836, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 88. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 135, 236.

⁴⁵ Sullivan, *Sister Rosalie*, 215.

⁴⁶ “Letter to François Lallier,” 17 May 1838, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 143. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 175, 308-09.

⁴⁷ *International Rule*, I, 11.

⁴⁸ Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée suggests that there is insufficient evidence to conclude definitively that Sister Rosalie was an ongoing mentor. He has written an excellent history of the Society, *La Société de Saint-Vincent de-Paul au XIXe siècle, 1833-1871. Un fleuron du catholicisme social* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2008). Hereafter cited as Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société*.

⁴⁹ The Vincentian Family often refers to this as apostolic reflection.

⁵⁰ Sullivan, *Sister Rosalie*, 211. Sister Sullivan does make this claim.

⁵¹ *International Rule*, I, 9.

those who should come together in His name, the more clearly do we seem to realize the fulfilment of His promise.”⁵² Conscious of the potential power the visit had to transform both the visitor and the visited, Ozanam begged members to examine their consciences:

We must bring light into this chill; edification, rather than conversion, is the chief necessity.... But how to make saints, when one lacks sanctity? How preach to the unfortunate resignation and courage which one does not possess? How rebuke them for failings present in oneself? There, gentlemen, is the main difficulty of our position; that is why we are so often overcome by confusion of heart and remain silent in the presence of families we visit who, if they are our equals in weakness, are often our superiors in virtue. It is such a time that we acknowledge, in the words of St. Vincent de Paul, “that the poor... are our lords and masters, and that we are hardly worthy of rendering to them our petty services.”⁵³

Moreover, Ozanam’s vision of the world determined that a person living in poverty was not a useless person, because in suffering she/he “is serving God and consequently serving society just as someone who is praying.” This person fulfills “a ministry of expiation, a sacrifice from which we benefit....”⁵⁴

Reverend Robert P. Maloney, C.M., insists that “Forming people for leadership roles is fundamental for bringing about long-lasting change. But experience teaches that a vertical style of leadership is rarely effective in systemic change projects. Servant leaders are needed, men and women who listen, help the group to formulate projects, involve it in implementing them, and engage it in evaluating and re-structuring them.”⁵⁵ Frédéric Ozanam was indeed this requisite servant leader. His was no vertical style of leadership. Reverend Shaun McCarty, S.T., readily discerns that “Ozanam’s leadership among his brother Vincentians advocated great openness, flexibility, and diversity kept in unity by sharing the same mission and spirit.”⁵⁶ Ozanam may have thought of himself as a weak Samaritan,⁵⁷ but others saw him as an authentic servant leader.⁵⁸

⁵² “Letter of Frédéric Ozanam,” 27 April 1838, in *Dublin Manual*, 121. This was actually a report of works given to the General Assembly of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Lyon. For the original French text see “To the General Assembly of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul,” 27 April 1838, in *Lettres*, v.5, n° 1372 [173 bis], 71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 209. For the original French text see *Ibid.*, 72. The quote at the end is from Conference 164, “Love for the Poor, January 1657,” the accepted modern English translation of which can be found in *CCD*, 11:349.

⁵⁴ Antoine Frédéric Ozanam, “De l’Aumône,” *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.1, v.7, 299. The original French text is: “l’homme qui souffre sert Dieu, il sert par conséquent la société comme celui qui prie. Il accomplit à nos yeux un ministère d’expiation, un sacrifice dont les mérites retombent sur nous...”

⁵⁵ *Seeds of Change* series, Chapter 13.

⁵⁶ Shaun McCarty, S.T., “Frederick Ozanam: Lay Evangelizer,” *Vincentian Heritage* 17:1 (1996), 34.

⁵⁷ “Letter to Léonce Curnier,” 23 February 1835, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 65. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 90, 167.

⁵⁸ “Letter to Ernest Falconnet,” 7 January 1834, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 43. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 67, 122.

When the first president, Emmanuel Bailly, decided to leave the position in 1844, Ozanam was largely responsible for defining the necessary qualities to hold that office. In a June document he portrayed that person as one who had “great piety, in order to be an example to all, and perhaps still greater affability in order not to discourage others by too rigid virtues; he must have the habit of devotion, the spirit of true fraternity, the experience of good works....” Zeal and prudence were equally essential, coupled with an ability “to maintain the Society in the paths of simplicity and prudent liberty....” In his final analysis the president’s character “must attract confidence and respect, while his gentle familiarity renders him the friend of the younger members in the numerous family united around him.”⁵⁹ The qualities listed undoubtedly describe an ideal servant leader, and are intimately connected to the fundamental principles of spirituality, friendship, and service.

Peter Senge argued that systemic thinking requires mental models to help identify shortcomings, and team learning that develops skills to see the bigger picture. These three essential elements of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul served as a perfect mental model by which to gauge and overcome shortcomings. They also served as the key to the group’s ongoing learning and formation. Ozanam’s fourth seed, then, is the essential elements of spirituality, friendship, and service.

“Humble simplicity”

Frédéric used the cogent expression “humble simplicity” in a letter to his fiancé, Amélie Soulacroix, dated 1 May 1841: “Only one thing could hinder and destroy us: the adulteration of our primitive spirit, the pharisaism that sounds the trumpet before it, the exclusive self-esteem which belittles any power other than that of the elite, excessive customs and structure resulting in languor and relaxation or rather verbose philanthropy more eager to talk than to act, or again bureaucracies which impede our march by multiplying our machinery. And especially to forget the *humble simplicity* [my italics] which has presided over our coming together from the beginning...”⁶⁰ This expression adheres to the intent of Vincentian systemic change strategy, to start “modestly, delegating tasks and responsibilities, and providing quality services respectful of human dignity.”

Simplicity, with its emphasis on openness, honesty, and modesty, was also one of the hallmarks of Saint Vincent de Paul: “Jesus, the Lord, expects us to have the simplicity of a dove. This means giving a straightforward opinion about things in the way we honestly see them, without needless reservations. It also means doing things without any double-dealing or manipulation, our intention being focused solely on God. Each of us, then, should take care to behave always in this spirit of simplicity, remembering that God likes to deal with the simple, and that he conceals the secrets of heaven from the wise and prudent of

⁵⁹ “Circular Letter of the Vice-Presidents-General,” 11 June 1844, in *Dublin Manual*, 257. For the original French text see “To the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul,” 11 June 1844, in *Lettres*, v.5, n° 1403 [540 bis], 112-13.

