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# The Virtuous Personality of Blessed Frederick Ozanam<sup>1</sup>

By

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.

This study sets out to present the personality of Frederick Ozanam which, among other facets of his life, has moved the Church to declare him among the Blessed. Virtues do not exist in the abstract, except in theoretical treatises. In the case of Ozanam, consequently, his virtues cannot be abstracted from his relatively short life. Rather, he enfolded them as husband, father, attorney, professor, and moving spirit behind the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. The famous Dominican preacher and friend of Ozanam, Henri Dominique Lacordaire, called Frederick "that type of Christian, as ancient as his religion, as modern as his time."<sup>2</sup>

Frederick lived in times of great upheavals in Church and society. The years 1813-1853, his life span, pulsed with Catholic revival in France. In those years religious communities, such as the Congregation of the Mission, were reborn, private Catholic schools reopened, and works of charity and mission flourished.

This review of his virtuous personality follows his life in that exciting period by examining its major phases: education and formation (1813-1836), legal career (1836-1840), and definitive vocation (1840-1853).

## Education and Formation (1813-1836)

Antoine Frédéric Ozanam was born 23 April 1813 in Milan, Italy. Because of his poor health at birth, Frederick received baptism at home. His family remained in Milan until the fall of Napoleon and the accession of Austrian rule in northern Italy as a result of the treaties

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<sup>1</sup>The most important works on Ozanam are those volumes prepared for his cause of beatification, especially: Sacra Congregatio pro Causis Sanctorum. *Beatificationis et canonizationis servi Dei Friderici Ozanam. Disquisitio* (Rome, 1980.) This is to be supplemented by *Positio Super Virtutibus. Informatio et Summarium* (Rome, 1990.)

<sup>2</sup>*Positio*, vi.

of 1815. Changed political and economic conditions led the Ozanams to return to France, and they went back to their city of Lyons. Frederick was the fifth of fourteen children born to Marie Nantas and Jean Antoine Ozanam. His parents, French with Jewish heritage, both were greatly devoted to the poor. Jean Antoine, although an impoverished physician, treated many of his patients free of charge, while Marie visited the sick in their homes. The Ozanam family shared the experience of many contemporaries, both rich and poor, in losing ten of their fourteen children in death. Besides, little Frederick contracted typhoid fever at age six, and endured poor health throughout his life.

The family also endured a certain measure of poverty amid the revolutions of their age. These, plus his frailty, may help to account for his receiving his primary education at home. His mother and his beloved elder sister, Elisa, were his teachers. Those who knew him testified that his physical weakness matched a meekness, even a sweetness, in his character. Yet he was a quick learner, and, under his mother's watchful supervision, developed a strong personal piety. He lost his beloved Elisa, age nineteen, when he was seven, and reflected in later years:

On many occasions have I not seen my parents in tears; when Heaven had left them, but three children out of fourteen! But how often, too, have not those three survivors, in adversity and in trial, counted on the assistance of those brothers and sisters whom they had among the angels! Such are indeed also of the family, and are brought back to our minds in acts of unexpected assistance. Happy is the home that can count one half of its members in Heaven, to help the rest along the narrow way which leads there!<sup>3</sup>

At age eight, Frederick then began his formal scholastic education at the Royal College, a secondary school. His first years there were noteworthy, as he admitted later, for periods of being a bad boy and lazy.<sup>4</sup> Of course, losing family members and feeling the sting of poverty and his own weakness, it is no wonder that he acted out in ways typical of a pre-adolescent. He was nevertheless happy to be able to study.

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<sup>3</sup>Louis Baunard, *Ozanam in his Correspondence* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925), 4.

<sup>4</sup>*Positio*, viii.

