

Frederic Ozanam

*A contemporary and
social reformist
for our time*

Lecturer

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Ozanam Lecture 2012

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East Melbourne

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The lecture is held annually in honour
of the St Vincent de Paul Society's founder



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

Blessed Frederic Ozanam
1813-1853



A message from the State President

Dear Friends

It is with pleasure that I present this printed version of the 15th annual Ozanam Lecture.

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

This year's Ozanam Lecture *Frederic Ozanam – A contemporary and social reformist for our time* was presented by Janet Buhagiar, Director Social Policy, Department of the Chief Minister, Northern Territory Government.

Janet's lecture explores and identifies in both Frederic's time and her own, the challenges, the need and the resulting fundamental themes of leadership.

Our respondent, Teresa Wilson, Director, Archdiocesan Office for Youth, Victoria & Director, VincentCare Victoria Board, complemented the lecture bringing her own knowledge and experience of working within the Society and highlighting the similarities in Janet's lecture between Frederic's time and today.

We commend this publication to you.

God bless you all.

Tony Tome
State President – Victoria
St Vincent de Paul Society

Mission Statement

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

Our Vision

The St Vincent de Paul Society aspires to be recognised as a caring Catholic charity offering 'a hand up' to people in need.

We do this by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope, and encouraging them to take control of their own destiny.



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

Janet Buhagiar

A short biography

Janet Buhagiar, originally from Melbourne, is a qualified Food Scientist, long-term Vincentian and worked in the corporate sector with Coles Myer Ltd for over eight years.

Janet moved to the Northern Territory in January 2007 to take up the position of Chief Executive Officer of the St Vincent de Paul Society (Northern Territory) Inc.

During that time Janet held various board positions within the NGO sector, was winner of the 2010 National Telstra Marie Claire Young Business Woman Award and has spent time in Timor Leste volunteering.

Recently Janet joined the Northern Territory Government in the Department of Chief Minister as Director of Social Policy.



Frederic Ozanam – A contemporary leader and social reformist for our time

Janet Buhagiar

Director Social Policy, Department of the Chief Minister, Northern Territory Government

As Vincentians and as a key faith-based organisation, what can we learn from Frederic Ozanam's leadership legacy as a social policy reformist in the 1800s as we strive for a more compassionate, equitable and fair society in 2012 and beyond.

I'd like to start with a prayer...

O Lord Jesus Christ... Let me recognise you at that virginal point in the depth of my heart where you dwell and heal me. Let me experience you in that centre of my being from which you want to teach and guide me... Take away the many fears, suspicions and doubts by which I prevent you from being my Lord, and give me the courage and freedom to appear naked and vulnerable in the light of your presence, confident in your unfathomable mercy.

A Retreat with Henri Nouwen – Reclaiming our Humanity

I decided to start with a prayer because we are called to be reflective.

There are two specific reasons why I chose this particular prayer. The first because it calls us to stop, to be still and seek God's gift of wisdom and guidance, to listen to God's call from the depths of our vulnerable hearts. And second, because it exposes our weakness and the fear that often exists in leadership.

There is a misplaced view in my opinion that

leaders are born strong, confident, never failing in their certainty. I suggest we are all called to be leaders but we all, even Frederic, have our fears, our uncertainties and it is only with reflection, a close listening to God's call, that we become great leaders and maintain confidence in the challenging times.

When considering the theme of today's lecture, my initial instinct was to be drawn into an appraisal of defining leadership, working through Ozanam's chronological history, exploring the concept of social reform in an academic, theological and political context, what Paris was like in the 19th century versus today, and so on.

Upon consideration and in deliberating the question of what can we learn from Ozanam's leadership style as Vincentians and as the Society, it became increasingly clear to me that Frederic's contemporary leadership and his passionate and persistent commitment to social reform through action is as effective as it was back then and as relevant today as it was then, because he was grounded in reflection and a fundamental connection with his faith. As I mused further around what made Frederic the leader that he was I found myself even further drawn to my own journey of leadership, particularly with my time at the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Northern Territory. I



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could identify in Frederic’s time and in mine, the challenges, the need, and the resulting fundamental themes of leadership. The key theme that strikes me to make change is the need for a deep and reflective human approach.

And so today, I propose not to share with you an academic or theological expression of views around the life of Ozanam and today’s world, rather I offer you in the context of my personal and professional journey, my views and thoughts of Frederic as a prayerful, lay, discerning and steadfast leader of his time. I will deliberately focus on my personal journey and that of those around me with a hope that today’s address helps us all reflect on how we as leaders within our community and within our ministry of the St Vincent de Paul Society respond to the needs of our people in 2012 both as individuals and as an organisation.