⁶⁰ “Letter to Mademoiselle Soulacroix,” 1 May 1841, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 243. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.2, n° 310, 137.



Portrait of François Lallier.

*Image collection of the Vincentian
Studies Institute*



this world and reveals them to little ones.”⁶¹ An essential feature of Vincentian pragmatism has always been “practical, concrete, and effective services... underpinned by the absolute belief that each person is made in the image and likeness of God and is a temple of the Holy Spirit.... All projects for the poor start modestly and grow into being.” And even today the Rule guiding the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul clearly identifies “simplicity — frankness, integrity, genuineness” as one of its essential virtues.⁶² In fact, when Emmanuel Bailly stepped down in 1844, he was praised for his fidelity to the traditions of humble simplicity which he had helped to establish.⁶³

Frédéric Ozanam was fully aware of the need to have both an affective and effective organization. To his friend, François Lallier, who was secretary general of the Society under Bailly’s presidency, Ozanam thoughtfully advised the following: “It is your duty, by age and office in the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, to reanimate it from time to time by new inspirations which, without harm to its primitive spirit, foresee the dangers of too monotonous a uniformity.” He further cautioned Lallier: “Let us be careful not to straighten ourselves with customs too hidebound, within bounds impassable in number or density. Why cannot the conferences of Saint-Étienne and Saint-Sulpice⁶⁴ go beyond fifty members? Why cannot the Society here get larger than forty members? Think about it.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ This quotation is from Vincent de Paul’s *Common Rules* in General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission, *Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* (Rome: 1984; English translation, Philadelphia: 1989), 109.

⁶² The first quote is from Ellen Flynn, D.C., *Seeds of Change* series, Chapter 6. See also *International Rule*, I, 10.

⁶³ “To the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul,” 11 June 1844, in *Lettres*, v.5, n° 1403 [540 bis], 112-13.

⁶⁴ Saint-Étienne-du-Mont and Saint-Sulpice are famous parish churches in Paris in which some of the first conferences of the Society were formed.

⁶⁵ “Letter to François Lallier,” 7 February 1838, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 131. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 169, 296.

Vincentian systemic change strategies attempt to “systematize, institutionalize and evaluate the project and its procedures, describing measurable indicators and results.”⁶⁶ In this spirit, Frédéric Ozanam was faithful to the accurate reporting and honest evaluation of the Society’s works, its accomplishments as well as its failures. There can be little doubt that Frédéric rejoiced in the growth of the Society and its works. Yet, he also maintained an important perspective on the process of growth, informing his fellow Vincentians that they should not only share “statistical statements crammed with enumerations of our successes...”, as important as such reports might be, but that they must also “exchange ideas, our inspirations... sometimes our fears, and always our hopes.”⁶⁷ Advising his friends to think of another kind of balance sheet, he exhorted them “to enquire not so much whether our numbers have increased but rather if our unity has grown; not so much whether our works are more numerous but if they are better; to report, indeed, what aid we have given to our poor, but far rather what tears we have dried and how many Christians we have brought back to the fold.”⁶⁸ Humble simplicity fostered personal motivation within each member of the Society to think deeply about how their actions were affecting the world — “personal mastery” in the words of Peter Senge — and proved to be Ozanam’s fifth seed.

The Rule

It is a given in Vincentian systemic change strategy that any project or undertaking should be “self-sustaining by guaranteeing that it will have the human and economic resources needed for it to last.”⁶⁹ The Rule of the Society was intended to provide guidance for long-term sustainability. Shortly after its formation, the conference of charity became known officially as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and a Rule to govern its members’ actions was written and promulgated. Although the writing of the first Rule is generally attributed to Emmanuel Bailly and François Lallier, Sister Louise Sullivan, D.C., suggests that Bailly, Lallier, and Ozanam “were charged with the task.” And she further emphasizes that as early as 1834 it was Ozanam who “had clearly seen the need for greater organization.”⁷⁰ Even one of his biographers, Reverend Edward O’Connor, argues convincingly that, at the very least, the concluding portion of the Rule was composed by Ozanam. According to Reverend O’Connor, Frédéric returned to Paris in the autumn of 1835 to complete his doctoral thesis. He was then living with François Lallier, his dear friend, who had the task of completing the final draft of the Rule: “Granted the latter’s natural seriousness of character and lack of imagination, we shall not err in attributing to Frederick [sic] himself

⁶⁶ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 118; 119; 122; 123. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 6 and 7.

⁶⁷ “Letter of Frédéric Ozanam,” 27 April 1838, in *Dublin Manual*, 120. For the original French text see “To the General Assembly of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul,” 27 April 1838, in *Lettres*, v.5, n° 1372 [173 bis], 71.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 121. For the original French text see *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 119; 124. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapter 8.

⁷⁰ Sullivan, *Sister Rosalie*, 221. Albert Paul Schimberg holds a similar view as Sister Sullivan. He contends that Bailly and Frédéric were collaborators and the resulting work “breathes the spirit of Ozanam.” See Schimberg, *The Great Friend*, 102.



Portrait of Joseph Emmanuel Bailly,
first President General of the
Society.

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the conclusion of the Rule, with all its warmth of feeling.” The moving conclusion, to which Reverend O’Connor alludes, read: “Together or separated, near or far, let us love one another; let us love and serve the poor. Let us love this little Society which has made us known to one another, which has placed us on the path of a more charitable and more Christian life. Much evil is being done, said a holy priest, let us do some little good. Oh! How glad we shall be that we did not leave empty the years of our youth.”⁷¹

The Rule that resulted in December of 1835 came two years after the fact for a reason. According to the Society’s first president, Bailly: “Was it not necessary that it [the Society] should be well established — that it should know what Heaven required of it — that it should judge what it can do by what it already has done, before framing its rules and prescribing its duties?” Bailly continued: “now we have only to embody... in Regulations, usages already followed and cherished; and this is a guarantee that Our Rule will be well received by all and not forgotten.”⁷² Interestingly, this practice of embodying what was already proven to work is in the best tradition of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. The Rule of 1835 set forth the Society’s goals, among which were:

⁷¹ Quoted in O’Connor, *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam*, 56. See also *Rules of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and Indulgences*, Printed for the Council of New York (New York: D. & J. Sadlier 7 Co., 1869), 43. This publication includes the original Rule of 1835 in translation. Hereafter cited as *Rules of the Society 1835*. Available at <http://archive.org/stream/rulesandindulge00paulgoog#page/n4/mode/2up> (Accessed 14 February 2013).

