

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK



SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT - March 12, 2006 B

GIVING OF THE GIFT OF SELF – THE INSPIRING STEWARDSHIP STORY OF BLESSED FREDERIC OZANAM

Many parishes have a St. Vincent de Paul Society to help them respond to the needs of the poor. Ascension's Thrift Store and Social Concerns offices is our equivalent to a St. Vincent de Paul Society.

I am very grateful to all of you who give of your time and talent to our Thrift Store and Social Concerns. Because of your willingness to share your time and talent thousands of lives are touched and helped.

What most of you who work at the Thrift Store and Social Concerns office may not know is that Blessed Frederic Ozanam is the Patron Saint of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Today, I'd like to share some excerpts from Frederic's life that appeared in a recent edition of *The Word Among Us*. The article was written by Fr. Ronald Ramson, C.M. He writes:

In 1831, Frederic Ozanam left his family and home in Lyon, France, to begin studies at the University of Paris, the Sorbonne. He was eighteen, with exceptional intellectual abilities, a zest for work, and a deep faith. Within ten years, he had obtained doctorates in law and literature and was becoming one of the most celebrated thinkers and writers of his day.

But it is not for his academic accomplishments that Blessed Frederic Ozanam is widely remembered today. His most enduring legacy stems from a practical decision he made with six friends one April evening in 1833. That evening he said:

"We must do what is most pleasing to God. We must do what our Lord Jesus Christ did when preaching the gospel. Let us go to the poor."

It was the beginning of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, an association of lay people that offers one-on-one assistance to the needy, in response to Jesus' call to love of God and neighbor. Today its members-drawn from every continent, culture, status, and race-are the living expression of Frederic's vision "to embrace the world in a network of charity." . . .

Servant of the Poor

One day while in class, Frederic and his friends were challenged by a fellow student who accused them of

doing nothing to alleviate the suffering of the poor or to promote justice. "You people who boast about being Catholics, where are the works that demonstrate your faith?"

Frederic knew in his heart that his challenger was right. "One thing is wanting," he told his friends later-"works of charity. The blessing of the poor is the blessing of God." They decided to meet the following week to see what they might do. This meeting-held on Frederic's twentieth birthday, April 23, 1833-is when the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul was born.

Frederic and his friends-young intellectuals from the middle class-needed guidance about how to connect with the needy of Paris. They received it from Sr. Rosalie Rendu, a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul who worked in the city's worst slum district. She became the group's mentor, teaching them how to serve the disadvantaged with love and respect, without judging them. An outstanding exemplar of Vincent de Paul's teaching, Sr. Rosalie fostered the group's devotion to the saint at patron of their outreach.

"Here to Serve"

From the beginning, the key to the Society's ministry was home visitation. Remembering that Jesus sent out his disciples two by two, members went in pairs to the homes of the poor. In a personal, friendly way, they assessed and responded to material needs like food, shelter, clothing, and firewood. They tutored, helped people find jobs, and cared for the sick and dying. In all of this, they kept Matthew 25:40 in mind: "As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. . . ."

Frederic eventually became well acquainted with this distressing misery-the dirt, the rats, the sewage in the streets. Whatever the conditions, he showed the greatest tenderness and respect for the people who had to live there. "I am here to serve you," he would say, on entering their homes. Without a trace of condescension, he would do whatever he could for them. Then, the renowned intellectual would sit down and spend time chatting with these uneducated persons about their concerns and interests.

In the process, the evangelizer was evangelized. Once, speaking to members of the Society in Florence, Ozanam told how he often felt weighed down by inner trials and worries over his health as he did his home

visits to the poor. But then, “coming face to face with so many who are living in miserable poverty and have so much more to complain about, I have felt reproached for my depression and better able to bear my sorrow.”

The Gift of Self

Frederic once assured another member of the Society that the man’s upcoming marriage would increase his zeal to serve the poor, not diminish it: “Love possesses something of the divine nature, which gives itself without diminishing, shares itself without division, and is multiplied and present in many places at once.” Certainly, this was Frederic’s own experience. During the twelve years of his marriage, he was both a dedicated husband and father and a committed servant of the needy.

In 1848 he helped found a Catholic newspaper that promoted social justice. Increasingly, he provided guidance for the Society, which had mushroomed. By 1853 it numbered two thousand members in Paris alone and had spread throughout France, across Europe, and even to North America and the Middle East.

Sickness and Death

Frederic pushed himself to meet the needs, but by the time he turned forty, he was exhausted and in pain from the chronic illness that eventually caused his death—probably a kidney disease originating from tuberculosis. He prayed that the suffering would purify him: “May my cross be that of the penitent thief.”

As the days and weeks passed Frederic pondered the great mystery that lay ahead of him. He reflected on God’s holiness and his own sinfulness, yet with increasing peace of heart. When, after administering the Anointing of the Sick, a priest encouraged him to trust in God’s goodness, he replied, “Why should I fear him? I love him so.”