I believe Ozanam’s journey demonstrates for us all that we become leaders, we become who we are through the faithful journey of growth which is influenced by our families, the people around us, our mentors, the circumstances that motivate the need for change and all grounded with a strong and steadfast faith.

In review of Frederic’s journey, his relationship with mentors like Bailey and Ampere and his spiritual counsellors like Rosalie Rendu, we see very clearly his journey of growth. With support, he was committed to challenging of the status quo, to being steadfast and authentic in his view of the causes of the poverty he witnessed and the responsibility he saw of those around him, civic, political and religious.

We witness how this young university law student, raised by a doctor and of reasonable academic and social status lead the St Vincent de Paul movement, not just as a voice for change at a structural and political level but as a practical witness of the church in action – long before the church had a formal social justice position. In fact it was over 40 years till Pope Leo 13th issued the church’s position on the conditions of the worker. He mastered a beautiful balance of advocacy and structural reform with practical support and grassroots investment in the human spirit.

Frederic’s journey demonstrates for me four fundamental themes of leadership which supported his works and which I see as just as relevant today.

Frederic was...

1. An authentic man – he knew who he was as a Catholic man and responded to the call amidst the challenges, the fear, the uncertainty
2. A contemplative and reflective man – he took time to listen to the deeper needs of others, to take solitude and discern what was moving gently within his heart

3. A resourceful man – he knew how to utilise networks and saw the value in working in partnership, gaining support from others
4. A man who established systems and structures – he saw the need to have a plan of approach for long term sustainable change and social reform

I hope that this afternoon, my sharing of my journey, offers a ‘today’s’ version of these four themes, certainly in a different context but nevertheless, a relevant insight into how we as Vincentians in 2012 and as an organisation like the St Vincent de Paul Society, should consider our approach to striving for a more compassionate, equitable and fair society with authentic and steadfast leadership.

Before moving into further reflection on these four concepts it is prudent to perhaps briefly define what we mean by social equity and reform.

Social equity and social justice is not just a political debate or a form of activism and advocacy that sits separately from who we are. God calls us to see everyone as equal in value and worth. It is a fundamental premise that we must keep at top of mind because no matter what century we live in; the 19th or the 21st, no matter what location; Paris, Melbourne or Darwin, no matter whom; Frederic, you or I, it is all about people. People matter in a fundamental way and we must never lose sight of this.

Gula¹ describes for us what the end goal of social equity and reform should look like. He suggests that “the reach of justice is that everyone should share in the basic goods necessary for participating in the human community. This is called, working for the common good”.

He reaffirms that “if we take seriously that people are all of value and radically equal before God, **justice disposes us in ministry to promote the well being of all** and to **protest attempts to sacrifice anyone’s dignity** for the enhancement of a few”.

I believe this is what drove Ozanam beyond his scholarly activities, what drove him to connect with the people in a human way and it is what reaffirmed him as an authentic and contemporary leader of social change in his time. He saw the inequity and challenges of the industrial revolution where the working poor would create wealth that they would never enjoy and he took the risk of speaking out, being a voice for change and by inviting others to join the cause. This is what should drive us all to be responsible for our role in social change for today!

I’d like to now share with you a little about my journey, focussing more recently on my time as the CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Northern Territory but what I share is not dissimilar to the challenges and journey of my time with Coles Myer and more recently in



my position as Director of Social Policy with the Northern Territory Government and are certainly not dissimilar to the challenges that we face as Vincentians today and as the lay Catholic organisation of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Nor will the journey be dissimilar in certain respects to that of Frederic in terms of his call to make a difference and his leadership in making things happen during sceptical and challenging times. The detail and focus in each organisation and of course in comparison to the 1800s in Paris is different but the fundamental purpose of the call to lead change, challenge the status quo and add a human component to the perceived and much sought after 'progress' of the day is the same.

I should first start with my family because I believe that family is the starting point of our journey of growth into leadership. I come from a strong, practicing Catholic family, where our faith is shared, supported and challenged by each other. My mum always encouraged us to get involved, do something for others and participate in the parish and in the community.

As Vincentians, our sharing of our faith, our healthy challenge of our works and why we do what we do is necessary to establish confidence in the grounding of our works and to nurture us all as leaders.