⁷² Quoted in Sullivan, *Sister Rosalie*, 222. Original in *Règlement de la Société de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Imprimerie de E-J Bailly et Compagnie, 1835), 5-6. See also *Rules of the Society 1835*, 9-10.

1. to sustain its members in the practice of a Christian life by example and mutual advice;
2. to visit those who are poor in their homes, to bring them assistance in kind... and to offer them religious consolation;
3. to apply ourselves, according to our talents and the time that we have at our disposition, to the elementary and Christian instruction of poor children, whether free or in prison;
4. to distribute moral and Christian books;
5. to apply ourselves to all kinds of charitable works, for which our resources are adequate [and] which are not contrary to the primary aim of our society....⁷³

Its primary aim, however, was “Christian piety,” a growing in holiness by service to those in need. Consequently, members were encouraged to be virtuous and in particular to practice the following virtues: “self-sacrifice; Christian prudence; an efficacious love for one’s neighbor; zeal for the salvation of souls; gentleness of heart and humility in words; and especially fraternal spirit.”⁷⁴ In its own way the Rule provided members with the mental model to see the world differently and encouraged team learning to see “the larger picture that lies beyond individual perspectives.”⁷⁵

The Rule today, fundamentally the same as it was in the nineteenth century, emphasizes the importance of reflection upon service experiences as an essential part of the development and growth of its members. Members, known as Vincentians, grow in holiness and lead better lives by visiting the poor “whose faith and courage often teach Vincentians how to live.” By reflecting and meditating on their experiences, Vincentians arrive at “internal spiritual knowledge of themselves, others and the goodness of God...” and transform “their concern into action and their compassion into practical love.”⁷⁶ Ozanam provides an excellent example of this: “How often has it not happened that being weighed down by some interior trouble, uneasy as to my poor state of health, I entered the home of the poor confided to my care. There, face to face with so many miserable poor who had so much more to complain of, I felt better able to bear sorrow, and I gave thanks to that unhappy one, the contemplation of whose sorrows had consoled and fortified me! How could I avoid henceforward loving him more.”⁷⁷ With the Rule in place the Society continued to flourish and grow, eventually becoming a world-wide organization. It provided the proper guidance for sustainability. Ozanam’s sixth seed is embedded in the Rule.

⁷³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 223. Original in *Ibid.*, 7-8. See also *Ibid.*, 11-12.

⁷⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 222-224. Original in *Ibid.*, 7-10. See also *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁷⁵ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 13.

⁷⁶ *International Rule*, I, 9.

⁷⁷ Quoted in O’Connor, *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam*, 57. See also Baunard, *Ozanam*, 343-44. Original French text in Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.2, v.8, 55; 57.

Circular letters and letters of report

Seeds of Hope counsels that systemic change strategies should foster transparency “by inviting participation in preparing budgets and in commenting on financial reports.” There must be “careful controls over money management” while those participating must fully “support and respect the mechanisms for promoting solidarity that exist among the community members.”⁷⁸ Both the circular letters and other letters of report constitute a primary example of promoting transparency and solidarity within the fledgling Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.

From its first beginnings, Frédéric Ozanam insisted that regular communication among the members was essential. The president should circulate letters on a regular basis which not only provide facts or describe key events, but which also address key concerns and necessary changes. But there should also be regular reporting from each Society location. For example, Emmanuel Bailly received an appendix to a report from Frédéric in July of 1838. Listing the membership and the monies of the Society in Lyon, Ozanam took great care to provide accurate figures as well as a description of the works they had accomplished. There are numerous other examples of these same kinds of reports which not only bring to light the work, but also provide evidence of good stewardship. Ozanam admonished his friend Lallier in a letter of 1837 to “attend particular assemblies frequently; see the presidents from time to time; take part in the meetings of the administrative council; prod sometimes the excessive tranquility of the president general; do not neglect correspondence with the provincial conferences.” He further counseled: “If you think as I do, when a conference fails to write by a designated date, you should write to it yourself a little in advance of the next date, to ask it to be more faithful in communicating. No longer allow the circular letters to be delayed too long. The one you sent me two months ago was very good and responded to an urgent need; visiting families is not as easy as it seems; instructions in this regard are extremely useful, and it would be good to repeat them.”⁷⁹

Peter Senge advised that mental models focus on “the openness needed to unearth shortcomings in our present ways of seeing the world.”⁸⁰ Certainly these circular letters and letters of report, like mental models, provided that openness for Ozanam and the rest of the Society to identify significant shortcomings as well as celebrate successes. Using a cogent organic image, Ozanam once described these letters as “brotherly communications” that “are like the circulation which keeps life in the Society.”⁸¹ They were also in the best tradition of Vincent de Paul, who valued such honest communication. Indeed, the

⁷⁸ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 77; 85; 119; 125. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 9 and 16.

⁷⁹ “Letter to François Lallier,” 5 October 1837, in Dirvin, *A Life in Letters*, 120-121. For the original French text see *Lettres*, v.1, n° 160, 283-84.

⁸⁰ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 13.

⁸¹ “Letter of Frédéric Ozanam,” 27 April 1838, in *Dublin Manual*, 120. For the original French text see “To the General Assembly of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul,” 27 April 1838, in *Lettres*, v.5, n° 1372 [173 bis], 71.



Frédéric Ozanam, from a mural painting of Ozanam by the painter-priest Sieger Köder, located in the parish hall of St. Vincent de Graz, Austria.

Courtesy of the Church of St. Vincent de Graz



circular letters and letters of report were, and still are, the Society's lifeblood, bringing rich nourishment to both the transparency and solidarity of the Society. In them we discover Ozanam's seventh seed.

Hearing humanity's cry for freedom

Reverend William Hartenbach, C.M., suggested more than fifteen years ago that it "can safely be said that he [Ozanam] involved himself in activities which were directed toward 'systemic social change,'" because Ozanam "was active in politics and was part of a group of Catholic intellectuals who were committed to the democratic ideal."⁸² Indeed, those committed to Vincentian systemic change strategies "promote engagement in political processes, through civic education of individuals and communities." They "struggle to transform unjust situations and to have a positive impact, through political action, on public policy and laws." Such persons often "have a prophetic attitude"; they "announce, denounce, and, by networking with others, engage in actions that exert pressure for bringing about change."⁸³

An acute appreciation of history eventually guided Ozanam to conclude "that in the nature of mankind democracy is the final stage in the development of political progress, and that God leads the world in that direction."⁸⁴ Although Ozanam condemned the French

⁸² William Hartenbach, C.M., "Vincentian Spirituality," *Vincentian Heritage* 17:1 (1996), 46.

