



## Frederic Ozanam

Frederic Ozanam, one of the principal founders of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, was a remarkable man, achieving much despite his short life.

Born in Milan on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1813 (where his French parents were on a temporary posting), he was reared and educated in France, first in Lyon and then at the Sorbonne in Paris where he went initially to study law. Here he had a distinguished academic career both as a student and later as a professor.

During his student days he and some fellow Catholic students were challenged on what practical steps the church was taking at that time to help the poor. Together with some of his friends Frederic established the Conference of Charity, which was the beginning of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. They had help from Sr. Rosalie Rondu, a Daughter of Charity in getting in touch with people in need. Frederic tells the story of being so embarrassed on his first call that he dropped the firewood he was bringing to an old man and ran!

The pursuit of human values of love and social justice was to become Frederic's life work, both in his writings and in the practical work with the poor. Twelve years before Karl Marx's manifesto in 1848 Frederic was deploring the increasing gap between the rich and the poor. He wrote "The question which divides men in our time is no longer a question of political systems. It is a social question; that is of knowing which will prevail; the spirit of selfishness or the spirit of

sacrifice? Whether society is to be simply a great opportunity of exploitation for the benefit of the strongest or a dedication of everyone for the benefit of all and especially for the protection of the weak". His thoughts would not be out of place in our world today.

Frederic became Doctor of Law in 1836 and for a time held the chair of Commercial Law in Lyon. He became professor of Foreign Literature in the Sorbonne in 1841, having received his Doctorate of Literature in 1839.

1841 marked his marriage to Amelie Soulacroix, they had one daughter, Marie born in 1845.

Ozanam was both a reflective man and one of action. Among the social Catholics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century he was one of the first to call for 'salaire nature' (forerunner of the basic minimum wage). Some of his vision we see in Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum in 1891.

Frederic died 8<sup>th</sup> September 1853, a few months after his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was beatified August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1997.

Apart from his writings his great legacy is the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which spread from France almost worldwide. One of its great strengths is the person-to-person contact of members with those seeking help, a practice of Frederic himself. Let's leave the last word to him... " I ask ..... that we should take responsibility for the people who have too many needs and not enough rights, who are claiming a fuller part in public affairs and guarantees in favour of work and against misery".

*Maura Mulhall SVP, 2009*