My journey to where I am today has been an unusual development of professional and personal choices over the course of 15 years however has been grounded in a lifelong interaction and connection with my family, my faith, my God and has been nurtured by actively

being involved in the community and actively engaged in dialogue and constructive debate.

I'm a food scientist by qualification. I worked for Coles Myer Ltd in their head office in Melbourne for eight years, auditing factories across the globe and progressed through senior positions within the organisation and spent my last two years there working on process development and 'simplifying the business'. I spent a great deal of my time at Coles Myer championing quality and standards of manufacture and this was often considered a philosophical debate rather than a fundamental necessity for the business. When you are leading a cause that is principle based as perhaps in contrast to quantum based measures of success and progress, it's a tough challenge. It requires a significant shift in mindset and a cultural shift in a way of working that was so engrained within the organisation.

Authenticity – the journey of growth

During my time working in the corporate world and really enjoying the opportunities of influencing others and making things happen, I had been equally enjoying my volunteering with Vinnies in Victoria, where I was supporting new programs in my spare time. I sat on their Centres Board, participated in buddies days, visited refugees in detention, etc. I got to a point however where I knew there had to be more. I felt it was time to transfer my skills and my passion across to a role that's fundamental focus was our most disadvantaged people. I felt a call more profound than any news headline



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“It was clear that if we were to be a strong force of social reform, of making a practical difference where the need was and if we were to connect on a human level more openly then we needed to focus on our people, our programs, our identity and our profits to reinvest back into the other three.”

Janet Buhagjar

to do something and make a more sustainable difference. There was a deep sense within me that knew there was more to be done, more to give and whilst I certainly didn't have the answers, my discernment and my prayer that I had been investing in over the years and which formed an integral part of my daily reflection gave me a sense of comfort that whatever it looked like, it would be OK.

It's at this point I would like to reflect on Ozanam's journey of growth. Ozanam was a scholar with a bright future ahead of him as a lawyer but through his discernment, his prayerful journey, he moved beyond his norm and lead change. He made a difference directly to the poor and also on a broader scale in terms of reform. There is a conversion and a transition that one makes from hearing and responding to the call and to then taking action in a meaningful way. It's also important to recognise that responding to the call first includes feelings of unease, uncertainty 'something just doesn't sit well here'. It is this feeling which leads to action and then leads to a second feeling of unease, a feeling of fear and uncertainty around how things are going to 'pan out'. At this point it is also appropriate for us to recognise that Ozanam didn't allow the secular space to change or alter his journey. Whilst he was steadfast and persevered which made him unpopular at times but effective and successful in his mission.

Gula talks about 'the way of virtue' where we bring together who we are and what we do.

Aristotle referred to 'human telos' – “best life for us to live is to reason well and act accordingly”. This is the journey of growth.

It's about what we think is the right thing to do – our thoughts or feelings. Gula, rightly so, explains that “we need virtues to develop as human beings. Virtues lead to action that expresses us at our best”.

We are called to listen within and respond to the call. We are called to take action that expresses us as Vincentians and as members of this community at our best.

My response to the call took a couple of turns. I had been intending and was placed to volunteer in Timor for two years mentoring a small business with Palms Australia when a friend, (a fellow Vincentian I might add!) emailed me and suggested I apply for the CEO position with Vinnies up in the Territory. I applied, was successful and five years ago I headed to Darwin, leaving my family, my networks and all that I knew for the unknowns of the Territory. My family and friends, whilst supportive, all had reservations.

I arrived in Darwin in January, the middle of the wet season. It was hot, humid and I definitely looked like a Melburnian wearing my suit and high heels. People were reasonably friendly but there was a clear sense of trepidation. They

had heard that change was potentially afoot! The status quo was not going to be around for long.

So what did Vinnies and the Territory look like five years ago? I have to say it didn't look terrible to the naked eye, - it certainly didn't look like the Paris Frederic saw in the 1800s! In fact it was functioning OK. We had programs, we had some funds and we had people working and volunteering for us, there was a significant amount of good will and we were making a difference to a core group of people.

So what required change? Two clear mandates:

- We had a huge issue with people management and had seen a history of treating people unintentionally poorly. There was a disconnect. We had heart for the people we helped but not for our people internally which led to complacency, a satisfaction with maintaining status quo.
- The people we served and assisted had increasing needs. The disadvantaged population in the territory and the complexity of their need was on the rise and we needed to be prepared and to have the capacity to respond to that growing need.