⁸³ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 77; 84; 164; 166; 167. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 15, 19, and 20.

⁸⁴ "Letter to Prosper Dugas," 11 March 1849, in "Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam," v.2, Frédéric Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Jacques Lecoffre et Cie, Libraires-Éditeurs, 1865), v.11, 236. Hereafter cited as "Lettres," Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*. See also *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam: L'engagement (1845-1849)*, Édition critique sous la direction de Didier Ozanam (Paris: Celse, 1978), v.3, n° 870, 495-496. Hereafter cited as *Lettres*, v.3. The original French text is: "Ce que je sais d'histoire me donne lieu de croire que la démocratie est le terme naturel du progress politique, et que Dieu y mène le monde." This is also quoted in James Patrick Derum, *Apostle in a Top Hat: The Story of Frederic Ozanam* (Michigan: Fidelity Publishing Company, 1962), 202.

Revolution's Reign of Terror (1793-1794), increasingly he came to appreciate the value of and necessity for democratic reform if France was ever to be resurrected from the ashes of the French Revolution. According to Catholic Church historian Thomas Bokenkotter, Ozanam interpreted the French Revolution "as humanity's cry for greater freedom, and as a key figure in the short-lived Christian democracy of 1848 he tried to move the Church to hear that cry and join the struggle."⁸⁵ In the *Correspondant* in 1848, Ozanam published a powerful public call to embrace the masses.⁸⁶ He later argued that "instead of espousing the interests of a doctrinaire ministry, of a fearful peerage, or of an egotistical bourgeoisie, we [must] take care of the people who have too many needs and not enough rights and who justly demand a more complete role in public affairs, guarantees for work and against misery."⁸⁷ He was clear: "It is in the people that I see enough remnants of faith and morality to save a society in which the upper classes are lost."⁸⁸

Ozanam was not a socialist; he did not want "the overthrow of society," but instead he anticipated the advent of "a free, progressive Christian reform of it."⁸⁹ Yet Ozanam was severely critical of those who continued to ignore the cries of the poor: "If a greater number of Christians, and especially clergymen, had looked after the workers for ten years, we would be more sure of the future."⁹⁰ Using strong words of caution in April 1848, Ozanam begged the Church to "take care of the workers like the rich people; it is from now on the only way to salvation for the Church of France. The priests must give up their little bourgeois parishes, flocks of elite people in the middle of an immense population which they do not know."⁹¹

Valuing civic engagement, Frédéric Ozanam took his duties as a citizen of France seriously. In the late 1840's he served in the National Guard and regularly voted in elections. He engaged in a significant journalistic venture during the Revolutions of 1848. He wrote articles on political and social matters in the newspaper *L'Ère Nouvelle* (*The New Era*) as a kind of civic duty, intending to influence minds and persuade people to avoid violence and support necessary democratic reforms. "My share in public life, from which no man should shrink today, is confined to the little I shall do in the *L'Ère Nouvelle*... We must

⁸⁵ Thomas Bokenkotter, *Church and Revolution, Catholics in the Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 131.

⁸⁶ He elaborated on this message in an article published in *Le Correspondant* entitled: "Les dangers de Rome et ses espérances." The article appeared on February 10th, just two weeks before the fall of Louis Philippe and the beginning of the revolution of 1848 in Paris. See Philip Spencer, "'Barbarian Assault': The Fortunes of a Phrase," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16:2 (1955), 237.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Mary Ann Garvie Hess, trans., *Cahiers Ozanam*, Nos. 37/38/39, January to June (Paris: Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Council General, 1974), 19. Hereafter cited as Hess, *Cahiers Ozanam*. See also "Letter to Théophile Foisset," 22 February 1848, in *Lettres*, v.3, n° 784, 379.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*; *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 21. For the original French text see "Letter to Alexandre Dufieux," 31 May 1848, in *Lettres*, v.3, n° 814, 432.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27. For the original French text see "Letter to L'Abbé Alphonse Ozanam," 15 March 1848, in *Lettres*, v.3, n° 789, 391.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* For the original French text see "Letter to L'Abbé Alphonse Ozanam," 12-21 April 1848, in *Lettres*, v.3, n° 802, 413.



Alphonse de Lamartine, influential in the founding of the Second Republic, stands in front of the Hôtel de Ville, Paris, following the February Revolution of 1848. Painting by Henri Félix Emmanuel Philippoteaux.

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found a new work for these times...⁹² The prospectus for that publication (1 March 1848) was signed by Ozanam: It purported to “reconcile religion and the democratic Republic, to demand from the Republic liberty of education, liberty of association, amelioration of the condition of the working men....” It also called for the protection of “all peoples who have lost their nationality by unjust conquests which time cannot rectify, and those other peoples which, following our example from afar, aspire to achieve their own political and moral emancipation.”⁹³

Ozanam was approached to stand for election as a representative in the new assembly to be formed following the revolution that had unseated Louis Philippe in 1848. He reluctantly agreed to offer his name as a candidate, stating publicly that he always had “the passionate love of my country, the enthusiasm of common interests,” and that he longed for “the alliance of Christianity and freedom.”⁹⁴ Although his personal wishes were against running for office, he felt it was his civic duty to do so. He was not elected, but he left a clear record of his mature political beliefs which had been nurtured by his

⁹² Quoted in O’Meara, *Life and Works*, 230. The original French text can be found in “Letter to A.M.L...,” 12 April 1848, in “Lettres,” Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, v.11, 219. See also “Letter to François Lallier,” 12 April 1848, in *Lettres*, v.3, n° 800, 409-10.

⁹³ Parker Thomas Moon, *The Labor Problem and the Social Catholic Movement in France* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), 35. Hereafter cited as Moon, *The Labor Problem*. The first quote is from Moon; the latter is a quote from the prospectus itself.

