

# Frédéric Ozanam

## Frédéric Antoine Ozanam



Blessed Frédéric Antoine Ozanam

<b>Birth</b>	23 April, 1813
<b>Death</b>	8 September, 1853
<b>Birthplace</b>	Milan, Italy
<b>Beatified</b>	22 August, 1997
<b>Canonized</b>	
<b>Memorial</b>	9 September

## Life

Frédéric Antoine Ozanam (April 23, 1813 - September 8, 1853) founded with fellow students the [Conference of Charity](#), later known as the [Saint Vincent de Paul Society](#). He was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1997.

## Important dates

- 1813 - Birth of Frederic in Milan, April 23, to Jean-Antoine and Marie Ozanam.
- 1815 - Move of Ozanam Family to Lyons.
- 1829 - Experiences a "crisis of doubt" about his faith.
- 1831 - Enters Sorbonne in Paris to study law.
- 1833 - Establishes the Conference of Charity with other Sorbonne students.
- 1834 - Leads petition to Archbishop for relevant sermons.
- 1835 - Conference officially becomes Society of St. Vincent de Paul.
- 1836 - Awarded Doctor of Laws degree.
- 1837 - Publishes THE ORIGINS OF FRENCH LAW; death of Frederic's father.
- 1839 - Awarded Doctorate in Literature.
- 1840 - Named Professor of Commercial Laws at Lyons; death of Frederic's mother.
- 1841 - Marriage to Amelie Soulacroix of Lyons.
- 1842 - Represents Church in negotiations with the government.
- 1844 - Assumes Chair of Foreign Literature at Sorbonne.
- 1845 - Birth of daughter Marie. Society is recognized by Pope Gregory XVI.
- 1847 - Publication of GERMAN STUDIES I.
- 1848 - Cofounder of JOURNAL L'ERE NOUVELLE.

- 1849 - Publication of GERMAN STUDIES II.
- 1852 - Mediates in student riots at Sorbonne.
- 1853 - Death in Marseilles of kidney ailment, September 8.
- 1855 - Posthumous publication of CIVILIZATION IN THE FIFTH CENTURY.
- 1989 - Society of St. Vincent de Paul established at St. John's University, NYC.
- 1997 - Declaration of Frederic as "Blessed Frederic" on August 22 in Paris.

Frederic Ozanam was born on April 23, 1813 in Milan, Italy. He was the fifth child of fourteen born to Jean-Antoine- Francoise and Marie Nantas Ozanam, ardent French Catholics of middle-class circumstances. His father had served with distinction as an officer under Napoleon, retiring early to become a tutor and later to practice medicine. When the city of Milan fell to the Austrians in 1815, the Ozanams returned to their native city of Lyons in France where Frederic spent his early years.

At seven he suffered the loss of his sister, Elise, which came as a great grief to him because they had grown close as she patiently helped him with his early lessons. Frederic became a day student at the Royal College of Lyons where he quickly showed an aptitude for and an interest in literature and where he would later become editor of a college journal, The Bee.

In a letter written when he was sixteen we have something of an autobiographical account of these early years:

...They say I was very gentle and docile as a child, and they attribute this to my feeble health; but I account for it in another way. I had a sister, such a beloved sister! who used to take turns with my mother to teach me, and whose lessons were so sweet, so well-explained, so admirably suited to my childish comprehension as to be a real delight to me. All things considered, I was pretty good at this stage of my life, and, with the exception of some trifling peccadilloes, I have not much to reproach myself with.

At seven years old I had a serious illness, which brought me so near death that everybody said I was saved by a miracle,. not that I wanted kind care, my dear father and mother hardly left my bedside for fifteen days and nights. I was on the point of expiring when suddenly I asked for some beer. I had always disliked beer but it saved me. I recovered, and six months later, my sister, my darling sister, died. Oh! what a grief that was. Then I began to learn Latin, and to be naughty; really and truly I believe I never was so wicked as at eight years old. And yet I was being educated by a kind father and a kind mother and an excellent brother; I loved them dearly, and at this period I had no friends outside my family,. yet I was obstinate, passionate, disobedient. I was punished, and I rebelled against it. I used to write letters to my mother complaining of my punishments. I was lazy to the last degree, and used to plan all sorts of naughtiness in my mind. This is a true portrait of me as I was first going to school at nine and a half years old. By degrees I improved; emulation cured my laziness. I was very fond of my master; I had some little successes, which encouraged me. I studied with ardor, and at the same time I began to feel some emotions of pride. I must also confess that I exchanged a great number of blows with my companions. But I changed very much for the better when I entered the fifth class. I fell ill, and was obliged to go for a month to the country, to the house of a very kind lady, where I acquired some degree of polish, which I lost in great part soon after.