What I saw as I began to observe and listen was that professionally we looked like a small charity, operating well in our associated field of accommodation and shops but no one really knew who we were, what our identity was, no one thought of us as influencers, as having the capacity to be innovators, to challenge the status quo and respond to emerging needs.

We had lots of paper but no one knew the answer to why we did what we did. Why were we Vincentians? What was our purpose?

We were not equipped to respond to the changing and emerging needs of the people we served. We weren't prepared to be the organisation that we said we would be.

It was clear that if we were to be a strong force of social reform, of making a practical difference where the need was and if we were to connect on a human level more openly then we needed to focus on our people, our programs, our identity and our profits to reinvest back into the other three.

So how was I feeling as I observed all of this in the first 100 days of my time in the Territory? I was expecting to feel a sense of joy and peace having responded to the call. In fact...

- I was feeling terrified!
- I felt out of my depth!
- Everyone was older, seemingly wiser.
- There was a strong message coming from certain corners that God would provide, status and my arrival wasn't part of Gods plan.



I agreed – God definitely had a plan, but I certainly felt I was being called by God to support the State Council in leading the St Vincent de Paul Society ministry with a different perspective, to bring us back to our core and to ensure that we were best placed to serve the poor, to be a voice of advocacy where wrongs were being done. I felt we were being called to stand up and make a difference in a meaningful, relevant way that was authentic to our mission. It was, to say the least, a challenging and daunting initial time at Vinnies.

Contemplation and reflection

So what did I do in the challenging times? I took a deep breath every time I felt overwhelmed with the enormity of the people change and I said a little prayer to cross check that I was still going to be OK. I asked myself, and reminded myself, why am I here? Why were we all here? It was because the people we serve deserved to have us there.

Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical Letter – Caritas in Veritate “Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth” talks to us about how in today’s crisis of economic, political and fundamental value deprivation, we find ourselves with the “opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future”. He calls us to address the difficulties of today’s time with confidence rather than resignation and to do so with prayerful process of discernment.

We are called to reflect! To contemplate! In doing so it is important to look at what is of God

rather than what is not of God. What Ozanam demonstrated and certainly what I found during my time at Vinnies in the Territory and even now in my role with Government as Director of Social Policy is that when you reflect and discern long enough, clarity appears. When you take time and create some physical distance and silence to the day to day, it leads to great insights into what the solution or options may be. Ozanam listened to his inner spirit and to the deeper needs of those he served and responded with fearless action and clarity.

I found my silent retreats, away from the busyness and noise, a great time of consolation and clarity and renewal when returning to the challenge at hand.

Ozanam wasn’t afraid of identifying what grounded him. He knew who he was and when he didn’t know or lost focus in the challenging times; he sought time of reflection and counsel.

So what did I do after taking a deep breath and not falling in a heap? Well the ‘action person’ in me was tempted to say, “I’m a leader so this is how we are going to fix this place”.

I could have alternatively let fear kick in and said, these are all the reasons why we are different here in the Northern Territory and why we shouldn’t change anything so I need to just maintain status quo and work with what we’ve got – there’s no room for thinking outside the square.

I didn’t take the first two options. Instead...

- I listened. I genuinely got back to the people. I started with the end in mind.



“I listened. I genuinely got back to the people. I started with the end in mind.”

Janet Buhagiar



“The role of the Society is to be there for the people it serves and to lead robustly. This includes the need to communicate in a meaningful way.”

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- I got to know our clients.
- I spent time visiting all our staff, volunteers, our clients, our stakeholders, partners.

People thought all I did was visit and meet with people over coffee and yes that’s what I did for a good portion of time. Why? Because people are important. They make the success and make the difference and you need to invest in the equity of people. That’s how you manage change but more importantly that’s how you lead authentically and with relevance.

Gula talks to us about the connection to ‘what’ we do is not as important as ‘why’ we do it. It is asking the question of why that leads to a more authentic and sustainable response to the needs and connects you as a leader to the end cause, to our people.

People were unsure, they didn’t know how to deal with a CEO who came to their sites, was interested in sitting down at the outreach centre and was interested in serving lunch to the homeless, who volunteered on the mobile food van on a Friday night, just because. Who went to the Buddies Day program, did face painting. Where did I come from they asked? What did she want? Was she assessing us? Why was she meeting with us? Connecting with us at the works and grassroots level? After a while people realised there was no assessment report, no reprimand for what we were or weren’t doing.

Networking and resourcefulness

Networking is at the heart of Vincentian life where we respond to the need through connection. Through the person to person both as Vincentians with the people we serve and Vincentian to Vincentian. We are called to support and connect with those around us.