⁹⁴ Hess, *Cahiers Ozanam*, 51.

service experiences from 1833 to 1848. In a public statement issued on the 15th of April to the constituents of the Department of the Rhône, he declared that the revolution of February 1848 was “not a public misfortune... it’s a progress that one must support.” Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity — the catchwords of the French Revolution — were, eloquently stated, a signal of the “temporal advent of the Gospel...”⁹⁵ His implication was clear. The French Revolution of 1789 had been bloody and violent precisely because it had forgotten its religious heritage, a Christian heritage that could and should embrace people in a loving way. Ozanam understood that only a transformation of both the human person and of society would lead to true liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The same year, he warned: “Behind the political revolution [of 1848], there is a social revolution ... One must not think he can escape these problems.”⁹⁶ The monarchy had now failed three times to resolve its issues,⁹⁷ and Ozanam passionately advocated that it “was time to demonstrate that the proletarian cause can be pleaded, the uplifting of the suffering poor be engaged in, and the abolition of pauperism pursued.”⁹⁸ His words were indeed bold and prophetic. He not only called out to his countrymen, but also to “all in the Vincentian tradition to find new ways to seek the temporal Gospel principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity to revitalize democracy, and with it, encourage the flourishing of humanity.”⁹⁹ Of most importance, he was intently focused on changing people’s attitudes, so essential to effecting systemic change according to both the Vincentian Family and Peter Senge. Consequently, in hearing humanity’s cry for freedom, and in writing in *L’Ère nouvelle* to champion democracy, support basic human rights, and address the root causes of poverty, Ozanam planted his eighth seed of systemic change.

“Help that honors”

Vincentian systemic change strategies “consider poverty not just as the inevitable result of circumstances, but as the product of unjust situations that can be changed, and focus on actions that will break the cycle of poverty.” They require “a holistic vision, addressing a series of basic human needs — individual and social, spiritual and physical, especially jobs, health care, housing, education, spiritual growth — with an integral approach toward prevention and sustainable development.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19. See “Letter to L’Abbé Alphonse Ozanam,” 6 March 1848, in *Lettres*, v.3, n° 787, 388.

⁹⁷ “Letter to L’Abbé Alphonse Ozanam,” *Ibid.*, 387.

⁹⁸ Baunard, *Ozanam*, 278. The original French text can be found in Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.1, v.7, 212.

⁹⁹ Reverend Craig B. Mousin, “Frédéric Ozanam — Beneficent Deserter; Mediating the Chasm of Income Inequality Through Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,” *Vincentian Heritage* 30:1 (2010), 80.

¹⁰⁰ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 44-45, 118-120. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 1 and 5.

In an article for *L'Ère nouvelle*,¹⁰¹ Ozanam distinguished between help that humiliates and help that honors. He proposed a holistic approach that offers more than simply providing for the material needs of the human person.

Help is humiliating when it appeals to men from below, taking heed of their material wants only, paying no attention but to those of the flesh, to the cry of hunger and cold, to what excites pity, to what one succors even in the beasts. It humiliates when there is no reciprocity... But it honors when it appeals to him from above, when it occupies itself with his soul, his religious, moral, and political education, with all that emancipates him from his passions and from a portion of his wants, with those things that make him free, and may make him great. Help honors when to the bread that nourishes it adds the visit that consoles... when it treats the poor man with respect, not only as an equal but as a superior, since he is suffering what perhaps we are incapable of suffering; since he is the messenger of God to us, sent to prove our justice and charity, and to save us by our works. Help then becomes honorable because it may become mutual.¹⁰²

Painfully aware that poverty was a complex phenomenon, Ozanam ascertained early on that persons living in poverty often were not to blame for their condition. In another article entitled "*Les causes de la misère*,"¹⁰³ he articulated a profound and powerful lesson learned through his service to others: "God did not make the poor... God forbid that we should calumniate the poor whom the Gospel blesses, or render the suffering classes responsible for their misery, thus pandering to the hardness of those bad hearts that fancy themselves exonerated from helping the poor man when they have proved his wrongdoing."¹⁰⁴ He ardently advocated for education, worker associations, and other practices that would give a hand up instead of just a hand out.¹⁰⁵ In line with Senge's belief, Ozanam once again proved open to changing the way he saw the world, attuned to looking for the larger picture, and continually learning and sharing how his and other's actions affected his world.

Of course, Ozanam embraced the Christian ideal of detachment from material goods, an ideal reinforced in large part by his scholarly study of and writing on the Middle Ages,

¹⁰¹ "De l'assistance qui humilie et de celle qui honore," n° 187, 22 October 1848. See Christine Morel, "Un Journal démocrate chrétien en 1848-1849: *L'Ère nouvelle*," *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France*, t.63, n° 170 (1977): 52. Morel provides an excellent appendix with the numbers and dates of the chief contributors' articles. Christine Franconnet wrote under the name Christine Morel in this article. Hereafter cited as Morel, "*L'Ère nouvelle*."

¹⁰² O'Meara, *Life and Works*, 176-177. Original French text can be found in Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.1, v.7, 292-293.

¹⁰³ *L'Ère nouvelle*, n° 180, 8 October 1848. See Morel, "*L'Ère nouvelle*," 52.

¹⁰⁴ O'Meara, *Life and Works*, 248; Original French text in Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.1, v.7, 282-283.

¹⁰⁵ See Moon, *The Labor Problem*, 25-28. See also David L. Gregory, "Antoine Frederic Ozanam: Building the Good Society," *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 3:1 (2005): 33-41.

especially Saint Francis of Assisi (interestingly, some claim that Frédéric was a third order Franciscan¹⁰⁶). He clearly understood, however, that severe poverty or destitution — the absence of all essential material, physical, and spiritual needs — was something neither to be glamorized nor condoned: “And let no one say that in treating poverty as a priesthood we aim at perpetuating it; the same authority which tells us that we shall always have the poor amongst us is the same that commands us to do all we can that there may cease to be any.... Those who know the road to the poor man’s house... never knock at his door without a sentiment of respect.”¹⁰⁷ The vicious cycle of poverty that often permanently entraps people in its grip was a phenomenon Ozanam became intimately acquainted with, and one which he hoped to break. Waxing eloquent in a letter dated 11 April 1839 to his fellow Vincentians, Ozanam expressed his firm hope “that those who were recently at strife will meet to know and love one another” and that they would embrace “an admirably simple thing, which is as infinite and eternal as the God from whom it comes... *Charity*.”¹⁰⁸ For him love was an essential part of change, and the solution to both alleviating and eliminating poverty. His ninth seed is found in the understanding and promotion of help that honors.

