

# The Life and Times of Blessed Frederic Ozanam

NO 01

Prepared by The Blessed Frederic Ozanam Institute of Spirituality (2003), St. Vincent de Paul Society NSW

## *Blessed Frederic Ozanam His Beginnings*

**ANTOINE FREDERIC OZANAM WAS BORN ON 23 APRIL 1813, IN THE CITY OF MILAN, WHICH WAS THE CAPITAL OF ITALY AT THE TIME. THE CITY WAS GOVERNED BY FRANCE, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF NAPOLEON.**

The Ozanams were a well-educated French family that had prospered for three centuries in the progressive commercial city of Lyons. Among their family members, they could cite Frederic's granduncle, the acclaimed seventeenth mathematician, Jacques Ozanam. Their family origins, however, go back to the time of Julius Caesar, to the emigration of a Jewish family called Hozannam. This family settled in the district north of Lyons, and converted to Christianity in the seventh century. The present spelling was given to the name when Frederic's grandfather, Benedict, dropped the 'h' and the second 'n.'

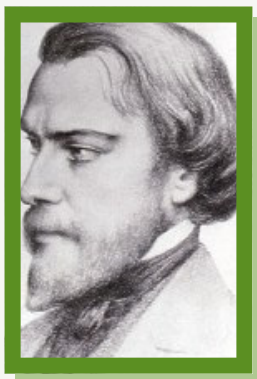
### **Frederic's family**

Frederic was the fifth child in a family of fourteen, eleven of whom died in infancy or youth. The example received from his parents was to prove

decisive in Frederic's life. At the age of four, the Ozanams returned to Lyon where his father became a doctor at the General hospital in 1817. This same father would often tell his children that being faithful to caring for the sick, meant giving one's life for one's patients. Doctor Ozanam gave witness to this conviction during his long hours of service to the people during the civil riots of 1831 and the deadly cholera epidemic in 1832.

Frederic also had a strong affection for his mother who died before his marriage to Amelie. Frederic's mother was the daughter of a successful silk merchant in Lyon. She had a deep Christian faith, and gave herself unstintingly to her family. One can barely imagine her heartbreak at seeing 11 of her children die in infancy or youth. From her, Frederic learnt about the greatness and gentleness of God, a habit of prayer, as well as a practical witness to Gospel values. Frederic's mother belonged to the Saint Pierre section of the Society of Nighwatchers. Its volunteer members took turns at sitting at the bedsides of women who were sick or in distress.

## *Our principal Founder: Blessed Frederic Ozanam 1813 – 1853*



Picture from [www.helpthelessfortunate.org/](http://www.helpthelessfortunate.org/)

### **Early sibling influence**

Besides his mother, Frederic also related strongly to his elder sister, Elisa, who was 12 years older than he was. About her, he said: I had a sister, a beloved sister who educated me along

with my mother and those lessons were so pleasant, so well presented, so well adapted to my childish intelligence, that I found real pleasure in them."

Eliza died when Frederic was 12 years of age. At the time of her death, there were only three surviving boys: Alphonses (1804-1888) who became

a priest, Charles (1824-1890) who became a doctor like his father, and Frederic (1813-1853), a University lecturer and founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

### **Frederic's health**

At an early age, Frederic showed high intelligence and inherited his parents' capacity for hard work. He had a near escape from death at the age of seven when he contracted typhoid fever. His parents stayed by his bedside for 15 days and nights. Fr. Ronald Ramson writes: "In his delirium, Frederic asked for a beer, and the beer cured him (so he writes!). His parents held a different version of his cure. They believed that Frederic's recovery was due to the intercession of St John Francis Regis, the French Jesuit saint who was a favourite of theirs because of his dedication to the poor and underprivileged."

[Praying with Frederic Ozanam P 18](#)

## How Frederic saw himself

In a letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> January, 1830, written to a College friend, M. Materne, Frederic draws this severe portrait of himself: "I was never worse than I was at the age of eight. I had become headstrong, passionate and disobedient. If I were punished, I revolted; I wrote letters of complaint to my mother; I was frightfully lazy. Every imaginable trick came to my head, notwithstanding the fact that a good father, an excellent mother, and a gentle sister were conducting my education."

## Some diary notes from Frederic

He received his First Communion at the age of nine. Later he would write about that event: "It was a day of days! How could I ever forget the experience. The improvement in my disposition was plain to be seen. I had become modes, gentle and tractable. But I could still be proud and passionate."

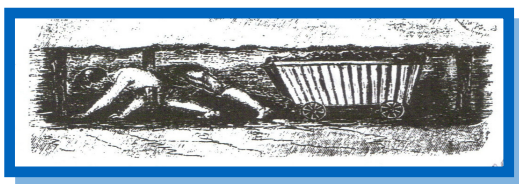
**"YOUNG MEN, FILL WITH HONOUR THE CAREERS TO WHICH YOU WILL BE CALLED."**

At school, a missionary gave a retreat. The thirteen year old Frederic wrote down this instruction: "Young men, it is in your training here to be good Christians. At the same time, you will be trained to be good citizens, and to learn to fill with honour the careers in which you will be called to serve your God and your country.: The missionary priest was none other than the future Cardinal Donnet, Archbishop of Bordeaux.

## A Changing world

France, however, was changing and this world was moulding the thinking of the deeply sensitive Frederic. The French revolution had turned the political climate upside down and industrial change was sweeping the country. People flocked into Paris, creating slums and a social and political situation which would eventually give birth to the St Vincent de Paul Society. Many did not like the new world that was being born. Frederic saw it differently:

**"What a stormy but instructive era! We may perhaps perish in it, but let us not complain about having entered it. Let us principally think differently than we do, to recognise there are Christians in all camps, and that God can be served today as always."**



Child labour was an ugly feature of the industrial revolution in France

## How his family saw him

His elder brother, the Abbe Alphonse Ozanam, later wrote "Frederic was, it is true, a quick-tempered child, headstrong in his desires, extremely sensitive and impressionable. But he was tender to littler children, compassionate with every form of suffering, of an angelic purity which shrank from the most venial fault, an impossible subject for evil, an enthusiastic devotee of good."

**By the age of thirteen, Frederic could write Latin verse and a few years later he begins to edit a College journal called "The Bee." His friends thought Frederic was destined for a career in literature.**

## Religious doubt

When he was sixteen (1829), however, Frederic's serious and sensitive nature was put to the test. He was overwhelmed by religious doubt, which exhausted his less than strong constitution. He had just enrolled in a course in Philosophy, and was taken under the wing of Abbe Noiroi. The Abbe was renowned throughout France as an eminent philosopher, and he mentored Frederic through this turbulent period. It lasted twelve months. During this religious crisis, Frederic made a promise to God that he would devote his life to the defence of truth. This experience left an indelible mark on him. All during his life, Frederic remained deeply committed to religious tolerance.

## SOME QUESTIONS

Having read the above profile on Frederic's life, how would you describe the main influences on his religious thinking and formation?

Nominate two key figures in Frederic's life. What inspiration did they give him for his personal journey?

Identify the various formative stages in Frederic's life and link them with your own (youthful) stages.

Read the first Chapter of 'Ozanam in his Correspondence.' Make notes & compare with the above.