The greatest gain for Frederic was to take his understanding and natural ability to network and transfer it across to the poor. I reflect on my own use of networks and attempts to connect. The NT was a new space for me. How and where did I start? How did I make things happen? It was connecting back to our people, Vincentians, staff, our other stakeholders, government, other agencies, etc and most importantly the people we served.

Gula reminds us that the human person “is not only sacred but also social”. He states that “with justice, we know that cooperation is better than playing the Lone Ranger and that give-and-take is better than grab-and-go. We are better together than we are alone and we flourish through respectful interrelationship”. This was reflective in Ozanam’s style and his ability to work with and connect with all levels of people to assist in his ministry and that of the Society.

What did I learn from my visits and getting back to people?

It became increasingly apparent to me that

what was limiting the capacity of our people to respond to the growing needs, the changing environment wasn’t a block to change it was fear.

They knew where we wanted to be, had great ideas BUT were afraid. Were never asked and were never empowered to make decisions, try new things or take risks. I often think the beauty of the St Vincent de Paul Society is that we have a system and structure that should offer all our people the opportunity to be leaders, to take risks, to respond to the call. I wonder however whether we get distracted and stop listening to our people.

The role of the Society is to be there for the people it serves and to lead robustly. This includes the need to communicate in a meaningful way. In an age and society where the means of communications are changing so rapidly, I’m not sure how much the Society needs to change in the way in which it communicates, operates and leads, but one thing is for sure not to change, not to respond to the needs of our people in 2012 is the wrong response.

So how did I approach what I saw?

Systems and Structures

I gave them permission to take risks to make informed decisions, be excited by the possibilities. Ask them, is it in line with our mission, is it in line with why we are here? If so, you are not going to send us broke or kill anyone so do it! Have a go! We put systems and structures in place (simple ones that didn’t make it difficult to carry out our ministry!) and we found that when we put structures around how we respond to social reform or in fact how we are to lead it, then we saw sustainable results.

Shifting a mindset, changing a culture, refocussing on people because people matter isn’t easy! Particularly when you are dealing with a legacy of thinking otherwise.

People started to be excited, to take ownership, to make decisions and make things happen. We started to actually respond in a meaningful way and people (not just the Catholics and Vincentians!) wanted to part of it!!!

So where did Vinnies end up? What had the four year journey delivered?

- Revenue had doubled
- People turnover was reduced, structure empowered clear lines of innovation and decision making where the CEO was informed rather than asked for permission
- The profile of the Society was known across other agencies, we were represented on peak boards, we were consulted by government and other agencies for expert advice and program management. We were recognised as an organisation that was authentic, delivered on what we said we



would deliver, innovative in our approach and was focussed on people but with sound business and governance processes in place to keep up with the times

- Our programs were innovative, we decided how we were going to deliver the services, not government, we innovated, we connected people back to community through our programs.

Reflecting on my time at Vinnies I feel exceptionally proud of what we achieved as a team and it reaffirmed to me then and continues to reaffirm now that investing in the asset of people, investing in the equity of the human spirit, being a visible and consistent value based leader with human focus and clear identity, returns so much more for the long term viability of our community.

This insight has become clear to me over the years because my professional development has been complimented by a personal development of spiritual reflection and growth, of action within the community through youth groups, voluntary work, participating within parish life and the broader church community and through my family support. So my perspective has been influenced not just by my leadership training, my studies and coaching/mentoring BUT also the development of the person I am, ensuring there is integrity and authenticity in all that I do. That's why in all the positions of leadership I have held, I have had people at the core and have responded to the needs of people through leading cultural change and reaffirming purpose.

What is the lesson for the St Vincent de Paul Society and us as Vincentians in 2012 and beyond? I believe, upon reflection of Ozanam's journey and leadership and the pressing demands in today's world, we are called to lead with a listening ear, an open heart and a clear mind with purpose.

This is the balance that Ozanam struck, this is the balance I hope my sharing of my experiences in the Territory have demonstrated – it is investing in the equity of the human spirit that then returns the tangible financial and sustainable long term difference to those in need and those in a position to make a difference in terms of social policy and reform.

I think regardless of what year we are in there is a thirst and hunger for something more profound, something of meaning, of purpose. I think the Society has something real to offer the community, both religious and secular. I think we need to LISTEN and understand what the needs are and respond authentically, with relevance and with courage. We need not be apologetic if we have listened and reflected.

