

OZANAM: PIONEER IN SOCIAL JUSTICE

Bruce Duncan CSsR*

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Frederick Ozanam was an outstanding pioneer in the renewed stress on social justice in the Church. Many church statements today reflect his views insisting that work for social justice is an essential aspect of evangelisation. As John Paul II reiterated after the 1998 Synod of Bishops of Oceania: 'It is certain that commitment to justice and peace is an integral part of the Church's mission...' (*Ecclesia in Oceania*, 26). Ozanam clearly saw the duty of Christians being to transform society so that it might embody the values and aspirations of the Gospels.

A man of profound belief, Ozanam urged his contemporaries boldly to address the critical social issues of his day, not to be silent or, even worse, to allow religious beliefs to be used as a conservative political ideology allied to injustice and social inequality. Ozanam strongly articulated what in recent times the Church terms the 'option for the poor'.

Basic to his belief was the conviction that God in Christ identified intensely with the poor, the distressed, the suffering and oppressed of the earth, and God expected his followers to do so also. Hence Ozanam rejected displays of religious piety that ignored or obscured this concern for the 'poor', the Bible's code word for disadvantage in all its forms.

The whole point of the Last Judgement scene in Matthew's Gospel, 'When did we see you poor, hungry, naked...', was that God vehemently rejects displays of piety that neglect genuine concern for the poor. Jesus' extremely strong words must have come as a great shock to his original listeners.

We are familiar enough with Ozanam's role as founder of the Society of St Vincent de Paul to bring practical and personal relief to the poor. From its early days, the Society also had an international dimension, sending relief to the famine victims in Ireland in the 1840s.

But it would be a mistake to think that Ozanam thought such charitable work was enough to bring about the transformation of society he advocated. He saw the Society also as a way to bring young middle class Catholics of his day into practical contact with the social distress of other classes, to expose them to social realities and energise them to draw on their skills and resources to reshape society. He aimed to build a wider constituency of opinion and activism for social reform.

The St Vincent de Paul Society was one element in his vision for the transformation of European society so that it truly embodied the Gospel imperatives of social equity, freedom and solidarity. As a young academic, he had studied the writings of Dante closely, and traced the efforts of earlier generations to develop medieval civilisation on the basis of Christian values. He was clearly aware of the many failures and tragedies along the way, but was convinced that this was the task of the Church and of believers in every age.

He saw parallels between the barbarian invasions at the close of the Roman Empire and the social, cultural and political upheavals of his time. In response he urged Catholics in France to engage more intelligently and forcefully in the struggle to reshape their country and society.

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He laboured to reform civil institutions and culture more adequately to meet the needs of all citizens. His ideas firmly supported the development of the modern welfare state.

Ozanam was advanced in his social and political views. Against many Catholics of his day who continued to support the monarchy, Ozanam viewed democracy as providential, allowing for wider participation of the masses. Long before Pope Leo XIII in 1891 issued his great social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, Ozanam wrote passionately about what 'Christian democracy' entailed: justice in wage contracts; a more just distribution of wealth; humane working hours; legislation to protect children and women in the workplace; progressive taxation; extension of co-operative marketing and ownership; the right to form trade unions; income support for the sick and aged; adequate regulation of finance and the economy etc.

He strove to draw French Catholics of his time beyond partisan political disputes to fresh visions of a renewed nation, more firmly incorporating the principles of human rights, equity, solidarity and social justice.

Ozanam firmly rejected as unjust and inhumane the doctrines of 'Economic Liberalism', that the market alone should determine wage levels and living standards. He warned his readers: 'Do not be afraid if wicked men of wealth treat you as communists'. He aimed to heighten the social conscience of his generation, and especially by uniting intelligence, science and religious belief in the task of social betterment.

The work of Ozanam and his companions helped lay the foundations for the social teaching of the contemporary Church, and has inspired generations of Catholics in their struggles for social justice. It is intriguing how relevant Ozanam's concerns are to debates about public policy in Australia today.

In Ozanam's day, hostile political forces greatly constrained the work of his colleagues. Today he would be delighted at the wider opportunities the Society of St Vincent de Paul has to improve the life opportunities of the disadvantaged, not just with immediate material help, but drawing on its experience and expertise to alert public opinion to better ways of doing things, and suggesting to governments how to improve social policies and service delivery.

He did not see charitable work as opposed to advocacy on behalf of the poor, but where possible as *informing* advocacy. He knew well that private charity was limited. More effective social institutions and policies were also needed, and only governments could develop these. In our day particularly, the Society has an important role to play in the development of social policy, as a voice and advocate on behalf of the disadvantaged.

Ozanam would undoubtedly be greatly enthused by the possibilities today of greatly reducing world hunger through programs like the UN Millennium Development Goals, making unprecedented efforts to enhance social justice and peace in every country. He would also share our concern about the growing threat from global warming.

The Society of St Vincent de Paul, of course, cannot do everything. But it can encourage its members and associates on their own initiative as citizens to become better informed about these problems, and to do what they can in their work, professions and associations to tackle them. This is essential to the mission of lay people in the world.

Like the Church itself, the Society avoids partisan involvement in politics, but it seeks to influence the political process by being a ferment in society, insisting that we can do better in the way we develop our world and societies, especially by looking to the key Gospel criterion: how fare the poor and distressed?