“World-wide network of charity”

The tenth and final seed Ozanam offered is his vision of a “World-wide network of charity,” with which he aspired “to encircle the world.”¹⁰⁹ By the time he spoke to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul conference in Florence (January 1853), Ozanam had witnessed his dream of a network of charity and justice becoming a reality. To the conference members he emphatically, yet humbly, proclaimed that “God has made our work His and wanted it to spread throughout the world by filling it with blessings.”¹¹⁰ The Society became a world-wide organization because of a genuine shared vision of charity and justice. According to Vincentian systemic change strategies, one must “construct a

¹⁰⁶ “Text of the Decree of Introduction of Ozanam Cause,” in *Ozanam: Path to Sainthood* (Melbourne, Australia: National Council of Australia Society of St. Vincent de Paul, 1987), 10. For the opposite point of view, see *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam: Les Dernières Années (1850-1853)*, Édition critique par Christine Franconnet (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1992), v.4, n° 1323, n. 550, 669. In this footnote to a letter from a Franciscan leader, the editors clearly indicate that Frédéric was honored by the Franciscans, but that there is no solid evidence that he was ever made a member of the third order.

¹⁰⁷ O’Meara, *Life and Works*, 177. For the original French text see Ozanam, “De l’Aumône,” *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.1, v.7, 299. It is an extract from *L’Ère nouvelle*. See also Morel, “L’Ère nouvelle,” 52.

¹⁰⁸ “Letter of Frédéric Ozanam,” 11 April 1839, in *Dublin Manual*, 113. See also “Letter to the General Assembly of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul,” 11 April 1839, in *Lettres*, v.5, n° 1378 [201 bis], 86.

¹⁰⁹ His hope “to encircle the world in a network of charity” was revealed in a letter from Léonce Curnier in 1834. Sister Louise Sullivan indicates that it was Frédéric who wrote the letter to Léonce. She cites: 3 November 1834, *Lettres*, v.1, 152. See Sullivan, *Sister Rosalie*, 212. But unfortunately no such letter exists in the collected works. There is, however, a letter of November 4th to Léonce, in which Ozanam responds to a letter sent to him by Léonce on November 3rd. See 4 November 1834, *Lettres*, v.1, n° 82, 153. It is in the letter of November 3rd to Ozanam (not from Ozanam) that Léonce mentions how inspired he was by Ozanam’s vision of a “network of Charity” for France. In fact, it led Léonce to start a conference in Nîmes. Concerning this letter see Baunard, *Ozanam*, 89. As the Society developed, Ozanam would readily and naturally expand his vision of a network of charity well beyond the confines of France. For this latter view see Thomas E. Auge, *Frederic Ozanam and His World* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966), 24.

¹¹⁰ The original French is: “...Dieu a fait de notre oeuvre la sienne et l’a voulu répandre par toute la terre en la comblant de ses benedictions.” It can be found in Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.2, v.8, 51.

shared vision..." as well as work to "promote social co-responsibility and networking, sensitizing society at all levels... about changing the unjust conditions that affect the lives of the poor."¹¹¹ Constructing the final vision, and promoting a network of friends, can best be attributed to Frédéric Ozanam. Throughout his life he was tireless in his efforts to expand the Society. To that same conference in Florence, he recounted the taunts of young socialists who claimed to have the answer to the future. But he proffered that they were no longer effective; their voices were silent. Instead through its reliance on love, its trust in providence, and its message of truth the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul had prospered and expanded globally.¹¹²

It is especially comforting to think that in the midst of this quick increase our society has lost nothing of its primitive spirit. Let me remind you what this spirit is for your fraternal attention. — Our main goal was not just to help the poor... Our goal was to keep us firm in the Catholic faith and to spread it among others by means of charity. We also wanted to advance a response to anyone who would ask in the words of the Psalmist: *Ubi est Deus eorum?* Where is their God? There was very little religion in Paris, and young people, even Christians, dared hardly go to church because they were pointed at, that is to say they simulated piety for positions. Today it is no longer so, and, thank God, we can say that young men, older and more educated, are also the most religious. I am convinced that this is due in large part to our Society and, to this point of view, we can say that she glorified God in her works.¹¹³

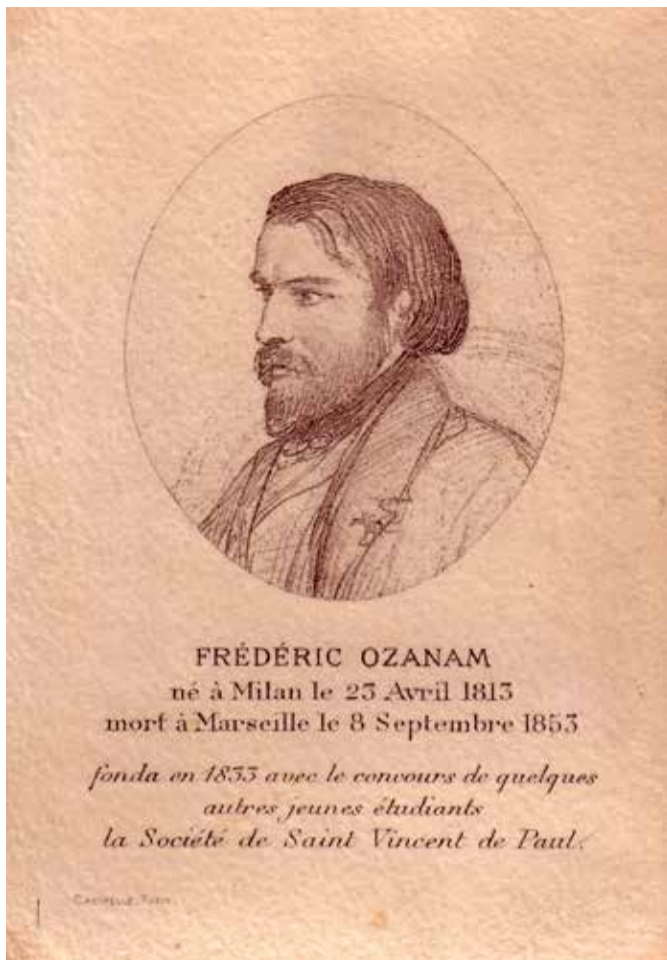
The transformation of individuals, and thereby the transformation of the society in which they lived, was the express intention of this network of charity and justice. It was the answer to a regeneration of society, his initial vision. There is no doubt Ozanam believed that the Catholic Church held out hope for both social and spiritual salvation; he wished for it to flourish because it held out the promise of progress. Indeed, he argued: "We must... restore the doctrine of progress by Christianity as a comfort in these troubled days."¹¹⁴ But he was neither a single-minded, nor a close-minded missionary. For him service to

¹¹¹ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 163-165. See also *Seeds of Change* series, Chapters 17 and 18.