The opportunity for the Society in today's world is to understand the challenges of today, to have courage, to reflect on the opportunities these challenges present and not be paralysed by the past but to be prepared to respond to the future and authentically listen to the voice of its people, within the Society and beyond and lead with confidence and relevance.



“I think we need to LISTEN and understand what the needs are and respond authentically, with relevance and with courage.”

Janet Buhagiar



Janet Buhagiar with attendees from the Gippsland Central Council area



“...Vinnies is showing leadership in today’s world and is embracing of all ideas, contributions. That Vinnies is an organisation that I’m proud to be part of.”

Janet Buhagiar

I wish to share with you a verse that often inspires me when the task at hand seems almost too challenging and uncertain to handle. It’s from the second letter of St Paul to Timothy.

He writes:

“For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self discipline.”

For me, I live my life and have been a leader in the faith based and also broader secular world with what some may describe in moderate success because I am grounded in the call to have courage, to use our gifts to make a difference and to be open to the changing needs of our people not because I have to, but because that is what I feel I am called to do. To live out my faith in action and to make no secret of what grounds that action.

Ozanam was steadfast in what grounded him, consistent and authentic in his response to the call. He listened... then responded.

We have the opportunity, as individuals, as Vincentians, as a faith based organisation to be brave, to challenge the status quo both internally and externally, and to bring the rewards that come from our faithful commitment to this process to the broader community with confidence and celebration.

This afternoon, and the fact that I’m up here, a young, relatively extroverted woman, sharing my journey, that Teresa, also a young woman will be responding to my lecture and looking around at the attendance and what a diverse membership we have, it reaffirms for me that Vinnies is progressive. That Vinnies is showing leadership in today’s world and is embracing of all ideas, contributions. That Vinnies is an organisation that I’m proud to be part of.

Ozanam calls us to action.

Ozanam founded and led an organisation that was and should still be brave and courageous to challenge the status quo but to also stand firm where constancy is so desperately needed.

Ozanam taught us through his leadership to be an organisation and to be individuals that have the confidence to self-reflect and to ask the questions that need to be asked of ourselves and the community around us and to then respond in a meaningful way, informed by our listening.

The Society which Ozanam founded and led is the Society I am proud to be part of today.

1 Gula, Richard – “The way of Goodness and Holiness – A spirituality for Pastoral Ministers”

Teresa Wilson

A short biography

Teresa Wilson has been a volunteer with the St Vincent de Paul Society for over 17 years.

She has held a number of leadership positions in the Society including State Youth Representative, State Vice President in Victoria and National Youth Representative.

Teresa was appointed as Vice President of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council in 2009 and finished her appointment in April 2011. In October 2011 Teresa was appointed as a member of the VincentCare board.

Currently she works as the Director of the Archdiocesan Office for Youth which seeks to engage young people in the life and mission of the Catholic church here in Melbourne.



Response to Ozanam Lecture

Teresa Wilson

Director Archdiocesan Office for Youth, Victoria & Director, VincentCare Victoria Board

I would like to begin today here in the shadow of St Patricks Cathedral by paying my own respects to the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered today – the Wurrundjeri people and their elders past and present.

Over the last week or so – if you have been anywhere near a radio, television or newspaper you would have heard a lot about leadership. Who is more statesmen-like? Who is more popular with the people? Who can defeat the opponent? Who is a better administrator? Who is more respected by their colleagues? There has been talk of coups, ‘faceless men’ and who holds the higher of the moral ground and therefore why they should be the leader.

The picture of leadership that we have heard from Janet today could not be more contrasting. She shared with us Frederic Ozanam’s vision and example of leadership for a community and society that could be and should be more focussed on those that have less and need more. She shared a portrait of Ozanam as a “prayerful, lay, discerning and savvy leader of his time” and how even today in 2012 on the other side of the world from his home city of Paris, he inspires us to strive for “a more compassionate, equitable and fair society with authentic and steadfast leadership”.

