

Social Initiatives: Ozanam's Legacy

Bruce Duncan is struck by the innovative thought and initiatives of the Society's founder, Frederic Ozanam.

Many of us have been surprised to find how multi-faceted was the life of Frederick Ozanam. He is widely known today, of course, as the founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Only in more recent years have we become aware of his life as a political activist, an innovative thinker and pre-cursor of Christian Democracy. He was a gifted academic and writer, an energetic advocate for the marginalised, in short, a 'public intellectual' as we would call him today.

Jesus' identification with the disadvantaged instilled a passion in Ozanam.

A married man and father, Ozanam is an exemplar of a new type of lay Christian activism. His profound sense of Jesus' identification with the disadvantaged instilled in him a passion for social justice and advocacy, with all its risks at that time. He knew deep disappointment as he saw many of his dearest social projects defeated, but he continued to strive, within his resources, to find new ways of solidarity with the poor.

Rapid Change

Two aspects of his life strike me as particularly intriguing. The first was his ability to respond to a rapidly changing and unprecedented context. In his day, it was the disastrous and inequitable consequences of the industrial revolution, with the threat of class war and social breakdown. The challenge was entirely new, and called for bold and imaginative responses.

Unfortunately most Catholics of his day did not listen to him. But consider how different world history might have been had it been the words and example of Ozanam that galvanised Europe to tackle the Social Question as it was called, rather than Karl Marx.

Today's Pressing Issues

If Ozanam were alive today, I have no doubt he would be paying close attention to the changed context of globalisation, increasing social inequity in Australia and overseas, the new threats to world peace, migration and multiculturalism, and the need to develop much more positive relationships and understanding among the great religious traditions.

One can only imagine what he might have written about the war on Iraq, the treatment of asylum seekers, the stereotyping of Muslims, and inequitable world trading relationships that have resulted in the virtual abandonment by richer countries of places like sub-Saharan Africa.

If it had been the words of Ozanam ... rather than Karl Marx.

He would be incisively critiquing the philosophy of neoliberalism that is driving so many of the social and economic policies in the West, resulting in such social distress in many countries. He would be deeply disturbed at the failure in September 2003 of the world trade conference in Cancun, Mexico, to devise policies to relieve the acute suffering of the poorest countries. He would be agitating strongly for a national campaign to support the UN Millennium goals to reduce significantly hunger and the worst forms of poverty by 2015.

But he would also know that no one person can be well informed across all these areas. He could not do it in his day; it is far less possible today.

Broadening the Conversation

Ozanam's second great contribution was in recognising the need to devise new forms of association to tackle current problems. The St Vincent de Paul Society is one of these. Ozanam needed friends and collaborators who shared his vision, but he did not expect the Society to meet all the social needs of his time. Much less can it do so today.



Nevertheless, the Society in recent years has broadened its scope to contribute to the formation of social policy, drawing on the experience and expertise of its members. I think Ozanam would be well pleased with this, and especially that the Society has been able to broaden the conversation in Australia about social equity and the plight of disadvantaged groups.

Devise new forms of association to tackle current problems.

Ozanam spent much of his energies trying to broaden the conversation in his day. He wanted others to understand that poverty was not inevitable, but by judicious social policies could be greatly ameliorated. Private charity was necessary, but not enough, for only governments could

collect the required resources to lift living standards.

Social Conscience

The Society embodies a vision of practical and effective solidarity which can nourish and encourage social initiatives in other areas. It aims to develop in younger members a well formed social conscience that they can carry into their work lives.

He wanted others to understand that poverty was not inevitable.

Ozanam provided a model in his attempt to spark a more informed conversation in his society, so as to help develop a lively social conscience.

Conversation is such a beautiful word, because it recognises others in a

relationship of mutuality, and implies respect for differences. Jesus exercised most of his ministry in conversations.

In the spirit of Ozanam, how might we draw on our immense resources in skill and expertise to contribute to a more fruitful conversation about our social responsibilities at this time?

Fr Bruce Duncan CSsR lectures in social ethics at Yarra Theological Union at Box Hill in Melbourne and is a consultant at Catholic Social Services Victoria.