As he prepared to make his first communion at age thirteen, he grew in his commitment to his faith. He took this resolution on that occasion: "I will affirm with my whole heart my faith, because in this age it is so exposed to being lost."<sup>5</sup> Fairly soon after this serious undertaking, he began to experience "a painful period," during which he underwent doubts about the faith he had so bravely promised to affirm. It is not surprising that, in an age of great skepticism, a young man recently removed from family surroundings and plunged into rigorous classical and philosophical studies would question his beliefs. Under the tutelage of Joseph Mathias Noiroit, a priest and professor of philosophy, Frederick was able to find his way through this crisis of religious doubt. He then resolved "to consecrate myself to the propagation of the truth, after having the happiness of knowing it in the midst of doubts which my spirit and those of my young friends had so cruelly suffered."<sup>6</sup> To be sure, this experience strengthened Frederick to support the Church, yet he always appreciated the struggles of others, Catholic and non-Catholic, who could not. He resolved to live not merely on the level of theory but in fact a life of moral perfection, with "a true and inflexible conscience."<sup>7</sup> His friends admired this strength of his.

In 1830, at the close of his secondary studies, he experienced the July revolution. During this upheaval, with its strong anticlerical bent, his love for the Church deepened and he began to fulfill his First Communion promise to defend it. Thus his first article appeared in print. In it he rejected the materialistic and pantheistic conception of religion promulgated by the adherents of Claude Henri de Rouvroy, count of Saint-Simon. At the same time, Frederick was apprenticed to an attorney in Lyons, thus beginning his legal career. In 1831, attentive to his father's wishes, Frederick left home to study law at the Sorbonne, the University of Paris. His father noted in his diary: "[Frederick] has refined, pure and noble sentiments; he will make an upright and enlightened judge. I venture to hope that he will be our consolation in our old age."<sup>8</sup>

In Paris, his growing number of Catholic friends brought him into contact with the leaders of French Catholic life, such as Chateaubriand, Montalembert, Ampère, and others. Gradually overcoming his shy-

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., ix.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., x.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., xi.

<sup>8</sup>Baunard, *Ozanam*, 13.

ness, he continued his work of defending the Church through his letters and intense conversations. By the end of 1831 he had developed a friendship with J. Emmanuel Bailly, one of the most prominent Catholic laymen of his time. This professor of philosophy, director of the *Tribune Catholique*, book publisher, and founder of the Conference of History also loved Saint Vincent de Paul. Bailly's family, noted for its work among the poor, maintained a strong practical devotion to the saint. Emmanuel's father, for example, treasured the large collection of manuscripts which had belonged to the Saint Vincent. These had been placed in his keeping during the revolution of 1789. Bailly's uncle was a Vincentian priest, and Emmanuel's son was named Vincent de Paul.<sup>9</sup> Bailly's wife, who shared Emmanuel's devotion to the poor, had undertaken, with a friend, to visit the poor in the care of Sister Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity. Discouraged in the work by the reception she encountered, Madame Bailly agreed with her husband that "it was not women's work. Men, and young men, were wanted for it."<sup>10</sup>

The long history of the Bailly family's interest in Saint Vincent was providential, inasmuch as young Frederick began to imbibe it under the guidance of Emmanuel Bailly. Frederick's devotion to practical charity helped him to formulate one of the great means to overcome the antireligious sentiments of the professors and students he met during his university days. At first, Ozanam countered by helping to organize the first of the series of renowned lenten conferences to revive and affirm the Catholic faith. Held at the cathedral, Notre Dame de Paris, and given by his friend Lacordaire, they served—and still serve—to galvanize interest in an intellectual defense of the Church. Yet this did not suffice.

A challenge arose at the same time to put the revived Faith into practice. The same Saint-Simonians whom Frederick had challenged in Lyons had been gaining supporters at the University of Paris. One of them, a certain Jean Broet, belonged with Frederick to the Conference of History, Bailly's debating society. At one of these meetings, Broet challenged its Catholic members to put their historical theories into practice by working for the poor and oppressed as the Saint-

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<sup>9</sup>Vincent de Paul Bailly was an Assumptionist priest and journalist, renowned for his holiness. His cause for beatification was introduced in 1960. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v., "Bailly, Vincent de Paul." Baunard, *Ozanam*, 68.