¹¹² Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.2, v.8, 49.

¹¹³ The original French is: "Il est bien consolant surtout de penser qu'au milieu de cet accroissement si rapide notre Société n'a rien perdu de son esprit primitive. Permettez moi de vous rappeler quel est cet esprit, et veuillez me continuer pour cela votre fraternelle attention. — Notre but principal ne fut pas de venir en aide au pauvre, non; ce ne fut là pour nous qu'un moyen. Notre but fut de nous maintenir fermes dans la foi catholique et de la propager chez les autres par le moyen de la charité. Nous voulions aussi faire d'avance une réponse à quiconque demanderait avec le verset du Psalmiste: *Ubi est Deus eorum?* Où donc est leur Dieu? Il y avait dans Paris bien peu de religion, et les jeunes gens, même chrétiens, n'osaient guère aller à l'église, parce qu'on les montrait au doigt, en disant d'eux qu'ils simulaient la piété pour obtenir des places. Aujourd'hui il n'en est plus ainsi; et, grace à Dieu, l'on peut affirmer que les jeunes gens les plus âgés et les plus instruits sont en même temps les plus religieux. Je suis convaincu que ce résultat est dû en grande partie à notre Société, et, à ce point de vue, on peut dire d'elle qu'elle a glorifié Dieu dans ses oeuvres." It can be found in Ozanam, *Oeuvres Complètes*, t.2, v.8, 51; 53.

¹¹⁴ A. Frédéric Ozanam, *History of Civilization in the Fifth Century*, trans. by Ashley C. Glynn, 2 vol. (London: W.H. Allen & CO., 1868), v.1, 3.



Memorial engraving dedicated to Frédéric Ozanam.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



others was to be based solely upon need, not upon creed. In one famous reported case, a Protestant congregation provided a substantial amount of money to Ozanam and his conference for assistance to those in poverty. Other members of his conference suggested that the sum should first be used to help Catholics. In an impassioned speech, Ozanam informed his companions that if they were to do this, then they would not be worthy of the confidence of the donors. He refused to be a party to such a dishonorable action. Moreover, throughout his life he was also willing to work with secular agencies who took notice of the Society's work, such as the Bureau of Public Assistance that worked with Sister Rosalie and the Daughters of Charity with whom she served.¹¹⁵

Peter Senge would likely say that Ozanam's vision was realized because he had a "deep understanding of the forces that must be mastered to move from here to there," and because he was able to integrate the disciplines of building shared vision, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery.¹¹⁶ In other words, Ozanam engaged in systemic thinking. His elder brother, Alphonse Ozanam, insightfully described his brother's successful vision: "As soon as Ozanam saw the finger of God in the rapid growth of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, he comprehended that the small charitable association... of which he had at first thought, might perhaps begin to realize the design which he had meditated for a long time: *the reconciliation of those who have nothing with those who have too*

¹¹⁵ See O'Meara, *Life and Works*, 175; and Sullivan, *Sister Rosalie*, 210, respectively.

¹¹⁶ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 13.

much, by means of charitable works."¹¹⁷ It was truly a vision of love which would inspire many long beyond Ozanam's short lifespan.

Conclusion

As a final note it is appropriate to point out that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, for which Ozanam was such an inspiration, has often been overlooked due to its genuinely transformative character. In *Seeds of Hope* five criteria for systemic change projects are enumerated.¹¹⁸ Examine all five and it becomes quickly evident that at least in its initial history the Society fulfilled, or came decidedly close to fulfilling, each of these criteria.

The first criterion is *long-range social impact*: the project "helps to change the overall life-situation of those who benefit from it." The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul helped to address the multiple needs of many individuals, improving their lives. The letters of report mentioned earlier provide ample evidence that those aided by the Society often found their way to a better, or more sustainable, way of life. The Rule today stresses that the Society is "committed to identifying the root causes of poverty and to contributing to their elimination."¹¹⁹ The second criterion is *sustainability*: "The project helps create the social structures that are needed for a permanent change in the lives of the poor, like employment, education, housing, the availability of clean water and sufficient food, ongoing local leadership, etc." Especially through its Rule, the Society ensured its own sustainability to the present day. Its members provided not only for immediate needs, but also opportunities for appropriate food supplies, apprenticeships, and other forms of employment, as well as education. Many of these eventually became the organized "special works" of the Society.¹²⁰ No work of charity was foreign to the Society.¹²¹ The third criterion is *replicability*: "The project can be adapted to solve similar problems in other places. The philosophy or spirituality that grounds the project, the strategies it employs and the techniques that it uses can be applied in a variety of circumstances." While the fourth criterion is *scope*: "The project actually has spread beyond its initial context and has been used successfully in other settings in the country where it began, or internationally, either by those who initiated it, or by others who have adapted elements of it." In the case of both, the Society expanded quickly not only in France, but elsewhere. Its principles and strategies were easily transferable to other countries and other needs. In 1855, two years after Ozanam's death, the Society had a presence in approximately

¹¹⁷ C.-A. Ozanam, *Frédéric Ozanam*, 210. Frédéric was close to his elder brother, who was a priest. Alphonse advised Frédéric throughout his life and also officiated at his wedding to Amélie Soulacroix. See also Ainslie Coates, trans., *Letters of Frederic Ozanam* (London: Elliot Stock, 1886), 81.

¹¹⁸ For these five criteria see Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 9.

¹¹⁹ *International Rule*, I, 16.

¹²⁰ See "Circular-letter of M. Gossin, President-General," 2 July 1845, in *Dublin Manual*, 218-221.

¹²¹ Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée emphasizes that the Society did not hesitate to multiply its works. See Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société*, 44.

thirty-five countries.¹²² It currently exists in more than 140 countries throughout the world. The fifth and final criterion is *innovation*: “The project has brought about significant social change by transforming traditional practice. Transformation has been achieved through the development of a pattern-changing idea and its successful implementation.”¹²³ The Society was actually counter-cultural in its day,¹²⁴ aspiring both to resist and to change the systems of thought and practice that were part of French social, economic, political, and religious life.