I grew rather idle in the fourth class, but I pulled up again in the third. It was then that I made my first Communion. O glad and blessed day! may my right hand wither and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I ever forget thee!

I had changed a good deal by this time; I had become modest, gentle, and docile, more industrious and unhappily rather scrupulous. I still continued proud and impatient.

At sixteen the young Ozanam started his course in philosophy and became greatly disturbed by doubts of faith for about a year. However, he was able to survive the ordeal with the help of a wise teacher and guide, Abbe Noiroi, who was to exercise a strong influence on Frederic throughout his life. In the midst of this crisis, he made a promise that if he could see the truth, then he would devote his entire life to its defense. Subsequently he emerged from the crisis with a consolidation of the intellectual bases for his faith, a life commitment to the defense of Truth and a deep sense of compassion for unbelievers.

Despite a leaning toward literature and history, Frederic's father decided on a law career for him and apprenticed him to a local attorney, M. Coulet. But, in his spare time, the young man pursued the study of language and managed to contribute historical and philosophical articles to the college journal.

In the Spring of 1831 Ozanam published his first work of any length, "Reflections on the Doctrine of Saint-Simon," which was a defense against some false social teaching that was capturing the fancy of young people at the time. His efforts were rewarded with favorable notice from some of the leading social thinkers of the day including Lamartine, Chateaubriand and Jean-Jacques Ampere.

Ozanam also found time outside of work to help organize and write for the Propagation of the Faith which had begun in this same city of Lyons.

In Autumn of the same year, Frederic was sent to the University of Paris to study law. At first he suffered a great deal from homesickness and unsuitable company in boarding house surroundings. But after moving in with the family of the renowned Andre-Marie Ampere where he stayed for two years, he had not only the nourishment of a very Christian and intellectual milieu, but also the opportunity to meet some of the bright lights of the Catholic Revival like Chateaubriand, Montalembert, Lacordaire and Ballanche.

It was at this time that Frederic's attraction to history took on the dimensions of a life's task as apologist, to write a literary history of the Middle Ages from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries with a focus on the role of Christianity in guiding the progress of civilization. His aim was to help restore Catholicism to France where materialism and rationalism, irreligion and anti-clericalism prevailed. He made plans for the extensive studies he would need to equip him for this vocation.

It was not long before Ozanam found the climate of the University hostile to Christian belief. So he seized the opportunity to find kindred spirits among the students to join in defending the faith with notable success. Among these was one who was to become his best friend, Françoise Lallier.

Under the sponsorship of an older ex-professor, J. Emmanuel Bailly, these young men revived a discussion group called a "Society of Good Studies" and formed it into a "Conference of History" which quickly became a forum for large and lively discussions among students. Their attentions turned frequently to the social teachings of the Gospel.

At one meeting during a heated debate in which Ozanam and his friends were trying to prove from historical evidence alone the truth of the Catholic Church as the one founded by Christ, their adversaries declared that, though at one time the Church was a source of good, it no longer was. One voice issued the challenge, "What is your church doing now? What is she doing for the poor of Paris? Show us your works and we will believe you!" In response, one of Ozanam's companions, Auguste de Letaillandier, suggested some effort in favor of the poor. "Yes," Ozanam agreed, "let us go to the poor!"

After this, the "Conference of History" became the "Conference of Charity" which eventually was named the "Conference of St. [Vincent de Paul](#)." Now, instead of engaging in mere discussion and debate, seven of the group (M. Bailly, Frederic Ozanam, Francois Lallier, Paul Lamanche, Felix Clave, Auguste Letaillandier and Jules De Vaux) met on a May evening in 1833 for the first time and determined to engage in practical works of charity. This little band was to expand rapidly over France and around the world even during the lifetime of Ozanam.

In the meantime, Frederic continued his law studies, but kept his interest in literary and historical matters. He was also able to initiate other ventures like the famed "Conferences of Notre Dame" which provided thousands with the inspired and enlightening sermons of Pere Lacordaire. This was another expression of Ozanam's life-commitment to work for the promotion of the Truth of the Church.

