

**HOMILY TO MARK THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
BEATIFICATION OF BLESSED FREDERIC OZANAM, FOUNDER OF THE
ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY**

Saint Francis Xavier's Cathedral, Adelaide

Wednesday 22 August 2007



Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ,
Auxiliary Bishop of Adelaide

My brothers and sisters, there are ways of looking at the world, seeing the world in the context that is charged with a vision that either enhances or diminishes. We commemorate tonight the life of a man who looked at the world with a vision that was charged with a sense of love and a sense of service.

Not many are aware of the story of the astronauts, Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong, just before the landing on the Moon took place on July 20th, 1969 – “One small step for man, one large step for mankind”. While Neil Armstrong prepared for his moon walk, Buzz Aldrin unpacked bread and wine and put them on the abort guidance system computer, and in his autobiography describes what he did next:

“I poured the wine into the chalice ... in the one-sixth gravity of the Moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the Moon and the very first food eaten there were Communion elements.”

Just before consuming the bread and wine, Aldrin read the passage from the Gospel of St John, “I am the Vine, you are the branches”. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without Me you can do nothing”.

Coming together in this Cathedral tonight, we commemorate on this Feast of Blessed Frederic Ozanam the fact that the Eucharist is central to our lives as Christians, and that we are the Body of Christ in the world. He is the Vine, and we are the branches. We know that there can be no Church without the Eucharist, the re-presentation to Calvary and Easter, the acts that renew and vivify us. We know there can be no Church without the Mission of Christ being lived in the world. His Mission was to preach, to teach, and to heal. We know there can be no Church without a love and service of the poor.

The Gospel read tonight was that of the Good Samaritan, ending with the instruction of the Lord, “Go and do likewise”. When the Apostles came to Jesus saying they could not cope with the crowd of 5,000, Christ’s words to them were, “Feed them yourselves”. The people lifted up on the Last Day who asked, “When did we feed

you, or clothe you, or visit you in prison ...? and He answered when you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it to Me.”

The Church cannot be true to itself without a sense of love and service of the poor, and those on the margins.

In the last ten days numbers of you have been on pilgrimage to mark this Feast, travelling to country centres so far apart as Coober Pedy, Woomera, Ceduna, Peterborough, Minlaton and so on. You have come now to the Cathedral, back to the Eucharist, back to the centre of our Christian lives, the Eucharist which sends us out to serve and feed the poor.

In 1833 at the age of 20, Frederic Ozanam sat down with his seven fellow students from the Sorbonne and commenced the Society of St Vincent de Paul. They were young men, Frederic 20, and the rest not much older, and in a short life, dying at the age of 40, Frederic Ozanam planted a seed that bore fruit for the help of tens of thousands of people in so many countries of the world. They called themselves at first a “Conference of Charity”, and that word “Conference” means not a meeting to discuss things, but a conferral, a community, a dynamic of interchange, fostered with a dimension of love. The Society of St Vincent de Paul has attempted to keep that spirit alive ever since.

The very gifted young man, Frederic Ozanam, publishing his first works at the age of 18, and later becoming a Professor of Law, a learned scholar, an insightful social analyst, publishing works on German and Italian Literature, frequent exhortations to his “Conferences of Charity”. He moved in a society of scholarly figures like Montalambert, Lacordaire, and other lights of the age. He wrote, “I promise God to devote my life to the services of the truth which have given me peace”. And he said that he wished “to ensure my faith by works of charity”.

The 1830’s were a bleak time for the Church in France, not in terms of persecution, but in terms of its own spirit. France was regenerating itself after the Napoleonic Age, but the tensions were still very much in force, between those who would wish to repress the movements of liberty, and those who wished to further them. It was the

Age of King Louis Philippe, an age of the propertied bourgeoisie. It was an era of the growth of capitalism and industrialism, bringing with it its dark omens of social inequality, and poverty for those at the bottom of the scale. The cynicism of Voltaire had charged the atmosphere against the Church and the general intellectual atmosphere was antagonistic to religion in general, and the Catholic Church in France in particular. It was the age of *La Bohème* as described in Puccini's opera, and *Les Misérables*, though the good Bishop in Victor Hugo's account was nothing like the Archbishop of Paris at the time who was seen as in league with the King in attempting to repress the labouring classes and students.

The young university students at the Sorbonne, Frederic and his seven companions, saw their work as a practical refutation against the detractions of the Church. One of the then makers of the Age, Fourier, proclaimed loudly, "We admit the past grandeur of Christianity but the tree is now dead and bears no fruit". The death of the Church has been announced very often, but time and again the spirit has moved in the hearts of men like Ozanam and his companions and new life has appeared in what appeared to be a bleak age. Conscious of the huge tasks before them, Ozanam and the other young men, wrote "before doing public good we can try to do good for a few. Before regenerating France, we can give relief to a few of her poor". Learned young men, they were sensible, practical, and working in their own situation.

Frederic Ozanam founded his Society of St Vincent de Paul in 1833, three years before the founding of this colony. In a mere 21 years later, the Society was founded in Melbourne, and then in 1884 in Adelaide, and in 1930 in Port Pirie. Since then the Church in Australia has been enriched by the "Conferences of Charity" and the "Centres of Charity". The Society of St Vincent de Paul, embodied in all the very fine people present tonight here in this Cathedral, has devoted itself to emergency assistance to anyone in need, no matter their background, or faith, or lack of it, or their attitudes. It has worked to provide food and furniture, petrol and toys, and shelter for the homeless, providing such shelter to what must be tens of thousands over the years. There are 100,000 active members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul throughout the world, with the same number of honorary members, and it is active in most countries on Earth.

There are various lessons to learn from this fine young man and his companions. Firstly, that the Spirit of God is active in the hearts of people of goodwill, no matter how bleak the circumstances might appear, or how destitute the Church might seem to be. There is a prophetic role of youth, with a young man at 20 years of age, at an age when many would challenge his credentials of inexperience, but so often the Church has been enlivened by her young, as we know in this Cathedral, where Mary MacKillop in her twenties used to come to pray. Next, we can never know the good that we might do, and should never underestimate the impact that one individual might bring about. Frederic Ozanam founded his Society three years before the colony of South Australia was founded. We throw pebbles into a pool, not knowing where the ripples of charity and justice might reach. Next, we must be encouraged to be the Body of Christ in the world. He has no hands but ours, no voice but ours. He is the Vine, and we are the branches. Again, as a reminder that the Eucharist is at the heart of our lives as Church, that we are the Body of Christ, and the Church is only true to herself when serving the poor.

We know that we can give without loving, as the adage says, but we cannot love without giving. We also know the words of Ignatius of Loyola, “that love is found in deeds rather than in words”. Tonight we commemorate the deeds of so many good people, and we recall also the anonymity of the good. We know the name Frederic Ozanam, but the names of his seven companions do not register strongly in the annals of history. In that they represent the goodness of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, which relies so greatly on the self-effacing, hidden work and generosity of so many of its members, who do deeds of justice and love with quietness and without self-advertisement.

So we come back to that vision of the world. Just as Armstrong and Aldrin looked at a new world, and in a way blessed it in the context of the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and the Gospel description that He is the Vine and we are the branches, so we come back also to the Eucharist as a centre of our lives, forming us a Body of Christ, being his presence for those who need the Love of Christ.

May the work of the Society of St Vincent de Paul continue to be very blessed.

Bishop G. J. O'Kelly, SJ
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