



Speech for National Presidency of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul:
What Frédéric Ozanam Would Say Today
by Heather Schilling, Western Regional President
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My dear fellow Vincentians, spiritual advisors, clergy, and friends, thank you for the privilege of standing before you today. I do so with humility, with gratitude, and **with a heart full of love for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.**

If we were to ask what Frédéric Ozanam would say to us today, I believe he would begin with a summons to the heart:

“Let us go to the poor, let us go to one another, and let us go forward with courage, compassion, and hope.”

The Society was born because a small group of young Catholics refused to let faith remain only words. **“What are you Catholics doing about them?”** Challenged by the suffering around them in a polarized world, Frédéric Ozanam and his companions chose action. They prayed together, they became friends in service, and they went out together to meet Christ in the poor.

That same fire still burns at the heart of our vocation today. Our mission remains as beautiful as it is demanding: **“to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in those in need with love, respect, justice, and joy”**. We are heirs to a vision almost 200 years old, that is both simple and revolutionary: to see Christ in anyone who suffers, to come together as a family, to stay close to those in need, and to serve with all the compassion and creativity we can offer.

That calling matters profoundly in our time. Across our country, many people are weighed down by rising costs, housing insecurity, food insecurity, loneliness, and uncertainty about tomorrow. Many of our neighbours carry burdens no one else sees:

- a young person who feels no purpose,
- a worker who has employment but no dignity, a refugee who feels unwelcome,
- an elderly person who spends days without human conversation,
- parents lying awake at night, wondering how they will provide for their children.

In such a world, Vincentians are invited not to remain at a distance, but to draw near. We are called to listen with compassion, to serve with tenderness, and through our presence, to remind those forgotten by the world that they are never forgotten by God.

This is why the personal encounter remains the beating heart of our vocation.

Whether in a home visit,

- a home food hamper delivery,
- an encounter in a shelter, a parish hall, a store,
- or a quiet conversation on a difficult day,

we are reminded that these are people we serve; never cases, never numbers, and never burdens. They are our brothers and sisters, friends and neighbours.

They are beloved children of God. And when we meet them with humility, friendship, and respect, charity becomes something radiant. It becomes relationship. It becomes solidarity. It becomes a living witness to the Gospel. In those moments, we do not simply offer help; we offer a sign that love is still alive in the world.

I also believe Frédéric Ozanam would remind us that charity and justice are strongest when they walk hand in hand. Immediate help matters. When someone is hungry, we are moved to bring food. When a family is in crisis, we are called to respond with generosity and urgency. But our mission does not end with relief alone. We are also invited to ask why suffering persists, why so many remain excluded, and how we can help build a society that reflects the dignity God has given to every person. **Ozanam understood that love of neighbour is never passive. It is active, thoughtful, and brave. It serves the person before us, and it also dares to challenge the conditions that leave people poor, isolated, or unheard.**

If entrusted with national leadership, I would seek to serve in that same spirit. I would listen first: to regional and diocesan councils, to local conferences, to longtime members and new members alike, and especially to voices that are too easily overlooked. Leadership in our Society is at its best when it is rooted in service: walks beside others, encourages them, and helps them discover their own call to serve. It can strengthen what is local, encourage what is faithful, and support what is life-giving. **As National President I will help the Society stay strong in its mission of service, rooted in the Catholic faith, in fidelity with the Church, and open to the movement of the Holy Spirit.**

I would also want to help renew the Society for a new generation. Renewal does not mean leaving behind our charism; it means allowing it to shine even more brightly in the world of today. We are called to welcome younger Vincentians, families, and people from diverse communities into the life of the Society. We are invited to foster formation that nourishes both the soul and the mission, to encourage mentorship and formation that passes on wisdom generously and joyfully. **Above all, we are invited to help one another remember why we serve: because we encounter Christ in the poor, and because our own hearts are changed when we love as He loves.**

At the national level, unity and peace are essential. Ours is a Society built on relationships, and those relationships stretch across diverse regions, councils, conferences, parishes, and communities. We are stronger when we share ideas, support one another, learn from one another, and walk forward together. National leadership must connect rather than divide, encourage rather than discourage, and help local works flourish rather than burden them.

The role is not to stand above, but to stand with. When we walk in unity, we become a more visible sign of the compassion, fraternity, and hope our world so deeply needs.

And above all, I believe Ozanam would tell us to lead with hope, not fear. Our motto calls us to serve in hope. Hope does not deny hardship, nor does it close its eyes to suffering. Hope looks directly at the brokenness of the world and still believes that love can heal, that compassion can restore, and that God is already at work among us. Hope is what sends a Vincentian to knock on one more door, make one more visit, prepare one more hamper, and speak one more word of encouragement. Hope is what reminds us that even the smallest act of love can become the beginning of transformation.

So if I may leave you with one conviction, it is this: the future of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Canada will not be secured by strategy alone. **It will be nurtured by hearts set ablaze with the love of Christ.** It will be shaped by members who pray deeply, serve humbly, and remain close to the poor. It will be guided by Vincentians who understand that leadership is service, that charity honors dignity, and that justice is part of love. **The future will belong to those who are willing to believe that holiness is still possible, that generosity is still powerful, and that the Gospel still has the strength to change lives.**

My friends, let us not be content merely to preserve what we have inherited. Let us renew it with courage. Let us strengthen it with our Catholic faith and Vincentian formation. Let us hand it on with joy to the next generations. Let us rebuild fraternity in a divided world, one encounter at a time. Let us go to the poor not only with bread, but with friendship, justice, and hope. And let us do so together, in the spirit of Frédéric Ozanam, trusting that God is not finished with this Society, not finished with our mission, and not finished with us. The poor are still waiting. The Gospel is still alive. The call is still before us: **“What are you Catholic’s doing about them”.**

This is **“what must be done”**:

Go to the poor. Walk with them. Learn from them. Love them.

And together, let us become the face of Christ in a world that is searching for hope.

Thank you.

Heather Schilling