

**St. Vincent DePaul Society (Canada) National Assembly,
McMaster University, Hamilton, June 20th 2025**

Adapting to a Changing World through the Eyes of Frédéric Ozanam and Pope Francis – Msgr. Cornelius (Con) O’Mahony

Good morning.

We gather this morning in a moment of deep significance for the Church and for the world. With the passing of Pope Francis, a shepherd who led not with grandeur but with humility, we find ourselves reflecting not just on what he did—but on what he passed on.

In his final years, Francis often spoke of legacy—not in terms of monuments or achievements, but in terms of hearts changed, margins embraced, and bridges built. Now, with the election of Pope Leo XIV, we are witnessing not an end, but a continuation—a torch being passed, a vision being renewed for a world still in desperate need of healing, justice, and tenderness.

In this spirit, I want to look at how we can continue adapting to a changing world—not through fear or retreat, but through the eyes of two prophetic figures: **Frédéric Ozanam** and **Pope Francis**. They both believed that the only way to keep faith alive is to let it walk, suffer, and rejoice alongside the poor.

In every era, humanity faces significant transitions—economic shifts, political upheaval, cultural transformations, and technological revolutions. The 19th century saw the birth of modern democracy, industrialization, and social unrest; the 21st century continues to wrestle with globalization, climate change, migration crises, and an increasingly interconnected yet polarized world. Amid these challenges, faith leaders and social thinkers provide crucial insights on how individuals and communities can adapt meaningfully and ethically. Two such figures—**Frédéric Ozanam** and **Pope Francis**—

though centuries apart, both offer a vision of how to live faithfully and justly in a rapidly changing world.

Frédéric Ozanam: A Prophet of Charity in a Revolutionary Age

Frédéric Ozanam (1813–1853) was born in post-revolutionary France, a time of intense political instability and growing socioeconomic disparity. As a Catholic scholar, he was deeply troubled by the suffering of the working class and the Church's perceived detachment from social concerns. In response, he founded the **Society of St. Vincent de Paul in 1833**, rooted in the idea that charity must involve personal contact and respect.

To understand Ozanam's deep connection to the poor, we can turn to a moment that changed his life. One day in 1833, while studying at the Sorbonne, he was publicly challenged by a fellow student: "You Catholics talk about charity and justice—but where are your works? What is your Church doing today for the poor?"

This question shook him. He realized that intellectual arguments for faith were not enough—action was required. That very week, Ozanam and his friends visited a poor widow in one of the most impoverished areas of Paris. Her living conditions were dire—no heat, no food, just a cold, damp room. They brought her some basic supplies, but what stayed with Ozanam was not just her material poverty—it was her gratitude for their presence.

Afterward, he said: "We are here not only to give bread but to give ourselves." That single encounter became the foundation for the Vincentian movement, which (as you know better than most) now serves millions worldwide. It's a beautiful example of what Ozanam would call "**charity grounded in justice**"—a direct, respectful relationship with those on the margins, not from a place of superiority, but from mutual humanity.

He later wrote: "**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” (Ozanam, as cited in Derum, 1963, p. 42).

This is what adaptation looked like for Ozanam—not withdrawing from the turbulence of 19th-century France but stepping into it with conviction and compassion.

Pope Francis: Shepherding in a Global Age

When **Jorge Mario Bergoglio** became Pope Francis in 2013, he brought with him the smells of the streets—literally and spiritually. Having served among the poor in Argentina’s slums, his leadership emphasized **proximity over power, listening over pronouncing, and service over status.**

We see this spirit come alive in one simple but profound story. While Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio would regularly visit the “villas miserias” also known as the favelas—the poorest neighborhoods in the city. One rainy morning, he arrived early to a small chapel where he was scheduled to celebrate Mass. As he was setting up, an elderly shoe-shiner approached him and said: “Padre, I’ve come to pray for you.”

Bergoglio smiled, expecting perhaps a quick blessing. But the man insisted: “Let me pray for you properly.” And so, in the quiet of that chapel, the future pope knelt, and the shoe-shiner placed his worn hands on his head and prayed.

Years later, Pope Francis would recall that moment, saying: “That day, I felt the Church was truly alive—alive in the hands and hearts of the poor.”

It’s a stunning image: the future pope on his knees, receiving grace from someone the world might overlook. It captures the heart of Francis’ theology—that the poor are not merely recipients of aid, but bearers of wisdom, dignity, and faith.

And this story does not end there: on the night in March 2013 when he appeared on the balcony of St. Peter’s for the first time as the newly elected Pope Francis, and before he gave his first blessing, he

bowed his head and asked the thousands assembled before him to pray for him. The commentators and cameras broadcasting his first act to the world, captured the deep silence that followed, and, as he did when he knelt for the shoe-shiner years before, he received grace from the crowd.