In 1834, after passing his bar examination, Frederic turned to Lyons for the holidays and then went to Italy where he was to gain his first appreciation of medieval art. After this, he returned to Paris to continue studying for his doctorate in Law. When he finished, he took up a practice of law in Lyons, but with little satisfaction. His attention turned more and more to literature. When his father died in 1837, he found himself the sole support of his mother which kept him in the field of law to make a living.

In 1839, after finishing a brilliant thesis on Dante which revolutionized critical work on the poet, the Sorbonne awarded him a doctorate in literature. In the same year he was given a chair of Commercial Law at Lyons where his lectures received wide acclaim and where, after an offer to assume a chair of Philosophy at Orleans, he was asked to lecture also on Foreign Literature at Lyons which enabled him to support his mother. She died early in 1840, leaving him quite unsettled about his future. At the time, Lacordaire was on his way to Rome to join the Dominicans with the hope of returning to France to restore religious life. For a while, Ozanam entertained the idea of joining him, but again under the guidance of Abbe Noirot and with the consideration of his commitment to the constantly expanding work of the Conference of Charity which were multiplying around France, he decided against pursuing a life of celibacy and the cloister.

In the same year (1840), to qualify for the Chair of Foreign Literature at Lyons, Ozanam had to take a competitive examination which demanded six months of grueling preparation. He took first place easily with the result that he was offered an assistantship to a professor of Foreign Literature at the prestigious Sorbonne, M. Fauriel. When Fauriel died three years later, Ozanam replaced him with the rank of full professor, no mean accomplishment for a man of his early years. This established him in the midst of the intellectual world of Paris. He now began a course of lectures on German Literature in the Middle Ages. To prepare, he went on a short tour of Germany. His lectures proved highly successful despite the fact that, contrary to his predecessors and most colleagues in the anti-Christian climate of the Sorbonne, he attached fundamental importance to Christianity as the primary factor in the growth of European civilization.

After years of hesitation concerning marriage, Frederic was introduced by his old friend and guide, Abbe Noirot, to Amelie Soulaacroix, the daughter of the rector of the Lyons Academy. They married on June 23, 1844, and spent an extended honeymoon in

Italy during which he continued his research. After four years of happy marriage, an only daughter, Marie, was born to the delighted Ozanams.

All during this time, Ozanam, who had never enjoyed robust health, found his work-load increasing between the teaching, writing and work with the Conference of St. Vincent de Paul. In 1846 he was named to the Legion of Honor. But at this time his health broke down and he was forced to take a year's rest in Italy where he continued his research.

When the Revolution of 1848 broke out, Ozanam served briefly and reluctantly in the National Guard. Later he made a belated and unsuccessful bid for election to the National Assembly at the insistence of friends. This was followed by a short and stormy effort at publishing a liberal Catholic journal called *The New Era* which was aimed at securing justice for the poor and working classes. This evoked the ire of conservative Catholics and the consternation of some of Ozanam's friends for seeming to side with the Church's enemies. In its pages he advocated that Catholics play their part in the evolution of a democratic state.

At this time, too, he wrote another of his important works, *The Italian Franciscan Poets of the Thirteenth Century*, which reflected his admiration for Franciscan ideals.

During the academic year 1851/52, Ozanam barely managed to get through his teaching responsibilities as a complete breakdown of his health was in progress. The doctors ordered him to surrender his teaching duties at the Sorbonne and he again went with his family to Southern Europe for rest. It did not deter him, however, from continuing to promote the work of the Conferences.

In the Spring of 1853, the Ozanams moved to a seaside cottage at Leghorn, Italy, on the Mediterranean, where Frederic spent his last days peacefully. Though not fearing death, he expressed the wish to die on French soil, so his brothers came to assist him and his family to Marseilles where Frederic died on September 8, 1853.

He has been revered since as an exemplar of the lay apostle in family, social and intellectual life. The work he began with the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul has continued to flourish. At his death, the membership numbered about 15,000. Today (in 1979) it numbers 750,000, serving the poor in 112 countries, a living monument to Frederic Ozanam and his companions.

The first formal step for his beatification was taken in Paris on June 10, 1925. On January 12, 1954, Pope Pius XII signed the decree of the introduction of the cause. He now (in 1979) enjoys the official title, "Servant of God."