Scripture was Frederic’s great consolation during his last year. Every day he read his Bible and underlined passages that spoke to his heart, especially from the psalms. This exercise brought him so much peace that he decided to share it with others who were in physical pain. With the help of his “guardian angel” Amelie, he prepared a book of the Scripture texts that had helped him most. “If these pages be the last ones I ever write,” he hold the Lord, “may they be a hymn to your goodness!”

Published after his death on September 8, 1853, Frederic’s Bible of The Sick was the last of his many acts of service. Frederic Ozanam—family man, scholar, and servant of the poor—had completed his

total gift of self.

And in the process, said John Paul II, he himself became a gift: “We must thank God for the present he has made to the church, in the person of Ozanam.” Now it remains for each of us, each in our own way, to follow his example of total, self-giving love of God and neighbor.

Comments

Several comments on Frederic’s inspiring life.

- “Listen to him” In today’s gospel, a voice from the clouds says to Peter, James and John: “this is my Beloved Son, listen to him.” Frederic Ozanam’s story is a beautiful example of a man who *listened to and responded* to God’s call. Frederic could easily have ignored the voice of God coming to him through the voice of one of his students. A daily challenge for us is to seek to *hear and respond* to the God who calls. We can say that the core of the spiritual life is “hearing” and “responding” to God’s call.
- Abraham is also a wonderful example of someone who heard God’s call and responded at 75 years of age. God calls us to leave “the safe” and “the familiar” and to venture with him into the unknown. I sometimes think that we keep God at arms length because we fear what he might ask of us.
- *A life of Stewardship.* The stewardship philosophy rooted in the scripture says: “My life and all I have is *not* mine to do with it as *I* will. It belongs to God.” It is very obvious that Frederic Ozanam got that message loud and clear. Once he started to respond to God, he gave himself totally to him.
- *Treat the poor with dignity and respect.* This can be a real challenge because the poor *can* be demanding, ungrateful, dirty, dishonest and manipulative. This makes it hard for us to see the face of Christ in the poor. Yet this is what we are called to do. Without a trace of condescension, Frederic treated the poor like brothers and sisters. *How* we treat the poor is just as important as what we *do* for them.
- I was moved when I read how Frederic told a young friend that his upcoming marriage would increase his love for the poor. One of the blessings we offer to newlyweds at the end of their marriage ceremony says:

May you always bear witness to the love of God in this world so that the afflicted and the needy will

find in you generous friends, and welcome you into the joys of heaven.

Every couple (and single person and parish) should ideally hold a special place in their heart for the poor—keeping in mind that it is the poor who witness to God on our behalf on Judgment Day. “Yes, Lord, this man/woman was a friend of the poor while on earth.” Many of you like Frederic, give of your time and talent to serving the poor in the Thrift Store, Social Concerns office, Habitat, Daily Bread and Gift of Water. The rest of us hopefully include the poor in our budget supporting ministries that daily serve the poor. As we prepare for our tax accountant we might check to see how the poor featured in our budget last year.

Promises to Keep — A Good Read for Married Couples.

Last weekend at some of the Masses, I mentioned rather quickly a book on marriage called *Promises to Keep*. The book has twenty-two short chapters on topics such as:

- Growing in Intimacy
- Communicating Well
- Negotiating Conflict
- Accepting One Another
- Keeping Expectations Reasonable
- Dealing with Male/Female Issues
- Balancing Family and Work
- Weathering Life’s Tragedies
- Surviving an Affair
- Adapting to the Stages of Marriage
- Aging Together
- Making a Second Marriage Work
- Keeping the Fun in Marriage

I honestly believe that whether your marriage is struggling or peaceful, healthy or unhealthy, fulfilling or lacking in life, reading this book will enhance your relationship.

The aim of the book is to help couples cultivate *the attitudes and skills* needed for a happy marriage. In the book the authors draw on their own married experience and the experience of many other couples that they have worked with in counseling and in marriage enrichments seminars. The book offers lots of *practical*, down to earth wisdom on marriage. It is written for a broad married audience, beginners, middle agers and seasoned veterans. It treats the stages of marriage with the challenges peculiar to each as well as the constant issues of marital relating.

I believe reading good books on marriage is one way to keep marriages strong. Couples could decide to read a chapter together (at home or while traveling) and then

share what spoke to them most in the marriage. If one spouse is not interested in the book, I believe the interested spouse could still benefit greatly from

AN IRISH TOAST

**May you have many friends
and may they be as mature in taste and health
and color and sought after
as the contents of this glass.**

**May you have warm words on cold evening
a full moon on a dark night
and the road downhill all the way to your door.**

**May every hair on your head turn into a candle
to light your way to heaven.**

**And may God and His Holy Mother
take the harm of the years away from you.**

**And...may you have no frost on your spuds
no worms on your cabbage
may your goat give plenty of milk
and if you should but a donkey
please, God, she be pregnant!**

Happy St. Patrick’s Week,