This theme pulses throughout his papacy. In **Evangelii Gaudium**, he writes: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (Pope Francis, 2013, §49).

His later writings, like **Laudato Si’** and **Fratelli Tutti**, extend that same commitment into ecological and social justice, reminding us that everything is interconnected—people, planet, politics, and peace.

Shared Themes: Hope, Service, and Prophetic Witness

Despite the gap of nearly two centuries, Frédéric Ozanam and Pope Francis converge on several key themes.

1. The Poor at the Center

Both figures insist on placing the poor at the center of Christian life. Ozanam did this through direct visits and structural analysis; Pope Francis does it through international advocacy and grassroots listening. Their message is clear: the poor are not problems to be solved—they are persons to be encountered.

Francis emphasizes: “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor” (Pope Francis, 2013, §187).

2. Personal Encounter and Relational Ministry

We see in both, stories how personal relationships—sitting in a widow’s apartment, kneeling before a shoe-shiner—shape their ministries. For Ozanam, it was the poor widow. For Francis, the man with weathered hands.

Francis speaks often of building a “culture of encounter”, saying: “Social love makes it possible to advance toward a civilization of love, to which all of us can feel called” (Pope Francis, 2020, §183).

3. Youth as Agents of Change

Ozanam started as a university student, and the Society he founded was led by young people. Pope Francis echoes this in *Christus Vivit*, where he tells young people: “You are the now of God” (Pope Francis, 2019, *Christus Vivit* §178). In times of change, young hearts and minds are not just needed—they are essential.

4. Social Structures and Institutional Reform

Neither man was satisfied with surface-level charity. Ozanam analyzed root causes; Francis calls for systemic reform—economic, environmental, and ecclesial. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he warns of “an absence of human dignity on the borders” and “a throwaway culture” (Pope Francis, 2020, §§37, 18). Both understood that change must reach not just individuals, but the systems that shape them.

5. Adapting with Integrity

Ozanam and Francis do not equate adaptation with compromise. Instead, they model adaptation with integrity—anchoring action in truth while being flexible in method.

Francis reminds us: “The future does have a name, and its name is hope” (Pope Francis, speaking to the Canadian Bishops on Ad Limina visit, 2017). And Ozanam’s life reminds us that hope begins with small acts—visiting the poor, listening deeply, organizing courageously.

Lessons for Today

In a world marked by ecological peril, rising authoritarianism, and mass displacement, the insights of Ozanam and Francis provide a roadmap for ethical adaptation:

1. Engage the World with Courage
2. Prioritize the Margins

3. Invest in Youth
4. Build Cultures of Encounter
5. Think Systemically, Act Locally

Conclusion

Frédéric Ozanam and Pope Francis, though separated by time and context, offer a shared wisdom: that **the Christian response to change is not fear, but faithful action.** Their examples challenge us to live the Gospel not as an abstract ideal, but as a lived reality—rooted in the world's suffering, attentive to its signs, and hopeful for its renewal.

And perhaps their stories leave us with one final question:

Who is the poor widow—or the old shoe-shiner—waiting to change our lives today?

References

Ozanam Quotes:

1. "We are here not only to give bread but to give ourselves."
 - Commonly attributed to Frédéric Ozanam and often cited in Vincentian literature. Though not found in a single definitive primary text, it summarizes his approach as described in:
 - Derum, M. (1963). *Frédéric Ozanam: A Life in Letters*. Melbourne: Vincentian Press.
2. "You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis..."
 - Ozanam, F. (as cited in Derum, M., 1963, p. 42).

Pope Francis Quotes:

3. "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets..."
 - Pope Francis. (2013). *Evangelii Gaudium* [Apostolic Exhortation], §49.
Retrieved from:
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html
4. "Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor..."
 - *Evangelii Gaudium*, §187.
5. "Social love makes it possible to advance toward a civilization of love..."
 - Pope Francis. (2020). *Fratelli Tutti* [Encyclical], §183.
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6. "You are the now of God."
 - Pope Francis. (2019). *Christus Vivit* [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation], §178.
Retrieved from:
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html
7. "An absence of human dignity on the borders."
 - *Fratelli Tutti*, §37.
8. "A throwaway culture."
 - *Fratelli Tutti*, §18.
9. "The future does have a name, and its name is hope."
 - Pope Francis. (2017). Address at TED Conference, April 2017.
Retrieved from:
https://www.ted.com/talks/pope_franis_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone

Additional Notes:

- Shoeshiner story: While widely recounted in talks and biographies of Pope Francis, this story is not found in a formal publication by Francis himself. It has been shared in multiple interviews and books such as:
 - Ivereigh, A. (2014). *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Ozanam's challenge and founding moment: Detailed in:
 - Derum, M. (1963). *Frédéric Ozanam: A Life in Letters*.
 - and frequently referenced in Vincentian formation materials and SSVP historical summaries.