The four fundamental themes of leadership that Janet identified provide a clear picture of not only the person of Ozanam and his vision for leadership but his vision for the leadership that

the St Vincent de Paul Society might take in society more generally:

1. To be authentic
2. To be contemplative and reflective on our works and on our mission
3. To be resourceful and
4. To establish systems and structures for long term sustainable change and social reform

As Janet clearly identified these four fundamental themes of leadership in Ozanam’s life and then in her own personal story of leadership with the Society I couldn’t help but be reminded of the story from Ozanam’s life which many of us know extremely well. It is Ozanam’s experience of his first home visitation when the St Vincent de Paul Society was in its infancy. Ozanam and some fellow students asked Rosalie Rendu for guidance on how they could help those in need in the slums of Paris. She told them of a poor man she knew who was living through a freezing Paris winter without firewood. They arrived on the doorstep of the man and dropped the firewood – too frightened and unsure of what they should do next. Ozanam was prepared physically for what they would do with armfuls of firewood but unprepared mentally, emotionally and spiritually for how the experience would influence him. We can only imagine how critical Ozanam and his friends would have been of their actions upon reflection that night and the subsequent days



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Teresa Wilson



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– so critical of their reaction and disappointed at the opportunity they had missed. We can certainly recognise the uncertainty, trepidation and fear that Ozanam and his companions would have felt at that first visit.

As all Vincentians know that first home visitation can be terrifying, overwhelming and yet if you persevere can also be the catalyst for life-long commitment to the work of the Society.

Ozanam’s experience could so easily have been the end of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Believing ‘that’s it – we failed’ or ‘we don’t know what we are doing’. However that wasn’t his response – he re-grouped, reflected on what had gone wrong and resolved to be better prepared and respond differently next time.

The fact that this incident was just the beginning of the St Vincent de Paul Society speaks volumes about Ozanam’s vision and leadership. He couldn’t have known it at the time but this ‘failure’ of a home visitation would in fact become something of a ‘parable’ in the St Vincent de Paul Society’s history. It tells us so much about Ozanam and his vision for what charity and service is – and isn’t. It is about sharing, listening, just ‘being’ with those we serve – sharing ourselves. It isn’t just about what we bring (however practical and necessary it might be) – it’s about how we bring it and who we are when we deliver it. For us as Vincentians it is also about recognising we don’t always get it right the first time, we need to walk away and reflect on our actions and how there might be a better response next time. That’s not to say we need to be overly critical of our actions from every visit or for every good work – but it does mean we reflect regularly to see if what we are doing as members, conferences, councils and as the Society is reflective of, and in line with, our mission and the needs of the community.

Much of what Janet shared with us today was her personal story and the story of the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Northern Territory during her time as CEO. As Vincentians we are enormously privileged in that we are invited into the personal lives of those in need that we visit. We are present as their personal story becomes ‘public’ as it is recounted to two Vinnies visitors – two strangers. I’m sure we can all picture a visit where as this personal story is told to us there are tears, or there is a quiet resolve, or there is an overwhelming amount of talking and nervous laughter to cover up the embarrassment and discomfort of sharing a personal failing in life. We are enormously privileged and put in a place of power when these personal stories are shared with us. We hear these stories and understand the person we are visiting so

much more – we can immediately sense that what they are sharing is real, is painful and is personal. The key is what we then do, as the St Vincent de Paul Society, with this personal story. And on this topic Ozanam was clear in that we must always strike that difficult balance between ensuring we continue to offer practical assistance while at the same time using this experience of the practical and the personal to then advocate on behalf of those that cannot.

As Ozanam wrote:

The knowledge of social well-being and of reform is to be learned, not from the public platform, but in climbing the stairs to the poor man’s garret, sitting by his bed-side, 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... 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.” (Bunard, p.279 in Honner 2007 p.55)

As the ‘visitors’ it is rare, if ever, that we Vincentians share our own personal story with those we visit or even within our own conferences. There is a sense of power in keeping our private life – private.

Therefore I thank Janet today for having the courage to share her own personal story and the story of the Society. We need to hear more often our own stories – to understand each other better, to understand the Society better and ultimately to serve those in need better. I would like to take Ozanam’s quote and then apply it to the those within the Society – and that we can use our own personal experience of visitations, of serving, of leadership and of councils and committees to help shape, change and grow what the St Vincent de Paul Society might be into the future. When Janet spoke of the change in the Society in the Northern Territory it was the point at which the people within the Society began to trust each other and have confidence to make suggestions and lead change. The opportunity was provided for all to become leaders, to take risks and to respond to the call.

Thank you Janet for sharing with us how your own journey and the journey of the Society Northern Territory has been shaped by Ozanam, by Vincentians, by experience, through prayer and by God. I know that you have given me, and I hope all of us gathered here today, much optimism and hope for what the St Vincent de Paul Society can be into the future if we remain true to the vision and fundamentals of our founder and leader, Frederic Ozanam.



