

To Go and Look at Misery

What most astonished Frédéric Ozanam during his university years became a turning point in his life (as happened to Paul on the road to Damascus, Ac 9:1-19, but less dramatically). That was to run out of arguments against those who, in March 1833, were objecting that most Christians paid no attention to the misery of their contemporaries and did not even join forces to alleviate it. Let us read excerpts from his letter to Léon Curnier, Paris, February 23, 1835, where this is mentioned:

The savants have compared the state of the slaves of antiquity with the condition of our workers and proletariat and have found the latter to have more to complain of, after eighteen centuries of Christianity. Then, for a like evil, a like remedy. 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...

The humanity of our days seems comparable to the traveller to whom the Gospel speaks; it also, although it took its way in roads marked out for it by Christ, has been attacked by the cutthroats and robbers of thought, by wicked men who have robbed it of what it possessed: the treasure of faith and love, and they have left naked and wounded and lying by the side of the road. Priests and levites have passed by, and this time, since they were true priests and levites, they have approached suffering themselves and wished to heal it. But in its delirium, it did not recognize them and repulsed them.

In our turn, weak Samaritans, worldly and people of little faith that we are, let us dare nonetheless to approach this great sick one. Perhaps it will not be frightened of us. Let us try to probe its wounds and pour in oil, soothing its ear with words of consolation and peace; then, when its eyes are opened, we will place it in the hands of those whom God has constituted as the guardians and doctors of souls, who are also, in a way, our innkeepers in our pilgrimage here below; so as to give our errant and famished spirits the holy word for nourishment and the hope of a better world for a shield.

That is what is proposed to us, the sublime vocation God has given us.

Prayer for the feast of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam

God, who has sent Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, burning in your spirit of charity, to promote the creation of lay associations to bring assistance to the poor, grant us, following his example, to obey your commandment of love and become a leaven in this world where we live. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen

Questions for reflection, that may also nourish an exchange of thoughts

1. How are Ozanam times similar to ours? What makes them different? Has there been improvement? Are there still challenges?
2. Do I, do we, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, have a share of responsibility in the well-being of God's creation?
Is it true that God entrusted his creation, including humanity, to us?
3. Human values and evangelical values: How have we, as members of the SSVP, come to see the difference and integrate them into our lives, as well as into our charitable work?
4. How does the disposition advocated by Jesus inspire our engagement to serve the poor?
Where do we take the trouble to go back to make a better place for them?

Historical notes

From the moment it was created on April 23, 1833, the young conference of charity called upon Sister Rosalie Rendu. Its members followed her in the Mouffetard district, in Paris. They then became more aware of the misery (promiscuity, unsanitary lodgings, diseases, high mortality). Visiting the locations where the poor lived revealed the extent of their needs. That required some effort, but it helped identifying the symptoms before applying remedies. It was not surprising that in the following weeks, they decided that their new society "should be secular and aim to 'alleviate individual woes through personal contact with the poor'." ¹

In 1833, Ozanam was studying law. As an accomplished scholar, he could correspond in six languages. In 1839, he received his Doctorat ès Lettres, and then qualified to become Professor of comparative literature at the Sorbonne. Married in 1841, he fathered a daughter in 1845. He also became involved in politics, passionately republican with a bias towards the workers. He might be called a Christian democrat with socializing ideas. He ran in the 1848 legislative elections, without success. Starting in 1849, his health declined and his resistance decreased. He became ill and died in Marseille on September 8, 1853. His departure to meet with God is celebrated on September 9, the anniversary of his beatification in Paris in 1997.

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¹ Madeleine des Rivières, Ozanam: un savant chez les pauvres, Montréal, Bellarmin, p. 44