<sup>10</sup>Baunard, *Ozanam*, 93.

Simonians were advocating for their own followers. Stung by Broet's taunt, Frederick recognized that the works of the Catholic members of the Conference, while laudable, were often individual and unorganized, and that they should go to the poor.

The first to do so, all members of the Conference of History, were Félix Clavé, Jules Devaux, François Lallier, Paul Lamache, Auguste Le Taillandier, and Ozanam, students in their early twenties. They held the charter meeting of a Conference of Charity in May 1833. During early sessions of the Conference, the members soon realized that they had no experience of finding the poor. Following the advice of their first president, Bailly, they turned to Sister Rosalie, as Madame Bailly had already done.

This pioneering Daughter of Charity lived in a neighborhood teeming with the poor and abandoned, and experimented in ways to care for them. Accepting these volunteers, Sister Rosalie located for each a poor family to visit. She also furnished her recruits with chits for food and clothing to help these families, a practice the first Conference of Charity would later adopt as its own.

At its founding in 1833, the Conference numbered only six or seven members, but one year later, the total surpassed one hundred. Rules had to be drawn up to regulate the work of this uniquely lay organization. For example, during the holidays, some members declined to visit the poor in their homes, declaring it unnecessary. Ozanam responded: "Gentlemen, let us not forget that the poor have no holidays."<sup>11</sup> In all this Frederick sensed himself as weak, hesitant, and nervous in the face of growing responsibilities. Although not the president of the first Conference of Charity (Bailly was), he was certainly its principal founder and guiding force. The remarkable thing was that all this was happening while Frederick was pursuing studies in law and literature.

One important suggestion of his was that the single Conference be divided into distinct units linked for greater efficiency in reaching the poor.<sup>12</sup> Those who wished to preserve the status quo opposed this division, but Frederick enjoyed Sister Rosalie's support. On 24 February 1835, therefore, Bailly established the first two sections of the Conference, and published the rule for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, to use its new name, on 8 December 1835.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 92.

To give focus to Frederick's growing interest in Vincent de Paul, Sister Rosalie nourished him with a deepened awareness of the saint's life and works. Subsequently, from these conversations with her and from his readings, Frederick nurtured the conferences by emphasizing Jesus Christ in the poor. The person of Vincent de Paul shines through his writings. "Vincent de Paul was not the man to build on sand or for the moment. The great souls who draw nigh unto God have something of the gift of prophecy . . . like all great Founders, he never ceases to have his spiritual posterity alive and active amid the ruins of the past."<sup>14</sup>

### Legal Career (1836-1840)

During the busy times of the beginnings of the Society, Frederick continued his university studies. As his father had hoped, he finished his first law degree, in 1834, and began to practice and teach commercial law in Lyons. There, he emphasized social issues and the new modern problems confronting the law. He continued his work for the Society there, and with some friends founded the first Conference outside Paris. Although his life was half spent, he was still young, and continued to pursue his first love, literature and history. This led him to return to Paris where, in 1835, he received his first degree in literature, then a doctorate in law (1836), and a second doctorate, in literature (1839). His doctoral thesis on Dante and his subsequent studies gave new impetus to critical study of the poet.<sup>15</sup> He also found time, somehow, to edit the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, beginning in 1838. He wrote several articles, published anonymously, on the history of the missions. During this period, as well, he unexpectedly lost his father (1837) and then his mother (1839). His many exertions and studies, together with an increasing personal freedom, led him to the final period of his life in which he pursued his definitive vocation.

At the beginning of 1840, Frederick received a chair in foreign literature at the Sorbonne. This was an unexpected turn of events, one that was to move him from law to charity, but not to the religious life, as some had expected. In keeping with the usages of his time, he also had time to teach secondary school pupils at the famed Collège de

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>His dissertation, *Essai sur la philosophie de Dante* (Paris, 1838) was published in a revised form in English: *Dante and Catholic Philosophy in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Lucia D. Pychowski, 2nd ed., (New York: Cathedral Library Association, 1913).