It would certainly be disingenuous to claim that Frédéric Ozanam was knowingly engaged in systemic change initiatives, because the phrase “systemic change” was not in the vocabulary of his day. However, if Ozanam’s thought, work, and strategies are compared to the Vincentian definition of systemic change, and to the criteria and strategies for creating systemic change recommended in *Seeds of Hope*, remarkable similarities and significant correlation are evident. Likewise, if Peter Senge’s five disciplines are applied to Ozanam’s thought, work, and strategies, significant correspondence and resonance are apparent. Indeed, Senge claims that a “learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.”¹²⁵ Ozanam diligently worked to make the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul such a learning organization. It would be equally disingenuous, then, to fail to recognize that Ozanam was attuned to the realities and need for fundamental change in the religious, political, economic, and social systems of his day, and that he sometimes thought systemically, planting seeds which grew into genuine hope for those living in poverty. As *Seeds of Hope* proclaims: “Hope is a tiny seed that contains the germ of life. When watered, it sprouts and generates sturdy plants, beautiful flowers, fruit bushes and trees.”¹²⁶ In thought and through his works, Frédéric Ozanam brought such hope to a despairing world. As Pope Saint Pius XII said of him: “The mustard seed sown by Ozanam in 1833 is to-day [sic] a mighty tree.”¹²⁷



¹²² C.-A. Ozanam, *Frédéric Ozanam*, 225.

¹²³ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 9.

¹²⁴ Thomas McKenna, C.M., “Frédéric Ozanam’s Tactical Wisdom for Today’s Consumer Society,” *Vincentian Heritage* 30:1 (2010), 28.

¹²⁵ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 13.

¹²⁶ Keane, *Seeds of Hope*, 188.

¹²⁷ Quoted in O’Connor, *The Secret of Frederick Ozanam*, 60.



Frédéric Ozanam, in his academic robes, performing a home visit. Painting by Gary Schumer.

*Courtesy of the Association of the Miraculous Medal,
Perryville, Missouri*

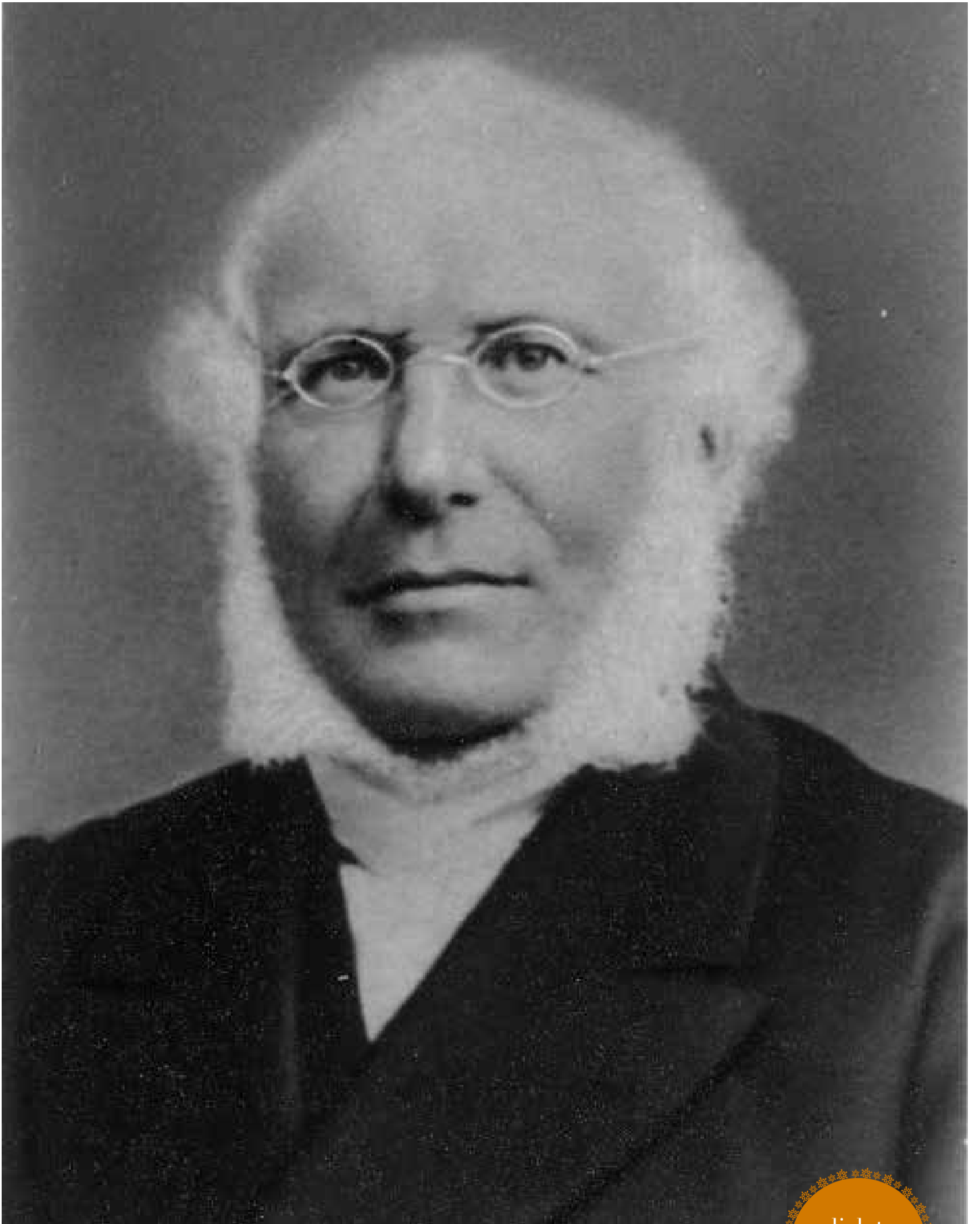




Portrait of Rosalie Rendu, D.C. (1786-1856).

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute





Portrait of François Lallier.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



Portrait of Joseph Emmanuel Bailly,
first President General of the Society.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



Frédéric Ozanam, from a mural painting of Ozanam by the painter-priest Sieger Köder, located in the parish hall of St. Vincent de Graz, Austria.

Courtesy of the Church of St. Vincent de Graz





Alphonse de Lamartine, influential in the founding of the Second Republic, stands in front of the Hôtel de Ville, Paris, following the February Revolution of 1848. Painting by Henri Félix Emmanuel Philippoteaux.

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FRÉDÉRIC OZANAM
né à Milan le 23 Avril 1813
mort à Marseille le 8 Septembre 1853

*fonda en 1833 avec le concours de quelques
autres jeunes étudiants
la Société de Saint Vincent de Paul.*

CRESPELLE, PARIS



Memorial engraving dedicated to Frédéric Ozanam.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute