

FREDERIC OZANAM, FRIEND OF LACORDAIRE

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HE revival of Catholicism in France in the nineteenth century grew out of the dreams of a few enthusiasts. They were endowed with insight, acumen and courage, and assisted by God. From among the champions of Christianity, two colleagues made a profound impression upon their own age and their works were destined to go on after they had left the scene of action. One, Frederic Ozanam, was to take his place as a professor at the Sorbonne and was destined to be the founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Henri Lacordaire, the other, was to become the "white robed lyrist of Notre Dame" and the restorer of the Dominican Order in France. They were akin in so many of their experiences, were one in so many of their convictions that their first meeting was the beginning of a life-long friendship, during which they were ever to regard each other as brothers-in-arms. Ozanam with his neophyte lay Vincentians was to rally round the pulpit of Notre Dame, and Lacordaire was to encourage and defend that youthful militia intent upon the Apostolate of Charity.

Early in life it was given to both of them to learn to prize the Catholic faith as their greatest boon. But they were educated to this appreciation in a bitter school. The scepticism of the age swept over their souls to victimize and confound them. Lacordaire later regarded his youthful fall into the abyss of unbelief as something permitted by God in order that he might come to a better understanding of divine truth. As he was emerging from that dark night, he realized that a little philosophy drew him away from religion, but that a great deal of it brought him back again. Ozanam, shaken in his faith, made every effort to repulse the doubts that taunted him. In desperation he was clinging to the sacred dogmas, when the Abbé Noirot appeared and brought light into the troubled mind of the youth. Frederic, now so fully reassured, vowed to consecrate his life to the service of truth.

As they came out into the light, now strong in faith, they saw clearly that in the Church was to be found the solution of the problems that vexed society. This thought filled their minds. Lacordaire, who had reached Catholic belief through social belief, was convinced of the social superiority of the Catholic religion over every other. Society could be brought to its perfection only through that religion which adapted itself to man with all his weaknesses and to the social order in all its conditions. It was the dream of Ozanam to have a few friends rally round him in order that they might create a work together, and in a practical constructive way bring the therapy of religion to bear upon the social ills of the day. He would see Catholicism placing itself at the head of the age to lead it on to civilization and to happiness.

The thought of the social mission of the Catholic Church so filled their minds and gripped their souls that they were impelled to action almost immediately. We see Henri Lacordaire going straightway to begin his studies for the priesthood. After three and a half years spent at Saint Sulpice, he was ordained in September, 1827. It was not long after this that he expressed his intention of becoming a religious, but this intention was not carried out until some twelve years later. He accepted the chaplaincy of a Visitation convent, where he welcomed the opportunity for study and reflection which this assignment afforded him. But soon he was to come out of that seclusion, for in 1830, he was invited to become a collaborator in the newspaper, *l'Avenir*. In this work he was associated with the Abbé de Lamennais and Count Charles de Montalembert.

Meanwhile, Ozanam strongly imbued with the idea that a special mission was to be confided to him, came to Paris in pursuance of his father's desire and took up the study of law. He urged his fellow students to prepare with him for the accomplishment of a great work—the defense of Catholic truth. Their novitiate was the lecture hall, the scene of the first defenses. Every time a rationalist professor raised his voice against revelation, the Catholic students rose to answer him. Frederic himself was as active as any in addressing objections. In this way, they were successful in showing the compatibility of Catholicism and common sense, and in making clear that one could be a lover of liberty and religion at the same time.

Ozanam's zealous concern "for all that he held dear in the world, faith, country, charity, the future of Christianity and

Truth," resulted in his first meeting with Lacordaire, which occurred at this time. He came, as Lacordaire later testified, "because he was a Christian and I was a priest." Frederic, new to Paris, found himself in a void, not realizing that God had sent him to fill that void. The occasion was preparing when he would find an esplanade for his zeal. He was soon to become the advance guard of that little band that was to give to France and to the world, a practical apologetic of the Catholic religion. Notable is the fact that this army was to be among other things the force raising out of his dejection the Preacher of Notre Dame by crowding around his pulpit.

The Apostolate of Charity had its inception in those meetings of Catholic students in Paris, that were patronized and encouraged by M. Bailly, the editor of the *Tribune Catholique*. The meetings were largely given over to debates, in which Frederic took a prominent part but of which he soon wearied. The Catholic youths already recognized him as their leader. He was accordingly influential in getting a few of his friends to abandon the conference hall and carry on their discussions at the different houses of the members. He wanted them to spend their energies in carrying out a more practical, a more urgent program. He would give answer to the challenge of the Saint-Simonians, the most rabid of those attacking the Church at the time. He had already made issue with their theories in his pamphlet, "Reflections on the Doctrine of Saint-Simon." Their taunt, "Show us your works!" annoyed him, and he was intent on answering them in terms of action. He suggested at one of the meetings that the little group occupy themselves, not with discussion, but with good works. "The suggestion," writes his biographer, "had in reality dropped unawares the seed of the future Society of Saint Vincent de Paul."¹ His companions hesitatingly took up the idea, and conveyed it to M. Bailly. The editor immediately became enthusiastic about the project and promised his aid. At the first meeting held in May, 1833, they made M. Bailly their president and determined that their work should be among the poor. This work of charity, as Ozanam declared some twenty years later at Florence, was motivated not merely by a sense of pity, but also by a zeal to prove by means of deeds the Christian faith. Sister Rosalie to whom the youths were sent by M. Bailly, welcomed them, advised them and furnished them with a list of needy families. So began the activity

¹ Kathleen O'Meara. *Frederic Ozanam*. New York. 1878. p. 60.

of the Society, taking Saint Vincent de Paul for its patron, which so soon reached out to other cities of France, and not long after to other lands.

This same year saw Lacordaire coming out of that short-lived seclusion at the Visitation convent, to which he had returned after experiencing those vicissitudes that attached to his work on *l'Avenir*, the subsequent cessation of that paper, and his rupture with the unfortunate M. de Lamennais. The Abbé Buquet, prefect of studies at the College Stanislaus, invited him to come and address the students. It is curious that among his auditors was Frederic Ozanam, who at the very time was seeking a man whose ideas sympathized with the aspirations and struggles of the young men of the time. On hearing Lacordaire, he became elated. He issued from the College Chapel, happy that he had found the man of his searching. He had known Lacordaire as a priest. He now knew him as "the man we want to confound Jouffroy and his school." He would extend the influence of this man of the hour! He would see him in the pulpit of Notre Dame preaching not a sermon but a series of Conferences. He drew up a petition, stressing "the need of a chair of preaching which should engage in hand to hand conflict with the adversaries of Christianity."² Petition in hand, off he went with two companions to see the Archbishop. This first interview was followed by another, out of which came a series of sermons, disappointing, however, to the youths, who asking for the "bread of Lacordaire" were given the "stone of Monsignor Frayssinous."³ Thanks to the Abbé Liautard, their disappointment soon ended. Archbishop de Quelen, won over to their side, found himself saying to Lacordaire: "I have a notion of confiding to you the pulpit of Notre Dame; would you accept it?"

The Conferences of Notre Dame began in the Lent of 1833. The vast audience of six thousand men, crowded into the nave of that mighty Cathedral, riveted its attention on the orator, whose avowed purpose was "to prepare souls for faith." "Standing there, with his eye fixed on the Spouse of Christ, in all her dazzling splendor," wrote Père Chocarne, "his voice rose and fell like a chant. . . . His hearers were breathless as they listened, they remained like men intoxicated and carried out of

² Monsignor Baurard. *Ozanam in His Correspondence*. New York.

³ *ibid.* p. 51.

themselves. It was indeed a splendid victory."⁴ For Ozanam this triumph was a cause of great rejoicing. His presence there with his fellow students, in turn brought joy and new courage to the preacher. "Looking back on those glorious days when the young ranks of St. Vincent de Paul closed, like the advance guard of a victorious army, round the pulpit of Notre Dame, Lacordaire once exclaimed, with emotion, 'Ah! Ozanam is an ancestor!'"⁵ The Conferences continued for two years, when they were interrupted not to be resumed until 1843, when Lacordaire reappeared in the pulpit in the white habit of a Dominican. In the interval he spent his energies in the task for which he is held in grateful remembrance in our day.

The mutual affection existing between Ozanam and Lacordaire is well demonstrated by the gestures of courtesy and the exchange of confidence that marked these years. Frederic completed his legal studies, passed the examination for the Doctorate in Law and began his duties as a barrister. None of these activities seems to have lessened the ardor with which he continued his work among the poor and in further organizing the Conferences of the Society, now grown to magnificent proportions. Nor did it keep him from revolving in his mind the long agitating question of his vocation. He watched, with sympathetic enthusiasm, the efforts being made by Lacordaire to restore the Friar Preachers in France. Lacordaire published a memoir on the Dominican Order and succeeded in getting several young men to join with him. He had hopes of seeing Frederic allied with him in this very project. In early 1839, taking his two companions, he set out for Rome, to enter the Order. On the way, they were received at Lyons by Ozanam, who had assembled the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul to listen to an address by the distinguished preacher. Lacordaire in striking fashion explained to them his purpose in bringing the Friars back to France, and expressed in no uncertain terms his affectionate regard for the members of their Society. In response to a letter from Rome wherein his friend told of his reception into the Order, Ozanam wrote asking for prayers for guidance in choosing his vocation, and requested information about the Order. If God wanted him in religion, there was no army in which he would more gladly serve than that of the Friar Preachers. Lac-

⁴ Pere Chocarne, O.P. *The Inner Life of the V. Rev. Pere Lacordaire*, O.P. Translated by Augusta T. Drane. London, 1923. Pp. 153-154.

⁵ Kathleen O'Meara. (op. cit.) p. 97.

ordaire wrote back embracing him cordially with the great desire "to call you one day, my brother and my father." But Ozanam felt no definite attraction to the religious life and in time followed the counsel of the Abbe Noirot who when questioned by Frederic had always advised him to marry.

When he was awarded the Chair of Foreign Literature at the Sorbonne in 1840, Ozanam looked upon it as a vocation, the manifestation of God's design. It was to be his mission. Admirably fitted for his position, by his knowledge of all the languages of Europe and by his stirring eloquence, he ever sought to make his lectures the "vehicle of Christian philosophy" and from his rostrum, to fulfill his vow to serve truth.

While Ozanam was championing Christian principles before the students who flocked to his lectures at the Sorbonne, Lacordaire returned from Italy to labor with maturer genius and renewed energy for the realization of his ambitions. He became busily engaged in making the foundation of the Order he was restoring in France. Soon he appeared in the pulpit of Notre Dame, where his Conferences enjoyed a greater popularity and exerted a greater influence than ever. Both Ozanam and Lacordaire were carried beyond the confines of their particular fields by their zeal to emphasize the Catholic position, and demonstrate the need of invoking Christian principles in the field of science, and in the clash of issues and expedients in the social, economic and political realm. Ozanam going out from the Sorbonne and Lacordaire going out from Notre Dame, found in the *Cercle Catholique*, a common medium for the extension of the message that clamored for utterance. The *Cercle Catholique* was founded as a center for the Catholic students in Paris. The literary conference was presided over by Ozanam. Lectures were given by notables of the day. Both Ozanam and Lacordaire frequently lectured to the students, among whom fortunately a strong intellectual stimulus for the better was manifestly percolating.

The convergence of the talents of Ozanam and Lacordaire which had always presaged monumental achievement had its climax in 1848 in that journalistic phenomenon, the *Ere Nouvelle*. In the field of writing, Ozanam had become distinguished. During the years of his Sorbonne professorship, he made several trips to different parts of Europe in the interests of his course. Although, invariably, he allotted a generous portion of his time during these tours, to organizing conferences of Saint Vincent

de Paul, he was able upon his return to write a book upon the subject he had been studying during the journey. As a result, his works fill eight octavo volumes. His pen was never idle for when he was not writing books he was contributing to *l'Univers* or the *Correspondant*. He attached great value to the service of the press in the defense and propagation of Catholic thought. So we can understand his design when to stay the "flood of revolutionary socialism" that threatened in early 1848, he turned to the idea of a paper that would reconcile Catholics with the Republic, and thereby seek from the Republic those remedies that economic conditions made so imperative. He would have the Catholic voice heard above the din, for he "perhaps more clearly than any other man of his generation," as a modern authority says, "perceived the opportunity for the Catholic Church to become the protectress of the common people in both economic and political life."⁶ He would enlist the genius and prestige of Lacordaire. So with Maret he approached the Dominican and asked him to join with them in launching the *Ere Nouvelle*. It took a little urging. The idea of returning to journalism was repugnant to the white-robed friar, and he did not fully share their exuberant enthusiasm for the republic. But he saw the need of bringing "to the help of society, now shaken to its very foundations, whatever light and strength each one had at his command."⁷ March 1, 1848, the Prospectus appeared, wherein the editors looked to the republic to employ its power in alleviating the sufferings of the people. During its brilliant, meteoric existence it became one of the most popular and widely circulated journals. This triumphant climax was the last of the great works in the accomplishment of which Père Lacordaire was a brother-in-arms with Frederic Ozanam, whose life of devotion and service to the Catholic cause was "one continual apostolate of a priest exercised by a layman."⁸

⁶ Parker T. Moon. *The Labor Problem and the Social Catholic Movement in France*. New York, 1921, p. 35.

⁷ Père Chocarne, O.P. (op. cit.) p. 416.

⁸ Reuben Parsons, D.D. *Studies in Church History*. New York, 1898. Vol. V. page 303.