Stanislas in Paris. A true Frenchman, he understood that Paris was the center of France's intellectual life. Debates on philosophical topics, long a staple of French secondary and university education, were raging. In his mind Providence placed him there, since for many years he had thought about consecrating himself to propagating the truth. He was now able to do something more about it. What he needed, however, was firm and persevering activity of a new type.

In his personal life, therefore, Ozanam wrestled with his vocation. He explored with his friend Lacordaire the possibility of becoming a Dominican like him. But his colleagues Lallier and Le Taillandier, fellow members of the Society, had already married and were settling down to family life. Ozanam, however, still wondered whether married life was compatible with a life of good works. His old mentor, Father Noirot, never wavered in his conviction that Ozanam was not cut out for the life of a religious. He introduced Frederick to his future wife, Marie-Joséphine-Amélie Soulacroix, aged twenty-eight.

His fiancée knew him as a Christian to the core. His life's program, as outlined in various of his writings, involved "a tender love for God, active good work for others, and a just and inflexible conscience for oneself."<sup>16</sup> He also took as his program something quite realistic and mature in its simplicity: "to become better—to do a little good."<sup>17</sup> This was a good enough recommendation for her, and so Mademoiselle Soulacroix and Professor Ozanam married in 1841. They had made a happy choice.

### Definitive Vocation (1840-1853)

From 1841 to 1846, Frederick developed the three main features of his mature life: the flourishing Conferences; a growing love for teaching, research, and publishing; and his family. The academic life was for him not just an intellectual pursuit. He was able to animate his vocation as a university professor by exercising an habitual concern for the poor. He spent his Sundays, for example, with his friends, especially those who had been visiting the poor. Like Sister Rosalie, he took time to support the young members of the conferences. As a result, his influence spread, and Conferences of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul began in Italy (1836), spread through Europe, to the

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<sup>16</sup>*Positio*, xix.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

Americas,<sup>18</sup> the Middle East, and North Africa. By 1852, the Society numbered 2000 conferences, with 500 outside France. In keeping with the practical Vincentian turn of his spirituality, his own visits to the poor in their homes led him to pioneering reports to the Society on the social evils of his time. In his lectures he propagated Catholic social doctrine long before this was popular.

His family life was blessed by the birth of his only child, Marie. His joy is clear in a letter to Théophile Foisset on 7 August 1845, "After a succession of favours which determined my vocation and re-united my family, yet another is added which is probably the greatest that we can have on earth: I am a father!"<sup>19</sup> Marie was the pride of his life, and he set out to devote himself to assure her education.

Illness marked the years from 1847 to his death. To recover his health, the Ozanam family took several trips. During a visit to Italy, on 7 February 1847, they had an audience with Pius IX, and talked about Ozanam's research and the burgeoning Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.<sup>20</sup> While traveling with his family, Frederick continued his research and publishing in Christian Latin, literature and art.<sup>21</sup>

The revolutionary events of 1848, which toppled King Louis Philippe and ushered in a second republic, interrupted somewhat the Ozanams' idyllic and productive life. The poverty which Frederick and his friends had seen a first-hand was a root cause of national unrest. Frederick had, however, little to do with the revolutionaries, since he was busy with his students. Nonetheless, he continued to study the causes of poverty and continued to work actively with the poor.

Events in Italy also brought on hardships for Pope Pius IX. Revolution in Rome necessitated his flight to the fortified seaport of Gaeta, where he remained from 1848 to 1850. Ozanam supported the papal cause in France in his addresses and writings.

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<sup>18</sup>The first conference in the United States began in Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1845. (Daniel T. McColgan, *A Century of Charity. The First One Hundred Years of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in the United States*, 2 vols. [Milwaukee: Bruce, 1951], 1: 53.)

<sup>19</sup>Baunard, *Ozanam*, 231.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>21</sup>His complete writings appeared as *Oeuvres complètes*, 11 vols. (Paris: 1855-1865). Besides a translation and commentary on the "Purgatorio" of Dante, short articles and other studies, these eleven volumes include his major works: *La civilisation au cinquième siècle*, (Vols. 1-2); *Les Germains avant le christianisme*, (Vol. 3); *Civilisation chrétienne chez les Francs*, (Vol. 4); *Les poètes franciscains en Italie au treizième et au quatorzième siècle*, (Vol. 5); *Dante et la philosophie catholique au treizième siècle*, (Vol. 6). Of these, volumes 1-2, 5 and 6 exist in English.

While journeying again to Italy in 1852, Frederick visited the birthplace of Saint Vincent de Paul. He reported to his friend Alexandre Dufieux:

There [in Pouy], we saw the old oak tree under which Saint Vincent de Paul, the boy shepherd, took shelter while herding his flock. That fine old tree is now held to the soil only by the bark, which is eaten into with age. But the branches are superb and even at the advanced season when we were there, the foliage was beautifully green. I saw in it the type of the foundations of St. Vincent de Paul which have no apparent bond of union with earth, but which nevertheless triumph over time and grow strong during revolution.<sup>22</sup>

He delighted in telling his brother Charles that the pastor of the village, engaging in an act of vandalism incomprehensible today, had had a branch of that ancient tree cut for him.<sup>23</sup> On this trip, Ozanam recounted another incident to his friend Lallier. At the shrine of Notre Dame de Buglose where Saint Vincent had once gone on pilgrimage with his family, Frederick had gone to confession to a holy priest. His simplicity and charity immediately reminded Ozanam of Saint Vincent de Paul. The priest spoke only of sufferings to endure patiently, of resignation, and submission to the will of God, "however hard that may be."<sup>24</sup> Such language surprised Ozanam, as he was feeling quite well at the time. The saintly confessor's advice, however, was to come true in the last few months of life remaining to him.

Once in Italy, he declined and gradually had to bid farewell to his life's work. Fading hopes for recovery led his family to have him take ship for his home in France. He died en route, however, in Marseilles, on 8 September 1853. He was only forty years old. By one of history's strange coincidences, he died on the birthday of his collaborator, Sister Rosalie Rendu.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Baunard, *Ozanam*, 369; letter #95, to Dufieux, from Notre Dame de Buglose, 2 December 1852, in *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam*, 9th ed., rev. (Paris: Gigord: 1925), 431.

<sup>23</sup>Baunard, *Ozanam*, 369; letter #96, to Charles Ozanam, from Bayonne, 4 December 1852 (*Lettres*, 435).

<sup>24</sup>Baunard, *Ozanam*, 370; letter #107, to Francois Lallier, Easter Monday [28 March] 1853, from Pisa (*Lettres*, 480).

<sup>25</sup>He was buried in Paris at the former Carmelite convent. The city recalled his memory in the Square Ozanam near the Collège Stanislas.

The strengths of his personality, his virtues, stand out in the events of his life. First, one notices his sensitivity to the sufferings of others. Instead of succumbing to the fashionable sentimentality of his time, he turned to action, following the lead of Vincent de Paul. He visited the poor and served poor persons whom he could call by name. He offered them such help as he could and set himself, following his scholarly training, to examine the causes of their indigence. Further, he extended his care to his companions in care-giving. His teaching was, according to the testimony of those who attended his popular lectures, full of practical wisdom. Second, he exhibited, as he promised, a great care for the truth: in the Church as well as in society. His writings attest to this commitment of his. Third, his love for his family and friends was deep and genuine. To be sure, sensitive charity, practical wisdom, care for the truth, love of family, are not the classical cardinal or moral virtues of the philosophers and theologians. That discussion is best left to others. What does appear from even a cursory acquaintance with Frederick Ozanam, is a strong Christian witness, a virtuous man, a saint.