Above: 1. Brendan Lindsay **2.** Teresa Wilson, Brendan Lindsay, Janet Buhagiar and Tony Tome **3.** Society members and volunteers **4.** Janet Buhagiar **5.** Jacinta & Glenn Colla, Elise Butler and Emily Wardeiner



Ozanam Lecturers and Respondents



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

- 1997** **Sir James Gobbo** Governor of Victoria
Respondent: Betti Knott, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.
- 1999** **Archbishop (now Cardinal) George Pell** Archbishop of Melbourne
Respondent: John Moore, National President, St Vincent de Paul Society
- 2000** **Sir Gerard Brennan** Chief Justice, High Court of Australia
Respondent: Susan Campbell, General Secretary, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.
- 2001** **Betti Knott** Director Operations, Archdiocese of Atlanta, USA
Respondent: Tony McCosker, Director, Ozanam Community
- 2002** **Professor John Molony** Professor of History and Author, Australian National University
Respondent: Morag Fraser, Editor, Eureka Street
- 2003** **Helen Johnston** Director, Combat Poverty Agency, Ireland
Respondent: Fr Mark Raper, Provincial, Australian and New Zealand Province of the Jesuits
- 2004** **Fr Frank Brennan SJ** Associate Director, UNIYA and Author
Respondent: Sr Libby Rogerson, Co-ordinator of Social Justice and Director of Caritas, Diocese of Parramatta
- 2005** **Moira Kelly AO** Executive Director, Children First Foundation
Respondent: Fr Peter Norden, Policy Director, Jesuit Social Services
- 2006** **Fr Gerald A Arbuckle SM** Co-director of the Refounding and Pastoral Development Unit, NSW
Respondent: Julie Morgan, Promoter of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation for the Franciscan Friars
- 2007** **Dr John Honner** Director, Edmund Rice Community Services
Respondent: Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council
- 2008** **Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez SDB** President, Caritas Internationalis
Respondent: Christine Boyle, Barrister and member, St Vincent de Paul Society
- 2009** **Dr Rosanna Scutella** Ronald Henderson Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research and The Brotherhood of St Laurence
Respondent: Dr John Falzon, Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council
- 2010** **Fr Richard Benson CM** Vincentian Father, USA
Respondent: Catherine Collins, VincentCare Victoria Board
- 2011** **Fr Desmond de Sousa CSSR** Redemptorist Priest and Professor of Catholic Social Teaching, India
Respondent: Maria Minto Cahill, Membership and Development Advisory Committee member and Flemington Conference President
- 2012** **Janet Buhagiar**
 Director Social Policy, Department of the Chief Minister, Northern Territory Government
Respondent: Teresa Wilson, Director Archdiocesan Office for Youth, Victoria & Director, VincentCare Victoria Board



Ozanam Lecture

The annual Ozanam Lecture celebrates the spirit of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and the good works of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Frederic Ozanam wrote:

"Yours must be a work of love, of kindness, you must give your time, your talents, yourselves. The poor person is a unique person of God's fashioning with an inalienable right to respect."

"You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis: You must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long term improvement."

The lecture is open to the public and welcomes all interested individuals. Each year a guest lecturer is invited to address an audience and raise their community consciousness on a contemporary social justice issue.

The selected lecturer is a person actively involved in practical work with the disadvantaged and marginalised (those God loves most). But is also an advocate for social justice through their words or examples. This is to reflect the charisma of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam and his companions and our patron, St Vincent de Paul.

The Society has been privileged to have a distinguished list of lecturers and respondents over the years. We are grateful to all for sharing their experiences while also raising the social consciousness of us all to our obligations in continuing to journey along Frederic Ozanam's vision.



The St Vincent de Paul Society began in 1833 with a 20 year old French university student named Frederic Ozanam. At that time the people of France were experiencing tremendous political and social upheaval including the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and unjust employment practices.

Ozanam gathered a group of colleagues and began responding in practical ways to the poverty and hardships he saw around him by visiting people in their homes, offering friendship and practical support such as a load of wood. Today this practice of 'home visitation' still remains a core activity of the St Vincent de Paul Society's members and volunteers.

The Society in Australia was founded by Fr Gerald Ward at St Francis' Church, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne on 5 March 1854. The Society is one of the largest and most cost-effective welfare organisations in Australia.

In Victoria the St Vincent de Paul Society consists of over 12,000 members and volunteers who assist more than 660,000 people in need each year. The specialist arm of the Society, VincentCare Victoria, provides professional assistance to people with more complex needs in aged care, accommodation and support services as well as supported employment for people with a disability.



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